

# The Figure of The Child in James Reaney's Poetry

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***Abstract**---The present study aims to shed light on Canadian poetry in general and in more specific the poetry of James Reaney as an emblem figure of Canadian literature. It focuses on the concept of image and how the poet employs the image of child to carry out his literary and moral messages to his readers. This study is innovative and valuable since it tries to explore a selected number of Reaney's poetry in order to explore his vision of his society as well as to the way he uses the imagistic picture of child to address his adult readers to deliver his messages.*

***Keywords:** Canadian poetry, James Reaney's Poetry, adult readers*

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## I. Introduction

James Reaney is a famous Canadian Academic poet and dramatist who has a nationalist tendency in his poetry. He tried hard to give an elaboration and exploration on the relations between human relations and what shapes the literary experience. He dealt with themes like the relation between the simple rustic life and nationality. Since the local history acquires great interest in him, therefore it plays a role in conveying his national thoughts. This is due to his wish "that the literature of a nation should glorify and magnify the history of a nation." (Atwood, 1988, p.6)

Being a poet and a dramatist at the same time, Reaney tried to make both close to each other. He used all his poetic gifts so that he can make his plays visual creative experience. Thus one can sense that they are composed of music of the spoken world. Reaney used in his poetry and plays many small children together with adults this is in strong harmony with his beliefs that "we are all children of an older growth". (Anthony, 1978, p.14). Consequently, the theme of childhood and growth to maturity which is part of Reaney's view of depicting reality is recurrent in his works.

For children has this symbolic search for truth and ends in a compromise with adult world because for him "the innocent child is the hope of the future" (Anthony, 1978, p.14). So it is quite clear throughout his poetry and plays as well that the theme of the child's movement from incorruptibility to adulthood which is a kind of emblematic hope for a fallen world is a theme that echoes and reechoes constantly. Such is a rich insinuation for the future generations, especially in Canada.

## II. Discussion

As a major Canadian poet and a playwright, Reaney intended to reflect the normal life of his country. The three Governor-General's awarded writer tries to build the distinctive model of writing for Canadian literature (Anthony, 1978, p.137). However, in drawing that approach, Reaney insisted on creating a distinctive Canadian outlook to express the Canadian dilemma thought art. He didn't wish to create a form of art to be written in a literary vacuum. Hence, for him is to learn from the critics' guidance in cooperation with the tradition is the only way to build a well-established literary morphology of art.

This point of view is clear through his influence by the Canadian critic Northrop Frye, his teacher and guidance (Sullivan, 1983, p.1-2). To accomplish his duty and build a native art, Reaney uses a fresh instinctive eye to form his work and to try to solve the social problem of the common life. D.M.R Bentley in his *Mimic Fries: account of Early Long Poem on Canada* assures that Reaney sees the poem as a sort of contradiction of human souls, a struggling between human bad and good nature, a nature that composes the society itself (Bentley, 1994, p.274).

Reaney draw that compact in a very symbolic way. Since he portrays his poems on tradition, his style stands as a reminiscence of Blake's concepts of "innocence" and "experience" to express that symbolism. Jay Macpherson emphasizes that sense of duality with the aid of tradition of "innocence" and "experience" can represent contemporary social problems in Canada as what James Reaney did in his works (Macpherson, 2017, p.66).

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This romantic view point in reflecting reality is much more obvious in his early poems. His interest in childhood and purity of children's spirits formulate the brick stone of his literary inspiration to depict social frustration. Hence, the romantic imagination of children stands as a biting satire for social corruption and materialism (Ricou, 1987, P.103-4).

Having such a theme, the child theme, has its origin in the fact that he himself begun writing early in his life, in his youth. Reaney is affected by the reading for important figures like Woolf, Sitwell, and Evelyn Waugh. In 1948 he won the Epstein prize for poetry and short story (Lecker, 1989, p194). He also made the very clever drawings for *The Undergrad (1948)*.

