
UNIT 13 FRENCH CANADIAN WRITING (QUEBEC)

Structure

- 13.0 Objectives
- 13.1 An Introduction to Quebec
- 13.2 Some Trends in Quebec Writing of Recent Times
- 13.3 'Naturalism' and Quebec writing Questions

13.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit seeks to provide the immediate context (the 'before' and the 'after') for Gabrielle Roy's 1947 novel *The Tin Flute* (written originally in French as *Bonheur d'occasion*). This is sought to be achieved by giving a brief idea of what Quebec stands for within Canada and of what gives a distinct identity to its literature especially after Quebec had made the shift from a rural to an industrial and urban society.

13.1 AN INTRODUCTION TO QUEBEC

Quebec is Canada's largest province, a vast territory three times the size of France. French is its main language and Montreal its best-known city and Quebec city is the provincial capital.

'Kebec', an Algonquin Indian word meaning 'where the river narrows', is also the heart of French Canada. The vast majority of the population speaks French, making Quebec unlike the rest of North America.

Quebec is generally at odds with the rest of English-speaking Canada, particularly in its politics. A sizable chunk of the population has long favoured seceding from the rest of Canada. Today, the French dominate the province. Outside of Montreal, English residents are generally few, although parts of the Eastern Townships and the Gaspé and an area around the Ontario border near Hull still have English communities. Most immigrants arrive from French-speaking countries such as Haiti and Vietnam but line up with the Anglophone group politically.

At the time of European exploration, the region along the St. Lawrence River from Ontario to Quebec City was controlled by the Mohawks of the Iroquois Confederacy. North of, and around Quebec City, the Montagnais settled. Farther north lived the Crees, and beyond that the Labrador Eskimo, Naskapi and Inuit peoples. The Montagnais and Naskapi are also known as Innu. Around the southern portion of the Gaspé Peninsula, the Micmac (known as Mi'kmaq in the Maritime Provinces), found throughout Atlantic Canada, were the principal aboriginal group. They still live in the region, although their numbers are small.

French explorer Jacques Cartier landed in Quebec City (then called Stadacona) and Montreal (then called Hochelaga) in 1534. Samuel de Champlain, also of France, first heard and recorded the word 'kebec' when he founded a settlement at Quebec City some 70 years later, in 1608.

Through the rest of that century, the French and English skirmished over control of Canada, but by 1759 the English, with a final battle victory on the Plains of Abraham

at Quebec, established themselves as the winners in the Canadian colony sweepstakes. From this point on, French political influence in the New World waned. When thousands of British Loyalists fled the American Revolution in the 1770s, the new colony divided into Upper (today Ontario) and Lower (Quebec) Canada and almost all the French settlers congregated in the latter region. The inevitable struggles for power and status between the two language groups continued through the 1800s, with Lower Canada joining the Canadian confederation as Quebec in 1867.

The early and middle portions of the 20th century saw Quebec change from a rural, agricultural society to an urban, industrialized one whose educational and cultural base, however, still relied upon the Catholic Church, which wielded immense power (about 90% of the population is Roman Catholic, though the Church's influence has declined sharply since the 1960s). Under the control of Premier Duplessis in the 1940s and 50s Quebec became archly conservative.

The tumultuous 1960s brought the so-called 'Quiet Revolution', during which all aspects of French society were scrutinized and overhauled. Under the leadership of Liberal premier Jean Lesage, a number of changes occurred. The provincial government instituted a mixed-sex (i.e. coeducational) and free education system for everyone under 16, developed a system of social services (e.g. government-funded medical care and pension benefits), gave more clout to unions, nationalized hydroelectric companies and celebrated the province's culture. Also, intellectuals and extremists alike debated the idea of independence from Canada, as Quebecois began to assert their sense of nationhood.

In 1960 the body *Rassemblement pour l'indépendance National* (Assembly for National Independence) was founded, and in 1968 the *Parti Quebecois* formed. From 1963 to 1970, the *Front de la Liberation du Quebec* (FLQ) committed a series of terrorist acts against symbols of English Canadian dominance, bombing mailboxes and other targets. When French president Charles de Gaulle visited Montreal in 1969 and made his news-making cry of '*Vive le Quebec libre!*' ('Long live a free Quebec!') the Quebecois crowd greeted him with wild cheers.

In 1994 in the provincial government, the *Parti Quebecois* returned to power under Jacques Parizeau and held another referendum in 1995 with a confusingly worded question on sovereignty. This one was a nailbiter and the 'No' side won by less than 1%, a mere 53,000 votes – less than the number of spoiled ballots. Parizeau made headlines by declaring that they had lost 'but by what? By money and the ethnic vote'. True, some 60% of francophones voted in favor of separation, while a vast majority of Anglophone, Native Indians and immigrants sympathetic to the Anglophone cause voted against it. However Parizeau's ill-advised statement only amplified his opponents' allegations of xenophobia among the *Parti Quebecois*.

By 2002 the issue of separation, while still officially advocated by the *Parti Quebecois* under Bernard Landry, was no longer topical. Landry, not nearly as popular as Levesque, saw support for his party slip in the wake of accusations of fiscal mishandling and social irresponsibility. While 43% of the population support sovereignty, the notion of an independent Quebec is less attractive to a younger generation with more global concerns. Indeed, apprehension over globalization will have a greater effect on the future of the separatist cause than the strategies born from a very distant-seeming 'Quiet Revolution'.

