

## Stylizing the Mundane Bernice Morgan's *Random Passage*

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Article abstract

This article offers a detailed critical reading of Bernice Morgan's *Random Passage*, a novel about nineteenth century Newfoundland. It focuses particularly on the book's lexical and grammatical choices, and explores how novelistic style functions rhetorically to construct an aesthetic of the mundane. The author then considers how a novel, especially one that performs a style of the mundane, can be thought of as liminoid festival space and how it might encourage *communitas* or a shared reading that "bring[s] about a temporary reconciliation among conflicting members of a single community" (Turner 1982:21). She argues that the novel, finally, can be read through the communal eyes of tourist desire, a stance that ultimately replicates, rather than subverts, existing attitudes towards place, particularly nostalgic understandings of history. A shared understanding of Newfoundland as a leisure space, as a tourist space, affects how readers, both local and non-local, read and value *Random Passage*. The author argues that particularly at a time of depopulation, unemployment, and resource depletion, a style of the mundane — one achieved through lexical choice, grammar, and narrative organisation in the novel — constitutes a persuasive means of celebrating the province together.

## STYLIZING THE MUNDANE

### Bernice Morgan's *Random Passage*

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"Tis like the bible," Vinnie had said and Mary had believed her, had expected stories of giants and floods, of storms and bolts of lightning coming out of heaven, yarns with great ringing phrases, rolling words like those that leapt from Ned's mouth when he was happy or excited. Instead Lavinia has written of women clearing gardens, of making fish, or hay, or candles — mundane things Mary would not have given the time of day to.

"Whenever is she goin' to get around to somethin' happenin'?" the old woman would ask peevishly after Rachel has been reading about berry-picking or boat building for an hour (Morgan 1992: 92-93).

This excerpt from Bernice Morgan's novel *Random Passage* (1992), an historical romance that narrates the trials, challenges and intrigues of early Newfoundland settlers on fictional Cape Random, highlights one of the novel's main preoccupations: the domestic, the workaday, and the mundane. Such a narrative might seem an unusual choice in a discussion about festival. Traditionally, the term *festival* has been defined in opposition to deprivation and fasting, to work, and to the ordinary. "Etymologically the term festival," writes Alessandro Falassi, "derives ultimately from the Latin *festum*, for 'public joy, merriment, revelry,' and *feria*, meaning 'abstinence from work in honor of the gods'" (1987: 2). Clearly, then, one of the crucial components of festival is a rest from work, whether this break be a night of mummering, a daylong birthday celebration, or a week of Christmas festivities. A marked departure from the habitual activities of a society, festival operates, to use Falassi's phrase, in a "time out of time" (1987: 7). In festival time, participants leave behind the rhythms of ordinary life to celebrate, often playing with conspicuous display and excess, symbolic reversals, and the subversion of what are generally regulated

activities. Given the exaggeration and celebration inherent in carnival, festival is, ultimately, remarkable. Festival is loud. Festival is joyous. It is, generally, anything but boring.

The non-festival, by contrast, is comprised of the unremarkable, the ordered, the ritualistic, the ordinary and the commonsensical. Non-festival dwells in the realm of the *mundane*, an adjective that comes from the Latin *mundus*, meaning “world.” As the etymology suggests, the mundane involves the banal activities and common material objects of the everyday world. The word smacks of the routine and the boring. Washing the dishes, brushing your teeth, or getting dressed — all mundane activities — hardly make for exciting existence. Indeed, we might not consider the mundane to be rivetting or worth celebrating or aestheticizing at all.

What then, one might ask, is the relationship between the mundane and the festive in a novel like *Random Passage* and others that stylistically construct the space of the “everyday” in regional texts? A novel, I contend, can bridge the festive and non-festive; it can, paradoxically, *celebrate* everyday experience and ultimately serve a therapeutic and community-building function for a region. In some respects, *Random Passage* enacts a space of a non-festival, stylistically: the syntax, word choices and narrative structure do not indulge in excess, in symbolic reversals, in subversions, or in play, but rather — as I demonstrate — emphasize the “ordinary.” In narrative content, too, the book follows for the most part the day-to-day activities on the Cape: women learning how to split fish, pick berries, gather eggs and stretch provisions throughout the winter — “mundane things” we might not “give the time of day to” (Morgan 1992: 92-93).

Yet a regional novel, no matter how mundane its style and content — or perhaps, *because* it seems mundane and “right” — can become (for local readers, at least) what Victor Turner calls “a celebratory symbol” (1982: 20) as it is read and celebrated as a means of knowing oneself as a regional subject. A celebratory object — here, a novel — only makes sense within social practice, however:

We must find out how [specialists and laypersons] act toward an object, what attitudes group members publicly display when they use it, handle it, venerate it, destroy it, dance around it, or otherwise orient themselves toward it (Turner 1998: 20).

*Random Passage* (1992) has been “venerated” by local readers and out-of-province readers alike. According to a Breakwater Books’ web page, “a 1994

survey conducted by the NF Library Association showed *Random Passage* as the book most frequently recommended by readers.” So popular was the book that it went into a second printing in its first year after selling 10,000 copies. The novel — and its sequel, *Waiting for Time* (1994) — are currently being made into a \$14-million, eight-hour television miniseries directed by John N. Smith, director of the award-winning film *The Boys of St. Vincent* (Rice-Barker: 2000).

