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The Loons
by Margaret Laurence
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In “The Loons,” Margaret Laurence successfully describes—by using an appropriate tone—the alienation felt by the young Piquette Tonnerre, who represents an ethnic group rejected by a cruel society, due to the fact that they are different. Piquette, a half-breed, “neither Cree nor French,” is forced to grow up in this cruel and cold society (409).

When describing Piquette’s status, Laurence, through a multitude of details and information, allows the readers to understand how the society of the time perceived them: “The Tonnerres were French halfbreeds, and among themselves they spoke a *patois* that was neither Cree nor French. Their English was broken and full of obscenities. They did not belong among the Cree of the Galloping Mountain reservation, further north. They were, as...Grandmother MacLeod would have put it, neither flesh, fowl, nor good salt herring” (409). Grandmother MacLeod will refuse to join the whole family in one of their trips, simply because ill Piquette will also go: “Ewen, if that half-breed youngster comes along to Diamond Lake, I’m not going” (409). Her tone is cruel and resentful, and the readers can’t help condemning her attitude. Laurence obviously expected this reaction, since her often sad tone allows the readers to feel and understand her compassion toward Piquette and her misunderstood world.

Although the tone of the story is predominantly sad, a first humorous moment is when the doctor chooses Piquette over grandmother McLeod for his planned vacation. Even young Vanessa knows the outcome, and the readers can't help but to laugh along with her. Another humorous moment is when all of Vanessa's efforts to get Piquette to play, fail. Vanessa is taken by surprise by Piquette's refusal, and the more she tries, the more Piquette refuses. For a little while, it's like a new game for both girls.

There's a cosmic irony in the fact that, although Piquette is very sick, she will outlive the kind doctor, who contracts pneumonia and dies soon after their trip to Diamond Lake. Also, like the loons, which cry out at night with their sad song and eventually lose their natural habitat, so Piquette lives her life as an outcast and dies alone and misunderstood. Even Vanessa's mother doesn't respect Piquette, by bringing up unpleasant details even after Piquette's death: "She was up in court a couple of times—drunk and disorderly, of course" (414). By adding "of course" at the end, the readers know that it's not an honest mistake that Vanessa's mother mentioned all of those sordid details, and it also confirms her attitude toward Piquette. Once again, Laurence accomplishes her intent to allow the readers to understand how cruel the society of the time was towards Piquette and her kind.

Another cosmic irony is in the fact that the only person who cares about Piquette's well being dies soon after trying to help her to heal. Even Piquette knows that the doctor's actions are honest and kind: "Listen, you wanna know something, Vanessa?...Your dad was the only person in Manawaka that ever done anything good to me" (413). Coming from Piquette, who keeps her

emotions hidden, just like the loons who cry only at night, her words mean a lot: they show to the readers, Piquette's loneliness and isolation.

Vanessa tries to understand Piquette, not because she likes her, but because she respects and loves her own father very much. Piquette senses this, and she refuses to open up to Vanessa, by rejecting her friendly acts. There's a dramatic irony in this, since Vanessa can't relate to Piquette's suffering, even when some of her scars are visible due to her tuberculosis of the bone. Only years later, after Piquette's death does Vanessa come to understand, although not totally: "Piquette might have been the only one, after all, who had heard the crying of the loons" (414). But again, she doesn't seem to be too sure, and Laurence chooses to use "might," in order to allow the readers to feel Vanessa's dilemma, who unfortunately will never fully understand Piquette's loneliness and sorrow.

When Piquette refuses to play with Vanessa, who's the same age as Piquette, by saying, "I ain't a kid," the readers feel sorry for this young girl who might not even know how to play, and who acts more like a grown up (410). She's been hurt so many times before, and as a result she feels she can't trust anyone, anymore. All of Vanessa's attempts to win her trust will fail. Like the loons, which sing only at night, so does Piquette hide her feelings and wishes from others—although it's apparent that, deep inside, she really does care. This becomes more obvious later on in her life, when she tells Vanessa, "I'll tell you something else...All the old bitches an' biddies in this town will sure be surprised. I'm getting married this fall—my boyfriend, 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?"

(413). The readers feel Piquette's desire to be a part of the society who rejects her. Unfortunately, her fate is one with that of the loons. When Diamond Lake, beautiful and cold like a real diamond, would cease to be a favorable habitat for the loons—which would soon perish or go somewhere else—so Piquette would die in a fire.

Laurence does a great job of conveying to the readers her sad findings about our society. Well chosen characters, cosmic and dramatic ironies, and even humorous moments contribute to Laurence's wonderful—although sad—story. In a way, Laurence's story is the story of life: most of us are alone, rejected, alienated, and misunderstood. In the end, good or bad, young or old, we all die; sometimes, only the most tragic stories are remembered, just like the song of the loons, long after they're gone.

Works Cited

Laurence, Margaret . “The Loons.” *Literature: An Introduction to Writing*. Roberts, Edgar V.
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