One interesting feature of today's Quebec life needs to be noted here. That is the words '*Je me souviens*' which means 'I remember'. '*Je me souviens*' was first added to the provincial coat of arms in 1883. Author Eugene Tache, the architect of Quebec City's Parliament Building, intended it to prolong the memory of a people and its hardships. Of course, it can be interpreted in various ways, but most agree that the phrase offers a permanent recognition, albeit unstated, of the marginalized status of Quebec's French citizens, who have been victimized by colonization policies and

denied nationhood. In 1939, the provincial government officially adopted 'Je me souviens' as its slogan.

13.2 SOME TRENDS IN QUEBEC WRITING OF RECENT TIMES

The rapid industrialization and urbanization of Quebec from around 1940 onwards had significant effects on Quebec fiction. One literary trend came to be urban social realism and the other was a tilt towards works treating industrial conflict. The second trend was preceded by the first. *The Tin Flute* belongs to the first trend. As the Second World War was drawing to a close, young writers in Montreal and in Quebec city (the provincial capital of Quebec) turned the Quebec novel towards the teeming working-class areas of these two cities. One such remarkable work was Roger Lemelin's *Aupied du la pente douce* (1944) (translated in 1948 as *The Town Below*). This novel, like Roy's *The Tin Flute*, drew its sustenance from the Depression; from the desire of youth to break out of a claustrophobic trap and from the tensions between socio-physical topographical entities.

Novels of industrial conflict followed the lead given by Lemelin and by Roy. Around the 1950s labour tensions became volatile in Quebec. Gerard Bessette's first novel *La haggare* is a good example. In this novel the hero Jules Leboeuf works by night and studies during the day. His evolution is provided a context by a strike by sweepers at the Metropolitan Transport Company. The strike and the events that surround it are a crucial part of the novel.

Propagandist in comparison with Bessette's novel is Pierre Gelivias's *Les Vivants*. It centers on a well-to-do-hero-turned-radical. Elements of contemporary political history and/or of the international novel are also incorporated. One notable event covered is the riot that followed Maurice Richard's suspension from the National Hockey League (NHL). The social canvas is broad and there is no dearth of highly dramatic description.

All this contrasts substantially with the contemporary fiction of writers like Jean Simard whose orientation is largely psychological-social in novels like *Felix* (1947). The orientation of Pierre Baillargeon in novels like *Commerce* (1947) is satirical.

13.3 'NATURALISM' AND QUEBEC WRITING

One international trend which needs to be understood in order to understand Roy's *The Tin Flute* better, is 'naturalism'. Crudely speaking, 'naturalism' amounts to photographic realism of the kind practised by the French writer Emile Zola, among others. It does not shy away from misery and squalor and it tries to be as objective and particularistic as possible. The great Irish writer James Joyce was also partly a practitioner of naturalism when he gave descriptions of Dublin life in his works. The difference is that Joyce did not share Zola's enthusiasm for science. Roy was well read in the works of these masters.

Naturalism was a development of 'realism'. The Naturalists believed that the novel should be based on scientific knowledge and objectivity should be a prime value. Environment should be exactly treated and character should be related to physiological heredity.

All this found an echo in poetry also. One remarkable poet was Emile Coderre who focused on the wretched misery of the urban poor. The same can be said of the work of Pierre Perrault.

The Tin Flute
(Novel)

One writer who needs to be mentioned but stands a little apart from the two main trends is Yves Theriault. The pinnacle of his career was reached with *Aaron* (1954) set in the 'exotic' milieu of Jewish immigrants in Montreal. Theriault's concern is largely with ethnic minorities.

The Montreal Group of poets caused a renaissance of Canadian poetry during the 1920s and 1930s by advocating a break with traditional landscape poetry. Its members - who included AJM Smith, AM Klein, Leo Kennedy and Francis Reginald Scott - encouraged realism, metaphysical complexity and expressionist techniques already used by Ezra Pound, TS Eliot and others. Smith's *Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943) is regarded as a landmark work.

One major Quebec novelist who writes in English is Mordecai Richler. Richer, born in 1931, left Canada for Europe in 1951. During a ten-year stay in England he wrote a series of linked novels, notable *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959). Duddy is a young man without scruples - 'Where Duddy Kravitz sprung from the boys grew up dirty and sad, spikey also, like grass beside the railroad tracks' - who escapes from the Montreal ghetto. *Cocksure* (1968) is reminiscent of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, but Richler's satire is blacker and verges on the absurdist. *St Urbain's Horseman* (1971) is his most balanced novel, the satire being counterpoised by what the novelist sees as a desirable normality. Here, as in the later novel *Joshua Then and Now* (1980), Richler dramatizes a decent man's attempt to answer some of the riddles of human existence. *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (1989) is large, ambitious, and sprawling, a farcical romp based on the improbable thesis that a Jewish antecedent of the wealthy Bronfman family in present-day Montreal was a survivor from the early nineteenth century Franklin expedition to find the North-West Passage. Richler returned to live in Canada in the 1970s and in *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec! Requiem for a Divided Country* (1992) he attacks Quebecois nationalism and the move towards separatism.

