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Deconstructing Myth: Magic Realism in Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World*

Jack Hodgins' critically acclaimed novel *The Invention of the World* has been celebrated as a quintessential example of Canadian magic realism. In the novel, Hodgins addresses questions of colonization, the repetition of history, the role of the imaginative space, and liberation from traditional bondages of myth and power. Using a close analysis of Hodgins' novel, this paper will examine the ways in which magic realism is employed in the text, specifically in the context of colonialism. Annika Hannan submits that magic realism is used in literature to question social contexts, asserting that "new understandings of individual as well as collective identity become possible through the liberating power of magic realism" (48-49). Within this framework, this paper submits that Hodgins invites his reader to undertake their own pilgrimage, and peel back the layers of humanity's collective stories and histories as both colonizers and the colonized.

In magic realism, topography occupies an imaginative space in the breaking down of schemas of colonization and power. Stephen Slemon claims that magic realism is "a literary practice seems to be closely linked with a perception of 'living on the margins,' encoding within it, perhaps, a concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems" (10). Sikorska and Agnieszka assert that in *Invention*, Hodgins was not as concerned with the development of a national identity as he was with creating voice and agency for Canada's marginalized space (18).

Furniss distinguishes "the frontier complex… involves more than a dominant historical epistemology. The idea of the frontier is also evident in the way that Euro-Canadians construct a regional identity as a 'small town' on the periphery of mainstream society, a town surrounded by a natural wilderness offering an abundance of natural resources that are unowned and 'free' for the taking" (17).

In Canada, magic realism experiences a close connection to the marginal borders of the unknown hinterland. This marginal, wild space occupied the literary imagination and established a larger-than-life, fictitious 'frontier myth'. It is the close connection to geography and space which gives Canadian magic realism its strangely compelling, marginalized 'other' space in which to solidify itself. Skirorska and Agnieszka submit that "for the white settlers the Jungian Shadow is the unexplored and specifically Canadian space beyond the familiar environment, a space often haunted by the eclipsed populations that once occupied the territory they now claim as their own" (20). For Hodgins, Maggie's island is filled with both real and metaphorical ghosts holding the chains of history, and a sense of profound curiosity and hope, "full of surprises and possibilities" (46).

The Invention of the World is preoccupied with deconstructing the myth of Canada's colonial experience. Slotkin identifies that modern cultures construct mythic narratives of their colonizing history "through frequent retellings and deployments as a source of interpretive metaphors, the original mythic story is increasingly conventionalized and abstracted until it is reduced to a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, 'icons', 'keywords,' or historical clichés" (5). Myth is used by Hodgins as a framework for which to understand "The Eden Swindle", and relies on hearsay to project the narrative forward, utilizing phraseology such as "[i]t is not known" (70), "it seemed" (77), and "[t]rust me or not" (69). Each of these phrases destabilizes any factual grounding related

to Keneally's formative years or charismatic presence in Carrigdhoun.[1] Myth becomes the catalyst for community transformation: "It seemed perfectly natural to them that the village of Carrigdhoun should produce a giant of a man after all, because in all its history up to now it had produced nothing at all but a couple of accidental saints" (77). The villagers are eager to establish cultural significance through their support of the colonizing, god-like Keneally**.**

Carrigdhoun's history of systematic oppression under centuries of English colonization is manipulated by Keneally in his promise of a new land in which *they* will be the colonizers. But this promise by Keneally, in that "the fear of God would be a forgotten thing" (Hodgins 99), simply means swapping one form of systematic control (colonization) for another form of domination (Keneally's worship). This synthesizes well with Furniss's evaluation: "The key to the resilience of the frontier myth is that it provides a highly flexible set of images, symbols, metaphors, and narratives that can be used both to affirm and to contest existing structures of power as well as past practices of colonial expansion" (20). As soon as the villagers are freed from the dominance of their English colonizers, they are immediately made subject to yet another power structure; Keneally uses the authority associated with myth to create a system of absolute control. Hannan concurs with this assessment:

> "The novel is highly critical of a supernaturalism – emerging in the form of legend and myth – that shapes the mindset of the people in one region (Ireland) and is transplanted without question to another (British Columbia). Hodgins' text is extremely uncomfortable with Old World myth, rendering it highly suspect, even unwelcome, in the New World. Where Old

[1] Hannan believes Becker to be the omniscient narrator of "The Eden Swindle", relying on hearsay, second hand accounts, and speculation to piece together the mythic narrative (56).

