

18-20 June, 2021

Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* & William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* – Canadian literature and the Western Canon –

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Abstract.

The paper undertakes a parallel between Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*, considered by most critics 'marginal' – according to topographic criteria – and one of the major novels pertaining to the Western canon, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. The points to tackle with in this comparison would, hopefully, allow for a favourable assessment as far as the "canonicity" of *The Double Hook* is concerned. The central focus of the analysis will be on the modernist scaffolding of both novels, especially targeting the insistent employment of the stream of consciousness technique, the interior monologue – which I premise to be the major criterion enabling a bridging of the gap between what I termed the 'marginal' and the 'canonical' texts. Likewise, a further investigation, into the deep structure of the texts, will reveal the existence of quasi-similar themes approached and treated extensively in both novels.

Keywords: parochialism; canonicity; magical realism; topography; decomposition.

1. Introduction

The idea of drawing a parallel between a "sample" of literature: Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*, considered by most "marginal" – according to topographic, rather than substantive criteria – and one of the major novels pertaining to the Western canon: William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* came subsequent to the reading of a statement made by Sheila Watson, in which she acknowledges the predicament of a rough ongoing. She thought, according to her own account, "about a problem and a place. Whether or not it was possible for a writer in Canada in the first half of the twentieth century to write about a particular place without remaining merely regional – this was the problem...[H]ow do you? How are you international if you're not international? If you're very provincial, very local, and very much a part of your own milieu..." (Watson, 1989).

The very strong feeling one has about the novel in the aftermath of its perusal is that the author has successfully managed to sidestep the (monocultural) parochialism and to imprint on her literary text the insignia of all those "badges of identity" that were recognised and acknowledged in

18-20 June, 2021

Faulkner's writing, leading to a positive valorisation of his novel and a legitimating by Western canons of appraisal.

2. Body of the paper

The points to tackle with on the agenda of this undertaken comparison between a 'marginal' text and a 'central', 'canonical' one will be the *what* and the *how* of the two literary productions, that would, hopefully, allow for a favourable assessment as far as the canonicity of *The Double Hook* is concerned, an assessment tributary, therefore, to two major analyses: that of the layout, the format of the novel – which seems to be, to all intents and purposes, a modernist one – and that of the underlying patterns of meaning.

The central focus of the analysis will be on the modernist scaffolding of both novels, especially targeting the insistent employment of the stream of consciousness technique, the interior monologue – which I premise to be the major criterion enabling a bridging of the gap between what I termed the 'marginal' and the 'canonical' texts. Likewise, a further investigation, into the deep structure of the texts, will reveal the existence of quasi-similar themes approached and treated extensively in both novels.

Before embarking on the analysis proper, I will mention the fact that Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* was considered to pertain to the modernist literary mainstream on the basis of Linda Hutcheon's remarks in *The Canadian Postmodern*. Arguing against a faulty surmise that "Canadian literature evolved directly from Victorian into Postmodern", she maintains: "[b]ut in the poetry the McGill group and others did give us some taste of modernism, just as Margaret Laurence and Sheila Watson did in fiction." (Hutcheon, 1998)

The Double Hook is a brilliant novel, but a curious and difficult one, particularly in the disposition of themes and the relative emphasis that Sheila Watson accords them.

Plato, in one of his dialogues (*Phaedrus*, analysed in detail in Jacques Derrida's *Dissemination*) argues that the scaffolding, the upholstery of any creation must be underpinned by logographical necessity, by some principle of composition. Well, with this novel, the principle is rather decomposition. The narrative is ripped apart, gnawed at, stretched to the point of breaking. It is almost like a labyrinthine enclosure with blind passages: the moment you think you've got it, you have finally grasped some meaning, it is all invalidated only a matter of a few pages away. (Betts et al., 2016) For example, Ara, one of the characters, is referred to at some point as a he, yet it turns out that he is a she, William's wife.

In fact, the movement through the book is a progression from obscurity to increasing enlightenment. The first part, the first sections bend the bow or coil the spring for an action that will discharge itself only in the last section of the novel. Because the first part begins in a style as illustrated in: "Greta was at the stove. Turning pancakes. Reaching for the coffee beans. Grinding away James's voice. James at the top of the stairs. His hand half-raised. His voice in the rafters. James walking away. The old lady falling. There under the jaw of the roof. In the vault of the bed loft. Into the shadow of death. Pushed by James's will. By James's hand. By James's words: This is my day. You'll not fish today." (Watson, 1989) – and goes on pretty much the same way.

