

Reading Beyond Race in Margaret Laurence's "The Loons" from *A Bird in the House*

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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Abstract

Margaret Laurence's short story "The Loons" from *A Bird in the House* (1970) has proved highly controversial as an example of racist or anti-racist literature. The question is which? Laurence's bifocal narrative technique allows the mature narrator Vanessa MacLeod to revise her childhood prejudices and satirize the racial stereotypes in her ten-year-old self's perception of Piquette Tonnerre. Some critics have opined that, in the last sentence of the story, Laurence reinscribes the racism she has taken pains to deconstruct. Considering the story in context, however, suggests the focus of the story is the death of Vanessa's father. Realizing Piquette shares her grief inspires Vanessa to view her, years later, as an individual. The loons, "those phantom birds," prophesy death. Vanessa realizes Piquette, who suffered so greatly, "might have been the only one, after all, who had heard the crying of the loons."

Résumé

La nouvelle « *The Loons* » tirée de l'œuvre *A Bird in the House* (1970) de Margaret Laurence s'est avérée un exemple fort controversé de la littérature raciste ou antiraciste. La question est de savoir quelle est la technique de narration à double foyer de Laurence qui permet à la narratrice Vanessa MacLeod à l'âge adulte de revisiter ses préjugés d'enfance et de se moquer des stéréotypes raciaux dans la perception qu'elle avait à dix ans de Piquette Tonnerre. Certains critiques ont émis l'opinion que, dans la dernière phrase de la nouvelle, Laurence réinscrit le racisme qu'elle a pris soin de déconstruire. Toutefois, le thème central de la nouvelle, replacée dans son contexte, est la mort du père de Vanessa. Lorsqu'elle se rend compte des années plus tard que Piquette partage sa douleur, Vanessa la voit comme une personne et comprend que Piquette qui a tant souffert « serait la seule personne à avoir entendu les cris des huards », des « oiseaux fantômes » qui prophétisent la mort.

Margaret Laurence (1926-1987) wrote passionately about Aboriginal peoples in both her African texts and her Canadian works. She wrote with particular passion about the Métis in Canada, notably in her essay, "Man of Our People," in *Heart of a Stranger*—a review of George Woodcock's 1975 book, *Gabriel Dumont: The Métis Chief and his Lost World*—in which she declares that "The whole tragic area of Canadian history which encompasses the struggles, against great odds, of the prairie Indian and Métis peoples in the 1800's is one which has long concerned and troubled me" (161).¹ Her interest in the Métis is clearly reflected in her Manawaka cycle of Canadian fiction. Indeed, the thread that interconnects this saga is the Métis family of Tonnerre, French for "thunder," which plays a significant role in the texts: beginning with Lazarus in *The Stone Angel* (1964), continuing with his daughters—Piquette in *A Bird in the House* (1970) and *The Diviners* and Valentine in *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969)—and concluding with his son, Jules, father of Morag Gunn's daughter, Piquette, in *The Diviners* (1974).² Laurence says in her essay "On 'The Loons'": "I never knew a family exactly like the Tonnerre family, but the fictional family first appeared in my writing in *The Stone Angel*. Next came the writing of the short story 'The Loons'" (805) in 1962-63. Her ironic portrait of Piquette in "The Loons" has generated considerable debate. I will re-examine recent interpretations of this story that focus on race and offer an intervention in the debate that emphasizes the individual and family. Some historical background on the publication of this story may help contextualize this debate.

Laurence has been caught in the "appropriation controversy" (xxiv), as Emma LaRocque puts it in "Here Are Our Voices – Who Will Hear?" (xv-xxx), her preface to *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada* (1990). In "The Loons," Laurence addresses, from her perspective as a white liberal of Scots-Irish background, the stereotyping of Canada's Aboriginal peoples and the silencing of the Métis a decade before Métis writers—beginning with Maria Campbell and including Beatrice Culleton Mosionier, Marilyn Dumont, and Gregory Scofield—began to write in their own voices. In her autobiography, *Halfbreed*, Campbell documents "what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country" (2). In doing so, she resists the racial stereotypes that Laurence's narrator, Vanessa MacLeod, attempts to impose on Piquette, challenging the white character's construction of Piquette's inadequacy as a stereotypical Indian, accounting for Piquette's displacement, and giving a voice to the silenced Métis girl. As Janice Acoose comments in her essay on *Halfbreed*, "[Maria Campbell] does not die a victim of Canadian society's racism and sexism, like Margaret Laurence's beaten-down Piquette Tonnerre"

(150). Campbell's groundbreaking text was published exactly one decade after "The Loons" was first aired on radio. Thus, Laurence anticipates the rewriting of a literature that had failed to include the perspectives of Canada's indigenous and Métis people. Consequently, it is important to historicize the story in order to see it in its chronological and cultural contexts.