Then there are the plays of Michel Tremblay and others. Tremblay was the single most important dramatist in Quebec in the 1970s. His work led the way to acceptance in the theatre of JOURNAL, the vernacular used by many urbanized Quebecois today. *Les BELLES-SOEURS* - whose production in Montreal in 1968 began the assault of *joual* on the theatre and the heated debate about its validity - is about lower-class women living in the east and Montreal who speak the fractured, vital language that may be heard on the streets there. It reveals not only Tremblay's ability to present convincingly Quebecois women, but also his sense of rhythmic dialogue and musical structure: the women speak both as individuals and as a chorus. *Les belles-sœurs* became the first of a series of eleven plays based on the lives of characters living for the most part in the same section of Montreal, many of whom appear in several plays. These plays were all published by Lemeac. *A toi pour toujours, to Marie-Lou* (1973), perhaps Tremblay's finest play to date, offers a harrowing picture of a Quebec family whose two daughters, Carmen and Manon, ten years after the violent death of their parents, reflect on the quality of life in their home and the lasting effects it has had on them. The role of musical structure in Tremblay's work is seen to advantage here as the girls' conversation is intertwined with the bickering of their parents in the past. The two plays that bear the names of Carmen and Manon involve transvestitism. Here, and in two plays about homosexuality, *La Duchesse de Langeais* and *Hosanna*, the central figures and their fate become symbolic of the Quebecois themselves, whom Tremblay sees as having been forced to betray their true identity and to put on a disguise that is foreign to them.

After the Parti Quebecois victory in 1976, Tremblay felt that much of the political message of his plays had been heard; he even allowed his plays to be produced in English in Quebec. Most of Tremblay's plays are available in English translation and have been produced in English, in and outside Quebec.

In the realm of theatre, David Fennario's *Balconville* scrutinizes the lives of middle-class Montrealers whose summer holidays are limited to their balconies. He strove to forge community ties on the basis of class, not language, emphasizing how exploiters and exploited spoke both languages.

French Quebec writers who are widely read in English include Anne Hebert, Marie-Claire Blais, Hubert Aquin and Christian Mistril. Roch Carrier's witty short story *The Hockey Sweater* can practically be taken as a microcosm of the country's French-English quarrels.

QUESTIONS

1. What is meant by 'Naturalism'? What is its relation to 'Realism'?
2. What is special about Quebec's political status?

UNIT 14 GABRIELLE ROY: LIFE AND WORKS

Structure

- 14.0 Objectives
- 14.1 Life of Gabrielle Roy
- 14.2 Gabrielle Roy's Works
- 14.3 Gabrielle Roy's Place in the History of French-Canadian Literature Questions

14.0 OBJECTIVES

Here a brief glimpse of Gabrielle Roy's life is offered. She is seen as representative (by and large) of the way Quebec fiction (a part of it anyway) moved.

14.1 LIFE OF GABRIELLE ROY

Gabrielle Roy was born on 22 March, 1909 in Saint Boniface, Manitoba. In 1927, the year of her father's death, she enrolled in the Winnipeg Normal Institute. Later she started teaching and from 1930 to 1977 she did school teaching in Saint Boniface. She sailed to London in September 1937 and studied acting. She travelled in Europe (especially France) and started writing articles on Europe and Canada for newspapers back-home.

She returned to Canada in 1939 and chose to settle in Montreal. She did a lot of journalism. In 1947 she met and married Marcel Charbotte. With him she travelled to France where she spent the next three years with excursions to other parts of Europe. In 1968, she received an honorary degree from Laval University. She died on 13 July, 1983.

14.2 GABRIELLE ROY'S WORKS

The titles of Roy's books are:

- Bonheur D'occasion* (1945)
translated as *The Tin Flute* (1947)
- La Petite Poule d'Eau* (1950)
translated as *Where Nests the Water Hen* (1950)
- Alexander Chenevert* (1954)
translated as *The Cashier* (1955)
- Rue Deschambault* (1955)
translated as *Street of Riches* (1957)
- La Montagne Secrete* (1961)
translated as *The Hidden Mountain* (1962)
- La Route d'Altamont* (1966)
translated as *The Road Past Altamont* (1966)
- La Riviere san repos* (1970)
translated as *The Windflower* (1970)

- Cet Ete qui Chantait* (1972)
translated as *Enchanted Summer* (1976)
- Un Jardin au Bout du Monde* (1975)
translated as *Garden in the Wind* (1977)
- Ces Enfants de Ma Vie* (1977)
translated as *Children of My Heart* (1979)
- Fragile Lights of Earth* (1982)

A brief detour through some of these works is helpful. In *Where Nests the Water Hen* Roy takes us to her childhood and the landscape of the West. At one level it is an idealized version. The focus is on the solace provided by nature. She describes in three parts a Paradise-like world where the people live in peace and harmony.

The *Cashier* is the story of an ordinary man who is a victim of liabilities of modern life. He is lost in the crowd. His name is Alexandre Chenvert. He is an 'Everyman' of the metropolis and epitomizes the 'white collar' employee burdened by financial insecurity and by the monotony and subservience of his job in a Montreal bank.

The story begins in 1947 and ends in 1949 with the death of the hero. Roy here has created a richly structured economic, social and political universe. Roy's description of the bank cabin is quite graphic and we are told that it was a transparent cabin, harbouring indeed as few secrets as a shop window. Here there is more diffuse localized realism than the photographic realism of *The Tin Flute*. Alexandre feels trapped inside the teller's cage as well as in the noisy, polluted city of Montreal. When Mahatma Gandhi is assassinated Alexandre goes on a fast to honour and respect this great Indian leader.

Street of Riches offers eighteen narratives. In these the world of the calm street of St. Boniface is recalled. Immigrants from outside figure here. These include two Italian girls and someone from Holland. The important thing is that the female narrator's mother helps her realize that foreigners are rarely as strange as they are believed to be. Christine becomes one with nature and is also able to create inner space.

