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Piquette Tonnerre in “The Loons”

Guo Fang¹

ABSTRACT

The short novel “The Loons” is a masterpiece by Margaret Laurence. She writes the novel in a fresh, natural and emotional way. In the novel, Margaret Laurence, with a detailed description of the female image of Piquette, explores the meaning of human existence. This paper is to analyze the crucial character, Piquette, from the description of her appearance, her family and education, interpersonal communication, personal ideals, and her tragic fate, which will help the readers understand the theme of this short novel further.

Mots clés: “The Loons”; Piquette; Margaret Laurence.

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1. Introduction

“The Loons” is excerpted from *A Bind in The House* by Margaret Lawrence, published in 1970. The collection consists of eight stories told from the point of view of a young girl, Vanessa, from the age of 10 to 20. “The Loons”, the fifth story, is set in the fictional prairie town of Manawaka, based on nee-Pawa, Manitoba, where the author was born. The plot line is clear: as a teenager, the author met Piquette Tonnerre, an Indian girl who grew up in poverty and discrimination and, suffering from bone tuberculosis, dropped out of school unnoticeably even by her classmate, the narrator. Four years later, when the author chanced to see Piquette again in a cafe, she excitedly told “me” that she was going to marry a white man. Four years later, “I” learned from “my” mother that her marriage had failed, that she had been abandoned, returned to Manawaka, and that she and her two young children had “accidentally” died in the fire.

In this short novel, Laurence paints Piquette from various angles, bringing her to life in three dimensions. This paper will interpret Piquette from the description of her appearance, her family and education, interpersonal communication, personal ideals, and tragic fate.

2. Her appearance

Based on the description of Piquette’s voice and appearance, the author creates a rough, untidy, unkempt female image with a sense of mystery. By showing the great changes of the image of Piquette before and after, the author gives readers space for imagination, creating suspense and

¹School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China. Email: gf922@163.com

thought-provoking. There are many references to Piquette in the novel, for example: "Otherwise, she existed for me only as vaguely embarrassing presence, with the hoarse voice and her clumsy limping walk and her grimy cotton dresses that were always miles too long." This gives the reader an overall picture of Piquette as an embarrassing personage, with a gruff voice, a limp and greasy, oversized clothes. "Her long hair hung back and straight around her shoulders, and her broad coarse-featured face bore no expression --- it was blank, as though she no longer dwelt within her own skull, as though she had gone elsewhere. Piquette's long hair is down, her skin is rough, her face is expressionless, and she seemed to have left her body for somewhere else. It creates a sense of mystery, as if Piquette doesn't belong here on earth. In her heart she seemed to have a premonition of her own fate and the fate of her people, and even of the loons with the same fate. "I stared at her, astounded that anyone could have changed so much. Her face, so stolid and expressionless before, was animated now with a gaiety that was almost violent." The author's comparison of piquette's facial expressions in different periods creates a kind of suspense, and readers naturally intend to explore the reasons. "Stolid--animated; expressionless--gaiety; before -- now" is a set of contradictory words that describe the great change that happened to Piquette, which unfolds an artificial complexity of the author's inner life. In the process of reading, readers can also understand the author's emotional intention in order to resonate with them at a higher level. Readers are no longer satisfied with the superficial meaning of the text, but exert their own subjective imagination to explore the reasons behind Piquette's change. Piquette learned to be strong and realized that the minority of the French-Indian race can only survive and thrive through its own relentless efforts (Wang, 2012:113).

3. The family and her education

The story begins with an account of the poor living conditions and circumstances of the Piquette family. First, it shows the untrammled prehistoric nature of western Canada: Just below Manawaka, where the Wachakwa River ran brown and noisy over the pebbles, the scrub oak and grey-green willow and choke cherry bushes grew in a dense thicket." Then, the author switched to a closer shot "In a clearing at the centre of the thicket stood the Tonnerre family's shack" (Lawrence, 2017:152) in the middle of the dense jungle. Piquette's grandfather came back from Batoche in 1885 with a bullet in his thigh. Finally, by the 1930s, the family was thriving, and the clearing was lined with cabins, surrounded by a jumble of wooden packing cases, discarded car tires, coils of barbed wire and rusty tin cans. Generations of Piquette's family have lived in this undeveloped virgin forest, which seemed far away from modern civilization. However, everything piled up around the cabin undoubtedly showed the strong impact of highly developed industrial civilization on their lives, implying the departure of human civilization full of industrial garbage from harmonious ecology.