*Moreover The Red Heart*, which is a compilation of forty-two lyrics, was published in 1949. The theme that this collection highlights is about a figure who is a youthful artist coming to poetic terms in relation to a special environment. The figure felt his life on earth is a continual withdrawal, yet he believes that one day he will be able to return to heaven, the very place he has gone astray (Urbancic, 2017, P.291). Thus in "Suns and Planets" part of this collection which reflects his myth making style, a question is raised:

Suns and planets of the sky  
When will you be ripe and die?  
Will a great wind sometime sweep  
The dark branches where you weal [... ] (Reaney, 1975, p.25)

Within this same poem, Reaney metaphorically uses the image of the sky as an orchard composed of fruit, trees, colorful pears, and apples as well as plums positioned aligned with dark branches. This is to be as a mythical images of Venus, Mars, and Pluto whom waiting for autumnal destruction to come (that is Domsday). Such metaphorical use shows an ironic handling for the repeated reference to the Canadian nature myth about the apathy of the Canadian wilderness to human morals (Bartlett, 2009, p. 8).

Doing so, the poet tries to give a picture of history development from the child's point of view with a realization of a kind of sever offence at the sexuality of men and women. In other words he tried to reflect the unhappy experience of the child which had not been happen unless he has never been born. Reaney, in his "The Dark Lagoon" stresses that:

Here lies the new born child Who,  
lately, lay within his mother And  
stood beside a dark lagoon  
Beneath a sunless, starless sky (Reaney, 1975, p.32).

This reflects the hardness and miseries sentenced to this child. He is born in a place where there is no chance for a hope to take him out of plight. Reaney expresses that by choosing a place where there is no symbol of hope in it (light). Everything is bleak to the degree that even the only positive sign of hope is seen as a calamity. He says:

Though he had no yet been born;  
And seems to hear his mother's heart  
Though also a clock  
That with little click mouthful  
Began to eat his time (Reaney, 1975, p.32).

Hence even the sound of his "mother's heart" instead of being a source of life and give him birth, it is the "clock" that count the time to his death.

Reaney in a recurrent way employed archetypal patterns related to the categorization of persons as well as places of the local history as well as culture. This has its origin in the fact that he has long lived in Western Ontario and how most of his works whether poems or plays show the decisive shaping influence of the popular culture on people, their creative imagination, and their commitment to nature and environment through the use of original speech and the real names of the places. Sometimes even the structure is related to the past with certain manipulation like that of Spencer.

Reaney applied this in a way like using the history of the child and his ancestors in relation to nature in order to show and focus on the idea of history as well as culture plays a very important role in the formation of the individual. Consequently children will be individuals in committant with their history and culture and doing so he is not after the repetition of history rather after reinterpreting it which means the refusal of the Europeaness.

Consequently, and in accordance with Alwin A. Lee in his book *James Reaney (1968)* Reaney's writings, whether poetry or drama, has a special thrust trying to make a literary sense of a certain environment against its ugly and destructive features

of an image. The poet in this sense manipulated the formation of his imagination so that he can create a mythopoeic tradition. (Chevalier, 1991, p796)

On the other hand, Margret Atwood, in *Reaney Collected(1973)* , noted that in Reaney's work:

The songs of Innocence come after the songs of Experience.

We can take a number of figures or images from the earlier poems and follow them through the corpus, watching how the Lost Child gets found in Night-Blooming Cereus, how the sinister Orphan gets hanged into the harmless comic-strip

Little Orphan Annie, how the baby doomed from before birth is allowed more latitude (though he can be the Christ Child as parody dwarf, he can also be the real Christ child or magic baby; and how the collection of random objects is permitted to have universal significance (Woodcock, 1974, p.157).

Reaney's best has an:

unmistakable quality. Both stylistic and thematic, and a strength that is present only when a poet is touching something fundamental. His works – articulate the primitive forms of the human imagination, they flesh out the soul, they dramatize - like Blake's "Mental Traveller" - the stance of the self in relation to the universe. (Woodcock, 1974, p.158)

Quite clear that Reaney is after a unique Canadian Mythology by joining together history , legend and romance, because talking about the locale and geography is just for the sake of teaching children about their country ,its geography and the history of it. For he believes: "One ought to have to keep in touch with an underlying legend or myth or pattern that makes the whole thing work dynamically" (James Reaney. Personal communication, Nov. 17, 1982). This means that there is a connection between the precedent history and human experience with the myths that form the literary experience. (Urbancic, 2017, p.291)

Germaine Warkentin remarks, with reference to the regionalist approach of Reaney's poetry, in her Introduction to *Selected Shorter Poems: James Reaney*: "...he (Reaney) in fact writes mostly about society." (Reaney, 1975, p.9) which is also a reference to his mythopoeic poet who is not only after depicting history rather after reshaping it. It is an approach through which he is going to specify the global morphology of tradition to produce native and specific piece of art.