The Windflower (1970) presents culture in contact and in conflict and also the search for identity. Elsa, an Inuit, is raped by an American soldier and abandoned. We are told about Jimmy her son and what happens to him subsequently.

Garden in the Wind (1975) probes the lives of Chinese and Ukrainian immigrants.

Enchantment and Sorrow (1984) is autobiographical. Here the relationship between Stephan and Gabrielle passes from carnal love to Platonic friendship.

The Hidden Mountain is an allegory on the vocation of the artist. Here a self-taught painter Pierre Crosses the great Northern regions searching for his mountain's. The book is allegorical.

The Road Past Altamont relates the deeply personal story of Christine who wants to become a writer. For her the act of writing signifies the efforts of rejoining her mother and her grandmother in their creative activities.

Garden in the Wind is another collection of stories and *Enchantment and Sorrow* was published posthumously.

On the whole, the portrait of the artist is largely a grim one. In *Street of Riches* the artist is shown as a lonely figure, constantly left behind. In *The Hidden Mountain* the artist is hunter and hunted simultaneously. He is both the pursuer and the pursued.

On the whole Gabrielle Roy was a very versatile writer who gave a new richness to Quebec writing.

14.3 GABRIELLE ROY'S PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF FRENCH-CANADIAN LITERATURE

Quebec has a special place in the overall Canadian political set-up and Roy has a special place within Canadian fiction as a whole.

Margret Atwood, Margart Lawrences, Robert Kroetsch, Rudy Wiebe, Corol Shields, Michael Ondaatje are all taken to be leading Canadian novelists. Then there is Mordecai Richler who though from Quebec, wrote in English. The contribution to Canadian fiction of all these novelists is substantial. Roy wrote in French and is as good a novelist as any of these. In her kind of writing she is the best because she is the best realist-naturalist novelist from Canada whose original writing was in French.

Roy's social concern is tremendous. Her commitment to the vocation of the artist is thoroughgoing. In some ways she is a Joyce and Dickens combined in one. Joyce immortalised Dublin. She has immortalised a part of Montreal. She writes in the realist style as Dickens does minus his sentimentalism. Her concern for the poor of Montreal is as genuine as Dickens's was for the poor of London. And her effort has a French angle to it because she tried to foreground the pathetic condition of the poor people of Quebec.

Roy lived a life committed to recording history in her own special way. She travelled extensively and did extensive journalism. She did not shy away from squalor and the ugly aspects of life and from life is pathos. She upheld human values. She is a modernist-realistic-naturalist novelist minus the Joyce kind of experimentation. She told it as it came. Here motto could have been that of the leading American poet Robert Lowell who wrote:

We are poor passing facts, warned by that
To give every figure in the picture its proper name.

Roy's photographic realism ensured that 'every figure in the picture' did get its proper name. The St. Henri district of Montreal got recorded the way Dublin streets and life were recorded by Joyce.

Roy is a realist par excellence and she is a naturalist par excellence. She is a wonderful short story writer too and in that domain what comes through unmistakably is her concern with the plight of immigrants.

Then Roy wrote a lot that was partly autobiographical. She also wrote a proper autobiography. In this endeavour also she excelled and gave us an exemplary specimen of autobiographical writing.

In short Roy is an artist who goes all the way both in recording her times and surroundings and in reacting to them. And she did most of it not from abroad but by being rooted in the local scene.

Gabrielle Roy represents the Quebecois voice in Canadian literature. Roy's novels and short stories are products created within the socio-economic conditions in which she lived. Roy experienced life when the great Depression, the war of 1939 and other social problems shook the world. Her novels depict the changes that took place in Canadian society not in a mirror image style but through the projection of complex human characters.

The inner truth of the works of the great realists rests on the fact that they arise from life itself, that their artistic characteristics are reflection of the social structure of life lived by the artist himself. Realist literature reflects human being in action. The more vigorously the social and individual character of men finds expression in their deeds, or rather in the mutual interaction of their external circumstance, their emotion and their deeds, the greater the cope of realistic presentation.

Realism has a specific reference to a particular literary movement which started in France in the early nineteenth century. The names of the novelist most associated with this movement are those of Balzac, Stendhal and Zola. These writers made enormous efforts to ensure that factual details in their works were correct that is to say, capable of being checked against an external reality by empirical investigations. They achieved the accuracy by lengthy and painstaking research.

Gabrielle Roy's fiction is a part of larger social system, a system which is a network of social relationship. Roy being of French origin was always aware of this fact that French Canadian have never enjoyed a freedom and lived a free life in their own country. The roots of French-Canadian nationalism lie deep in the minority complex and are therefore mainly of domestic origin. But this minority complex would never have existed at all had it not been for the tremendous pressure exerted on French Canada by Anglo-Canadians.

On her return to Canada before the war in 1939, Roy chose despite the pull of home, to settle in Montreal which became the centre for her travel through Quebec and Canada, her investigation into Quebec society and urban and industrial growth.

Roy went through financial problems. She had before her a choice of either persuing a teaching profession or to pursue a literary career. She opted for the latter, and began her forays in to literary creativity by writing articles on Europe and on Canada for the newspaper in Saint Boniface and Paris.

Gabrielle Roy in the collection, *Street of Riches*, suggests that artist has a solemn, strange, difficult and dangerous vocation. The theme is developed in *The Hidden Mountain*. *The Hidden Mountain* gives an insight into the nature of the artist including the difficulty of the Canadian artist both at home and abroad.

