

《實踐報告》

## ***Be Fruitful and Multiply:* A Canadian short story in Basic Seminar**

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*Every story tells a story that has already been told.*

Umberto Eco

### 1. Introduction

The use of literature as object of study in the second language classroom creates extra challenges for both teacher and student due to complexities at the grammatical and structural level as well as the polysemous nature of words and symbols. A reader can look up an unknown word in the dictionary to find its denotative meaning but may be totally unaware of other connotations. This is particularly true when the story is set in a foreign culture. At the same time, these characteristics offer potential rewards not available from other texts. People turn to literature not only to entertain but also to help make sense of the culture and times they find themselves in, and perhaps this is what makes it so appealing for language teachers. To read and understand literature in a foreign language is to travel abroad and, in some cases, travel in time as well, and this represents part of the motivation behind using *Fruitful* as a class text. Students can encounter and contemplate life in a time and culture they will never experience. It also has the potential to add a dimension to their understanding of Canada as a country beyond the stereotypical images they are exposed to through materials and media in their first language.

*Be Fruitful and Multiply*, hereafter *Fruitful*, was selected for study for three reasons. At less than four pages and 1200 words, it is by any measure a very short short story. The second reason is that at least on the surface, the topics and scenes described within are quotidian and presented in an almost fairy-tale like simplicity: girl gets married, works hard, has children and raises them, grows old and retires. Finally, being characterized as a myth, the story can be read allegorically, and functions as a scathing indictment of the patriarchal, authoritarian rule of Quebec society, in particular the administration of Premier Maurice Duplessis and the hegemonic influence of the Catholic Church. It was hoped that this final feature would stimulate profitable discussion in the classroom and individual reflection on society and our places in it. Thus, its length, content and function made it appropriate for university students on the cusp of adulthood who may be reading literature in English for the first time. This paper will describe the cultural codes present in the story that are essential to understanding the tragedy under its placid surface, in particular the social history of Quebec, the many biblical allusions, and the characteristics and functions of myth in society.

## 2. Background

Canadian multiculturalism, enshrined in the Charter of Rights, is often upheld as *realpolitik* that enables different cultures to live together in one country peaceably while maintaining their distinctive aspects. The historical basis for multiculturalism is what is known as the Conquest, the 1759 defeat of the French military by the British on the Plains of Abraham in Montréal, by virtue of which all French colonial territory in North America was ceded to England. Pragmatic concerns dictated policy and the British found themselves promising the substantial number of new British colonials they could keep their language (French), property, education (religion-based), law (Napoleonic code) and religion (Roman Catholicism) in return for loyalty to the King, which amounted to paying one's taxes on time and refraining from armed insurrection. Thus Canadian multiculturalism was created and eventually codified into law. It has been a constant political balancing act ever since. The French-speaking people of Quebec to this day struggle with what they view as English hegemony in government and policy creation. *Je me souviens*, I will remember, is the provincial slogan, displayed on millions of license plates around the province, as a constant reminder of past events that shaped the present political reality.

These legal guarantees mean that Canada is in fact one country made up of multiple

culturally distinct nations, none of which is theoretically sovereign over any of the others. The topic of this paper, *Fruitful*, reflects the life of an individual born into one of these cultures, that of French Quebec. Although the reader approaches it as fiction, Ferron claims, “My stories are real. They develop an image of life and it is not allegorical” (Basile, J. 1966).

## 2.1 La revanche des berceaux

According to scholars, it is impossible to overstate the influence of the Catholic Church throughout all levels of Quebec society from its founding in 1608 to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bothwell, 2006; Dickinson & Young, 2003; Kevra, 2007). The church ran hospitals and schools and worked closely with the government toward a policy that emphasized traditional (read: Catholic) values and a rural, agricultural economy. Not only that, the power of the priest over even the smallest details of life is evident:

Each family was assigned its own seat in the church...After the reading of the gospel and the delivery of the homily, Monsieur le Cure customarily proceeded to instruct the members of his flock...on who to vote for in the elections, how to spend their money wisely, what crops to plant in the spring and how to fatten their animals. They were urged to go to confession regularly...Venial sins consisted of such minor infractions as disobeying one’s parents, fighting with one’s brothers and sisters, failing to say one’s daily prayers, impure thoughts, gossiping. (Raina, 1996: 9-10)

The lack of economic progress in Quebec was a price the spiritual and political leaders were willing to pay. Both the church and government resisted industrialization and the education necessary for modern workers to participate in the new economy (Dickinson & Young, 2003). This was portrayed as the only way to ensure the survival of French language, culture and religion in the face of overwhelming Anglo influence in Canada and North America as a whole. Although Quebec could not compete economically or culturally with the Anglo majority, there was one area in which it dominated: procreation. The church encouraged people to have as many children as possible. Popularly known as *La revanche de berceaux*, The Revenge of the Cradle, it was a staggering success. For centuries the fertility rate in Quebec was higher than that of the rest of Canada, any country in Europe, or even the poorest of contemporary developing nations by order of magnitudes. Between 1760 and 1960, the population of Quebec

multiplied 80 times, while by comparison the world population increased fourfold (Krull & Trovato, 2003). Quebec could not compete militarily, economically, or politically, but they were determined to overcome by sheer population. Of course, rapid population growth can only be guaranteed by a strong measure of population control, an area in which the government and church excelled.

## 2.2 Grande Noirceur of Duplessis

Modernization changes the orientation of a society, from one primarily based on collectivism to one primarily characterized by individualism. Rising individualism contributes to secularization and the weakening of traditional values and belief systems. The ruling hegemony of Duplessis and the Catholic Church resisted these progressive forces at all costs, sometimes violently, and as a result their reign came to be known as *Grande Noirceur*, Great Darkness.

Nonetheless, the post-war period saw an increase in liberal university education, and resentment at the centuries paternalistic rule of festered among the people of Quebec. With the death of Duplessis in 1959 and arrival of a new Liberal government the next year, a period of rapid modernization known as The Quiet Revolution took place. Liberal intellectuals, one of whom was Pierre Trudeau, former Prime Minister and father of the current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, published their modernist manifestos in the journal *Cité liberte*, calling for greater state control over education, healthcare and childcare and the end of church intervention in daily life (Dickinson & Young, 2003). Once emancipated from the yoke of patriarchy, women writers also began to find their voices and enter the literary field. In was into this milieu that Madeleine Ferron published *Fruitful* in 1966. The great darkness had lifted.

## 3. Analysis

### 3.1. Allegory and Myth

The story is both allegory and myth. It is allegorical because has a double meaning: a primary or surface meaning and a secondary or under the surface meaning. As described earlier, on one level *Fruitful* is an uncomplicated window into the life of a country girl in rural Quebec as she grows up. As an allegory, she is any one of us who risks a life devoid of real meaning if we fail to

question the received modes of conduct that shape society and do not do the hard work of designing and actualizing our own lives.

The story is also myth in that it illustrates a specific social concern, in this case the subjugation of people under an oligarchy and the complicity in their own suppression. Myths are not simply vehicles to transmit culture, but are, in the words of Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye, “stories that tell a society what it needs to know” (33). According to Frye, myths are created to rally a community together, and cause it to reflect, to look inward into itself, and as a result, catalyze change. It is this social function of myth that was one of the main focusses of analysis in the classroom. Inherent in the idea of a liberal arts university education is to be liberated *from* something, mostly ignorance, which often takes shape as our unexamined assumptions about the values society encourages us to adopt, something the protagonist was neither equipped nor willing to do.

### 3.2 Biblical Myth

The central myth of the bible is one of deliverance. The message repeated in many different narratives throughout this most influential book is that obedience to the law makes one’s life a predictable series of repeating conditions—freedom, peace, and prosperity—while disobedience to the law makes life an inevitable sequence of disasters—conquest, slavery and misery (Frye, 1982). Variations on this ideology are found in many societies, religious or not. Of course this mindset, inculcated from birth, created in the Quebec populace a deep reservoir of credulity and servility, which as described earlier was exploited for centuries by the ruling oligarchy of church and state power. It was primarily these forces that the Quiet Revolution looked to end.