Since Reaney's early period of writing poetry encompasses childhood as a major theme and such theme was omnipresent. Therefore children in such early poem appear in the figure of Antichrist as a child. Reaney uses the first person viewpoint to articulate his poem. Antichrist is the speaker, where the child is presented as a passive being as well as a victim of impulses he has no knowledge about yet, he is involved in.

Another image of the child is found in "The Plum Tree" where the child is presented as a farm child with low intellectuality "whose head spins with / Vast God and the interiors of tree trucks" , a baby, "an old man one hour old." This interest in childhood is dated back to his earlier experience in rustic Ontario which was the source of his both, affliction as well as delight. Thus the effect of this early experience placed on him is just what his friend John Beckwith says as "a whole world of wonderful images coming out of that grain of sand that is the farm"(Bartlett , 2009, p.8).

Moreover, Reaney is a gifted poet who didn't pay so much attention to technique, but rather he emphasizes themes and subject matter. Like Wordsworth, he is gifted in presenting simple and common objects like "plum trees", "kitchen" and "highway" to illustrate more complicated ideas and themes though tackling those object in a different way and camera eye (Ganrowski, 2017, p.168). Thus he was trying to reflect in these poems both the bad effects and threats that effects the human understanding and at the same time the gratification of poetry as well as creativity.

Therefore, Reaney's major attraction was the society far more than the great emphasis on nature like most of the Canadian poets. For there is a message he is after providing. He explains:

All things are voiceless save the sound  
Of some plums falling through the summer air

Straight to the ground.

And there is no listener, no hearer...  
Save a child who, lolling  
Among the trunks and old featherticks  
That fill the room where he was born,  
Hears them in his silent dreaming...

In this poem there is only one single dweller in the society, the child. This child is solitary in this city where there were gardens. The loneliness that the child lives or suffers is highlighted here(Reaney, 1975, p.7).

This recurrent theme of loneliness and isolation of children is even more obvious in his "Play-box". It is a poem written before his first collection book of poetry, *The Red Heart* (1949). It is being told in the dramatic monologue technique and the speaker is a child, an orphan child. The child dreams of having a "camp in a fence-corner/ And be independent a while," Yet he discovered that this is just a dream and the reality is that his place is the orphanage where he is bounded by the remnants of the past(selected shorter poem. P7).

*A Suit of Nettles* (1958) presents a more biting criticism to the society. It reflects the point of view of a more aware poet of social corruption. In which Reaney pays no more attention to the form. He rather stressing the meaning and talk to the readers' minds (Marshall, 1979, p.113). He employs the emblems to be a speaking tongue that brings his readers to the edge of collapse. Through that technique, Reaney directs his readers to his message in every single image and even every object appear in his poetry (Gerry, 2013, p. 168).

Reaney intended to reconstruct the traditional "eclogues" of a domestic setting in a reformed way. He replaces the romantic places with the common distracted world of normal life. He moves from the playful language of a poet to the ordinary one. As a result he creates a dramatic poetry that retails human tragedy (Reaney, 1976, p.9). Therefore it portrays the environment of the rustic Ontario. Hence, Reaney aims to introduce his poem through the eyes of a farm boy. A technique guarantees a clear closeness from reality to tell the stories and frustrations of common man in farmyards (Reaney, 1972, P.288).