18-20 June, 2021

In fact, I consider that it bears a very strong resemblance to Faulkner's stream of consciousness novels: *Absalom! Absalom!* and *As I Lay Dying*. In *Absalom! Absalom!* Faulkner, who writes in the same elusive style, tells the same story, in different ways, four times. But the retellings were experienced as failures that compelled him to further repetitions that would correct those failures, but that were themselves experienced as failures in turn. In a commentary made by Faulkner himself on the failures of his narrative, he said: "I finished it the first time, and it wasn't right, so I wrote it again [...] then I tried to let Faulkner do it, that still was wrong."

Well, Sheila Watson only tells the story once... If we were to draw on Professor Salter's sectioning of the book – who was handed in a copy of the manuscript by the author herself to "assess" it – the five of them would be as follows: "The Death of the Old Lady", "Lenchen vs. Greta vs. James", "A Flowered Garment", "Nowhere to Go" and "An End – and a Beginning" (qtd. in the *Afterword* to Sheila Watson's novel, 1989). The reader's impression of *The Double Hook* is one of an elaborately formal abstract structure. Rarely can a novel appear so disordered – as if made up of disconnected enclaves – and accidental in its concreteness. (Betts et al., 2016) They seem a clutter of facts and memories, a cluster that has trouble illustrating or pointing to something. Yet, as far as I can attempt a guess – and a commentary – to the countenance of this "surface structure", we would say that this is precisely the form that any novel intent on rendering a stream of consciousness would make use of. Consequently, it is the apparent formlessness of so much of the book that tempts one to insist upon the underlying patterns, upon the "deep structure".

This elusive style entraps the narrative into a kind of repetitive present: "Greta was at the stove. Turning hotcakes. Reaching for the coffee beans. Grinding away James's voice." The sense of timelessness is also intimated by the insistence of the present participles. So, there is no evident causality, the past is confiscated by the present. This creates an immediacy almost enforced upon the characters, "who have no alternative but to be in their time and place – they don't seem to have a history apart from the experience of the readers." (Watson, 1989)

Not even memory – analepsis – is allowed to them: "He [James] held memory like a knife in his hand. But he clasped it shut and rode on." (Watson, 1989) Maybe that's why James tries to break this circle:

He crouched down between his horse's ears and pressed it into full gallop. He wanted only one thing. To get away. To bolt noisily and violently out of the present. To leave the valley to another life which moved at a different rhythm. (Watson, 1989)

This idea of an oppressive, overburdening world appears under various guises and is traceable in the characters' reactions: they can't make anything of the world they live in, they don't see anything, in the sense in which "to see" is equated with comprehension: "I've seen Ma standing with the lamp by the fence, she said. Holding it up in broad daylight. I've seen her standing looking for something even the birds couldn't see. Something hid from every living thing." (Watson, 1989)

In fact, this old lady seems to be the only perseverant character in the novel, inasmuch as she keeps on trying to hook meaning – she never ceases fishing:

18-20 June, 2021

Still the old lady fished. If the reeds had dried up and the banks folded and crumbled down, she would have fished still. If God had come into the valley, [...], moaning in the darkness, thundering down the gap at the lake head, skimming across the water, drying up the blue signature like blotting-paper, asking where, asking why, defying an answer, she would have thrown her line against the rebuke; she would have caught a piece of mud and looked it over... (Watson, 1989)

So, her fishing is in fact an embittered and stubborn attempt at clutching on to a meaning which is, like the fish she is trying to catch, always slippery, elusive and quick, and overabundant, because she will never have respites from fishing: it will continue to overwhelm and to outpace her comprehension. Maybe she stands for the need to construct a meaningful sequentiality – as will be the case with Faulkner’s Addie, also – maybe a history from sparse, dismembered bits. But the old woman – again, like Addie – dies at the end of the first section of the book. So, the attempt is doomed to failure...

As I have said early on, although they strive hard to see, Watson’s characters fail to do so, they begin feeling as if in a forest at night, wrapped up and invaded by darkness and seeing eyes, watching eyes everywhere. Greta has this kind of experience: “Now Greta’d sat in the old lady’s chair. Eyes everywhere. In the cottonwoods the eyes of foolhens. Rats’ eyes on the barn rafters. Steers herded together. Eyes multiplied. Eyes. Eyes and padded feet.” (p. 35) So, since they do not see, they feel looked at, surveyed, blinded even: “Blinded? She asked. For sure? Blinded, she said. Who’ll see anything worth seeing now?” (Watson, 1989)