Although the family was of French descent, they spoke neither French nor the Cree dialect, but their own patois. They also spoke English, but with a very irregular quality, for "They were neither Cree of the Galloping Mountain reservation, nor Scots-Irish nor Ukrainians of the Marawaka" (Lawrence, 2017:152). They were, as the author's grandmother put it, "neither flesh, fowl, nor good salt herring." (Lawrence, 2017:152)

Piquette was in "my" class at school. She had failed several grades by the time she was 13. "Her attendance had always been sporadic and her interest in schoolwork negligible" (Lawrence, 2017:153). The reason why her school performance was not good apart from her bone tuberculosis was she had to take care of the house. Her father Lazarus and grandfather worked at odd jobs and lived on relief. Sometimes the father and son would get drunk and fought, and the Mountie would arrest them and put them for the night in the barred cell and then release them. Piquette was responsible for cooking for the family while "Lazarus did nothing as long as she was at home. As for her mother, she "took off a few years back". "My" father, from the doctor's point of view, said, "I don't think she'll be able to take care of herself once she gets home." (Lawrence, 2017:153) Living in such a family situation, Piquette had to bear the burden of housework on her weak shoulders.

4. Interactions with “me”

Piquette, who grew up in an unloving home, was sensitive, indifferent, and aloof. She was wary of everyone around her. “My” father, to ensure that Piquette should be cared for so that her leg could recover soon, decided to take her with “us” on a vacation to Diamond Lake.

When we arrived, my parents and I and even my 10-month-old brother were all excited and curious about the scene, but Piquette was untouched. After some hesitation, I approached her and offered her my invitation, “Want to come and play?” Piquette looked at me with a sudden flash of scorn. “I ain’t a kid,” she said. “Wounded, I stamped angrily away, swearing I would not speak to her for the rest of the summer” (Lawrence, 2017:154-155). That is the first turn of verbal exchange between “me” and Piquette. But the communication was not successful. Piquette did not abide by the communicative cooperate principle and she showed her scorn towards “me”. Piquette’s reaction is both expected and unexpected for readers. It is expected because we know that there is no such a word like “childhood” in her world. While it is unexpected for we are enlightened that all children are gifted to be good at playing games. From this turn of exchange, readers witness that Piquette is unhappy, proud, indifferent, and short of confidence. However, Piquette began to interest “me” because “I” realized that the Tonnerre family were actually Indians. “I” was so curious about the Indian culture and that “I” was eager to learn the secrets about that ethnicity. Therefore, “I” managed to be closer to Piquette although “I” had promised not to speak a word to Piquette. “I” lured her down to the beach. “Do you like this place?” I asked, after a while, intending to lead on from there into the question of forest lore. Piquette shrugged, “It’s okay. Good as anywhere”. “I love it,” I said. “We come here every summer.” “So what?” (Lawrence, 2017:156-157) Her voice was distant, and I glanced at her uncertainly, wondering what I could have said wrong. That is the second unsuccessful verbal exchange, which informs the readers that Piquette shows no interest in anything and she does not have a love for the people and the surroundings. Piquette has no an eye for the beauty of the nature. To put it directly, we should say that she has never experienced the feeling of being loved and she has no time or mood to notice the natural beauty. She is unfriendly towards the world because the world treats her unfriendly. Though “I” was rebuffed, “I” didn’t retreat. I continued my try. “Do you want to come for a walk?” I asked her. “We wouldn’t need to go far. If you walk just around the point there, you come to a bay where great big reeds grow in the water, and all kinds of fish hang around there. Want to? Come on.” She shook her head (Lawrence, 2017:156). That is the third exchange and this time “I” was refused again. However, this exchange is approaching to be normal. Hence, we should say that all people are born to be kind and soft and when they smell of no danger to them, they will let go of the guard and open themselves to the world naturally and normally. Piquette’s normal reaction ignited “my” hope and “I” came directly to the question, “I bet you know a lot about the woods and all that, eh?”. Piquette looked at me from her large dark unsmiling eyes. “I don’t know what in hell you’re takin about,” she replied. “You nuts or somethin’?” If you mean where my old man, and me, and all them live, you better shut up, by Jesus, you hear?” (Lawrence, 2017:156-157) In this turn of exchange, Piquette resumed her guard because she was so sensitive that she had realized that she would be a prey. From this exchange, we can see that Piquette was not proud of her origin and she was unwilling to belong to a special ethnic group. Her ethnicity is a burden to her and she wanted to throw away the label, the farther, the better. So when she was asked about the story of her ethnicity she was enraged. She began to retreat behind the wall of protection. When “I” went on with “my” inquiry, she suppressed her anger and reacted “Who gives a good goddamn?” That is the last exchange between Piquette and “me” in that summer. “I” was rebuffed once more and from then on “my” dream of getting touch with Piquette well was scattered.

