



Research Paper

Enchantment and Sorrow: The Fictional World of Gabrielle Roy

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ABSTRACT: *Gabrielle Roy, (1909-1983) was a pre-eminent French Canadian novelist praised for her skill in depicting the hopes and frustrations of the poor. Her poverty stricken life in Manitoba, her life-changing experiences as a school teacher, a drama enthusiast and a journalist, her frequent travels to Europe and back, exposure to the utter squalor of urban Montreal and her perennial quest for an ephemeral Eden colour her fictional landscape and fill it with a throbbing realism which is mellowed by her pastoral view of life. The urban-rural divide, the city-country dichotomy, the stirring realistic portrayals of the ills and travails of innocent people caught in the never ending cycle of life, the harmony of the soul with nature- these numerous contradictions make Gabrielle Roy both fragile and endearing, and it is no wonder then that Roy with her remarkable oeuvre is considered one of the great contemporary writers on the human condition. Winner of many prestigious Governor General's Awards (1947, 1957, 1978), the Prix Duvernay (1956), and the Prix David (1971), Member of the Royal Society of Canada since 1947, Gabrielle Roy was appointed Companion of the Order of Canada (1967). In her novels and short stories and in her posthumously published autobiography, *Enchantment and Sorrow*, Roy offers a vision of humanity afflicted on all sides and beset with problems but ultimately redeemed by the quest for a perfect world touched by Love.*

KEY WORDS: *City-country divide, Realism, Enchantment, Sorrow*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Grande Dame of Canadian letters, a major literary figure in the horizon of Canadian Literature, Gabrielle Roy carved her niche as a significant French Canadian author. Her very first novel, *The Tin Flute* raised her status overnight. This text had a marked impact on the very development of the Quebec novel as earlier ones had been regional, conservative and traditional, based on an adherence to religion and land. *The Tin Flute* published in 1945 brought with it the inception of the realist movement in Quebec. Her fiction was nationalistic in character treating themes such as the adverse effect of progress on Canada and its people. Roy's first novel set the trend for future works based on these narratives.

The Tin Flute, a socially realistic work of art derived its success from its stunning documentary quality, and the stinging authority with which it arraigned the monster of big-city poverty. The novels that followed were romantic retreats into a charmingly simple but irrecoverably passé frontier. Semi-autobiographical in nature, they moved out and portrayed the realm of memory and idealism. *The Tin Flute* and *The Cashier* (1954) paint a picture of stark forbidding realism, showcasing the backyard squalor, the wretchedness, the isolation, poverty and alienation in the Montreal urban jungles. Roy's imaginative landscape- big city living with its attendant pains and dislocations is in direct contrast to life on the frontier –warm and simple, pastoral, innocent and idyllic. In the words of Hugo McPherson, a Canadian critic, “this perception of the controlling pattern in Gabrielle Roy's work is essential to an understanding of her statement. The values of the garden, childhood, innocence and the past array themselves against the forces of the city, adulthood, experience and the present...” Roy alternates visibly between the novel and the disguised ‘memoir’ in the early part of her literary career. Thus after *The Tin Flute* she pens the idealistic *Where Nests The Water Hen*, (1950) and the urban novel *The Cashier* which is followed by the beautifully poignant *The Road Past Altamont*(1966). Montreal and Manitoba, the place of her birth exist side by side. In Roy's own words “...when I landed in Montreal and I discovered St, Henri, as it was then...I discovered the people that was my own, and its tragedy and its sadness and its gaiety too. Since then I have tried to give it expression. But I couldn't forget the rest of the country which is also part of my heritage, so I alternate.”

Roy's second book, *Where Nests the Water Hen*, set in Manitoba on a remote island, with its wide open spaces is an exception to the theme of enclosure and exhibits a genuinely humorous vein. The isolation of

the characters that people the urban hell bears a striking contrast to the solidarity of the Tousignant family in the rural paradise depicted in the novel. The tone is warm, nostalgic and Roy switches between memory and imagination. As Roy herself said, "...it's life such as it might have been, or could have been, or could be...It's at the beginning of all time." From one book to another she alternates between two poles. Novels and short stories, between places, the concrete jungles of Montreal, it's frustrating and alienating conditions and the almost idyllic nature of the vast open prairies. The present, the past, sorrowful and joyful, adulthood, its pains and the innocence of childhood- in short to paraphrase the title of her own autobiography she depicts the enchantment and sorrow of life. The continuous quest for peace, happiness and harmony, characterize her works and she tries to bring out the rather tenuous rapport between the individual and society.

Employing traditional literary forms, the bitterness at the heart of her early novels is gradually undermined and the artistic tensions are resolved. Depressing images of urban life and existence are represented in *The Tin Flute* and *The Cashier* and these two novels are interpretations of the human condition. Pragmatic portrayals of the French Canadian minority, a deep sense of her roots, a consciousness of her race, her identity- these serve to enliven her work with a dignity and sincerity and make her a striking voice in the world of Canadian letters. Her oeuvre is characterized by her varied experience and her universal vision of mankind. A spokesperson for the Canadian mosaic and truly representational her works stand apart in Canadian Literature.