"The Loons" was first broadcast by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in May 1963 and published in *The Atlantic Advocate* 56, 7, in March 1966, long before it was collected in *A Bird in the House* in 1970. In her 1972 essay, "Time and the Narrative Voice," Laurence affirms that, although seven of the eight stories appeared individually before they were collected in *A Bird in the House*, the stories were "conceived from the beginning as a related group" (157). Ironically, Judith Jones, Laurence's editor at Knopf, urged her to change *A Bird in the House* from a collection of linked stories to a novel, because collections of stories did not sell as well as novels and because she disliked the overlapping of the stories that Laurence repeatedly defends and that critics have admired. Jon Kertzer argues in "*That House in Manawaka*": Margaret Laurence's *A BIRD IN THE HOUSE* (1992), that "it does not matter whether we treat [Vanessa's memories] as a collection of stories or a novel with eight chapters. In either case the book aspires to a special kind of unity" (22). Bruce Stovel claims, in his 1989 essay, "Coherence in *A Bird in the House*," that "the artistry in each story lies in the interconnected, cumulative resonances that bind the stories together into a single, coherent whole" (130). Sherrill Grace, in her 1977 essay, "Crossing Jordan: Time and Memory in the Fiction of Margaret Laurence," considers *A Bird in the House* "a small masterpiece" and "perhaps her finest work" (329). Clearly, *A Bird in the House* as a collection of stories has proved an artistic and a popular success.

In *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence records her battles over this issue: when she declared she "would rather not have the book published at all than make the stories into a novel" (198), her preference prevailed. Laurence's responses to Jones's requests for editorial revisions, titled "Revisions and Disagreements," suggest that Jones wanted Laurence to omit "The Loons."³ Laurence responds, "The Loons—??—I think this story should remain, although I know it isn't the strongest story in the collection" (np). Given its fame, this is ironic, for "The Loons" is Laurence's most frequently anthologised short story, collected in Gilbert and Gubar's 1985 *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* and Margaret

Atwood and Robert Weaver's 1995 *New Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English*.

"The Loons" has proved highly controversial as an example of anti-racist *or* racist literature. The question is *which*? Or is it both? Critics have been divided on this question. "The Loons" was dropped from Gilbert and Gubar's latest edition of the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* and was replaced in Atwood and Weaver's *New Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English* by "Horses of the Night"—perhaps for this reason.

The original title of the story, when it was first published in *The Atlantic Advocate* in 1966, was "The Crying of the Loons," a phrase that is repeated three times in the original story: at the beginning, in the title; in the middle; and at the end, in the concluding sentence: "It seemed to me now that in some unconscious, and totally unrecognized way, Piquette might have been the only one, after all, who had heard the crying of the loons" (120)—a sentence that has itself proved highly controversial. (Interestingly Marilyn Dumont implies similar symbolism in the last line of "The geese are not welcome" in her 1996 collection, *A Really Good Brown Girl*: "there are no geese here; they are not welcome" [67].)

Tracy Ware explores the possible implications of this sentence in his 1998 essay, "Race and Conflict in Garner's 'One-Two-Three Little Indians' and Laurence's 'The Loons,'" suggesting that Laurence associates Piquette, and, by extension, Métis people, with the disappearance of the loons: "Piquette is inscribed in a tragic fate in which she has no agency" (79). Although Ware acknowledges that "[n]o one would doubt the good intentions of Margaret Laurence" (80), he finds unintended racism in her loon symbolism.⁴ He concludes, "There are, then, two types of confusion in 'The Loons': the Métis are confused with the Indians; and both are confused with the loons" (79). It is important to note, however, that it is the young Vanessa, not Laurence, who confuses the Métis with the Indians, a confusion that Laurence clearly satirizes. Herbert Zirker provides a semiotic analysis of the word "loon" in his 1988 article, "Metaphoric Mapping in Margaret Laurence's Narrative," problematizing Laurence's loon symbolism and Vanessa's realization that "the destiny of the loons as a vanishing species epitomizes the fate of Piquette and her social group, the Métis of Manawaka," in Zirker's words (174). These critics conclude that, in that final sentence, by connecting the Métis girl, Piquette Tonnerre, with the symbol of the vanished loons, Laurence reinscribes the racism she has clearly been at pains to deconstruct throughout the story.

