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[See table of contents](#)

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# “The Same as Bein’ Canadian”: John Marlyn’s Eye among the Blind

BENJAMIN LEFEBVRE

“Pa, the only people who count are the English. Their fathers got all the best jobs. They’re the only ones nobody ever calls foreigners. Nobody ever makes fun of their names or calls them ‘bologny-eaters,’ or laughs at the way they dress or talk. Nobody, . . . ’cause when you’re English it’s the same as bein’ Canadian.”

— John Marlyn, *Under the Ribs of Death* (17-18)

**I**N HIS CONCLUSION TO *Literary History of Canada* (1965), Northrop Frye cites several examples of popular Canadian novels that offer “nostalgia for a world of peace and protection, with a spontaneous response to the nature around it, with a leisure and composure not to be found today” (840): L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Stephen Leacock’s *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), Louis Hémon’s *Maria Chapdelaine* (1913), W.O. Mitchell’s *Jake and the Kid* (1961). Whether about childhood, the rural past, or both, such novels fit within the structures of what Frye terms the “pastoral myth,” which he claims is “associated with childhood, or with some earlier social condition . . . that can be identified with childhood” (840). This view of childhood as innocent and nostalgic — most often staged in texts designed for child readers, a genre that Perry Nodelman refers to as “a literature that leaves things out” (35) — is undercut by a grouping of later Canadian texts in English that cast child characters in settings that are not Edenic or idealized, including Timothy Findley’s *The Last of the Crazy People* (1967), Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* (1974), Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981), Beatrice Culleton Masionier’s *In Search of April Raintree* (1983), and Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees* (1996). Although these later texts stage versions of childhood that clash with the notion of the pastoral myth, which Frye sees as “the vision of a social ideal” (840), they nevertheless find ways to adapt his claim that “Literature . . . is conscious mythology: it creates an autonomous world that gives us an imaginative perspective on the actual one” (837-38).

My objective in this paper is to investigate what role a child protagonist placed in a setting of suffering and injustice can play in the construction and performance of cultural citizenship in Canada, with particular attention to the ways that confirming or resisting the values of the status quo becomes linked with a child protagonist's coming of age. I focus specifically on John Marlyn's *Under the Ribs of Death* (1957), a lesser-known novel that looks back to earlier historical moments — the immediate pre-Great War era in the first half of the text, a five-year period surrounding the stock market crash of 1929 in the second — while rejecting the motifs that Frye associates with the pastoral myth. In its deployment of childhood as a site of cultural tension, Marlyn's text anticipates Peter Coveney's study *The Image of Childhood* (1967) concerning the ideological function of the child character in British and American fiction. In such texts, Coveney claims, "The child could serve as a symbol of the artist's dissatisfaction with the society which was in process of such harsh development about him [or her]. . . . Through the child the artist could express his [or her] awareness of the conflict between human Innocence and the cumulative pressures of social Experience" (31). Marlyn's novel uses the perspective of Sandor Hunyadi, a young Hungarian immigrant living in poverty in Winnipeg's North End, to introduce a cultural voice that has been obscured in the dominant narratives of Canada to an audience of readers who may be unfamiliar with such counter-discourses about the Canadian nation. As revealed in the epigraph that opens this paper, Sandor aspires to become like "the English," a term that he uses interchangeably throughout the narrative to signify a language, a class, an ethnicity, a nation, and an identity (not to mention a gender, since he links the benefits of being Canadian to the privileges of patriarchy). The problem, however, is that he sees nothing but signs of Hungarian difference — poverty, language, custom, cuisine, and type of employment — that he believes need to be erased in order to achieve a more privileged form of cultural citizenship in Canada.

I borrow the term "cultural citizenship" from the American critic Aihwa Ong, who uses it to refer less to the legal rights and responsibilities granted to all citizens of a democratic nation-state than to the negotiated relationship between an individual and an imagined community. Her term emerges out of her discussion of the ways in which racialized citizenship and belonging are produced through everyday practices of

inclusion and exclusion in the process of transforming immigrants from Asia into “desirable” American citizens. In this context, Ong defines the term in reference to “the cultural practices and beliefs produced out of negotiating the often ambivalent and contested relations with the state and its hegemonic forms that establish the criteria of belonging within a national population and territory. Cultural citizenship is a dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society” (738). Not only is cultural citizenship determined by relations of power, according to Ong, but it is also an *ongoing* process, which has tremendous potential when applied to child characters, whose attitudes, ideologies, and even bodies are undergoing processes of transformation (Castañeda 1-5).