At the level of being taken as an individual work, the achievement of *The Tin Flute* was that it was contemporary; it dealt vividly, honestly and above all without the slightest trace of self-consciousness, with the unfortunate poor in Montreal, who could step out of their misery only when war brought prosperity to the country it over flowed with good humour, enormous pity, deep understanding and a fearless will to be truthful.

Canadian and others recognized both the life they had been living and their world; the mind destroying noise and the inescapable filth of the city, but more tragically, the essential solitude of life on the mean streets. Caged in their cold water flats, trapped in the poverty of St. Henri behind physical walls and the symbolic palisade of factory Chimneys and church steeples. It is little wonder that the characters walk endlessly round and round like animals seeking escape, any escape whether it be the war and physical death, a marriage without love and emotional death, unrelenting ambition and spiritual death, or just the pathetic memory of childhood in the country or of manhood found in real work in one's trade.

Roy's understanding of the nature of the poverty is the chief irony and central perception of the *The Tin Flute*. Manitoba passed a law in 1890 that abolished public funding for catholic schools and forbade the use of the French language for instruction in the schools. To support alternative French language schools for their children, Franco-Manitobans began taxing themselves, and by 9one of those painful ironies that history often repeats, as Roy notes in her autobiography, thereby assured their own poverty: 'Already it gripped me in some curious ways that I still don't

The Tin Flute
(Novel)

understand. Its cries, smells and reminders of travel weren't its only fascination. Its poverty moved me.'

QUESTIONS

1. What is Gabrielle Roy's contribution to French-Canadian writing?
2. Can Roy be seen as a Modernist experimentalist or is she more in the mainline realist tradition represented by Henry Fielding and Charles Dickens?

UNIT 15 *THE TIN FLUTE*: STRUCTURE AND THEME

Structure

- 15.0 Objectives
- 15.1 Structure of *The Tin Flute*
- 15.2 Theme of *The Tin Flute*
- 15.3 Conclusion
- Questions

15.0 OBJECTIVES

Here we shall briefly take up the structure of *The Tin Flute* and its thematic strands.

15.1 STRUCTURE OF *THE TIN FLUTE*

Structurally, Bonheur D'occasion (translated as *The Tin Flute*), employing omniscient narration, moves regularly among three equally important settings – homes, the streets (the characters do a considerable amount of walking), and public establishments. Chapters are unified in several different ways: by place, as the reader surveys the thoughts of several different characters gathered together; by point of view, as he or she follows an individual from place to place; and by a process of transfer, as the reader shifts from one centre of consciousness to another after two characters have met. The constant shift of setting and the amount of action set outside the home convey the degree to which the characters are socially and psychologically dispossessed. The characters do possess their district in a sense, and it can be seen as an extension of the home, but this situation is double-edged. Except during the Lacasses' abortive trip to Saint Denis and some ironic glimpses of prosperous Westmount, the novel never leaves the district. The parade of soldiers tramping off to war and death signifies one of the few paths of escape, and the surrounding mountain and spires suggest entrapment. Ironically the repeated images of trains and ships have realistic significance in the acrid smoke, the noise, the soot they discharge, but they do not fill their conventional function as symbols of freedom, except as a grim joke. The penultimate image of the novel, of "unarbre, dans un fond de occur, quit poussait ses branches tordues entre les fils electriques et un reasau de cordes a linge. Ses feuilles dures et ratatinees semblaient a demi mortes de fatigue avant meme de s'etre pleinement ouvertes" ("a tree in a backyard, its brances tortured among electri wires and clothesline, its leaves dry and shrivelled before they were fully out") symbolizes, a little heave-handedly, both the tragedy and the limited triumph of these characters, in a social environment in which they cannot flourish and from which they cannot flee.

The Tin Flute divides itself into two parts roughly. The first is where Florentine and Jean Levesque figure more. The second is where Rose-Anna, Florentine and Emmanuel figure more. The story develops on a threefold level: that of the individual, the social and the global. At the first level the centre is Florentine, at the second level Rose-Anna is foregrounded. At the third level the effects of the World War take over.

There are 33 chapters in all.

Chapter one shows Florentine Lacasse at work. A representative passage from this chapter is as follows and it shows Roy at her descriptive best

The Tin Flute
(Novel)

New customers were crowding toward the counter. It was the usual rush between twelve and one: a few neighbourhood working men in heavy drill; store clerks from Notre Dame Street with white collars and small felt hats which they tossed on the counter; two social service nuns in grey cloaks; and a taxi-driver and several housewives who, between shopping trips, came to perk themselves up with a cup of scalding coffee or a plate of French fries. The five young waitresses bustled back and forth, bumping into each other on the way. From time to time there was the tinkle of a spoon falling on the tile floor. A waitress would pick it up swiftly and toss it in the sink, then rush off, beding slightly forward so as to gain more speed. They were all in a hurry. Their quick footsteps, their sudden comings and goings, the rustling of their blouses, stiff with starch, the click of the toaster when the bread jumped up, the purring of the coffee pots on their electric plates, the crackling of the kitchen loud-speaker, combined in a continuous sound like the hum of a warm summer day, with the added charm of strong odours of vanilla and sweets. You could always hear the muffled rumbling of milk-shake mixers in tall chromed containers, like the interminable buzzing of flies caught in sticky paper; and then the ring of a coin on the counter, and, at intervals, the bell of the cash register like the period of a sentence, a small, high-speed knell, tireless and shrill. Though the frost had painted its arabesques on the glass doors at the front, here in the back of the store the air was torrid. (pp. 13-14)

Chapter two shows Jean Levesque at work.