I hope to counter this interpretation by contextualizing "The Loons" in the collection as a whole and by introducing a personal, familial perspective on the story that moves beyond race.

Laurence's protagonist, Vanessa MacLeod, does reduce Piquette Tonnerre to a romantic stereotype that Laurence satirizes. Narrated by Vanessa, as an adult writer remembering her childhood, *A Bird in the House* offers a dual perspective, ironizing the chasm between the child's fantasies and the mature writer's memories. The child Vanessa's vision of Indians is inspired by literature like *Hiawatha*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's (1807-1882) 1855 narrative poem, known as his "Indian Edda," which romanticized the North American Aboriginal. Vanessa asserts, "I was a devoted reader of Pauline Johnson at this age, and sometimes would orate aloud and in an exalted voice, *West Wind, blow from your prairie nest; Blow from the mountains, blow from the west*" (112).⁵ Pauline Johnson (1861-1913), born on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario, of a Mohawk father and an English mother, typified, according to David Jackel in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, "an authentic 'Indian' voice in poetry" (581) in poems that themselves romanticized aboriginal legends. Pauline Johnson, however, critiqued stereotypical portraits of Indians in "white" writings.⁶ Gloria Bird corroborates her view in "The First Circle—Native Women's Voice," her introduction to *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada*: "As Indian women we are taught through stereotypes in literature" (ix)—a view that Marilyn Dumont also confirms in her essay "Popular Images of Nativeness."

Piquette piques Vanessa's interest, for "I realised that the Tonnerre family, whom I had always heard called half-breeds, were actually Indians, or as near as made no difference" (112). Here, Laurence satirizes the confusion that Ware notes. Vanessa mythologizes the Métis girl: "my new awareness that Piquette sprang from the people of Big Bear and Poundmaker, of Tecumseh, of the Iroquois who had eaten Father Brebeuf's heart—all this gave her an instant attraction in my eyes" (112). Vanessa also romanticizes Piquette: "It seemed to me that Piquette must be in some way a daughter of the forest, a kind of junior propheticess of the wilds, who might impart to me, if I took the right approach, some of the secrets which she undoubtedly knew—where the whippoorwill made her nest, how the coyote reared her young, or whatever it was that it said in *Hiawatha*" [*sic*] (112). Gloria Bird explains, "Negative self-images have been internalized, pitting culture and identity against a romanticized version of who and what we are as people" (ix). Emma LaRocque writes, "Aboriginal peoples' worlds have been falsified in white North American

literary traditions and popular culture” (xxiii-xxiv). Laurence calls attention to these falsifications in “The Loons.”

Vanessa’s conception of Piquette is coloured by literary stereotypes that Laurence cleverly satirizes. Laurence’s bifocal narrative technique in *A Bird in the House* allows the mature Vanessa to revisit and revise her childhood prejudices and to satirize her ten-year-old self’s stereotypes when Piquette visits the family cottage at Diamond Lake.⁷ Laurence makes the irony explicit by stating, “Diamond Lake had been renamed Lake Wapakata for it was felt that an Indian name would have a greater appeal to tourists” (119). Regarding this name change, Leslie Monkman notes, in “The Tonnerre Family: Mirrors of Suffering,” “The white world that displaces the loons and rejects Piquette chooses to acknowledge only a romantic image of the past rather than the grim reality of the present” (146).

Contextualizing “The Loons” in the collection as a whole can help to clarify the story and the import of its final sentence. *A Bird in the House* chronicles Vanessa’s maturation, as she comprehends the reality of others and the life lessons of “love and death” (65). The loons, as the title of the story indicates, are a touchstone for Vanessa’s maturation process. Her father urges her to listen to the loons and to remember their cry because, when more people move to the lake, the loons will leave. In “On ‘The Loons,’” Laurence records:

We did indeed have a cottage at Clear Lake, Riding Mountain, and this is the very beloved place I am describing in the fictional Diamond Lake, Galloping Mountain. The loons used to be there, nesting on the shore, when I was a child, and we used to hear their eerie unforgettable cry. The loons did move away when the cottages increased in number and more and more people came in. (805)

When Vanessa tries to interest Piquette in the disappearance of the loons, however, Piquette responds, “Who gives a good goddamn?” Piquette’s rebuff deflates Vanessa’s romantic conception. As Laurence explains in “Time and the Narrative Voice,” “The eleven-year-old Vanessa sees the Métis girl, Piquette Tonnerre, in terms of romanticized notions of Indians, and is hurt when Piquette does not respond in the expected way” (159-60). Vanessa concludes, “as an Indian, Piquette was a dead loss” (114)—one of the most ironic statements in Laurence’s fiction, for Piquette’s death with her two children in a fire at the Tonnerre shack is a tragic loss indeed. William H. New concludes, in “No Longer Living There: Margaret Laurence’s *A Bird in the House*,” “A ‘dead loss’ is

precisely what Piquette becomes, but in terms that invert the stereotype and mordantly criticize the society that can only think in clichés" (199).