Intersecting Marlyn’s novel with this discourse of cultural citizenship as an ongoing process of being and becoming reveals the potential in the child’s growing consciousness to question some of the boundaries and cultural codes that are taken for granted by surrounding adult characters. This narrative strategy is especially salient in Marlyn’s text, which centres on the question of who qualifies — or ought to qualify — as a Canadian citizen without ever clarifying the characters’ legal status. It likewise recalls Debbie Pinfold’s central thesis in her study *The Child’s View of the Third Reich in German Literature* (2001): alluding to the poetry of William Wordsworth, Pinfold suggests that adopting a child’s perspective becomes “a particularly effective defamiliarizing device” because the child “has not yet been weighed down by ‘custom’, but instead experiences the world with the kind of intensity evoked by the phrase the ‘Eye among the blind.’” Such an emphasis, according to Pinfold, “puts the intuitive wisdom of the child above the acquired knowledge of the adults” (4-5).

But Marlyn’s novel complicates Pinfold’s thesis by making Sandor an unsympathetic hero and by allowing for gaps and inconsistencies in his limited viewpoint, particularly when he transforms himself into Alex Hunter as an adult. To do so, it relies on a mode of dramatic irony, a literary device that Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz claim is used “to describe the situation which arises when a character in a play speaks lines which are understood in a double sense by the audience though not by the characters onstage” (133-34). Beckson and Ganz are obviously writing in the context of the theatre, but we can adapt their claim for Marlyn’s novel, in particular their point that “the writer demands that

the reader perceive the concealed meaning that lies beneath his [or her] surface statement" (133). In *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974), Wayne C. Booth echoes this warning that irony depends on the reader's ability to recognize the literary device being used: "A naive reader who overlooks irony will totally misunderstand what is going on" (25). Unlike the allegory, which offers two layers of meaning (one literal, one metaphorical) simultaneously, Booth sees the ironic text as one that requires the "reject[ion of] the literal meaning" (10). The male child (Sandor), figured in Marlyn's text as the opposite of the male adult (Alex), becomes the vehicle for the text's ironic mode, a trope that Linda Hutcheon claims has been reconfigured in late-twentieth-century Canadian art and literature as "a more positive mode of artistic expression with renewed power as an engaged critical force, that is to say, a rhetorical and structural strategy of resistance and opposition" (11-12). According to Hutcheon, the troped doubleness of irony — which "has always been a critical mode" (13) — is closely aligned with "the historical and cultural nature of Canada as a nation," not only in terms of two official languages and two levels of government (federal and provincial) but also in terms of the creation of "Upper" and "Lower" Canadas (12). Hutcheon also defines "situational irony" as "a state of affairs in which events or circumstances, desirable in themselves, are either perversely ill-timed or turn out in a contradictory manner to what might be expected" (34). Given that Sandor defines himself not within his own Hungarian culture (however this "culture" may be precisely defined) but *in relation to* "the English," my goal here is to consider what Sandor Hunyadi and his counterpart, the adult Alex Hunter, offer as an ironic "eye among the blind" to the ongoing citizenship debates that have persisted in innumerable forms across the history of the nation.

In the final moments of *Under the Ribs of Death*, a grown-up Alex becomes overwhelmed by a sudden bond with his unnamed son, the heir he once planned to mold into his own image: "Tears came to his eyes. He wiped them away and looked at his son and smiled and wept" (260). These conflicting emotions draw the novel to an ambivalent close. Here, the text revisits Alex two and a half years after the penultimate chapter, which depicts the end of his career as a result of the stock market crash of 1929. During a rare visit, his parents and his younger brother attempt to persuade him to return home with his wife and their child. Despite living in dire poverty, Alex refuses the invitation without offering his

family an explanation. Marlyn's novel, which opens with twelve-year-old Sandor wandering home by himself in a poor neighbourhood in Winnipeg, ends along similar lines, with Alex back in the neighbourhood and in many ways worse off than at the beginning. By the novel's end, however, he no longer dreams of the prosperous future he once sought, a form of situational irony that calls into question the legitimacy of his overall viewpoint and goals.