With the other geese in the goosehouse  
There lived, I do not know how, various kids  
Of geese: some like a cat, some like a mouse, (Reaney, 1976, p.13)

It is obvious that the boy teller or the poem sees that all children in his environment, as well all human are trapped in this dismal world. They can do nothing but to live their lives. They have to accept it like any object or even animal who find itself in specific place and time. It is a hierarchy world and everyone is sentenced to live his role in that world of "goosehouse". Reaney states:

It's a guilty house, my girls; tho' we kill  
Grass blades, they kill scores of green elms.  
A dead savage lies beneath the door-still,  
The first son play card went to proper church  
The second son did plot beneath a beer vat much. (Reaney, 1976, p.13)

This catastrophic atmosphere of life where nature is being killed reminds us of the ugliness and the grotesques atmosphere of modern life. It brings to our mind the modern world of T.S. Eliot. It is a world where nature is being killed. Here the death of "green elms" is not only a death of nature, it is a death of romanticism and human relations. No one pays attention to other people. It is the hypocrisy of modernism where everyone seeks a temporary joy in playing or drinking to escape from harsh reality.

*Colours in the Red(1967)* is a complement to *The Red Heart* . Both based on personal details from the poet's life. Whereas the later talks about a lost child, the earlier shows how this child becomes an adult. The child becomes a father, the bitterness turned into happiness because this orphaned child now through the adult's recognition has gained his own identity. Simply the father has found his lost son:

Oh Life in Death! My bonny nursling  
Merry drummer in the nut brown coffin,  
With vast wings outspread I float  
Looking and looking over the empty sea

And there! In the—on the rolling death  
Rattling a dried out gourd  
Floated the mysterious cradle  
Filled with a source.

I push the shore and kingdom to you,  
Oh winter walk with seedpod ditch:  
I touch them to the floating child  
And lo! Cities and gardens, shepherds and smiths. (the poem, or shorter poems , p8)

Reaney in his "The School Globe" presents a first- person narrator who goes back to his past childhood in a flashback referring to his teachings in a classroom in comparison with his present status:

Sometimes when I hold  
Our faded gold globe  
That we used at school  
To see where ocean were  
And the fine continents  
The lines of latitude and longitude,  
The North Pole, the Equator and the South pole-  
Sometimes when I hold this  
Wrecked blue cardboard of pumpkin. (Reaney, 1975, p30)

It is very clear that the poet aims to move toward reality. He seeks to confront with it and to put an end the to the escape from social problems and to face them as a part of everyday life matters (Patton, 1990, p.382)

Moreover, the "wrecked blue cardboard" of his school globe, is a symbol of paradise, the lost paradise of his childhood. Thus there is a connection between past and present or the present in the light of the past. He uses a common school images to show that linkage between the two times in a simple way.

Here, Reaney assures that in the past, the globe represents "the fair fields and lands of my childhood"(Reaney, 1975, p.31). The reference to the childhood means the poet's childhood because in the present time when he holds the globe, he immediately recollects the beautiful days of the past, the childhood whom are different from the adulthood, because the globe is "a parcel of past, A basket of pluperfect thing" (Reaney, 1975,p.31).

Thus the globe is "faded old globe" because it stands for all that is good as well as happy, it is not an ordinary globe, it is the one perceived from the child's view point which is different from the adult's. Consequently the Reaney hopes to have "this old world back" to "give...in exchange/ The great sad real one". This is quite desired because he is now living in a world "filled/ Not with a child's remembered and pleasant skies,/ But with blood, pus, horror, death, stepmothers, and lies". The poet is after escaping the world of adulthood with all it represents of misery to the world of childhood with all its beauty and joy.

### III. Conclusion

Reaney's poetry is related in one way or another to the sense of the absurdity of life. Reaney's interpretation of this is that the agonizing prison of provincialism pressing on the mind of the talented poet making him construct a sort of "arrested development", where language and the fantasy-world of childhood leftovers the only imaginative as well as vital reality for him and the one to which he continuously returns. This sympathetic literary account would communicate to Blake's theory of innocence and the general romantic idyllic myth of childhood.

According to Reaney, children similar to the ancestors are very vital to a regionalist. Reaney's works are written for kids or packed with childlike antics. His poems capture children as subjects or pretend childish innocence in their tone. Reaney never does anything without the responsiveness of fun.

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