Mine is not the first or only discussion to focus on the celebratory status of the everyday in Newfoundland women’s writing. Danielle Fuller explores how Newfoundlander Helen Porter’s fiction allows for subversive moments in which disempowered women effect small transformations in their everyday realities. Fuller writes that

[d]espite the material hardships, feelings of frustration, tensions within families, and the difficulties of breaking out of the cycle of poverty that Porter’s characters often experience, her stories are not overwhelmingly depressing. Instead, Porter’s novel *January, February, June or July* (1988) and her collection of short stories *A Long and Lonely Ride* (1991) might be described as quiet celebrations of everyday survival since Porter conveys to her reader a sense of a character’s courage in negotiating her way through another difficult — yet fairly predictable — way (122).

I share Fuller’s interest in the reception of “everyday texts” and their celebratory status. My analysis moves in a different direction than previous work, however, in that it performs a close reading of the style of “mundane” representation and, I believe, opens up new ways of understanding historical representations of place and their reception. With this approach, I offer an analytic method to folklorists, anthropologists, literary critics, and ethnographic researchers for understanding style and considering how compositional patterns and choices speak to the desires of a contemporary readership.

This article, then, offers a detailed critical reading of Morgan’s *Random Passage*, focusing particularly on its lexical and grammatical choices, and explores how novelistic style functions rhetorically to construct an aesthetic of the mundane. Following this close reading, I consider how a style of the mundane replicates the festival space of *communitas*, in this case a shared reading that smooths antagonisms and encourages a unified regional community, if only temporarily. While a reader can certainly detect feminist themes of domestic work, family connection, and female tenacity in *Random Passage*, the novel can also be read through the communal eyes of *tourist* desire, a stance that

ultimately replicates, rather than subverts, existing attitudes towards place, particularly nostalgic understandings of history. A shared understanding of Newfoundland as a leisure space, as a tourist space, affects how readers, both local and non-local, read and value *Random Passage*. I argue that particularly at a time of depopulation, unemployment, and resource depletion, a style of the mundane — one achieved through lexical choice, grammar, and narrative organization in the novel — constitutes a persuasive means of celebrating the province together.

### Narrating the Ordinary

Narrating the ordinary is part of Morgan's self-proclaimed project. In a recent interview with Helen Porter, Morgan communicates her desire to "record details of landscape, of time, of place, and the endlessly intriguing lives of people considered ordinary" (Porter 1994: 23). For the ordinary to be "endlessly intriguing," however, it needs a little aesthetic airbrushing. And despite the many reviews of the book, no one, to date, has spoken of *Random Passage* as a stylized (that is to say, constructed, aestheticizing, and ultimately, fictional) novel. One reason for this lack, I suspect, is that book reviewers of home-grown *Random Passage* tend to read Morgan's novel against the Pulitzer Prize-winning giant, *The Shipping News*. One reviewer in the *New Maritimes*, for example, writes that "*Random Passage* is all that E. Annie Proulx's best-seller *The Shipping News* could have been but isn't" (Rev. 1996: 25). Those reviewers most enthusiastic about Morgan's work praise it for its groundedness and realism. For instance, unlike Proulx's book, which has been derided for its over-the-top artistry, *Random Passage* is applauded by the *Globe and Mail's* Susan Sutton because it "has the ring of truth to it" (qtd. in Porter: 1994), while another reviewer in *Fiddlehead* claims the book "seems artistically exact" (Rev. 1994: 182). Perhaps, when read against Proulx's highly aesthetic creation (with its paratactic style, its knot metaphors, and exotic naming), Morgan's novel seems unremarkable and mundane. Perhaps, when read with a desire for participation rather than critical distance, Morgan's novel seems familiar and true. Whatever the reasons, Morgan's Newfoundland — in the eyes of many local readers, at least — takes on the flavour of roasted caplin and hard candies brought home from the seal fishery, whereas Proulx's Newfoundland takes on the flavour of half-baked fictions. Morgan's representation of place is a grounded, material and embodied one. Or so one is to believe, if one does not recognize the particular brand of aestheticization in Morgan's novel, an aesthetic of the mundane.

Bernice Morgan is by no means the only Newfoundland woman writer who contemplates the mundane in her fiction. Newfoundland writer and *Evening Telegram* columnist Kathleen Winter, in her published journal *The Necklace of Occasional Dreams*, details her daily struggles as she copes with her husband's terminal cancer, and thereby "learns to appreciate the basic things in life, like a quiet moment over a muffin and a coffee in a downtown café" (Barron: online). In a *TickleAce* review of Winter's diary, Jacqueline Howse writes that "[t]he journal is a place where Winter can begin to understand many things about her life, her relationships with her husband and daughter, her faith, the things that sustain her, and how it all fits in the minutiae of daily life" (1996: 113). Poet Agnes Walsh and short story writer Libby Creelman also explore domestic life and the intricacies of relationships. And, as Danielle Fuller notes, short stories of Helen Porter explore "the manual work that is undertaken by women within and beyond the home in order to sustain day to day life within it" (1999: 122). "Many of Porter's protagonists," Fuller argues, "are faced with the mundanity of repetitive, low-paid jobs, and with the accompanying constraints of a life lived on a low income" (122). These stories, she concludes, demonstrate how characters cope and how "small variations within the daily repetitions" (123) can serve as a form of daily resistance against authority.