In a 1982 article in *Canadian Ethnic Studies / Études ethniques au Canada*, John Roberts sees hope in this final scene, which he interprets as Alex's realization that the economic, linguistic, corporate, and national future will emerge out of the investment made in the subsequent generation, here embodied in the male child in Alex's lap. And yet, the final line of Roberts's study of Marlyn's text as an immigrant novel bothers me: "Laughter, beauty, love and sensuality: they all sing of hope in the heart of the ethnic Canadian home" (48). Roberts's use of the term "ethnic" to describe the Hunyadi/Hunter household, with its implied distinction from a dominant "Canadian" or "English-Canadian" norm, becomes particularly troublesome given that the text refuses to reproduce such a rigid dichotomy. Whereas the first half of the novel, set in 1913, focuses on Sandor's eager internalization of assimilationist values and on his rejection of his father's old-world East European intellectualism in favour of accumulating wealth and possessions as public signs of success, the second half picks up the thread of the narrative over a decade later to focus on Alex's financial and professional downfall, as indicated in Margaret Atwood's précis of the novel: "Hero amputates himself spiritually in order to make it financially, fails anyway" (34). Complicating a straightforward delineation between "English-Canadian" and "ethnic" as mutually exclusive categories of cultural citizenship, Marlyn's text highlights the impossibility of imagining a magical resolution to the ongoing pressures of cultural assimilation. Robert Thacker suggests that Sandor is "crushed by the weight of assimilationist pressure" (30) throughout the novel, yet this pressure to assimilate to an obliquely defined "English culture" is created and internalized by the young protagonist, a citizen-in-training, and resisted by his parents. Readers who sympathize with Sandor's viewpoint end up being required to reconsider that identification with the hero when the quest ends in failure.

In the opening chapter of the novel, Sandor attempts to explain to his father the playground politics through which he must negotiate his daily existence, often resorting to violence as a form of self-defense. His father refuses to take his son's perspective seriously and disapproves of Sandor's fights with the "English gang," using violence as a method of punishment without appearing aware of the inherent contradiction. The values that young Sandor espouses in this scene are significant because he does not remember or long for a prior existence elsewhere, with the exception of a dim memory of the trip across the Atlantic that is filled with fantasies about his "real" father, "an English lord" (11). In other words, he is less able than his parents to place their immigration and subsequent life in Winnipeg in contrast with a prior life in Hungary, nor can he understand much Hungarian, the first language of his home nation, making him more distanced from his originary culture. In stark contrast with the possibilities for disruption that Pinfold sees in the child figure in German literature, Sandor's limited perspective makes his perception of his environment — a metonym of Canada — far narrower. In this scene, Sandor attempts to convince his father to change their surname to an Anglo-Saxon approximation of Hunyadi, firmly believing that such a change would enable them to fit in, to "be like other people, like everybody else" (17). As I have already shown, however, by "other people" Sandor actually means "the English," a cultural standard that refuses to include him in the privileged group. In contrast to his initial reference to these cherished group members as "other people," represented in the text as a gang of faceless schoolboys, ultimately Sandor views himself in opposition to a group that he idealizes for its power, prestige, money, and status, thus taking for granted the agency of that group in deciding who is accepted as a Canadian citizen and who must remain "foreigners." Moreover, given the time proximity of these events to the Great War of 1914-1918 (which is glossed over in the novel), Sandor's Hungarian ancestry positions him in direct conflict with the dominant Anglo-Saxon "Canadians," mimicking allegorically Hungary's alliance with Germany during the war.

Despite the centrality of the question of who qualifies as a Canadian, the text offers few direct challenges to the hierarchical system that disadvantages citizens of non-"English" origin: the most evident solution, from young Sandor's limited perspective, is not to transform the hierarchy but to acquire a more secure place within it. One of the ways

the text exposes Sandor's limited perspective is through his own use of the term "foreigner," a label first used in the story to describe his plan to leave his "foreign" neighbourhood one day, thoughts related by the omniscient narrator even before Sandor is named: "nobody would laugh at him again, not even the English, because by then he would have changed his name and would be working in an office the way the English did, and nobody would be able to tell that he had ever been a foreigner" (10). Arguing against critics who read the novel "as a realistic, omnisciently narrated account of the experience of a Hungarian immigrant to Winnipeg" (5), Julie Beddoes insists that *how* the story is narrated is just as important as *what* events are described: "Virtually the entire text is an account of the boy's reading of events, his thoughts and fantasies" (7-8). She ultimately concludes, however, that "while the main character of *Under the Ribs of Death* attempts and fails to find a coherent identity, the text itself resists all efforts to give it one" (14), meaning that the text never replaces Sandor's elusive "English" identity with a form of cultural citizenship that is definable and attainable. The text's use of what Mieke Bal terms "character-bound focalization" (105) confirms Beddoes's remark that the third-person narrator privileges Sandor's (and, later, Alex's) perceptions, interpretations, and fantasies, thus compromising the possibility of an "objective" (or at least multifaceted) depiction of an immigrant experience. The narrator occasionally retreats away from the character-bound focalization and adopts what Bal calls "*external* focalization" (105) in order to provide details that Sandor cannot perceive (such as when he is sleeping), but never to the point of amending or intervening in his dominant view of events.