Years later, “I” met Piquette again. She saw me, and walked over. She teetered a little, but it was not due to her once-tubercular leg, for her limp was almost gone. “Hi, Vanessa,” Her voice still had the same hoarseness. “Long time no see, eh?” (Lawrence, 2017:158-159) That is the first time for Piquette to say “hello” to “me”. From her tone of language and from her air of speaking, we are surprised to see that a new Piquette is coming, full of hope and energy. She was not escaping from the reality and she was to face it bravely because she thought that she had walked into the main current of the society by means of marriage. She was satisfied with her would-be husband because he was handsome and he was from a family with white blood. Piquette thought her spring was coming and she

would enjoy the sweet life the same as others did. She left the past behind and an optimistic, energetic, confident and enthusiastic Piquette came into being.

5. Tragic fate

When "I" was eighteen, "I" left Manawaka for college. At the end of the first year, "I" came back home for the summer. "My" mother told me the story of Piquette: "Either her husband left her, or she left him," my mother said. "I don't know which. Anyway, she came back here with two youngsters, both only babies—they must have been born very close together. She kept house, I guess, for Lazarus and her brothers, down in the valley there, in the old Tonnerre place. I used to see her on the street sometimes, but she never spoke to me. She'd put on an awful lot of weight, and she looked a mess, to tell you the truth, a real slattern, dressed any old how. She was up in court a couple of times—drunk and disorderly, of course. One Saturday night last winter, during the coldest weather, Piquette was alone in the shack with the children. The Tonnerres made home brew all the time, so I've heard, and Lazarus said later she'd been drinking most of the day when he and the boys went out that evening. They had an old wood stove there—you know the kind, with exposed pipes. The shack caught fire. Piquette didn't get out, and neither did the children." (Lawrence, 2017:160)

When the marriage failed, Piquette thought she had completely lost the chance to change her fate. Losing hope in the future, she bowed her head to life. She sank into alcoholism. Sometimes she was taken away by the police, and eventually killed in a fire after a drunken day. Piquette led a tragic life and her fate was doomed to be so.

The themes and the characters are vividly reflected and depicted in this excellent novel. The author creates an unforgettable image of an Indian woman with her superb writing skills, sincere emotion, keen insight and vivid and simple languages. By means of telling the story of the loon and the creating of the female image, Margaret Lawrence explores the meaning of human existence and self-worth, and calls on the Canadian authorities to correctly deal with the cultural differences and conflicts among various ethnic groups. It calls for equality and freedom between ethnic cultures in the real sense, which reflects the author's deep sympathy and understanding for the living conditions of ethnic minorities.

6. Her dreams

Piquette is a flesh person and she has her own spirit and eagerness. Like others, her mind is full of dreams and eagerness too.

Piquette seemed to be indifferent and interested in nothing. But at the bottom of her heart, she had a sweet princess dream just like other girls. "I came out and sat beside Piquette on the sand. When she saw me approaching, her hands squashed flat the sand castle she had been building, and she looked at me sullenly, without speaking." (Lawrence, 2017:155-156) On the beach, Piquette built a sand castle where is usually the residence of a princess. From this point, we can guess that Piquette dreamed to lead a life of a princess'. However, she dared not expose her dream because she was afraid of being laughed at. Therefore she buried the dream at the bottom of her heart and she would like to appreciate it privately.

After years of being laughed at, Piquette has been waiting for a chance to rebel. In her mind, the only opportunity lied in her marriage. To her satisfactory, she thought she had grasped it. When she met "me" years later, she can't wait to show off. "I'll tell you something else," Piquette went on. "All the old bitches an' biddies in this town will sure be surprised. I'm gettin' married this fall—my boy friend, he's an English fella, works in the stockyards in the city there, a very tall guy, got blond wavy hair. Gee, is he ever handsome. Got this real classy name. Alvin Gerald Cummings—some handle, eh? They call him Al." (Lawrence, 2017:159) Piquette was eager to be a member of the mainstream. She had been treated badly by the rest of the society. But she was not defeated. For years, she had been waiting to be accepted, respected and even admired. She put all her stakes on the last cast of dice (marriage) and she thought she made it.

Acknowledgement

Margaret Laurence (1926–1987), one of the most outstanding Canadian female writers, is also an important Canadian realist writer. She was awarded the Governor General’s Literary Award, Canada’s highest literary honor. Margaret Laurence’s parents died young and she was raised by her stepmother and grandfather. After marrying Jack Lawrence, an engineer, she went to Somalia, Ghana and lived in Britain for many years before returning to Canada in 1974. Margaret Laurence is different from most white British and American writers. Instead of focusing on the mainstream culture of white people, Margaret Laurence uses her years of life experience in other cultures, her deep understanding of Canadian multiculturalism and her delicate interpretation of women (Cai, 2008:131). In her works, she has made her own interpretation of the plight of people and nations in marginal cultures. Margaret Laurence writes in a fresh, natural and emotional way. Her works seem to be written without conflict, but in fact, they are carefully planned through delicate descriptions. “The Loons”, her representative work, is typical of this writing feature.

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