### 3.3. Counter-myth

In *Fruitful*, Ferron has created a kind of counter-myth to the dominant cultural ideology that shaped Quebec policy for at least two centuries. The modern reader is jarred and eventually saddened by the anachronistic elements of Quebec society at characterize the story. By way of comparison, Table 1 summarizes some of the competing ideologies of contemporary society and the feudal society in *Fruitful*.

Table 1: Contrasting ideologies in contemporary society and historical Quebec

<b>Modern, Progressive (Normal)</b>	<b>Traditional, Feudal (Abnormal)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Individualism</li> <li>● Self-determination</li> <li>● Adult, love marriage</li> <li>● 2-4 children</li> <li>● Secular education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Collectivism</li> <li>● Fatalism</li> <li>● Child, arranged marriage</li> <li>● 22 children</li> <li>● Pastoral/religious education</li> </ul>

The arranged marriage, large number of children and seemingly lack of self-determination appear tragic to many, but not all, modern readers as evidenced by some of the student reactions. However, these features add verisimilitude to the story, and make the protagonist’s pitiable life all the more compelling.

### 3.4 Four Phases

The story is divided into four thematic phases as outlined in Table 2, which may be taken as a condensed modern history of humanity under unbridled capitalism. The protagonist is carried along by her tribe and its values, becoming less individual and more functional and machine-like as the narrative progresses, finally ending in a state of near dementia, not able to find a role for herself nor able to recognize her own family.

Table 2: Narrative motifs in *Fruitful*

<b>Agrarian/Pastoral</b>	<b>Industrial/Capitalist</b>
1. Wedding: ceremonial or ritual loss of innocence as determined by the tribe.	3. Unthinking ‘machine’, overproducing material goods and children.
2. Transition from child (essential) to sacrificial brood animal (functional).	4. Disintegration: overworked machine breaks down, no restoration or redemption.

Each phase will be dealt with in detail in the following sections.

### 3.4.1 Ceremonial loss of innocence as determined by the tribe

Weddings are expected to be among the happiest days of a person's life, so it is contrary to expectations when She—the main character is never named—expresses feelings of shock, amazement and disbelief upon waking the day after her ceremony. No wonder, as She is 13 years old and one half of an arranged marriage. Her husband—also anonymous—has fared no better. He has gotten extremely drunk at the urging of the wedding guests. “You cannot refuse,” they said. “After all, you are the bridegroom.” He cannot refuse the cup given to him. This is the first of many allusions to the bible, this one reminiscent of Jesus being unable to refuse the metaphorical cup of suffering he was obliged to take as the propitiatory sacrifice to god. The implication is clear: individuals belong to the group, and must accept whatever role is assigned to them. This was the starting point for classroom discussion.

Divisions along gender lines are alluded to in the description of the reception after the wedding: “...the wild pleasure *he* was taking in *his own* wedding feast.” These feasts—and many rituals—are for the groom only. Weddings are for men, who must marry and drink to excess, for these are the roles assigned to them. As an afterthought (“Since it was her wedding too...”), She is portrayed as a passive observer at her own wedding. The subjugation of women to men is *de rigueur*, even at weddings, ceremonies nominally about conjoining men and women in equality.

Past traditions determine present actions, and traditions, according to the church, ultimately come from god. As mentioned earlier, obedience to the law brings one blessings, while disobedience results in disaster. The narrative in *Fruitful* turns this on its head, smashing the idea of the blessings of blind obedience into dust.

### 3.4.2 Brood animal

The party ends when he, not She, decides it is time to leave, but he is so drunk he cannot make it back to their room without her support. They both end up on opposite sides of the bed, children, unprepared for the roles given to them, roles that have been fixed for them along with everything else: “...he turned the horse at a trot towards the property that had been prepared for them. He was to be the second neighbor down the road.” Spouse, dwelling and, as we shall

see later, vocation, are all determined by society.