Years later, when Vanessa meets Piquette in the Regal café, and Piquette's mask slips to reveal a desperate need to belong to the very social order she rejected, Vanessa declares, "I saw her" (117). After the sentence, "She had been forced to seek the things she so bitterly rejected" (117), Laurence excised the following sentences from her typescript: "Both the rejection and the deliberate seeking—on her part or on anyone's—seemed warped. How had she failed so deeply—and how had we?"⁸ In "Time and the Narrative Voice" Laurence explains, "It is only when Vanessa hears of Piquette's death that she realizes that she, too, like the entire town, is in part responsible. But the harm and alienation started a long way back [...]" (160). Thus, Piquette's fate also represents Vanessa's failure.

After editor Lachlan MacLachlan assigns Vanessa's classmate, Morag Gunn, to report on the fire for the *Manawaka Banner* in *The Diviners* (172-76), Morag weeps "as though pain were the only condition of human life" in "*Memorybank Movie: Down in the Valley, Act III*" (176). When Vanessa learns of Piquette's death, she feels remorse and begins to apprehend her. As Peter Easingwood observes in "Semi-Autobiographical Fiction and Revisionary Realism in *A Bird in the House*," "In this story, this enlargement of experience occurs only in the narrator's retrospective view of her relationship with the unlucky Métis girl" (23). In her essay, "On 'The Loons,'" Laurence records:

When I was young, fires in winter among the collection of destitute shacks at the foot of the hill, in the valley below town, were tragically common. Years later, when I lived in Vancouver, I used to read in the newspapers about fires destroying the flimsy shanties of native peoples. Something about that fire, and the terrible and unnecessary waste of lives, must have almost obsessed me, for that event came into my fiction twice more after the short story—a relatively brief reference in my novel *The Fire-Dwellers*, and a long scene and many other references in my novel *The Diviners*. (806)⁹

After she learns about the fire, Vanessa realizes Piquette "might have been the only one, after all, who had heard the crying of the loons" (120). The question is: what does this concluding sentence import?

Laurence explains in her commentary, "On 'The Loons'": "The loons seemed to symbolize in some way the despair, the uprootedness,

the loss of the land that many Indians and Métis must feel”(805). Such symbolism has been addressed by various critics. Angelika Maeser-Lemieux explains, in “The Métis in the Fiction of Margaret Laurence: From Outcast to Consort,” that the Métis “serve as a metaphor for the alienated and repressed parts of the individual and collective psyche in patriarchal culture” (129). In “Romantic Nationalism and the Image of Native People in Contemporary English-Canadian Literature,” Margery Fee explains that, in such Romantic nationalist metaphors, “the Indian stands for a dispossession larger than his own” (24). In “The Tonnerre Family: Mirrors of Suffering,” Leslie Monkman, naming four 1973 texts that “focus primarily on the impact of the dispossessed native on a twentieth-century white protagonist,” affirms:

The three generations of the Tonnerre family peopling the Manawaka fiction of Margaret Laurence function within this latter pattern, bringing to this series of works images of suffering and death, acceptance and endurance, that are integrally related to the experience of each of Laurence’s heroines. (143)

In “Time and the Narrative Voice,” Laurence says:

The loons, recurring in the story both in their presence and in their absence, are connected to an ancestral past that belongs to Piquette, and the older Vanessa can see the irony of the only way in which Piquette’s people are recognized by the community, in the changing of the name Diamond Lake to the more tourist appealing Lake Wapakata. (160)

By noting the economic reasons for using an Indian name, however, Laurence ironizes the racism in Manawaka’s attitude to the Métis culture.

Interpreting the final sentence of the story as suggesting an objective correlative between the loons and the Métis may imply a failure to understand the associative range of symbolism and may reinscribe the very racism that Laurence is concerned to deconstruct in this story. Whereas, initially, the naive child Vanessa views Piquette as a representative of a race in Laurence’s satirical portrayal of racial prejudice, the maturing adolescent Vanessa learns to see her as an individual. The focus of all the stories in *A Bird in the House* is Vanessa and her developing perception of people. Thus, the focus of “The Loons” is not so much Piquette herself as Vanessa’s developing perception of her. Readers have been taught to be cautious about conflating the narrator’s voice with the author’s. So, to ascribe racism to Laurence based on her narrator’s statement seems

to suggest such conflation. Indeed, Laurence may be representing the adult Vanessa's views ironically in that final sentence, as she did the child Vanessa's prejudices, suggesting an implied criticism on the part of the author, a subversive subtext uniting author and reader.