In fact, feminist folklore has centred on women's domestic and mundane life — women's activities — in response to "male-oriented," "highly individualistic or competitive" performances (Jordan and Kal...ik 1985: ix). Women's stories, women's oral traditions, and women's aesthetics, according to historian Bettina Aptheker, "locate women's cultures, women's ways of seeing; they designate meaning, make women's consciousness visible to us" (1989: 43). Everyday practices and domestic spaces constitute a powerful position for what Dorothy E. Smith calls "a feminist sociology" (1987), an alternative to standard sociology that does not claim objectivity or privilege a removed stance but rather valorizes speakers' lived experiences and the world of the "local and particular"(6). To be sure, *Random Passage* celebrates women's activities and women's perspectives. For instance, after the men jump from ice pan to ice pan in the harbour to catch seals, main character Lavinia ponders the male "bravado":

Killing the seals was necessary, she thinks. God knows she's thankful to have a full stomach. Still, she resents the foolhardy bravado, the male pride that, mixed with necessity, makes the job more dangerous than it need be.

Men, Lavinia concludes, lack imagination. They see only ice and the seals, whereas women see the fathoms of black water below, visualize the frozen seaweed swirling and clutching.

"It's not a bad thing to be without husband or sons," she writes that night (41).

One could certainly read *Random Passage* as a tale of women's survival, women's ways of knowing, and the continuity of women's narratives (in the form of a journal passed down through generations of women characters in the book). One can read the novel as a narrative of women's survival and endurance through economic, climatic, and ontological hardship.

That said, the novel's style of the mundane also encourages the *communitas* of celebrating place as authentic, real, and nostalgic, a script that comes out of tourism attitudes that have developed in the province since the nineteenth century. This form of festive *communitas* I will explore later. First, however, I illustrate how stylistic patterns can construct the mundane.

### Lexical Selections in *Random Passage*

The construction of the ordinary in *Random Passage* and its appeal to various reading audiences is achieved, in part, through the balancing of core and non-core vocabulary choices in the novel. These terms are treated at some length by stylisticians Ronald Carter and Walter Nash, who make the distinction in their rhetorical study of newspaper articles. Core vocabulary is used, generally,

to describe those elements in the lexical network of a language which are unmarked. That is, they usually constitute the most normal, basic and simple words available to a language user. Psycholinguists would probably argue that core words are those which are most perceptually salient; that is, they mark dominant areas of core sensory perception such as size (large/small), weight (heavy/light), colour (red/green) (but not mauve or scarlet or fawn). And so on. Sociolinguistically, they might be isolated as the items to which we have most natural and regular recourse in contexts such as talking to foreigners or to young children (1990: 63).<sup>1</sup>

1. In addition to being "unmarked" and "perceptually salient," a core word will display collocational frequency; that is to say, it will co-occur with or call up many other words. For example, Morgan frequently uses the word *fish*, one that allows for such combinations as *fish* cake, *fish* net, *fish* hook, *fish* bait, *fish* face, *fish* quota, and many others. By contrast, non-core words like *halibut*, *sole* or even *cod* do not collocate

Equally important, however, are Morgan's non-core selections, highly specific or particularly exotic interlopers like puncheon or liniment (or any of the terms in the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*) that construct a particular lexical field — specifically that of historical Newfoundland experience. Of course, such a simplified binary requires a qualification: while these designations allow for a more systematic analysis of lexical choice, they are not rock-solid classifications, as lexical choices are always used in particular contexts by particular practitioners with different lexicons. It is more fitting, then, that we think about degrees of coreness or non-coreness rather than categorical definition.

Reading for lexical choices, I turn to one section of *Random Passage*, which narrates the ritual cleaning that must take place when the men return from the annual seal fishery:

It is the eighth year men from the Cape have gone to the ice. By now, everyone knows that the rest of the day will be spent hauling water, scouring bodies, scrubbing clothing and delousing hair. The wooden wash tubs, cut down from puncheons, will be dragged in from back porches and the women, in a rage to be rid of all that dirt, will scrub the men down. Clothing so worn and filthy that it cannot be washed will be burned on a bonfire the big boys build outdoors. A pungent mixture of turpentine, vinegar and liniment, warmed in cracked saucers, will be rubbed into the men's scalps and their heads will be tied around with rags. Only when every louse and nit is guaranteed to have expired will the rags be unwound and burned and the hair scrubbed with soap made from lye ashes and blubber. This treatment, Ned maintains, is why so many men along the coast have heads as hairless as eggs. He, however, has kept his own fuzz of curls. Each year, Mary threatens to shave his head before he leaves for the ice (Morgan 1992: 101).