Consider, for example, Onkel Janos's arrival in Winnipeg, in which the description of newly arrived, "foreign-looking," and "begrimed" immigrants disembarking from the train, focalized through Sandor's limited perspective with no intervention from the omniscient narrator, is filled with the Anglocentric assumptions he has already absorbed: "They were so close to him. Only a few months or years — a few words and recently acquired habits — separated his parents from them. The kinship was odious. . . . But [his parents] were changing. . . . They were becoming Canadians. And now here it stood. Here was the nightmare survival of themselves, mocking and dragging them back to their shameful past" (83-84). Sandor's fear that his uncle will be "as foreign-looking and as dirty as these others" (84) is initially proven true, much to his



horror and shame, but after a bath and a shave and a change of clothes, Onkel Janos undergoes a “complete transformation”: “His uncle was a foreigner no longer” (86), a statement that implies that, from Sandor’s perspective, to be foreign is literally the equivalent of being dirty.

It is precisely the limited perspective of the protagonist that makes this section ironic: rather than invite readers to share Sandor’s perspective of shame and filth, the situational irony undercuts the suffering child’s distaste by juxtaposing this description with a scene depicting the neighbourhood sharing a feast in celebration of Janos’s arrival. While Sandor tends to see everything Hungarian as irredeemably backward and part of a collective “shameful past,” the Hungarian culture performed in the elaborate feast scene shows democracy, festivity, community, and inclusion; these are all aspects that Sandor would presumably give up in his quest to become “Canadian,” but the text does not depict him making this realization himself. As a male child, Sandor is relatively powerless within the patriarchal family unit, but in contrast with his mother, whose powerlessness seems to be more or less fixed, he anticipates shedding that powerlessness once he evolves into an adult. After all, Sandor’s fantasy of achieving Canadian cultural citizenship actually involves becoming a Canadian *man*, since power, wealth, and prestige are shown in the text to be specifically masculine qualities. Indeed, the child Sandor anticipates the male privilege that he later enacts as the adult Alex in his relationship with Mary and with Aunt Kathie (a dynamic that, in my view, is not treated as obviously with irony). This transition from relatively “innocent” boy to relatively experienced man is at the crux of a novel that relies on this unlikely hero to tell a story of an individual and of a larger cultural problem.

In the final chapter of *Masculine Migrations* (1998), Daniel Coleman focuses on two late-twentieth-century Canadian novels, Rohinton Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey* (1991) and Ven Begamudré’s *Van de Graaff Days* (1993), in which the central protagonists reject the paths prepared for them by their fathers, causing a tension in what he terms “the romance of family progress”:

the romance of family progress responds to disillusion through the construction of a family fantasy, and, like the Freudian version, this fantasy expresses itself in terms of upper-class ambition. But whereas Freud’s family romance involves the child’s (usually the son’s) nostalgic invention of a *grand past for himself*, the romance of

family progress involves the parents' invention of a *grand future for themselves through their child* (usually the son). (131)

A major difference between *Under the Ribs of Death* and the typology Coleman discusses is a reversal that is in keeping with the ironic structure of the text: while Marlyn's novel, like Mistry's and Begamudré's, concerns "the author-son's questioning of the father's authority" (132), in Marlyn's case, the ambition of class mobility is definitely the son's, *not* the father's. Coleman notes that, "according to patrilineage, the son's success is the father's success, the child's achievement the parents' achievement" (132), but the reverse occurs in Marlyn's novel: both Sandor's parents express their conviction that he should be ashamed of what they see as twisted priorities — wealth and power over family and community. Further, even at age twelve, it is the innocently wise child who is the only family member aware of the financial impossibility of living out his father's fantasy for him — to attend and then teach at university (see 18, 93). Sandor realizes that, his own lack of scholarly ambition notwithstanding, his father — first described as a "sad, grey figure" (10) — has not taken steps to make this dream financially feasible.