Although irony, dating from Quintilian, has been taken to mean something that is the opposite of what is actually said, recent theorists, such as Linda Hutcheon, in *Irony's Edge: the Theory and Politics of Irony* (1994), acknowledge the "dynamic and plural relations among the text or utterance (and its context), the so-called ironist, the interpreter, and the circumstances surrounding the discursive situation" (11). Jennifer Andrews concludes in "Irony, Métis Style: Reading the Poetry of Marilyn Dumont and Gregory Scofield":

There is no guarantee that an audience will receive and understand the irony as it was intended. Hence, irony can be more accurately understood as the layering of different perspectives that create multiple voices or visions. [...] The process of interpretation is a critical part of irony, and one that is obviously shaped by the audience's perspective.

"The Loons" demonstrates the truth of her conclusions, for critics have been divided about interpreting the voice in the last sentence as the author's or as her narrator's.

Intriguing as this racial controversy is, I wish to suggest an alternate focus for the story. "The Loons" is not only about racial relations, I argue, but also about familial relations. *A Bird in the House* is Laurence's most autobiographical fiction. In "A Place To Stand On," the opening essay in *Heart of a Stranger*, she defines it as "the only semi-autobiographical fiction I have ever written" (5). In her commentary, "On 'The Loons,'" she affirms, "The roots of ['The Loons'] go back a very long way into my childhood" (805). Lyall Powers reports in *Alien Heart: The Life and Work of Margaret Laurence*, "Margaret Laurence frequently admitted that *A Bird in the House* is quite heavily autobiographical" (15). Doreen Xiques confirms, in *Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer*, that "the fictional Vanessa MacLeod is depicted in some situations which parallel those in the life of young Peggy Wemyss" (48). Helen Buss affirms the "identity theme" in "Margaret Laurence and the Autobiographical Impulse," and Peter Easingwood develops it further in his essay "Semi-autobiographical Fiction and Revisionary Realism in *A Bird in the House*." In "On 'The Loons,'" Laurence affirms, "The character of Vanessa is based on myself as a child, and the MacLeod family is based on my own childhood family

[...] but here is where the process of fiction becomes interesting” (805). She explains how she fictionalised fact: the character of Piquette was modeled on a Métis girl who had tuberculosis of the bone and who visited the Wemyss cottage at Clear Lake, but she was much younger than Peggy Wemyss, while Peggy’s father was a lawyer, not a doctor, who had died years before she knew the girl.¹⁰

Other parallels between Piquette and the Métis girl prevail, however, Laurence recalls:

She was, not surprisingly, very shy and withdrawn, and I was puzzled by her at the time. Only many years later did I realize how unhappy she must have been. I learned something about her when we were both grown up—she did indeed marry an English-Canadian, and the marriage turned out badly. I never heard anything more. She became the basis of the character of Piquette Tonnerre. (805)

Piquette is thus an excellent example of Laurence’s artistic alchemy, her creative genius for transforming fact into fiction. Laurence writes: “All these things somehow wove themselves into the story. Other things surfaced, part of the mental baggage which one carries inside one’s head always. [...] And so, by some mysterious process which I don’t claim to understand, the story gradually grew in my mind until it found its own shape and form” (806).

Before introducing my novel perspective on “The Loons,” I will consider the collection in its entirety, as Laurence originally conceived the project. All the stories in *A Bird in the House* focus on a member of the MacLeod family, as Vanessa reconsiders her childhood from the vantage point of adulthood. First, “The Sound of the Singing” focuses on her gentle, pious maternal grandmother, Agnes Connor, inspired by Laurence’s maternal grandmother, Jane Bailey Simpson; her autocratic patriarch grandfather, Timothy Connor, based on her grandfather, John Simpson; and his scapegrace brother, Dan. “To Set Our House in Order” focuses on her paternal grandmother, Eleanor MacLeod, that mauve-veined matriarch, modeled on Laurence’s paternal grandmother, Margaret Harrison Wemyss. “A Bird in the House,” the title story, focuses on Vanessa’s father, Ewen MacLeod, Manawaka’s doctor, based on Laurence’s father, Robert Wemyss, Neepawa’s lawyer; as the central story, it provides the pivot for the volume. The final story, “Jericho’s Brick Battlements,” focuses once again on Timothy Connor, framing the entire collection.