I never mentioned the filiations and affiliations between the characters because there’s a strong sense of their being immaterial – just as in Faulkner’s novel the only important persona is Addie, who is dead... They only seem to exist insofar as they can be made pawns in an allegory of time and space, especially a space particularly hostile and alienating: floorless, roofless, wall-less, a wilderness, as one character describes it: “But outside was night. Outside was floorless, roofless, wall-less.” (Watson, 1989) This sense of alienating world leaves a deep imprint upon the outlook on life as a whole: it is only conceived of in terms of suffering: “I [Ara] never see baby clothes, she said, that I don’t think how a child puts on suffering with them.” (Watson, 1989)

This line of argumentation is partly prompted by the title of the book itself, illuminated, in its turn, by one of the characters’ (Coyote’s) words, cited at the beginning of the novel: “He doesn’t know/ you can’t catch/ the glory on a hook/ and hold on to it./ That when you/ fish for the glory/ you catch the/ darkness too./ That if you hook/ twice the glory/ you hook/ twice the fear.”

A tentative interpretation would be that every attempt at breaking free – as is James’s case – nearly always backlashes at you. That search for something better on the yonder side is most often than not attended with further dangers and threats. James is deprived of his wallet, where he had all his savings and he has no option other than to return.

So maybe Sheila Watson’s conclusion is that that’s what there is to life: an endless search – which sometimes takes the proportions of a quest – that nearly always ends in failure.

Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* deals, likewise, extensively with human suffering. The story of how the Bundrens managed the burial of Addie Bundren affords him a very special vantage point from which to contemplate the human capacity for suffering. (Gorra, 2020) Few, if any, families would

18-20 June, 2021

have attempted to do what the Bundrens did. This is obvious from the reaction of all the non-Bundren characters in the novel, with respect to the expedition.

Lula Armstid exclaims: “It’s an outrage. [Anse] should be lawed for treating her so.” (Faulkner, 1963) Rachel Samson bursts to her husband: “You and [Anse] and all the men in the world that torture us alive and flout us dead, dragging us up and down the country –” (Faulkner, 1963) Samson thinks to himself: “I got just as much respect for the dead in a box four days, the best way to respect her is to get her into the ground as quick as you can.” (Faulkner, 1963)

As in Sheila Watson’s *The Double Hook*, in Faulkner’s novel we have a game of perspectives. (Hines, 1997) And this is due to two reasons: on the one hand, each chapter provides unique viewpoints on Addie’s life and death, and on the other hand, there is a constant mixture of perspectives.

As a consequence, the views presented are sometimes complementary, some other times disjunctive, bringing about the readers’ questioning them – and in this context the Foucauldian syntagm of “games of truth” comes to mind. The reader is not helped in comprehending the novel – and the situation bears a striking resemblance to Sheila Watson’s book – by introductory information, explanations or additional comments, so one is forced to assemble the story oneself, to make one’s way through what seems to be a labyrinthine world of monologues, most often under the form of interior monologues, constructing a world from “streams of consciousness”. (Singal, 1997)

So, as far as the interior monologue is concerned, it is most often present in the wanderings of the mind, being the most appropriate form for representing thought processes as they actually occur in the minds of characters:

Vardaman: “Then it wasn’t and she was, and now it is and she wasn’t. and tomorrow it will be cooked and et and she will be him and pa and Cash and Dewey Dell and there won’t be anything in the box and so she can breathe.” (Faulkner, 1963)

The dialogue – as Olga Vickery, one of Faulkner’s commentators, argues – is almost always spare and minimal, embedded in interior monologues and juxtaposed to a torrent of internal reflections. (Vickery, 2004) This she interprets as a formal counterpart of the character’s isolation from one another – a theme I will especially enlarge upon, insofar as it will allow me to establish some parallels between this novel, belonging to the Western canon, and Sheila Watson’s Canadian *The Double Hook*: “Jewel’s mother is a horse,” Darl said. “Then mine can be a fish, can’t it Darl? I said. “I haven’t got ere one,” Darl said. “Because if I had one, it is was. And it is was, it can’t be is, can it?” (Faulkner, 1963))

Addie’s “story” is infused, we might say, following Wendy Faris’s theoretisation, with an element of magical realism. According to Faris, one of the primary characteristics of magical realist fiction is the fact that the text contains an “irreducible element” of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them. The abnormality in Addie’s story consists in the fact that, though she belongs to the dead, she speaks as if she were alive among the others. (Faris, 2004)

18-20 June, 2021

She is given long monologues, maybe the longest, in which she presents the events of her life in condensed manner:

My children were of me alone, of the wild blood boiling along the earth, of me and of all that lived of none and of all.”; “So I took Anse. And when I knew that I had Cash, I knew that living was terrible and that this was the answer to it. That was when I learned that words are no good; that words don’t ever fit even what they are trying to say. (156)

So, Addie seems to be – as inferred from the above cited thoughts, committed to concrete fact. She has seen through all illusions. She despises words. This is pervasive in the long, terrible expression allowed her in the novel in which she tells the story of her life. What Addie lacks, and what she yearns for, is some kind of communion. Even before her marriage to Anse, she has felt this emptiness of despair. She switches the children she teaches as a school teacher – in a desperate attempt, as she puts it, to say to them: “Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever.” (Faulkner, 1963)

With Addie, the loss of communication – and community, we might add – is made salient. Language seems to her empty and drained and ineffectual. She relates: “I would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other; and that sin and love and fear are just sounds that people who never sinned nor loved nor feared have for what they never had and cannot have until they forget the words.” (Faulkner, 1963)

Faulkner has employed various devices to suggest Addie’s vitality in the coffin – which grants her the possibility to be so vocal about her discontents, and so very credible and creditable, too. Anse will say not that Addie’s mind “was” set on it, but “is” set on it. The confused child Vardaman worries that she might suffocate in the box that Cash made for her. (Matthews, 2005) The madman Darl tells Vardaman to put his ear to the coffin so that he can hear their mother talking – this eight days after her death – and Vardaman says that he can hear her, only he “can’t tell what she is saying.” (165) Even the stolid and sturdy countryman Vernon Tull at Addie’s funeral has the feeling that “her eyes and her voice were turned back inside her, listening.” (Faulkner, 1963) Though Dr. Peabody, on the day of her death, says to himself that the “still-breathing woman has been dead these ten days”, Addie maintains her vital power.

In her increasing alienation from her husband, Addie sees as the difference between them the trickery of words and the implacability of deeds, but she soon comes to put the difference in terms of death and life. She says that she discovered that Anse was “dead”. (Rollyson, 2016) As she puts it: “And then he died. He did not know he was dead. I would lie by him in the dark, hearing the dark land talking of God’s love and His beauty and His sin; hearing the dark voicelessness in which the words are deeds, and the other words that are not deeds, that are just the gaps in people’s lacks, coming down like the cries of the geese out of the wild darkness in the old terrible nights, fumbling at the deeds like orphans to whom are pointed out in a crowd two faces and told: That is your father, your mother.” (Faulkner, 1963)

18-20 June, 2021

The romantic poets like Byron and Shelley, would have understood very well what she was talking about. Byron, one remembers, yearned to find “words which are things.” Addie resents mere words, for emptied of substance as they are, they stand as a fence between her and experience. Though put in quite different terms, the theme of separation, of felt severance from the reality around is bluntly asserted in Sheila Watson’s novel, too: “I’ve not been up myself lately, Greta said. The thing about stairs is that they separate you from things.” (Faulkner, 1963)

At this final stage of my analysis, some concluding remarks are required. As anticipated in the early proceedings of my discussion, the sections of both novels are all examples of the stream of consciousness method – and yet, how different they are in movement, mood and effect. Nevertheless, there is, as we move toward the end of the books, the sense of coming out into an objective world – if we don’t dare too much in calling it so – a world in which truth (objective?) and not mere obsessional impressions, exist. (Watson, 2002)

Both novels seem to acquiesce in the meaninglessness of existence, which takes protean forms: be it under the guise of an atopographical topography in *The Double Hook*, a wall-less, roofless, floorless world, trapped in an almost mythical – we might say – timelessness, which most often than not terrifies its inhabitants and compels them to break free, to breach the circle (e. g. James), be it under the guise of an alinguistic language, which jeopardises any attempt at expression, faithful expression of states of mind or states of soul that, consequently, can only find an outlet in long, painful interior monologues – as were James’s and Greta’s in *The Double Hook* or Addie’s in *As I Lay Dying*.

3. Conclusion

All in all, I think it is precisely the crafty avoidance of a parochial here and now and not the less masterful handling of devices and techniques agreed upon and credited by Western canons – which make Sheila Watson’s novel a canonical one, worthy, in qualitative terms, of a comparison with Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*.

As a concluding remark, which claims equal distribution to both novels analysed, I would say, extrapolating from Alexander Pope’s observation: “Never blessed, but always to be blessed”, which characters in Faulkner and Watson transpire a strong impression of not living, but always preparing to live.

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18-20 June, 2021

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