> World beliefs continue to inform, even dominate, the culture, magic realism becomes a disruptive device suggesting alternate modes of perception and action" (50).[2]

The motifs of amnesia, madness, and sleep become important aspects deconstructing colonialism through magic realism. Within the novel, Keneally's mother loses "every trace of memory" (69), prophetically remarking, "What kind of life is it at all… where the soul cannot remember what it is she is fleeing and has no notion of what she seeks?" (Hodgins, 70). Keneally's mother is no anomaly to this phenomenon; the villagers quickly succumb to Keneally's "hypnotism and illusion-making" (83), and become driven to madness (106), quickly losing their history and wisdom as their older generation mysteriously die on route to the 'promised land' (114).[3] Hodgins integrates the relationship between the loss of memory and the creation of an invented, collective narrative when he writes: "it was now impossible, they discovered, to see what the real world looked like, and before the year was over they'd learn to create worlds for themselves out of their imaginations" (106). Wade references this motif of amnesia in his wedding speech: "He gave them a

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[2] Meek offers another perspective on this statement when she asserts that Hodgins draws parallels between European and First Nations experiences of colonization, and that Hodgins implies a commonality between the British occupation of the Irish and western Canadian islands, attempting to 'deracialize' the identity of the post-colonial Vancouver Island subject (2).

[3] Delbaere-Garant has identified elements of the grotesque in Hodgins' appropriation of the genre of magic realism (256). She notes: "Grotesque elements are used to convey the anarchic eccentricity of popular tellers who tend to amplify and distort reality to make it more credible" (256). Other elements of the grotesque in Invention include the Carrigdhoun bailiff staggering down the mountain, leaving a trail of blood "that scorched the grass and melted stones" (Hodgins, 88) or the list of Maggie and Wade's wedding gifts (352). For Delbaere-Garant, the grotesque elements allow a way for Hodgins to avoid "pomposity when he makes serious points" with the grotesque operating as a magnification in the myth's retelling, allowing "such events [to] assume epic proportions" (256).

brief half-hour rundown of the history of the Colony of Truth, as he knew it, or as rumour had it, for the benefit of those… who had been asleep for the past hundred years, or had only just moved to the country" (351). This integrates with Sikorska and Agnieszka's claim: "Sometimes the white settlers carry with them the memory of a traumatic past of their own in which they remain trapped and which continues to imprison them" (20). However, if Hodgins' described amnesia creates a culture of paralysis, an excess of memory can also be a dangerous tool; one need not look further than Keneally's appropriation of myth to dominate his followers. Maggie demonstrates that it is only when memory is used appropriately can personal and community transformation occur.

Throughout the novel, Keneally repeatedly references the smooth, circular stones of Carridghoun as being representative of perfection and magical properties, insisting that the Colony of Truth be built in a similar pattern (Hodgins, 121). Maggie recognizes that the stones have become synonymous with the perpetuation of colonization's 'frontier myth': "But if there was magic here it wasn't in the stones, it was in the command they had of the earth, which fell away below them and ringed them round as far as she could see. Dominion was the word that nagged to be said" (313). Commenting on this scene, Slemon notes: "Maggie, the symbolic heiress of the process of colonization, achieves her longed-for liberation from colonialism's foreclosure of the imagination precisely by going back into history to where the Keneally legend and the process of new World domination began: a mountain top in Ireland upon which a circle of standing stones exercises dominion over the landscape" (13). Unlike the patriarchal ruler Keneally, Maggie does not see the stones as a tool by which to assert dominance. Rather, they become a symbol of humanity's broken - yet very real - past, and of her community's ability to move forward in authentic and imperfect ways. This can be evidenced when Wade makes a final reference to the stones in his wedding speech, quoting the poet Robert Browning: "What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much

good more: On the earth the broken arcs; in heaven, a perfect round" (Hodgins, 351). A beautifully broken, authentic reality is superior to the controlled, perfected artifices of myth.

One of the most significant moments in *Invention* is when Maggie, Becker, and Wade are flying toward Vancouver Island, returning from their pilgrimage of self-discovery. While flying, the pilot shows Maggie that the "real" and "true" "…can be hid but it can't be changed" (Hodgins, 323). In spite of its colonized presence, Vancouver Island pulses with life beneath the "lines and things that people have tried to put there; industrialization is "only a small scar" to the permanency and transcendence of the land (322). The moment becomes a living embodiment of Becker's claim that he would rather be a sparrow than a snail (1). It is with this shift in perspective that Maggie and her friends are able to see through the artifice of the 'frontier myth' and reconstruct the realities of their personal and collective narratives.