The collection is a work of mourning, as Christian Riegel explains in "Rest Beyond the River": "*A Bird in the House* is an exploration of themes of death and mourning" (67). Indeed, deaths structure the text: the first death, of Agnes Connor, occurs early in the volume in "The Mask of the Bear"; the death of Vanessa's father occurs in the central story, "A Bird in the House"; and the death of Timothy Connor occurs in the final story, "Jericho's Brick Battlements." Death, like love, is one of the adult phenomena that the child Vanessa must confront and attempt to comprehend, as I argue in "'Love and Death': Romance and Reality in *A Bird in the House*."

The three stories following "A Bird in the House" feature animals and outsiders: "The Loons" centres on Piquette Tonnerre and loons; "Horses of the Night" introduces Vanessa's cousin, Chris Connor, and his phantom steeds, Duchess and Firefly; and "The Half-Husky" hinges on Harvey Shinwell and the dog, Nanuk. Each of these characters is significant, but they are all outsiders—outsiders to Vanessa's family, that is. Coming from disadvantaged homes, they impinge on Vanessa's home and disrupt it. In doing so, they serve as triggers for Vanessa's epiphanies and catalyze her maturation. Laurence's focus is not simply on the outsiders themselves, but on Vanessa's maturing perception of them, a perception that is deftly symbolized by the telescope that Harvey Shinwell steals from the Connor house.¹¹ Laurence ultimately returns to the family for the final story, "Jericho's Brick Battlements," the only one written specifically for this collection, which focuses on the death of Timothy Connor. Considering any one story out of context can lead to distortions of interpretation.

The specific placement of the stories is significant as well. The fact that "The Loons" follows "A Bird in the House" suggests that it reflects the pivotal death of Vanessa's father. So the crucial scene in "The Loons" is not so much Vanessa's attempts to engage Piquette in conversation about wilderness lore, I would argue, as the scene in which Vanessa and her father sit silently together by the lake during the last summer of his life:

At night the lake was like black glass with a streak of amber which was the path of the moon. All around, the spruce trees grew tall and close-set, branches blackly sharp against the sky, which was lighted by a cold flickering of stars. Then the loons began their calling. They rose like phantom birds from the nests on the shore, and flew out onto the dark surface of the water. (114)

Laurence's description of the black lake reflecting the moon suggests death. "Neither of us suspected that this would be the last time that we

would ever sit here together on the shore, listening” (115), she recalls in retrospect, for her father dies the next winter.¹² This image of the lake as a symbol of death is reprised in “Horses of the Night,” when Vanessa and Chris camp by the lake, “the water which had spawned Saurian giants so long ago,” and talk about the death of Vanessa’s father, distant galaxies, and the impossibility of a God:

No human word could be applied. The lake was not lonely or untamed. These words relate to people, and there was nothing of people here. There was no feeling about the place. It existed in some world in which man was not yet born. I looked at the grey reaches of it and felt threatened. It was like the view of God which I had held since my father’s death. Distant, indestructible, totally indifferent. (138)

After painting an existential vision of the lake, Vanessa describes the cry of the loons:

No one can ever describe that ululating sound, the crying of the loons, and no one who has heard it can ever forget it. Plaintive, and yet with a quality of cold mockery, those voices belonged to a world separated by aeons from our neat world of summer cottages and the lighted lamps of home. (114)¹³

These “phantom birds” represent, not Canada’s indigenous peoples, I suggest, but death itself; not an aboriginal land before the arrival of the white settler, but a prehistoric land before there were any men, or gods, at all. The loon, or *gavia*, was formerly considered to be the most ancient of the northern hemisphere bird families. In aboriginal creation myths, loons bring up mud from the bottom of the lake to make the earth.¹⁴ Loons, therefore, as mythic creators of the earth, signify pre-existence in Laurence’s fiction. Their ancient origins connect them with the prehistoric dinosaurs and “the monster-kings of the lake” (144). “Pagan Point”—a poem written by Peggy Wemyss, as the young Margaret Laurence was then named, in 1942 and published in *The Manitoban* in 1944—portrays a primeval lake, where “heathen gods” and “unearthly paganism” reign, pierced by the “[r]aucous and heathen” cry of a loon (*EW* 2), connecting the loons with prehistory.¹⁵ In her short story, the loons are prophets of death, their ululating cry a primeval mourning.

