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Playing in the Yellow Dirt: An Examination of Growing Up and Child-Adult Relationships in "To Set Our House in Order" by Margaret Laurence

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When we think of the process of growing up, it is often inseparable in our minds from the idea of our evolving relationships with our parents and the other adults in our lives. This is logical; they are what we are in the process of becoming, and their ideas and expectations are heavily involved in shaping this phase of our lives. When we think of these dynamic relationships, we often think of an ordered series of phases: child, preteen, teen, young adult, each characterized by varying degrees of obedience, rebellion, reverence, and independence. While these stereotypes are common and often reinforced through media and cultural stories because they do a good job of capturing and generalizing the varied experiences of a large group of people on a collective level, they often fall short of representing our own personal lives. In reality, these phases are often muddied together, inverted, jumbled and haphazard; "growing up" may move both forwards and backwards, take place over the course of 25 years, or occur over the span of one significant life event. In her story, "To Set Our House in Order," Margaret Laurence attempts to show readers how complex and messy the process of growing up can be through the experiences of the story's narrator, Vanessa MacLeod. In the story, Vanessa seems to grow up rather suddenly over the course of a single event in her life as she comes to realize the fallibility and vulnerable humanity of the adults in her life, shattering the illusion of adults having some sort of god-like knowledge and realizing that the gap between children and adults is not as large as it has always seemed. She comes to these realizations through her own curiosity and expanding experiences and eventually acknowledges that she does not have to accept all the perspectives and ideas of the adults in her life and gives herself the freedom to draw her own conclusions about the world, which is in many ways the essence of growing up.

Although the catalyzing event for Vanessa's changing perspectives is the hospitalization of her mother during her pregnancy with her little brother, it is through her interactions with her grandmother and father that Vanessa begins to see the fallibility, weaknesses, and contradictions in the lives of adults. Much of this knowledge can be attributed to her increasing awareness of the illusory world inhabited by her grandmother, Grandmother Macleod. Throughout the story, Grandmother Macleod is shrouded in juxtapositions between reality and illusion, both in respect to her physical self and to her ideas. In the first description of her that we are given, she is described as holding herself "straight and poised, as though she were unaware that her hair was bound grotesquely like white-feathered-wings in the snare of her coarse night-time hairnet" (Laurence 43). She is later described again as being "steel-spined despite her apparent fragility" (45). Through these descriptions, we get the sense that Grandmother Macleod is denying the physical reality of her age and shape, clinging to an illusion of youth and an ideal of physical power that is more aligned with her own vision of her place within the house and in the world. This physical ideal is deeply linked to her attitudes and reflects her own deep wishes to be a proper lady. According to her, she is, in fact, a lady, telling Vanessa that her family clan were "the lairds of Morven and the constables of the Castle of Kinlochaline" (Laurence 49). According to her Aunt Edna, she was actually born in Ontario, and her father was a horse doctor, and according to Vanessa's father, she always wished to be a lady, and for the majority of her life, she was able to do so, based on the substantial income of her husband, Grandfather Macleod, who was a doctor. However, given the current financial situation of the family and town, this is no longer the case, therefore bringing about a conflict between the reality of the situation and her deeply held beliefs. Rather than shedding these beliefs, Grandmother Macleod withdraws further and further into her illusory world, which becomes ever clearer to Vanessa as the story progresses. This withdrawal is also symbolically present in the story when Grandmother Macleod wishes for Vanessa's brother to be named after Roderick, and her father makes a reference to Black Roderick, a character from a Sir Walter Scott poem called "Lady of the Lake" (Laurence 58). In this poem, Roderick is a Scottish outlaw who fights against a half-English king, which may seem irrelevant in the context of a small town in Canada, except the family is Scottish, and the song from this play that hails Black Roderick, "Hail to the Chief," is used in the inauguration of American presidents, despite its bloody meaning (Tucker 11). This creates an interesting parallel between America using a song of rebellious origin to establish

authority and Grandmother Macleod using the name of a son brutally killed in war as the new name for a grandchild. In both cases, the juxtapositions reinforce the idea of the illusion of peaceful order being built upon a disordered and chaotic reality. This fallibility in the beliefs and behaviour of her grandmother contributes heavily to Vanessa's coming of age.