This passage, to begin with some general observations, contains a number of monosyllabic words (the first sentence is completely monosyllabic). One-syllable words carry considerable truth value, an attitude communicated by Richard Lederer who writes (in one-syllable words): "Small words are the ones we seem to have known from the time we were born, like the hearth fire that warms the home" (Eschholz 1997: 56). The intuitive status Lederer grants

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with as many other words. Further, core vocabulary tends to be hypernymic; in other words, in a lexical set comprised of the words *granite*, *boulder*, *slab*, *flint*, and *rock*, only the word *rock* constitutes the overarching term that characterizes the rest of the terms and defines the others in the group. (For example, we can define *boulder* as a large *rock* and *slab* as a broad, flat *rock*.)



short words carries over to Morgan's text, where her vocabulary — supposedly ingrained, intuitively familiar language — effectively makes readers feel as if they, too, have known this back-to-basics place "from the time [they] were born" (56).

Further, many of the process types or actions in this passage are material ones, that is to say, processes of doing as opposed to having, being, or thinking. For instance, the women will scrub down the men; boys will build a bonfire; men leave for the ice. Significantly, most of the processes take the passive voice: wooden wash tubs are dragged in; clothes will be burned; a lye mixture will be rubbed into the men's skin and will be tied around with rags. The passive voice, in this ethnographic context, emphasizes the activity instead of the actor. Especially in the context of this noun-heavy text, material processes construct a physical and tangible world, one that is palpable, solid, and basic.

Not only that, a sense of predictability, of routine, is established in the repetition of passive voice clause structures in four subsequent sentences. In *Random Passage*, Newfoundland life becomes predictable because Morgan quite often sets up lists and repeated clause structures that become easy to anticipate. Consider the following excerpt:

The women have established a routine from which they seldom vary. Each morning, when the most necessary household chores are done, the babies fed, the day's water hauled from the pond, the pot of salt fish set to simmer over the banked fire, they pack Sarah's wooden chest (57).

The repetition of structure in such phrases as household chores are done, babies [are] fed, the day's water [is] hauled from the pond, the pot of salt fish [is] set to simmer establishes an economy of predictable sentence structure, one that makes this world safe, simple, and neat. Similarly, we find repetition in sentences like the following:

This container (1), half the size of a coffin. (2) a seaman's trunk for generations of Gill men (3), was taken by Sarah as a blanket box when she left Pinchard's Island to marry Josh (57).

They have scrounged an unlikely collection of tools (1). things the men can spare from more important work (2): a blunt axe, a pick, the long iron rod Josh found tangled in his net last summer, a shovel, a length of rope and several brin bags (3) (57).

Here, the underlined phrases are essentially repetitive noun and adjectival phrases, the first example expanding upon a container and the second, the

collection of tools the women take with them to start a vegetable garden. This pattern, which emphasizes objects by unpacking them in a series of descriptive phrases, reduces historical outpost experience by making *things* represent the authentic past, the literary equivalent of a museum display representing nineteenth-century outpost life with objects. Further, many of Morgan's sentences — even if they do not contain a list — perform some kind of repetition or parallelism and thereby emphasize routine and predictability in their very syntax. Not only do these patterns reify place, but they also establish a predictable rhythm to the telling that makes the story feel comfortable and “right.” In addition, these phrases (which constitute narrative satellites or information not central to the plot) slow the pace of reading and make the reader feel *as if she were* participating in mundane activities.

To return to the core/non-core discussion laid out above, many of the words in Morgan's writing — choices like *man*, *boys*, *dirt*, *coast*, *year*, *day*, and *bodies* — constitute core lexemes, the nucleus or central mass of our everyday usage. Selections like *dirt* in the long passage quoted at the beginning of this section are less marked or noticeable than alternatives like *grime*, *filth*, or *abject waste*. *Man*, the choice in this excerpt, evokes less political and emotional response than *martyrs*, *heroes*, or even *sealers*. *Ice* in the phrase *to the ice* is considerably less loaded than *seal hunt*, *seal fishery*, or *annual slaughter*. In fact, in this passage which centres on a return from the seal fishery, neither *seal* nor *fishery* nor *hunt* appears even once. One might argue, quite rightly, that a person actually acting in this space (the narrator and the characters) or a reader familiar with local terminology would not need to specify a coast or year and would know, through located in-group competence, that “to the ice” means sealing. In other words, linguistic markers speak of a local perspective and shared knowledge between speaker and local audience. One might also argue that a removed, impersonal narrative style marks a divide between the narrator's voice and those of the characters who live in this place.

However, such insights do not erase a political consequence worth exploring here: Morgan's choice of unmarked, neutral terms places this event, this place, beyond evaluation and contestation. Such “studied neutrality” marks the realist ethnographer, a category explored by anthropologist John Van Maanen:

Basically, the narrator of realist tales poses as an impersonal conduit who, unlike missionaries, administrators, journalists, or unabashed members of the culture themselves, passes on more-or-less objective data in a measured intellectual style that is uncontaminated by personal bias, political goals, or moral judgments (1988: 47).