Indeed, the lack of material resources remains one of the central sources of conflict between Sandor and his parents, exacerbated in his perception of the freeloading boarders upstairs who are given good food to eat while the family members subsist on bologna. The description of the boarders clearly anticipates his view of new immigrants disembarking from the train: "They were all foreigners, every one of them, and as though that were not bad enough they were actually proud of their foreign, outlandish ways. Not one of them had yet made a serious effort to learn English. . . . They even smelled foreign" (13). It is not clear how Sandor defines foreign "ways" and smells, given that the standard against which the boarders are measured is the English language. His father's philosophical reminder — that "It is meaningless to call anyone a foreigner in this country. We are all foreigners here" (18) — conflicts with Sandor's reality of persecution at school, both by adults who smile when they try to pronounce his name and by the fellow students who refuse to include him in their social group. And yet, while the text appears to heighten reader sympathy with Sandor by focusing on his struggles with socialization, rather than his father's, the text's ironic structure leaves room for a perspective that sees beyond the schoolyard

and views his rejection of his father's philosophical values with skepticism. He can feel only indignation on his father's behalf when his boss, Mr. Friedel, "who had come to Canada on the same ship with him and from the same village in Hungary," and who is "almost a relative," starts yelling at Joseph (26). From Sandor's limited perspective, then, community does not grow out of shared origins or shared experience of emigration. He does not question the hierarchical system between employer and employee but feels shame because his father sees greater value in a job well done than in the respect from others that would be given to him if he were a leading citizen in the community.

As part of this intergenerational conflict, Sandor's fantasy of an English lord as his "real" father brings us back to Freud's theory of the family romance. Marianne Novy discusses this notion in her introduction to the collection of essays *Imagining Adoption* (2001), noting that "for most people — nonadopted people — the fantasy of discovering that they were adopted and can be reunited with a different family elsewhere is a way of dealing with negative feelings about their parents" (2). Indeed, Freud locates this fantasy as a result of the (necessarily male) child sensing "that his own affection is not being fully reciprocated"; moreover, "here the influence of sex is already in evidence, for a boy is far more inclined to feel hostile impulses towards his father than towards his mother and has a far more intense desire to get free from *him* than from *her*" (222). The trope of adoption plays out in Marlyn's text once Sandor introduces the alter ego "Alex Humphrey" to Mrs. Creighton, the woman whose lawn he has been engaged to cut: "Mr. Crawford [the man who arranged for him to do this work] like most people made such a mess of Hunyadi that she would not suspect anything if he gave her the name he was trying to get his father to *adopt*" (70; emphasis added). Rather than adopt a child into a family in a symbolic move of plurality and expansion, Sandor wants his parents to adopt a new identity, even if doing so requires purging the family of the very traditions, customs, and histories that make them belong already to a cultural group.

This central tension in the intergenerational conflict culminates in Sandor's fantasy to replace his actual father with father figures who more closely embody the capitalist values that he aspires to: Onkel Janos and Mr. Nagy, both of whom figure prominently in his fantasies for both the present and the future and who could, in some sense, "adopt" him. Such daydreams, according to Freud, have both erotic and ambi-

tious aims: “the child’s imagination becomes engaged in the task of getting free from the parents of whom he now has a low opinion and of replacing them by others, who, as a rule, are of higher social standing” (222-23). Moreover, Freud remarks that the apparent ingratitude toward the actual parent reveals that the envied parental figure bears characteristics that are remarkably similar to those of the actual parent:

Indeed the whole effort at replacing the real father by a superior one is only an expression of the child’s longing for the happy, vanished days when his father seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men and his mother the dearest and loveliest of women. He is turning away from the father whom he knows today to the father in whom he believed in the earlier years of his childhood; and his phantasy is no more than the expression of a regret that those happy days have gone. (224-25)

Prior to meeting Janos, Sandor daydreams of “sailing on that sea which he had never been able to pronounce, to strange far-away ports. About him was an aura of treasure chests and peril and adventure” (20). Even though the actual Janos is a disappointment compared to the fantasy uncle nurtured in his imagination, Sandor eagerly assists his uncle in courting wealthy widow “Fraulein” Kleinholtz while keeping their relationship secret from his parents. As for land-owning Mr. Nagy, Sandor is “entranced” (20) by the older man’s “power and prestige and wealth” (21) — precisely the values that he wishes his father possessed in greater abundance — which proves to him that such cultural citizenship is not impossible to achieve even for someone of Hungarian background. Sandor is enthralled by Mr. Nagy’s status in the community, but while the text does not explicitly correct Sandor’s perspective to include the realization that the respect spoken to Mr. Nagy, a landlord to numerous North End immigrants, might well be out of fear of eviction, it counters Sandor’s awe of wealthy Hungarians by making both Mr. Nagy and Fraulein Kleinholtz physically repulsive. From Sandor’s perspective, Mr. Nagy is “a pallid little man — with a mouth, Sandor now recalled with sudden indignation, which Mr. Schwalbe once said reminded him of a toad” (21). The demonization of Fraulein Kleinholtz is even more explicit, to the point of caricature: “And this part of her face, between the furrows, always reminded him of a trap door, hinged at the bottom and likely to spring open at any moment to expose a gullet that would swallow him wholly” (105). Although the text obviously links wealth