The Catholic Church through its various social organs, taught and expected women to have as many children as possible, and to subsume their own feelings in the process (Kevra, 2007). She was unprepared for that role, too, as evidenced by this interaction:

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He answered quietly. “You are the sheep and I am the ram.”

“Oh,” she replied. It was simple when one had a reference point.

The sheep and ram are of course symbolic animals in the western literary tradition and as well as in the modern idiom (i.e, *sheeple*). The sheep is an animal of sacrifice in the old testament and the new. It is an animal used as a ‘reference point’ by the Catholic Church to encourage servility and compliance in the population. The reference point was created by her religious education, again pointing to the self-sacrificial motif running throughout the bible. Whether sheep or ram, both animals are members of the flock, guided and directed not by their own wishes and desires, but by the shepherd and his dog, who uses the animals for his own purposes irrespective of their needs.

At this point in the story students are asked to brainstorm and come up with the characteristics of sheep. Answers usually include language like *weak, soft, docile, obedient, tendency to herd or follow*. The sacrificial connotation of the animal is explained, including its centrality to the Christian religion itself and Jesus as the prototype (‘Lamb of God’) meek, obedient, self-sacrificing human, the ideal person to which all believers are to aspire. The question raised by the end of the story is what is the cost of walking down this path, of making this life choice of unquestioning obedience? Her response, ‘Oh’, is, the ultimate passive response. It is a circle, empty, neither an agreement nor a disagreement, nor even a question.

By this point in the narrative the transition from new bride to automaton is complete, finalized by her mother’s encouragement to get back to work. Family and church perpetuate subjugation, communication stopping long before questions come to uncover motivations and feelings behind the characters’ words and actions: “The mother, fascinated, watched her daughter attentively *but did not dare to question her further*[emphasis added].”



This second thematic unit ends with the girl in a frenzy of overproduction, responding to some unidentified goad, but what we can assume is the hegemonic superstructure of church and society, ever-present, subjugating people into herd-animal mentality. A women's community group of the time in Quebec called Circle de Fermières operating under the slogan, *Travaillons sans cesse!*, or work without cease. The pressure to conform was always present.

### 3.4.3 Industrial Exploitation

Despite the societal forces arrayed against her, she is not without responsibility. Everyone, it is implied, has a choice: "The simple mechanism *she had set in motion* [emphasis added] did not falter." She, of course, is the mechanism and the product is more people. She becomes the proverbial baby machine, giving birth to twenty-two children. It seems almost supernatural or superhuman, as, "...the rhythm was too fast. She outstripped the seasons." Again, society's goals, in this case the cultural policy of *la revanche des berceaux*, the revenge of the cradle, whereby Quebec would achieve political power through sheer numbers of voters, which was described as a 'miracle' by clergy writing at the time (Kevra, 2007). There is no sense of intimacy in the process—the husband is not even mentioned—it is purely an act of manufacture, an act of policy.

This segment ends with another signpost of a life lived uncritically: "Nevertheless, it (22 children) was extravagant. *She never realized it.*" This ignorance appears again and again throughout the story, a cry of anger against the education of the period, an education that was not guided by a desire to foster individual intelligence and talent but by a desire to maintain control of the population.

At this point students were asked to if they wanted marriage and/or children and, if so, how many. An informal survey of the size of parents' and grandparents' families was also conducted, anecdotally supporting the trend of smaller families as industrialization replaces agriculture.

### 3.4.4 Dis/integration

The final section of the story shows a woman who rather than enjoying her retirement and the large family she has created, is lost outside of the narrow roles assigned to her. What can she

do now that there is no family to take care of? Without critical faculties to think for herself, the faculty of self-determination, she ends up wallowing in confusion:

The mechanism could not adjust to a new rhythm. It broke down. She found herself disoriented, incapable of directing the stranger she had become, whom she did not know, who turned round and round with outstretched arms, more and more agitated.