In fact, such unmarked choices as those mentioned above contribute to the mundane, because ultimately, the mundane is comprised of the unremarkable (see Labov and Waltezy: 1967; also, Polanyi: 1985 both of which study the unremarkable in oral narratives). Cape Random is neither shocking nor catastrophic: it simply *is*. In keeping with this “simply-is” world are Morgan’s adjectival selections which are material or possessive ones instead of evaluative ones, a pattern which foregrounds the materiality of this place. For instance, the reader encounters *wooden* wash tubs, *back* porches, *cracked* saucers, and *men’s* scalps. Morgan, with her repeated core choices and material adjectives, suggests a dispassionate perspective, one that belies the intrusion of a mitigating and stylizing interpreter.

This mundane rendering only goes so far, however, because the very core choices that ground a narrative also effectively remove a story from any locatable time and place and therefore make it a utopia (literally, no place). Core vocabulary is, after all, quite abstract, in large part because it effectively generalizes a field or in this case, a narrative. While, on the one hand, readers are zooming in on the minutiae of cracked saucers and “turpentine, vinegar and liniment” mixtures, which communicate a materiality, a thing-ness, about the story, we are also kept at some distance from particulars by the regulating hypernyms. *Men*, *women*, and *boys*, for example, constitute overarching categories that could refer to anybody. Similarly, in terms of location, *ice*, *porches*, and *cape* could encompass any northern location, porch, or cape. This narrative may seem like an ordinary day in some respects; however, the tale catches our attention in part because of its essential remoteness. The narrative, comprised of such abstractions, is not completely mundane.

This remoteness is further emphasized by the non-core selections, the more marked, less neutral and more specific lexemes than their core counterparts. Words like *pungent* in a *pungent mixture*, *puncheons* in *cut down from puncheons* and *expired* in *only when every louse and nit is guaranteed to have expired* are most likely not core terms in the repertoire of late twentieth-century readers. Nor are verbs such as *maintains* in the phrase, *this treatment, Ned maintains*. (In speech, we might be more inclined to say *feels* or *believes* or even *says*.) These words, in effect, insert a split between the world of the text and the world of the reader, a split that underlines the necessary defamiliarization that defines historical fiction. Literary theorist Dennis Duffy argues that

the reader's initial impression from a work of historical fiction ought to be that of discontinuity. The reader is somewhere different, stepping out of a time machine. The point of the novel may be to teach readers what they thought was temporally distant is morally contiguous, but that message begins in remoteness (1986: iv).

While arguably core words to the nineteenth-century outport characters in the book, *liniment* and *puncheon* are not wide-spread words in Newfoundland today. Like most historical novels, *Random Passage* “emphasizes overtly or implicitly, the otherness of that past” (Duffy 1986: iv). So even if the vocabulary hints at the mundane, it is also defamiliarizing and makes this world remote and exotic.

Ultimately, the world of Newfoundland outport existence as depicted through these lexical choices functions as an imaginary — and not mundane — space. The noun-heavy style replaces the complex world of real perception and human relations with objects: wooden wash tubs, back porches, turpentine, liniment, cracked saucers, rags, lye ashes and blubber. For contemporary readers (particularly those outside the region), these lists of things unproblematically and even glamorously replace very real attitudes towards place and the people who currently live there. When a writer substitutes real-world agents and complex attitudes with simple, aesthetic physical objects, the conflicts of place disappear, as they unproblematically and attractively fit together in a world out of time. As in festival, these hierarchical and antagonistic relationships are reconciled within a suspended space. As in celebratory spaces, the book invites a state of oneness and total unity that those both within the region and outside of the region can share (during the suspended reading time of the text, at least).

### Grammatical Selections in *Random Passage*

Lexical choices often do not function alone, however, but make sense in a given syntactical arrangement. And the selections drawn upon, grammatically, have consequences. That is to say, certain resources will construct this Newfoundland region in a particular way and will hail particular kinds of readers in particular ways. In the following analysis, I study the realizations and consequences of two grammatical patterns. First, I examine circumstance types and the construction of utopic space. (Most often, circumstance types are adverbial groups or prepositional phrases that give us extra information about the processes in a clause: when, where, how, why, and under what

conditions did the action occur?) Then, I explore thematic arrangement — what kind of information heads up the sentence — to understand how the syntactic organization at the level of the sentence highlights the mundane information in the clause.

To describe circumstance types briefly, then, Morgan's narration seems detailed and specific because we are supplied with a generous number of phrases which locate processes and the novel's participants. If we look at the sealing excerpt provided above, for instance, we read that men *from the Cape* go *to the ice*; the buckets are dragged in *from back porches*; the clothes will be burned *on a bonfire*; men *along the coast* have heads as hairless as eggs. Similarly, the text provides abundant information about how things are done: women clean *in a rage*, *with soap*, and *with rags*. These domestic activities are quite carefully placed in this world. And, to iterate, the etymology of the word *mundane* connects to the concept of world.