to ugliness through its depictions of these two secondary characters, Sandor himself never makes this connection. Moreover, Janos's eventual disfigurement aligns him with Mr. Nagy, and with Fraulein Kleinholz, in more ways than one: all three of them, two male mentors and one female financial backer, ultimately turn against Alex and his aspirations.

The first half of the text keeps its focus on Sandor's limited perspective on the kind of cultural citizenship he would like to obtain, requiring a reader who can recognize moments of dramatic and situational irony and see the crucial gaps in his point of view. The second half maintains that focus even once Sandor transforms himself into Alex — in other words, although young Sandor rejected his father's values and influence, the adult Alex takes his patriarchal privilege for granted, not only in his relationship with his wife but in all his fantasies about unborn children, all of whom are sons. In daydreaming about "the men who would succeed him" (234), it does not occur to him that this future son might refuse this inheritance, just as Alex refused his. Moreover, in these fantasies his wife is merely the vessel that will carry this dream to fruition: "She would be the mother not only of his son but of the man who would some day succeed him in the business he founded" (234). A few pages later, a follow-up fantasy of his son preferring the piano and books prompts him to vow to "beat the living daylight out of him" if he resists (236), and to "throw that damned piano out of the window and burn every book I find in the house" if Mary opposes him (237). Alex's imagined rebuttal to Mary's protest — that books and music will "fill his head with crazy ways of living and make him wonder if things couldn't be different" (237) — reveals that, from his perspective, rebellion is possible only for the hero (or anti-hero) of the narrative, who remains convinced of the wisdom of his ways long into adulthood. The contrast between the delusional child and the equally delusional adult adds to the irony of the narrative, demonstrating that the adult Alex is still the twelve-year-old schoolboy he vowed he would outgrow, placing the idealized cultural citizenship permanently on the outskirts of his reach.

The narrative's refusal to provide concrete solutions to the problems associated with cultural assimilation is not only in keeping with this ironic mode, but it also marks a stark contrast with the romantic assimilationist assumptions in a text such as Ralph Connor's *The Foreigner*

(1909). As Thacker suggests, “Connor’s perspective here is that of a member of the dominant group idealizing an immigrant’s happy acceptance of the British traditions[,] and . . . as a result, his effusions are quite biased” (26). Picking up this thread more than thirty years later, Coleman posits that “Connor’s version of the allegory of maturation designates the immigrant as a child with nothing to offer Canada until he is educated into British Canadian ways” (“Immigration” 88), adding that Marlyn’s novel is “a counterdiscursive answer” to Connor’s assimilation thesis “in the way it so clearly echoes but also twists the story of the immigrant boy in Winnipeg who struggles to assimilate to Canadian ways” (96). Given that Alex’s internalized quest to assimilate meets with failure, the model of assimilation in Marlyn’s text becomes more complex than in Connor’s, due to what it silences and leaves ambiguous or underexplored. By the beginning of part two, for instance, the entire family has changed its name from Hunyadi to Hunter, with no explanation of when or by whom this decision was ultimately made.

As part of his failed quest to assimilate, Sandor’s childhood attempts to be admitted into the dominant group, here figured as the “English gang,” repeatedly backfire: although he wins a contest for the best essay on Queen Victoria after considerable effort, his parents are horrified by the paper’s contents (29), which are not explicitly described but which no doubt express the assimilationist values that he seeks to emulate and that his parents strive to resist. Although he wrote the essay in order to “show the English gang what he could do” (23), motivated by the sliver of a possibility that doing so would lead to social sanction and acceptance from the gang members, his success leads to further threats and bullying. In other words, despite his attempt to assimilate by entering a geographical area figured in the text as enemy territory, the representatives of the dominant culture to which Sandor yearns to belong refuse to admit him into their exclusive club, to the point that he briefly toys with the option of suicide as a way of escaping from his problems, fantasizing about the English gang’s mass guilt. The narrator uses the violence of schoolboys — as well as Sandor’s sado-masochistic attraction to the members of the group he covets — to describe the double-sided attractions and problems of cultural assimilation:

He stared at them, unable to move, as they came running toward him. It was always that way. There was always the desire to run and to remain, the feeling which he could never admit to himself

— that he almost wanted them to catch him because when he was caught he was with them and one of them, even though they beat him. There was always the feeling, when he was being chased by them, that he was running away from the very thing he wanted most. (33)

Here Marlyn's novel defamiliarizes the kind of familiar and seemingly straightforward cultural assimilation valorized in Connor's *The Foreigner* by contextualizing its problems on a microcosmic level. Because he shares Queen Victoria's birthday, Sandor finds special pleasure in the parade and daydreams that the community's attention is directed at him: "This was his, he thought fiercely, his alone, and no one could ever take it from him" (31). Moreover, Sandor's theft of the flag of a lost "English" child shows him symbolically appropriating a British-specific holiday in an attempt to make it his own. In this episode, the site of the parade becomes the fraught space in which he tentatively stakes out a territory with other male children in a hierarchy of power.

Contrasted with the Victoria Day parade is a party thrown later that day at the home of Mary Kostaniuk, who eventually becomes Alex's wife. Similar to the parade, this episode depicts on a microcosmic level the tension between those who have progressed in their class aspirations and those who have not. By focusing on the limited perspective of a child who cannot understand why Mary's mother treats him with such hostility when she was once his neighbour, the narrative anticipates a reader who has a greater understanding of the reasons her smile "made him feel suddenly ashamed without knowing why" (35). Aware of the looks he is receiving from all the women present, the "collective grimace which the older children around him seemed immediately to understand," he imposes on them what he interprets as their perception of him "as something darkly alien in their midst and yet disturbingly familiar. . . . All of them had come from Henry Avenue. He was everything they wanted to forget" (37). Angry and resentful that these "foreigners" look down on him, he draws his own lines of inclusion and exclusion: "If they had been English . . . , it might have been excusable, but who were they, to stare at him like that?" (38). In keeping with Booth's discussion of dramatic irony, Sandor remains unaware of this connection as he mimicks many of their fears about their collective "pasts" catching up to them when Onkel Janos makes his first appearance in the narrative.

But while the middle-class home of the Kostaniuks becomes a site of rejection for a child who embodies their past, Sandor can retreat to another allegorical site, the comfort and apparent democracy of “the gang” inside the red fence, and ponder the possibilities of the future. In their shared exclusion from middle-class respectability, this group of ragamuffins has formed a community, one in which “you could say you wished you were a man already and nobody would laugh at you” (46-47):

He was sure of himself when he was with the gang, because everybody was the same there. They were Italian and French and Hungarian, German, Swedish, Russian and even English. . . . They were dressed the same; they all wanted to get away from Henry Avenue; they talked the same language even though their parents did not. (47)

Significantly, Marlyn’s text imagines a world in which there are so few options for its protagonist: unlike Frye’s notion of the pastoral myth, the world of Marlyn’s text stages a childhood and an imagined world of stagnation and limited resources rather than opportunity and growth. Sandor must choose between a group that accepts him but requires him to steal in order to survive and an elite group of citizens that continually deny him entry. As it turns out, Sandor’s decision to quit the gang indirectly leads to more “respectable” employment since he resorts to attending Sunday school to offset his boredom. Mr. Crawford, the Sunday school superintendent, finds him work cutting lawns in a prosperous neighbourhood, one that resembles “a picture in one of his childhood books” (68). Here in this strange new world, the children’s play that he observes becomes metonymic of the larger class distinctions broached throughout the novel: “It was as though they were living in a fairy tale, he thought. They played, not as he and his friends played, hot and eager and hungry to win, but easily, quietly, without any strain” (70). Soon, however, his observation becomes overrun with anger: “They probably didn’t even appreciate it. While he, if he were ever to live on a street like this, would have to fight and push and work all his life” (71). What he does understand is that his employment is directly dependent on the family’s middle-class values: Eric’s ongoing crisis is that his parents won’t let him do anything that they consider “dirty” (his mother “likes things to be clean”), which is why it is necessary for them to hire help (77).