Although Piquette scorned to join Vanessa at the water’s edge to listen to the loons, exclaiming, “You wouldn’ catch me walkin’ way down there jus’ for a bunch of squawkin’ birds” (115), Vanessa realizes, after

the death of her father, that Piquette, who has suffered loss and pain in her own young life, could hear the tragic note in the loons' prophetic cry—"the cries that come to symbolize an isolation both more painful and more profound than that experienced by Vanessa," Monkman writes in *A Native Heritage* (59). When Vanessa meets her years later at the Regal Café, Piquette confides a long-concealed truth: "'Listen, you wanna know something, Vanessa?' she confided, her voice only slightly blurred. 'Your dad was the only person in Manawaka that ever done anything good to me.'" Vanessa recalls, "I nodded speechlessly. I was certain she was speaking the truth" (116). The reader must infer the thoughts Vanessa cannot utter: Piquette, who depended on Dr. MacLeod, must have been jealous of Vanessa's easy relationship with her father, Vanessa's secure family and home, in which Piquette remained an outsider, and Vanessa's "kingdom" (111) at Diamond Lake. When Dr. MacLeod died, Piquette, like Vanessa, grieved.¹⁶

Ewen MacLeod said he hoped Piquette would be "company for Vanessa" (110), but, clearly, he hoped Vanessa would be company for Piquette. Piquette—abandoned by her mother, forced at thirteen to keep house for her father, Lazarus Tonnerre, and her siblings, and suffering from tuberculosis of the bone that has hospitalized her for months and left her with a limp—is a child who needs friendship.¹⁷ And Vanessa fails to provide it. She fails her father, and the guilt for this failure pains her. Similarly, when Vanessa fails her cousin, Chris Connor, in "Horses of the Night," she reflects, "I felt I had failed myself utterly" (*BH* 141). On their last meeting, however, the girls connect in their grief for Ewen's death. That is why Vanessa can see Piquette in a new light:

I remembered how Piquette had scorned to come along when my father and I sat there and listened to the lake birds. It seemed to me now that in some unconscious and totally unrecognised way, Piquette might have been the only one, after all, who had heard the crying of the loons. (120)

Considering Piquette as an individual allows us to perceive a meaning in this final sentence different from the racial interpretation that Ware and Zirker give it. Laurence suggests that Piquette, with her experience of loss, is aware of the loons as harbingers of death.

"On 'The Loons'" concludes: "The ways in which memories and created' events intertwine in this story probably illustrate a few things about the nature of fiction" (805):

Although certain details are taken from one's own life, and from memories of places and people, I think that the fiction comes to have its own special reality. In fact, the fictional town of Manawaka often seems as real to me as my own town of Neepawa, and its people seem very real in my mind. Of course, the odd thing about fiction is that even when the characters are based to some extent on actual people, they cease to be those people and become themselves. Ultimately, Vanessa is herself and not me at all, just as Piquette is herself.

And the process of fiction remains, thank God, mysterious. (806)

Thus, Laurence reminds us that fiction should not be confused with fact, but should be appreciated as a mysterious meeting of verity and imagination. In "No Longer Living There: Margaret Laurence's *A Bird in the House*," William H. New writes of Vanessa:

She tries to turn Piquette into a storybook character, temporarily concluding that 'as an Indian, Piquette was a dead loss'—but listening and language compel her instead into fracture, ambivalence, irony, reality. [...] Vanessa demonstrates her literacy by resisting closed stereotypes and inviting the reader to become an open listener, along with the child-Vanessa, to a language in the process of acquiring dimension.

Laurence corroborates New's individualistic perspective in her essay "On 'The Loons'": "History for me, as with social issues, is personalized—these events happen to real people; people with names, families and places of belonging" (806). So, we, as readers, must also become "open listeners" so that we, too, can hear "the crying of the loons."

To become open listeners, we must listen to Métis voices to fill the spaces of Piquette's silence. As Emma La Rocque writes in her preface to *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada*, "Here Are Our Voices – Who Will Hear?": "This anthology gives voice to Native women" (xxvii). As Gloria Bird writes in "The First Circle—Native Women's Voice," her introduction to *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada*, "silence gets us nowhere" (ix). Jeanne Perreault and Sylvia Vance state in their foreword, "*Native Women of Western Canada: Writing the Circle—An Anthology* was initiated for only one purpose—to give a place for Native women to speak. ... to lift the blanket of silence" (xi). As Robin Melting Tallow writes in her afterword to this anthology, "The written word has given us our voice" (287). Finally, Piquette's silence is broken by the Canadian Aboriginal women who write this circle.