This idealistic vision of harmony is best expressed in *Where Nests The Water Hen*. Roy advocates 'Love' as a remedy for all ills. This then is her credo, which is also evident in her work *Street of Riches*, a collection of short stories detailing universal truths as a young girl discovers maturity, purpose and fulfillment as a writer.

The Hidden Mountain(1961), her last true novel speaks of a different kind of discovery- the artist's quest, an allegory of the need for perfection and immortality in creation. Subsequently she wrote *The Road Past Altamont*, a personal narrative that suggests that all of us are forever charting out our own routes in life. E.A. Walker avers that "while may think we know our destination, chance may take us past our Altamont, our magic place, our Eden, Atlantis or Oz." *Through Windflower* (1970), Roy attempts to say that individuals can be unduly affected by isolation and it is a sensitive portrayal of the horrible dilemma of a woman caught between two worlds.

For her next work Roy seems to delve into the past and turn inward. *Enchanted Summer*(1972) is a collection of brief but beautiful impressions of nature. Its major characters are not human beings struggling to live, but bullfrogs, swallows, fireflies, flowers, cows and crows- all personified. In the words of E.A. Walker, "the controlled melancholy of the book is almost unbearably touching and the same tone pervades Garden in the Wind with its four stories of Western Canada..." These vignettes showcase her skill in the art of storytelling. Her educative experiences as a young teacher in a rural area form the base for *Children of My Heart* (1977), a rare book with a romantic vision. This remarkable work in which the real and the lyrical are united is a sign of the artistry of Gabrielle Roy achieving its highest form and confirms her stature as one of the most important French Canadian writers. Two totally opposite worlds, the introspective and the outward looking, people her fictional world and Gabrielle Roy skillfully weaves her own stories within this artistic tension creating and almost beautiful and delicate vision of the world. The gradual shift from the world of adults to that of children and nature in its entire innocent splendor is seen in her last two books *Ma Vache Bossie*(1976) and *Cliptail*(1979), children's literature.

Growing up in the restrictive and constraining atmosphere in an enclosed French quarter of St. Boniface, Manitoba, Roy realizes the urgent need for freedom, of a better understanding of her self. This soul-searching quest ends in Quebec. Fascinated by the cries and smells, the poverty, the poetry in the city of Montreal, Roy makes it the backdrop for her urban novels. Manitoba suffices as setting for her rural pastiches.

The images of the 'cage' and 'cycle' are useful in understanding the works of Gabrielle Roy. Society is equated to prison, a metaphor which works effectively in her urban works. The characters in *The Tin Flute* and *The Cashier* are socially and culturally alienated, seeking meaning elsewhere and through them Roy paints a picture of the disenfranchised anywhere in the world- the Quebeckers, the women and the poor. In *The Road Past Altamont*, Roy presents the interconnectivity between the cycle of generations, the past, present and future and the continuity inherent in the cycle of life. Most of her characters are trying to break free of the constraints of a prison like society, while at the same time being caught up in the constantly turning wheel of life.

Roy's writings are marked by a broad vision and a total absence of regional pettiness, uncommon in the annals of French Canadian Literature. The ordinary folk are symbolically portrayed and theirs is an often ephemeral quest for joy, a courageous striving for understanding their fellow beings. The city-country dichotomy is treated with great finesse synthesizing the basic values of both. In Hugo McPherson's words, "...her whole concern is for the unnumbered thousand who 'lead lives of quiet desperation' - the terrible meek. And she records their plight with a tolerance and compassion that rests not on patriotism, humanism or religiosity, but on a deep love of mankind... Gabrielle Roy feels rather than analyses, and a sense of wonder and

of mystery is always with her. She is “witness” to the aches of the century and her culture rather than a reformer; and she believes that only Love can redeem the time.” (qtd in Walker 111)

In Gabrielle Roy’s own words: “I have rarely felt at home in this world. Sometimes, however, confronted by human malice and the suffering of our human condition, I am again overcome by doubt and ask myself whether we are really advancing towards something better...then I regain my hope. What, after all, is at issue but to have faith in the ultimate purpose? And who, in the final analysis can fail to have faith in creation?” (qtd in Walker 111)

A French-Canadian though she was, her all-encompassing vision lend her the status of a pre-eminent Canadian author. In Roy’s novels we see that her subjects are Everyman whose character is to hope and aspire, in spite of his woes and sufferings. The dark realism in some of her works is offset by the innocent splendor in her pastorals. Roy portrays life in all its vibrant hues and her works have earned for her a unique place in the history of Canadian literature.

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