The complication here is that Sandor's fantasy of class mobility is undercut by the humiliating reality — at least in his eyes. After Eric and his mother discover him at the community rummage sale trying on a man's coat that his mother plans to fix for him, the friendship ends, not due to Eric's rejection of Sandor after discovering his poverty but as a result of his own shame caused by his exaggerated interpretation of the expression on Mrs. Creighton's face: "He saw the astonishment in her clear, untroubled gaze give way to a brief concern. . . . [A] look of revulsion leaped into her eyes and spread to her features, which strained to an unfamiliar ugliness, to a reproach that screamed and screamed within him" (119). Once the link to the repulsive Fraulein Kleinholtz has been made, Sandor returns home in a sequence in which the text's manipulation of the adult reader it implies becomes most clear. In the sanctuary of the bathroom, Sandor discovers two books given to him by Eric: "He opened one and in the fly-leaf read 'To Alex. From his Pal Eric.' Above this line, the words 'Eric from Aunt Margaret' had been firmly crossed out" (122). Like the clothes he wears, the message of this didactic novel is a hand-me-down from a well-intentioned middle-class benefactor who no longer needs it. But the moment he begins to read he becomes entranced by this tale of class aspiration: Sandor's story book — which could easily have been written by Ralph Connor or by Horatio Alger Jr. — is not quoted directly but summarized through the limited perspective of the young reader. After completing the tale in one sitting, except for "a lengthy dissertation on the fruits of virtue, which Sandor skipped" (125), Marlyn's protagonist renews his determination to assimilate:

The great men his father talked about, what were they after all but talkers like himself? The great ones in this book were the doers, the men of wealth and power, the men who counted, whose words people listened to. And one had only to work hard and devote oneself whole-heartedly to the things they believed, *to become one of them.*

He stood there filled with wonder that there should be such a book, giving him back his own dream, his own secret longings that had stirred within him so long — dreams which his father had tried so hard to destroy. From the very beginning it was he who had been right, not his father. (126; emphasis added)

Beddoes reads this scene in terms of Sandor's becoming a subject-in-process, who "read[s] the various texts that are at the same time writing him as subject" (9). Rather than extend an invitation to a reader to follow the protagonist's viewpoint, which is what Sandor's didactic children's text does to him, the narrative uses Sandor's reading strategies to prompt the very reverse in an adult reader — in other words, to encourage skepticism toward his ambitions for the future by showing how *not* to read this text. The narrative likewise invites readers to see further gaps that are beyond Sandor's limited perspective — the fact that Jack, the hero of this text, is already part of the dominant culture in terms of ethnicity and language, although materially disadvantaged. Jack's success derives more from hard work and an opportunity to access higher education than from cultural assimilation. Sandor's mistake in this extract is in identifying *too closely* with the protagonist of a text, in blindly assuming that copying the hero's actions and ambitions will guarantee him a similar financial success. Sandor — later as Alex — in fact mimics Jack by demanding a job from a wealthy businessman who will apprentice him (Mr. Nagy) and by attending night classes to make up for his lack of a formal education. He is so convinced of his ability to replicate the resolution in the novel that he is unable to foresee the shifts between fantasy and reality — that Mr. Nagy would turn against him, that his Hungarian background would continue to disadvantage him in a business world populated by a grown-up "English" gang, and that the stock market would crash, throwing socio-economic aspiration into disarray.

In a book for children, much like the didactic diatribe that gives his ambition new license at the end of the first half of the novel, all loose narrative threads would be neatly tied, so that the overall message of the novel could not be missed. Not so of *Under the Ribs of Death*, a novel that "plot[s] the graph of failure," to borrow from Atwood (152). And yet, despite Alex's failure to achieve everything he wanted, Atwood sees the same transformative potential located in his (unnamed) son:

Perhaps — though it is by no means certain — the third-generation son will be able to reconcile the spiritual values of the first generation and the material ones of the second; though in Marlyn's book the spiritual and the material seem irreconcilable. To enter Canada spiritually is to enter the Death-monster of the title; Alex Hunter, Sandor's Canadian creation, has sold his own soul and failed to gain the world in return. (154)

I read Atwood's ambivalence as a further indication of the novel's ironic mode, given the resolution's inability (or unwillingness) to close up these loose threads of cultural citizenship (not to mention the misogynistic depictions of nearly all women in the novel, especially Mary and Fraulein Kleinholtz). The final image of the narrative opens up the potential for change and growth beyond the end of the novel, but one that might be possible for the third generation. Such a deferral of idealized cultural citizenship is in keeping with the ironic mode of the narrative structure: just as the novel refuses to "solve" the problem of cultural assimilation that it so clearly raises, so too it passes on the opportunity to "properly" resolve the story arc of its hero.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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