In Chapter three Azarius and Jean have a discussion about war. Here we have told that:

Azarius Lacasse had been one of the hardest hit by the years of unemployment. (p. 43)

About Jean we are told

The young man's insolent tone, his detachment, stunned the others. (p.45)

Chapter four introduces Emmanuel into the story at Ma Philiberts' restaurant. About him we are told:

Tall, very thin, a little awkward with his hands, his face rubbed by the frost and lit by a friendly, open expression, he stood there uncertain because of the silence that had followed his greetings. (p. 50)

Chapter five describes the Lacasse home on Beaudoin Street. Eugene tells his mother Rose-Anna about his having joined the army.

In Chapter six Jean and Florentine have their first proper brush with each other. Florentine realizes that her mother is with child again.

Chapter seven shows Rose-Anna and Azarius together. Here we are told

The depression had affected Azarius early on, as he was a carpenter. Too proud to take just any work, he had tried to find it only within his own trade. Then he had become discouraged, and, like so many others, had finally accepted government relief. (pp.93-94)

In Chapter eight Florentine, Jean and Emmanuel are shown together. Emmanuel invites Florentine to a party at his place. Emmanuel says to Florentine:

"My mother's giving a party tomorrow night..... " and he touched Jean's arm. "We just wondered, my friend and I, whether you'd like to come." (p.112)

Chapter nine shows Rose-Anna at Florentine's workplace. At the start of this chapter we are told:

Florentine stared, amazed to see her mother there. She realized that her first feeling had been one of relief that she hadn't come earlier, before Jean and Emmanuel left. But she regretted this thought so sincerely that she leaned over the counter and called out to her mother with an effort to be jolly: (p. 115)

In Chapter ten the party at Emmanuel's workplace home is described. One of the passages reads:

The music, much slower, was less to Florentine's taste. Emmanuel was holding her too tightly. His moist hand was crushing her fingers. Clumsy couples bumped into them at every second step. The room seemed too small now that all the young people were dancing. Their many-coloured mass was swaying without advancing or retreating, as if they were searching for a way out. (p.132)

Chapter eleven shows Emmanuel and Florentine together. The two discuss Jean briefly. One important excerpt from this chapter is:

Emmanuel was breathing deeply, ecstatically. He was astonished at how mild the morning was, and even more at the peace it brought him. Walking beside Florentine, holding her so that she wouldn't slip, he felt a relaxation and serenity that he had never known. They seemed to be starting on a real friendship, more than a friendship, a budding affection, ill-defined, delicious, but uncertain and changeable as the daylight whose colour was just breaking through the veils of night. (p.137-138)

In Chapter twelve the Two Records restaurant run by Sam Latour and his wife Anita is talked about. Azarius makes an appearance there. The novelist gives us an analysis of Azarius character and his general recklessness.

Chapter thirteen shows mother and daughter together at home.

In Chapter fourteen Florentine and Jean meet when she goes to St. James Street where Jean's workplace was. She expresses her love for him. His initial response is one of discouraging one.

In Chapter fifteen the Lacasse family visit the countryside. This visit is quite important for Rose-Anna.

In Chapter sixteen Jean and Florentine are in Florentine's home on Beaudoin Street. They make love. This leads to her becoming pregnant. In this chapter the novelist gives us some analysis of Jean's character.

Chapter seventeen shows Jean pondering his relationship with Florentine.

Chapter eighteen focuses largely on Rose-Anna. Daniel's illness is also brought in. she thinks for another children also.

Chapter nineteen gives us Rose-Anna's reactions to Germany's role in the War. There is also a scene between her and Eugene. We are told that Rose-Anna hated the German more than war itself and this troubled her because she has never hated anyone in her life.

In Chapter twenty we are at Sam Latur's bar. Here also Eugene figures.

In Chapter twenty one brings the focus back to Florentine. She feels isolated and Jean's having left abruptly gives her a sense of being lost. We are told:

Florentine had grown more or less immune to the charms of spring. April was gone, May was making a timid start in the neighbourhood of St. Henri, and the old trees along the streets, imbedded in cement, had budded and grown green without winning a single glance from her as she walked twice a day between her home and the store. (p.246)

Chapter twenty two shows Florentine at her home and there is a small scene showing her and her mother together.

In Chapter twenty three Florentine leaves her home and goes to Marguerite. She also makes her peace with her new situation in which Jean does not figure much. We are told that in her heart the need to live in spite of everything found its expression in a stubborn defiance:

In her heart the need to live in spite of everything found its expression in a stubborn defiance. This was not the end. Because she couldn't have what she wanted, she refused whatever was offered; but there must be miracles, she thought, for people like herself, bold and self-sufficient. Her eyes, heavy with sleep, were fixed on the thin ray of sunlight growing stronger in the room. (p. 271)

The focus of Chapter twenty four is on the Lacasse households' shifting.

Chapter twenty five tells us about Emmanuel and how he feels in St. Henri. He also visits the Lacasse home.

In Chapter twenty six we are given a scene at 'The Two Records restaurant'. Their Emmanuel talks to Azarius. We are told:

Several men were standing in the middle of the restaurant, motionless and silent. Others, leaning on the counter, forgot to smoke their pipes. The radio was bringing news of the war. Very often these days regular programs were interrupted by bulletins with the latest happenings. There had just been a break in a program of light music and the announcer's voice came on. After a short newscast the music began again. The listeners relaxed and several began to talk, when a hollow voice rose in a kind of lament: (p.294)

In Chapter twenty seven Emmanuel is shown in the company of his friends.