Yet, when we look more closely at these locating circumstances, again we can see that they are anything but concrete: what *Cape*? Exactly where is *to the ice*? Along *what* coast? These grammatical circumstances, in conjunction with the hypernymic — or overarching — lexical choices already discussed, simply establish a maritime thematic field that allows a reader to imagine some coast, some cape, some ocean. Further, the numerous temporal phrases locate the narrative events relative to each other (they indicate sequence), but they do not really tell the reader when this narrative is taking place. Consider this excerpt which opens chapter twelve:

*For years* Meg, Sarah and Annie have taken turns going to the Norris house to change the filthy quilts, wash the mad woman and dress her in clean clothing. *Between times* Frank and Rose do for her. Annie Vincent, who goes most often to the Norris house, has never been heard to mention Frank Norris' wife. But according to Sarah and Meg, Ida is not completely silent. Her only occupation is stripping wallpaper from all the upstairs rooms. *Hour after hour*, Ida picks at the flowered patterns with her dirty fingernails ... Then *one morning* Frank Norris pulls on his boots and finds that *during the night* they have been filled with molasses. *The next day* he and Rose come in *at suppertime* to discover two goats barred in the kitchen. *The following day* Frank's tobacco, his only luxury, is mixed into the flour barrel. The tricks continue; *each day* Rose whispers a new story of her mother's malevolence into Willie's ear. *In time*, everyone knows that Ida's sickness has taken a strange turn. It is unsettling, virulent, as if someone long dead had risen and was demanding attention (152, italics mine).

The temporal information in this passage seems specific because it offers markers of sequence (the next day, the following day, each day, and in time). Importantly, it is located in the thematic or “what this clause is about” position of the clause and is therefore in a prominent position. Upon consideration, however, we realize that referents like day, morning, year, and time are vague. Because we do not encounter specific days of the week or calendar years, we could place this narrative any time in the eighteenth, nineteenth, or early twentieth century.

Moving to thematic organization in the clause, I refer to linguist Michael Halliday’s definition of theme as “the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that about which the clause is concerned” (1994: 35). Morgan’s point of departure is often ordinary or negligible information, while new and comparatively big events get sidelined in short, adverbial phrases. For example, a reader often encounters sentences like the following: “The men, home from sealing, are halfway down the path when Lizzie, now Young Joe’s wife, comes hurrying towards them *with the baby on her hip*” (101, italics mine). Readers to this point know nothing about this marriage or this baby. These more dramatic demographic details appear to be secondary information in Morgan’s style because both the marriage and the baby are communicated in unmarked and presumably omissible phrases of time and manner. The syntax instead foregrounds the unremarkable information, the men, home from sealing. A second example supports this pattern: “Ned’s oldest child, Jane, grown now to a pretty young woman, with a round face and pouting mouth, is in the other door holding Moses, *her newest step-brother*” (102, italics mine). The grammatical organization highlights details of Jane’s appearance, all of which fall in the thematic or “what the clause is about” position of the sentence. Meanwhile, the new child, Moses, the grammatical patient of the process (of being held), is relegated to direct object status. He is embedded in the folds of the less prominent remainder of the clause.

Couching new information in an offhand adverbial phrase does not ultimately hide this news, however, but draws attention to the new member of the community and this new marriage. These sentences appear to highlight the ordinary but, in fact, the thematic element only serves as a backdrop for the noteworthy passing remark to come. This strategy is one way to give the mundane a jump-start. After all, one of the primary purposes of narration is to tell stories about events and actions that are made interesting for the audience. This pragmatic interestingness is usually obtained by the account of events or

actions that are unexpected, deviant, extraordinary, or unpredictable, given the knowledge and beliefs of the audience.

Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson list “telling a good story” among their positive politeness strategies, strategies for enhancing relations between speakers and strengthening community. Readers would likely put down a book if a story repeated the details of splitting a fish or building a boat. In fact, we might consider whether or not we could actually have a mundane tale about the nineteenth century in the first place. Any action, given its historical status, would be extraordinary merely by virtue of its historical distance. The narrative cohabitation of mundane and historical is doomed from the start. As readers of this story, we have split perspectives: we might feel like we have access to the everyday and ordinary, but this ordinary is set 150 years ago.

### **Stylizing the Mundane: A Rhetorical Understanding of the Liminoid and *Communitas***

Morgan’s aesthetic of the mundane constructs a world of the unremarkable, the ordered, the workaday, the ritualistic and the secular. In many ways, it occupies the space of the non-festival. But this non-festive, realistic style has the overriding rhetorical function of constituting, oddly enough, an imaginary space, a “time out of time,” that Newfoundlanders can celebrate together. Paradoxically, then, *Random Passage* celebrates the non-festive, the secular. This paradox makes sense when we consider how people generally read novels: we tend to set aside the worries and work of our everyday life and indulge in the removed chronotope and characters of a fictional construction. Leisure reading, itself, is a celebratory activity that fits Victor Turner’s view of festival as a “step out of secular space and time [to] explore the world of heightened celebratory consciousness” (1982: 7).

Turner, further, understands celebration and ritual as responding to the crises that plague modern societies (see also Myerhoff: 1982). He writes that

with the increase in scale and complexity, with urbanization, specialization, professionalization, job mobility, labor migration, stress on individualism, the omnipresence of the cash economy, and so on, the occasions of personal crisis multiply exceedingly as compared with “tribal” or rurally based societies (1982: 25).