Perhaps of equal importance to Grandmother Macleod is Vanessa's maturation in the interactions and attitudes of her father. Her father is not delusional in the same sense as Vanessa's grandmother; he is able to separate reality from his own beliefs and dreams, as well as the beliefs of others, but he is complacent and resigned to creating a life within the illusory bounds of his mother. Her father is very sympathetic to all of the people around him, which forces him to live in his own ordered reality as he tries to maintain the order created by others for their own sake. In some ways, this compassion for others blinds him to his own reality. For example, in a discussion with Vanessa in his study, he explains that they must be kind to her grandmother because she always wanted to be a lady (Laurence 55). He is also sympathetic to the plight of his father, who enjoyed studying Greek and may have wanted to be a classical scholar, but instead chose to be a doctor because his father was one. However, her father misses the irony in the fact that he says he dreamed of joining the merchant marine, as evidenced by his extensive collection of books about travel and the sea, but he also ended up as a doctor. This shows to Vanessa that adults have regrets and unrealized dreams, and that often adults can be defined as deeply by these dreams that they never pursued as the lives they actually chose to live. Her father's sense of empathy also forces him into lying to his mother about the death of his brother Roderick; he tells her "how gallantly Rod had died," but to his wife he said that "men don't really die like that, Beth" (Laurence 59). These actions help Vanessa to realize the disillusionment in the order her grandmother worships in several ways. Firstly, it shows her that adults lie to one another, which is especially relevant given that her grandmother refuses to coddle Vanessa by allowing her to be told that her mother will definitely be okay, while she herself has been coddled and sheltered from the truth her whole life. The revelation itself is also important because her father is directly highlighting the harsh, chaotic realities of war and death in a way that emphasizes the random chance nature of death. After hearing this, Vanessa's attitudes towards death are changed; her father has removed death from its mysterious place in the distance and placed it in the living room, where it could reach out and take anybody at any time.

Shaped by her interactions with the adults in her life, Vanessa's perspectives are constantly adapting throughout the short story as she goes from naïve and trapped by the narratives of the adults around her to learning of their fallibility and her own power of choice. At the beginning of the story, Laurence makes reference to the sounds of the house possibly being those of "a sparrow that had flown into the attic through the broken skylight" (Laurence 45). We immediately associate that trapped sparrow with the feelings of Vanessa (it is also invoked in the title of the whole collection, *A Bird in the House*), trapped in an adult world that she does not understand. However, the bird is mentioned again later on in the story, after Vanessa's conversation with her father, when she could hear "the caught sparrow fluttering in the attic" (56) in her dreams. This time, however, we no longer associate the sparrow with Vanessa, but instead with her father and the other adults. We have just heard him talk about his dreams and the dreams of the other adults that were never pursued; like the bird caught in the attic, they ended up in a sheltered reality, warmer and safer than the dreams they gave up, but unable to satisfy them, just like a bird who has seen the open sky would never be satisfied flying around an attic. Like the bird, they have a way out, through the skylight. But it is broken, just like their conceptions of reality are broken, and therefore they remain trapped, resigned to dreams. This juxtaposition is also revealed through another symbol: the portrait of the Duke of Wellington that hangs at the top of the staircase. The Duke of Wellington may be remembered for his command of the British army and his victories in battle, but he himself was very much opposed to war as can be evidenced by him telling a friend that "if [he] could avoid, even for one month, a civil war, in a country to which I am attached, I would sacrifice my life to do it" (*The American Advocate of Peace and Arbitration* 17). Based on her confusion of the man in this portrait with her grandfather, we see that Vanessa sees the duke simply for a man, just like any other. On the other hand, we get the sense that her grandmother cares deeply about his grand reputation and compares herself and her husband to him, inflating their perceived social status, which is evidenced when Vanessa's father reveals that her grandfather was not as wealthy as her grandmother lets on. Therefore, even though Vanessa knows less than her grandmother about the portrait and is indeed mistaken, it is actually her grandmother who is disillusioned, and Vanessa may have a clearer view of reality despite her youth. We get this idea presented to us again when Vanessa is describing the stained-glass windows of the house that allow you to view the world in any colour that you like, including, if you so choose, "a hateful yellow" (46). It is significant that

Grandmother Macleod enjoys these features, and also significant that these types of stained-glass windows were used extensively in the Scottish Presbyterian church in Neepawa, which is the hometown of Margaret Laurence and serves as the basis for the fictional town of Manawanka (Payne 225). This is further alluded to at the end of the story when Vanessa compares the yellow leaves of the poplar trees to "church windows in the sun" (Laurence 60). With this knowledge, we can assume that Grandmother Macleod's worldview is shaped by the lenses of religion and society, as are the views of other adults, while Vanessa is still aware that these are but lenses, and that the world exists separately from them.

In the short story "To Set Our House in Order," Margaret Laurence paints a complex picture of growing up, a messy process characterized chiefly by the dynamic relationships between children and adults. While acknowledging the biases and fallibilities of adults is a key part of this process, in the reality created by Laurence, it is also paradoxical, as it invokes the idea that grown-ups are perhaps not as grown up as we often like to think. Though explained through the lens of transitioning from childhood to adulthood, Laurence's lesson can perhaps be applied to all of us. It is a warning to cultivate mindfulness and awareness of the biases and lenses that can obscure our view of reality, for if we do not acknowledge them, we risk letting them trap us and control our lives, preventing us from achieving our dreams. While they seem to create order from our perspective, when viewed externally, we look like ladybugs attempting to climb up blades of grass, clinging to order, "seeming to be unaware that [we] [possess] wings and could [fly] up" (Laurence 60).

Works Cited

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