In Chapter twenty eight we are given Emmanuel's stream of thoughts as he takes a walk. The chapter closed with the following lines about Emmanuel:

Leaning on the parapet, he searched the distance among the lights to the southwest, sparkling like fireflies against a lake of darkness, and chose one that might be Florentine's. (p.321)

In Chapter twenty nine Florentine and Emmanuel are shown together. They also dance together.

In Chapter thirty Rose-Anna and Florentine have a scene together. It is in this chapter that Yvonne and Daniel are taken away from Rose-Anna, the latter through death.

The Tin Flute:
Structure and Theme

Chapter thirty one and thirty two focus on Rose-Anna and Chapter thirty three concludes the novel. Here we are given some idea of what war was doing to the lives of people of St. Henri.

Structurally one part of the novel is oriented more towards Florentine and the other is more Rose-Anna-oriented. Jean Levesque is absent from the part in which Emmanuel makes his presence felt.

15.2 THEME OF *THE TIN FLUTE*

Thematically *The Tin Flute* deals with the lives of the little people of Montreal and the effect of the Depression and the War on their lives. The poor and francophone Montreal suburb of St. Henri is brought into focus. The unprivileged inhabitants of this Montreal district and the strategies they come up with to cope with the harshness of their lives are portrayed with care and accuracy. The value of courage, camaraderie and perseverance is stressed throughout. The society the characters are caught in is an urban and inhospitable industrial society (the period is around 1939).

The novel is an urgent and moving portrayal of ordinary people caught in an inhospitable urban-industrial society. It succeeds because it embodies it them in fresh, accurately observed, sensory details.

St.-Henri is a grimy factory district in which the slums are hemmed in by soot-covered railway tracks and by the Lachine canal which is also slimy. There are lines of shabby clothing. Few men can find jobs. In the tawdry cafes young men discuss war or sit by the jukebox. We are told about Ma Philibert's restaurant store that this store had always been the refuge of a noisy, squabbling group usually penniless.

Pages 32 and 33 of the novel give us two remarkable descriptions. The first tells us about Jean Levesque:

He stopped in the middle of St. Henri Square, a vast area furrowed by the railway and two streetcar tracks, a crossroad planted with black and white posts and level-crossing gates, a clearing of asphalt and dirty snow, open between bell towers and domes to the assault of howling locomotives, the peal of the great bells, the raucous streetcar gong and the unending traffic of Notre Dame and St. James streets. Almost every night now, adding to the anguish and darkness of St. Henri, came the distant tramp of heavy boots and the roll of drums, sometimes coming from Notre Dame, sometimes from as far away as the armouries up on the heights of Westmount, when the wind blew down from the mountain.

A little later we have a second description (bottom of p.33). It reads:

The train rolled by. The acrid smell of coal filled the street. A swirl of soot rose just above the rooftops, then, as it began to swoop down, the belfry of St. Henri's Church appeared, floating, without a base, like a phantom arrow amid the clouds. Then the clock appeared. Its lighted face pierced an opening in the trail of smoke, and little by little the whole church was to be seen, high architecture in the Jesuit style. In the middle of the front yard a Sacred Heart statue received the last particles of soot with open arms.

The restaurant called 'Two Records' is described in the following way on pages 40-41 of the novel:

The Two Records, not far from the railway station and the taxi stand, and just a stone's throw from the Cartier cinema, was at the busiest part of St. Henri. A new face aroused much less curiosity there than in the little hangout on St. Ambroise. But on nights when the weather was bad, it was almost always the same people you saw gathered around the fat cast-iron stove: a taxi-driver taking a few minutes off between trains, a railway worker from the station, a night watchman from the switchman's cabin, a worker from the late shift. From time to time an usher from the movie house would come in on the run, splendid in his blue livery with red braid, and occasionally there would be a railway porter or messenger. A number of neighbourhood unemployed spent the whole evening there.

Thematically *The Tin Flute* is as much about the Lacasse family as it is about the people of St.-Henri.

The description of 'Workman Street' on pages 97 and 98 is also revealing. On page 97 we read:

A crowd of ragged children were playing on the side-walk among the litter. Women, thin and sad, stood in evil-smelling doorways, astonished by the sunlight. Others, indoors, set their babies on the windowsill and stared out aimlessly. Everywhere you saw windows plugged with rags or oiled paper. Everywhere you heard shrill voices, children crying, cries of misery coming from the depths of this house or that, doors and shutters closed, dead, walled up against the light as if it were a tomb.

On page 98 we read:

Every spring that hideous street was emptied, and every spring it filled again.

This fact of having to be on the move is a grim fact in the lives of many Saint-Henri residents. Two lines on page 95 reinforce this impression:

Rose-Anna met several workers wives who were, like her, walking slowly as they scrutinized the houses. In a few weeks there would be hundreds of them on the march.

How much of poor suffering humanity is brought together in a few lives is evident on pages 74-75 of the novel when we get this description:

Masons, white with mortar, carpenters with their tool boxes, housewives hurrying to get home before their husbands, workers in their caps, lunch boxes under their arms, girls from the textile or cigarette factories, mill hands, puddlers, guards, foremen, clerks, shop-keepers. The six-o'clock flood caught in its stream not only the workers from the neighbourhood but those coming home from Ville Saint Pierre, Lachine, Saint Joseph, Saint Cunegonde and even Hochelaga, as well as those who lived at the other end of town and started here their interminable tram ride.