Newfoundlanders have, over the past decade, faced particular demographic, economic, and social anxieties. According to an online article in *The Evening*

*Telegram* (26 Sept. 1998), Newfoundland recently experienced its largest ever demographic decline, its population falling by almost 10,000 between July 1997 and July 1998. James Overton characterizes the economic state in Newfoundland as follows:

Canada's eastern-most and newest province has an official unemployment rate of about 20 percent, twice the national average. Per capita income is but 70 percent of the Canadian average. The province's main industries, fishing, mining and forestry, all face serious problems or have limited room for expansion. In recent years the fishing industry, in particular, has been plagued with problems. Fish plants were already closing in some communities, even before there was a partial collapse of fish stocks and the closure of the northern cod fishery in mid-1992. The cod moratorium has displaced approximately 30,000 people from the industry (1996: 2).

In some ways, Newfoundlanders' reading of *Random Passage* constitutes what Turner calls a "liminoid" experience (Turner 1982), a space in which celebrants respond to "marked cultural change and its accompanying personal psychological stress" (Turner 1982: 211). When we participate in these liminoid phenomena, according to Turner, we "take our crises and transitions into our own hands, ritualize them, make them meaningful, and pass through and beyond them in a spirit of celebration, to begin a new uncluttered phase in our lives" (1982: 26).

The ritualization associated with reading a novel like *Random Passage* is different, however, from the annual festival, biannual solstice celebration, or weekly party. The ritualization I refer to comes back to the repetitive style of a novel (here, specifically the repetition inherent in an aesthetics of the mundane), a style that, during the reading time, enacts the repetitive, the recursive. Form, according to rhetorician Kenneth Burke, is "an arousing and fulfilment of desires" (1968: 124). Repetitive form, he maintains, sets up and gratifies

a constancy of expectations; the reader "comes to rely" upon the rhythmic design after sufficient "co-ordinates of direction" have been received by him; the regularity of the design establishes conditions of response in the body, and the continuance of the design becomes an "obedience" to these same conditions (1968: 124).

Here, Burke refers to verse rhythm, but indicates that the same applies, if to a less immediate and apparent extent, to prose rhythm and repetition. He writes that "the rhythm of a page, in setting up a corresponding rhythm in the body, creates marked degrees of expectancy, or acquiescence" (125). Repetition



in lexical and grammatical patterns addresses a desire, even at the bodily level, for predictability and redundancy, and the prose music in the mini-context of the novel overrides the internal contingency of the action within (and, temporarily, outside) the novel: this world is a safe one, stylewise.

Recursivity, even at the level of sentence structure, gives a reader what sociologist Anthony Giddens calls a sense of *durée*:

Human action occurs as a *durée*, a continuous flow of conduct, as does cognition. Purposive action is not composed of an aggregate or series of separate intentions, reasons, and motives. Thus it is useful to speak of reflexivity as grounded in the continuing monitoring of action which human beings display and expect others to display (1984: 3).

In *Random Passage*, Newfoundland life becomes predictable because, as I have demonstrated, Morgan sets up lists and repeated clause structures that become easy to anticipate. This routinization and predictability offers readers ontological security (1984: 62). In his work on routinization and motivation, Giddens draws upon psychologist Erik Erikson's thoughts concerning bodily autonomy and trust. Both theorists concentrate on the specifiable connections between the individual agent and the social contexts through which that agent moves in the course of daily life. To understand the importance of predictability, psychological autonomy, and the "futural" sense that we all assume in our everyday activities, Giddens focuses on what he calls "critical situations," times of radical disruption in the everyday routines of agents. Newfoundlanders' love of this novel points to a similar desire for routine and predictability at a time when the future seems uncertain.

*Random Passage* is festive, as well, in that it achieves *communitas*: it "partly bring[s] about a temporary reconciliation among conflicting members of a single community" (Turner 1982: 21). A rhetorical act, the style of a novel about place encourages identification on the part of readers, encourages them to share certain terms (and not others) for understanding place. Undoubtedly, reading is a complex act. A book allows for different interpretations. And while some readers will read *Random Passage* as a valorization of marginalized women's experience or marginalized Newfoundlanders' voices, book reviews and public comments about the novel focus, instead, on traditional ways of understanding Newfoundland culture: as "real" or "authentic." For example, according to Breakwater Books' web site, the novel provides "those details that headstones and history books can never give: the "real" story of our Newfoundland ancestors" ([www.breakwater.nf.net.bmfiction2.htm](http://www.breakwater.nf.net.bmfiction2.htm)). Similarly,

former Newfoundland premier Brian Tobin recommends both of Morgan's books "to anyone who wants to get a slice of this province" ([www3.nf.sympatico.ca/nf/bernice.morgan/books.htm](http://www3.nf.sympatico.ca/nf/bernice.morgan/books.htm)). This belief in the real Newfoundland constitutes a collective fiction and serves as the means of *communitas* for readers.