Notes

1. This essay was originally published in *Canadian Forum*, December-January 1975/76, 28-29, under the title "Man of Honour."
2. Piquette Gunn Tonnerre is named for her late aunt. Lyall Powers claims that the Métis family of Tonnerre was modelled on Neepawa native Pate Chaboyer (*Alien Heart* 18).
3. Laurence's "Revisions and Disagreements," a holograph manuscript in box 2, file 2 of the Laurence Archives in the Special Collections at McMaster University, catalogue her responses to Knopf editor Judith Jones's requests for changes to the manuscript of *A Bird in the House*. James King discusses their disagreement in *The Life of Margaret Laurence*, 268-70. In a subsequent typescript titled "Revisions," Laurence reiterates to "Judith": "I really would like *The Loons* [*sic*] to remain, although I know it is not one of the stronger stories. In a sense it fills in details of the life of Manawaka, and also I think it might be a good thing to have some variety from the strictly family circle" (2).
4. Coincidentally, Tracy Ware presented this paper at an ACCUTE panel on Margaret Laurence in which I presented a paper on *The Diviners*. Disturbed by his reading of "The Loons," I was moved to counter his interpretation.
5. Unless otherwise indicated, all references will be to *A Bird in the House*.
6. See Johnson, E. Pauline. *E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake): Collected Poems and Selected Prose*. Ed. Carole Gerson and Veronica Jane Strong-Boag, 177-83.
7. Laurence writes, in "Time and the Narrative Voice," "The narrative voice had to be that of an older Vanessa, but at the same time the narration had to be done in such a way that the ten-year-old would be conveyed. The narrative voice therefore, had to speak as though from two points in time, simultaneously" (New 158-59). Jon Kertzer categorizes *A Bird in the House* as a "confessional memoir" in "That House in Manawaka" (15).
8. The typescript of *A Bird in the House*, containing these sentences, is in box 2, files 3-13 at McMaster University. There is no indication as to why this passage was omitted.
9. These shacks have now been eliminated from Neepawa. The late Florence Henderson, former Curator of the Margaret Laurence Home in Neepawa, told me that fires among these shacks were regrettably frequent. Laurence wrote articles for *The Westerner* in 1947, including one about a disastrous train wreck, compounded by fire, outside Winnipeg, perhaps inspiring the article Morag Gunn writes about the death of Piquette Tonnerre and her children in a fire for the "*Manawaka Banner*" in *The Diviners*.
10. In "On 'The Loons,'" Laurence says, "When I was about eleven or twelve, I got to know a young Métis girl who was several years younger than I. The Matron of the Neepawa Hospital was a close friend of our family, and the Métis child was in her care because the girl had tuberculosis of the bone in one leg. When the girl was well enough to walk (first with a cast, then with an awkward leg brace), she used to visit our house often" (805).
11. Laurence uses the telescope to symbolize Vanessa's perception of Harvey Shinwell as an orphan abused by his aunt. Such visual aids have frequently been employed in fiction to symbolize vision. One example that Laurence might have been familiar with is the use of binoculars in the Marabar Caves episode in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924).
12. In an eerie echo of "The Loons," my husband, Bruce Stovel, died in the winter between the time that I proposed this essay for a conference and the time I composed it. Although not prone to offering advice, he urged me not to propose this essay, lest I draw criticism.
13. Loons surface in other Manawaka texts: Rachel Cameron, recalling loons at Diamond Lake, says, "People say loon, meaning mad. Crazy as a loon. They were mad, those bird voices, perfectly alone, damning and laughing out there in the black reaches of the night water" in *A Jest of God* (168); and Stacey Cameron MacAindra recalls the "lunatic voices of the loons, witch birds out there in the night lake, or voices of dead shamans, mourning the departed Indian gods" at Diamond Lake in *The Fire-Dwellers* (172).

14. See "Nesaru and the creation of the world" in Burland, 84-86, and "Wigwam Tales of the Exploits of Manabozho" in Emerson, 343-49.
15. The title of "Pagan Point" includes the phrase "Approaching Night," with the subtitle "Wasagaming," the Cree name for Clear Lake. The 1942 date on the manuscript indicates "Pagan Point" is the earliest extant poem by Margaret Laurence. See *Embryo Words* 48.
16. Monkman argues in *A Native Heritage* that Laurence's later Canadian protagonists, including Vanessa, "find a new perspective on their pain through contact with the poverty, discrimination, and death pervading the world of the Tonnerres" (57).
17. Emma LaRoque writes, in her preface to *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada* (1990), of native children's betrayal by their families in being sent to hospitals, residential schools, and foster homes: "Where were the grandmothers, the mothers, the fathers, the brothers, the 'warriors'? Why did they not protect?" (xxix).

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*Reading Beyond Race in Margaret Laurence's "The Loons" from
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