This, the narrative tells us, is the end of a life lived in uncritical servility.

The government of Duplessis focused on traditional agrarian society and drove away hundreds of thousands of Quebecois from their homes to other parts of Canada and the United States so that they could find more satisfying work. In other words, by trying to protect Quebecois language and culture through shaping society based on outmoded ways of living, they drove away thousands of the very people they were trying to preserve. This is illustrated in the story when She decides to use her retirement to visit her family, who has spread to, “the four corners of the province, some even exiled to the United States.” When She does find them, the not-knowing continues, exemplified by her inability differentiate between people: “The generations had become confused. She no longer knew.” In Marxist terms, she has been alienated from the products of her labor—her offspring—emptying meaning from her life’s work, and failing to find the promised honor in the life proscribed to her by church and society. Her confusion continues as her family, unable or unwilling to take care of her, pass her off amongst themselves until she is finally taken in by her son, a priest in an old folks’ home. The story begins with her confusion and shock and ends in the same way as she looks around at the community and asks her son, “Tell me, are all these your brothers?”

#### 4. Student responses

As part of a final assignment, students were asked to respond to the following question:

*Do you agree with the inherent criticism in the story, *Be Fruitful and Multiply*? Why or why not?*

Student responses were transcribed as is, errors uncorrected. Emphasis is mine.

*S.I., female:*

*I agree. Woman and man have their own roles. Woman can not doing power work but man can do it. Woman is able to have child, but man can't. They accept these roles until now. But now, some people resist it. They don't accept the role. I think it is bad. Because if woman don't accept own role and she accept man's role, woman don't have child...**I think man and woman should accept their own roles that society gives them.***

*A.M, female:*

*We should have freedom, we have equality...this is natural thinking. "You cannot refuse." What to say? **We can refuse anywhere, anytime.** In this way, many people become more happy, I think.*

*N.K, female:*

*I disagree with the criticism in this story...**We should accept the role. We...should live like soft sheep.***

*S.M, male:*

*They should decide their own lives...If she decide her life, she don't become dementia...**I don't want to be a sheep. I want to decide my own life.***

## 5. Discussion

Despite the challenging nature of the task, many students responded thoughtfully. While the expected answers emerged ("I don't want to be a sheep."), some students agreed with the historical roles assigned to men and women, even going so far as to connect population decline with excess personal freedom, a conclusion not without evidence as the birthrate in Quebec dropped off drastically with the onset of the Quiet Revolution, and even today is the lowest of all Canadian provinces.

## 6. Limitations

While students were required to highlight grammar and vocabulary they did not understand both in class and for homework, there is no guarantee that linguistically the story was completely understood by everyone, but that was not the main purpose of the class.

Also, some student may have been uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the Socratic approach employed by the instructor, whereby statements are closely examined and probed for underlying assumptions. This may have led to some reticence among less confident members of the class.

Understanding the complex web of meanings that constitute a literary text is not easy in a first language, and the task is made more difficult in a second language. Despite the brevity of the text and the careful explanation, some students failed to grasp the motifs and themes contained in the story. Perhaps the difficulty of the task was demotivating, or there was mismatch between student expectations and classroom activities. Some students expressed disappointment at having to do homework and other assignments in the Basic Seminar class.

## 7. Conclusion

Too easy, or too hard? After teaching this text in many Basic Seminar classes over the years, it is perhaps a bit of both. Students should leave the classroom unable to immediately put aside whatever it is they learned that day. There is a trend to make things as easy as possible for students, to set the bar so low that anyone can get over it. But an essential part of education is lost if that is always the case. There is enormous value in the struggle to understand, and particularly if the resulting conclusions can be generalized to other areas of life. In *Fruitful*, She lived an ultimately unsatisfying life. If in our struggle to understand how and why that life was not well spent, we may be able to achieve something better, and then that is a worthy expenditure of classroom time and energy. Maturity is a process that can only be achieved by questioning and testing the structure of society and traditions, not taking them at face value. It is the more difficult road, but the only one that leads to true individuality.

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