This desire for the "real" derives, in part, from pervasive tourist attitudes in Newfoundland, attitudes theorized by James Overton. He draws upon the work of theorist Dean MacCannell, who argues that the "unifying consciousness" of moderns is their belief that "reality and authenticity are... elsewhere, in other historical periods and cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles" (1976: 3). While Overton points out that this view of modernity is narrow, he maintains that it is nonetheless useful for characterizing a tourist view of Newfoundland which began in the nineteenth century and continues to the present. These attitudes provide a means of understanding some of the context of reception for Morgan's book. In Newfoundland, according to Overton,

there is a hunger for heritage and a quest for quaintness. The gnawing appeal of nostalgia runs as a theme through much tourism... Some people argue that we are seeing the emergence of a "post-industrial society" and a "post-modern culture." There is also talk of a "post-tourism" which is supplanting the mass holiday making which was "the quintessential form of tourism in industrial society." ... They see Newfoundland as being able to inhabit a niche in a world where "heritage" has become one of the most potent cultural symbols of our time (1996: 39).

Put simply, the utopic representation of outport Newfoundland in *Random Passage*, one accomplished in part through its style, appeals to one's *nostalgic* response. Nostalgia, a painful desire for homecoming, "acquires its widest and deepest possible meaning as the primeval and ever-present dream of a known but not specifically geographic homeland" (Nakjavani 1994: 98). One may feel nostalgic for a Newfoundland left behind or for a Newfoundland that no longer exists (if it ever did). Given the demographic upheaval and economic shifts in the province, a vague temporal and geographic setting opens itself up to many readers who will recognize it, desire it.

According to Pierre Bourdieu (1984), popular nostalgic texts become particularly desirable with "individuals or groups in decline," because these stories allow cultures to

endlessly reinvent ... essentialist faith in the eternity of natures, celebration of tradition and the past, the cult of history and its rituals, because the best

that they can expect from the future is the return of the old order, from which they expect the restoration of their social being (1984: 111).

Morgan's celebration of tradition has precedent in Canadian history and company in current literature. Ian McKay, for example, argues that much Maritime writing constituted a contradictory task of "modernizing antimodernism." He writes that such people as radio producers, advertisers, and novelists in Nova Scotia — often residents of Halifax — gave their region a cultural boost by highlighting in their various works of art those aspects of Nova Scotia they knew would be popular in the international marketplace. What was popular was also profoundly antimodern, an attitude which, he contends,

included a new way of evaluating regional landscape (the picturesque sublime) that esteemed those rockbound areas which previously had been maligned; a new way of seeing regional history (as a series of frozen moments from a distant Golden Age) ... All of these interconnected networks of words and things spoke of essence, the final perfect state towards which existents are striving or, more relevantly in this case, from which they have tragically diverged ... Nova Scotia's heart, its true essence, resided in the primitive, the rustic, the unspoiled, the picturesque, the quaint, the unchanging (1993: 2).

Morgan's book, then, comes out of a currently pervasive understanding of place as authentic, and this version of Newfoundland, Overton argues, is a classed phenomenon which

was "invented" for tourists. But it was not invented just for tourists. The same totems, icons, and images highlighted for tourists came to be seen as the essential symbols of Newfoundland national identity. Perhaps this is not surprising. Many of the same people were involved both in creating a sense of national identity and in publicizing Newfoundland. These largely middle-class individuals had a broadly similar world view and broadly similar tastes. Gradually, the state played a larger role, both in creating a Newfoundland identity and in promotional activity (1996: 17).

This desire for the essential is satisfied, in part, by *Random Passage's* reification of place, its noun-heavy style of cracked saucers and wooden tubs appealing to an aesthetic disposition, one that, according to Bourdieu "valorize[s] the trivial" (1984: 39). Bourdieu argues that this aesthetic consciousness, which requires that one be removed from the realities of poverty and economic necessity, is particularly characteristic of middle-class readers who idealize and aestheticize the working classes and their traditions. The

market success of *Random Passage*, I suspect, arises in part because Morgan's style appeals to working-class and middle-class readers. The book accommodates the working-class and lower-middle-class desire for participation with art (outlined by Bourdieu in *Distinction*) with its chronological plot, its simply drawn figures and lack of formal experimentation (32-33). At the same time, the book satisfies the middle-class impulse to aestheticize the mundane objects of working classes (here, settlers in an outport community).

We might ponder, finally, how "reflexive" a novel like *Random Passage* is. Festivity, particularly the festive liminoid space, ultimately involves self-reflexive and self-conscious understandings of one's society. According to Barbara Myerhoff:

Criticism and awareness are almost inevitable in liminal circumstances. When an initiate is stripped of all that he/she knows and understands — the sources of knowledge of self and society — he/she is likely to develop a freer, deeper understanding of the system from which he/she has been removed. Then the moral order is seen from a different perspective and the result may be alienation, social change, and/or individual self-awareness (1982: 117).

The extent to which *Random Passage* prompts reflexivity, alienation, and self-awareness depends on the idiosyncrasies and the attitudes of each reader: whether a reader indulges in Morgan's nostalgia and thereby validates and replicates her conceptions of place, or whether she reads it critically and critiques those popular conceptions. We might ask ourselves whether a novel challenges or maintains popular attitudes and whether our reading of popular fiction acknowledges the socially constitutive nature of texts. By examining style as a rhetorical act, we can reveal and interrogate the discursive terms in which a novel seduces its readers into a shared celebration of place.

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