As a character, Maggie leadership is clearly juxtaposed with that of Keneally, with Hannan describing her as "the spirit of generosity and community that the Irish leader never was…her task is to locate the centre of herself, in clear contrast with Keneally, who locates himself at the centre of existence" (66). Rather than allowing myth – or the scars of the past – to disable her, as the citizens of Carrigdhoun do, Maggie is constantly on a journey of self-discovery, continually moving 'up' in the quest for ownership of her own choices. This is evidenced in the text when Hodgins writes: "In the old days, when she was content to live the kind of life her circumstances had defined for her, there'd been no risk… She would not, no matter what she threatened, go back to what she had been, if she failed" (300). Maggie maintains a desire to parent her youngest child, and again takes ownership of her future through her pilgrimage to Ireland. Significantly, both instances involve quite literally taking flight (166, 322).

Keneally, obsessed with the self and consumed by a desire to dominate, quite literally burrows himself into the earth in his search for peace. Conversely, Maggie dreams of climbing, clearly juxtaposing the superiority of the ‘sparrow’ life to the ‘snail’. Hodgins writes: “The instinct had been freed. Who cared where it led. She would trust it, follow it, she would climb – my God, she thought, she would soar – until she was able to understand all there was to understand about the universe and be all that she was capable of being” (293). Through this, the reader can understand Maggie as being a pilgrim of the imaginative process. Through this journey, Maggie is able to free herself – both personally and as part of a collective community – from the long-lasting results of Keneally’s collateral. Through viewing her life and community through the lens of ‘sparrow’, Maggie is able to create an imaginative space in which to create a future for both herself and her band of eccentric friends. Hodgins notes: “…she couldn’t heal them all by herself or cancel that monster’s damage alone, but she would do what she could” (336). Indeed, Maggie occupies the imaginative space where in spite of the ‘invention’ of the past, the future remains unwritten.

Stephen Slemon identifies Maggie and Wade’s ‘carnivalesque’ wedding as a metafictional, cognitive, and imaginative recovery of collective narratives, claiming that Hodgins “summons into presence all those figures made absent from the text by the formal system of writing itself” (17). The wedding offers a significant juxtaposition between Keneally and Wade. Slemon postulates: “as the agent of a neo-colonial domination…the legacy [Keneally] leaves is a paralysis in regard to history” (13). Keneally’s ghost, dragging the chained specters of his three wives, appears ominously in the backdrop of the feast; he is a quiet, forgotten presence, yet never disappears, for he “represents what most of the world believed anyhow” (Hodgins, 257). In contrast, Wade has dismantled his invented faux-fort, severing the dysfunctional “umbilical cord to the past” (223). Throughout the novel, Wade is characterized as a small-scale reincarnation of Keneally; through the

pilgrimage toward self-actualization and the literal deconstruction of personal and collective myth, Wade experiences a type of metamorphosis which evaded Keneally; at the wedding, he joyfully re-absorbs the allusive Horseman, his better self and 'exact duplicate' (152) to the shock and 'total silence' of the wedding guests (353).[4] Wade is made complete; the extraordinary event presents a sharp binary to the prowling, ignored manifestation of Keneally.

As Slemon concludes: "Read as post-colonial discourse, then, magic realism can be seen to provide a positive and liberating response to the codes of imperial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity" (21). Slemon's assertion that the de-colonizing of the imagination is the primary concern of magic realism is particularly important in Canada's post-colonial milieu. Sikorska and Agnieszka submit that magic realism "is not a literary genre, it is a strategy to break down the polarizations of oppression and more generally to serve as an antidote against an excessive domination of the mind" (31). Hodgins demonstrates that myth is inseparable from the experience of the past, but it is only by understanding it in this colonizing context that it can be applied to new understandings of culture, community, and the self. Hodgins writes: '"Myth," [Becker] said, "like all the past, real or imaginary, must be acknowledged…Even if it's not believed. In fact, especially when it's not believed. When you begin to disbelieve in Keneally you can begin to believe in yourself"' (314). Hope is a subversive force because it creates a claim that all is not as it should be; it is only when reality is proclaimed and named for what it is – balanced carefully with

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[4] Delbaere-Garant offers a fascinating perspective on duality and twinning in the novel. She notes: "A close look at the different treatment of his two 'ghosts' – Horseman, the better side of Wade, and Brendan, Keneally's invented twin – throws light on this distinction between the 'creation' of the self, rendered through what I have called 'psychic realism,' and mere 'invention,' rendered through magic tricks" (254).

magic and mystery – can the community embodying the 'frontier myth' begin to imagine a better way.

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