So what is remarkable about *The Tin Flute* is not only its stunning documentary quality but also its concern with humanity. The qualities of warmth, compassion and humanity are strongly present in the novel. In a sense *The Tin Flute* is the Odyssey of

a people victimized by a society dedicated mainly to the pursuit of happiness only of the 'haves'.

***The Tin Flute:* Structure and Theme**

The district of St. Henri does, in itself, come to lay a claim to being the protagonist of *The Tin Flute*.

The atmosphere that is established at the start of the novel through the detailed description of the restaurants bustling with activity helps in establishing an ambience. Roy does it with great accuracy and economy and is unsparing in underlining the grimy aspects of the life being portrayed. This is Roy's way of introducing her characters whose identities are essentially derived from their environment.

The diverse reactions to war expressed in *The Tin Flute* emphasize the complexity of the society portrayed by Roy. This is an important aspect of her realism.

One can also say that thematically, Roy illustrates the emotional impoverishment caused by financial hardship. In their own need to survive, the characters have become indifferent to universal suffering as exemplified by the war. Even Rose-Anna, temperamentally the most compassionate of the characters, has learned to be sparing of her sympathy, preserving it for the many demands of her immediate family and, even there, forced to look first to physical rather than emotional needs. Florentine, more tragically, feels that gentleness, in the shape of her beloved but unreliable father, has blighted their lives, and she has resolved to expunge such emotion from her life. Roy reveals, in place of sentimental notions of the ennobling effect of poverty, how need makes Rose-Anna momentarily mean and calculating and how, once money is lacking, the strong ties between her and her husband Azarius are strained.

By Roy's account the driving force behind *The Tin Flute* was indignation, indignation at the waste of human energy and hope observed in Saint-Henri. The novel's function in impelling social change is underlined in her 1947 address 'Retour a Saint-Henri' (included in *Fragiles Lumieres de la terre*), in which she describes the sense of futility for the author who observes the repetition of those miseries which earlier demanded documentation.

15.3 CONCLUSION

The Tin Flute deals with the unfortunate poor in Montreal. It focuses on the Lacasse family and on other ordinary people and their essential humanity, warmth, togetherness and courage. It brings out the squalid conditions quite well.

QUESTIONS

1. Which two rough parts can the action of *The Tin Flute* be divided into? How does Florentine figure in both the parts?
2. Comment on the thematic side of *The Tin Flute*.

UNIT 16 THE TIN FLUTE: CHARACTERIZATION AND TECHNIQUE

Structure

- 16.0 Objectives
- 16.1 Characterization in the *The Tin Flute*
- 16.2 Technique in *The Tin Flute*
 - 16.2.1 Urban-Social Realism in *The Tin Flute*
 - 16.2.2 Naturalism in the *The Tin Flute*
- 16.3 Conclusion
- Questions

16.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall comment on the handling of character in *The Tin Flute* and the narrative technique employed by Roy in this novel. Here some of the excerpts used in Unit 15 may get reproduced but that is done only when it is unavoidable.

16.1 CHARACTERIZATION IN THE TIN FLUTE

Bonheur d'occasion (*The Tin Flute*) focuses on two lives: that of Rose-Anna Lacasse, gentle, harassed, and determined mother of ten, scheming to manage a cramped and impoverished household and expecting yet another child, and that of her oldest daughter, Florentine, febrile, moody, determined to escape her mother's lot but, failing to win the ambitious Jean Levesque who could free her from Saint Henri and pregnant with his child, settling for the 'bonheur d'occasion' (bargain-basement happiness) of marriage to the idealistic Emmanuel Letourneau. Interwoven with these stories is detailed description of street life in the district and particularly discussions, at neighbourhood, and social inequity. The central irony around which the novel revolves is that war offers the only salvation for the men of Saint Henri.

The Tin Flute is as much about poverty as it is about the Lacasse family. It is as much Florentine's and Rose-Anna's story as it is of the poor who populate Saint Henri.

A large part of the novel is about people who dream and are thwarted in their dreams. They feel trapped. But along with the 'trapped' there are those who long for a world of light and warmth. These include Emmanuel. The longing and the dreaming comes to be a saving grace in his case.

The dreams come to be frivolous (as with Florentine) or impractical (as with Lazarius) or pathetic (as with Daniel).

Florentine works as a waitress but rejects the background of pain and privation that has produced her. She intuitively reacts against the young men who belong to St. Henri. She falls in love with Jean Levesque a ruthless young orphan. He has set his eyes upon the 'high' life elsewhere. He is a young egoist.

One page 45 of the novel we are told about Jean's 'insolent tone'. At the start of Chapter four we are told that he longed for the company of 'a friend to whom to could show off and talk about himself.' (p.49)

Florentine and Jean are together in Chapter fourteen and later in Chapter sixteen. Here they make love and Florentine comes to be pregnant. In the next chapter we are shown Jean's ambivalent feelings about the whole affair. After that he virtually disappears from the novel. Structurally, the remaining chapters belong to Rose-Anna, Florentine, Emmanuel and those around them.

Within Chapter sixteen we come to know a lot about Jean Levesque. On pages 202 and 203 we are given a detailed view of his life and his mental make-up.

His adoptive parents, while they showed no affection for him, were not stingy with material things. In those days he was well dressed and always had pocket money, which he jingled with satisfaction as he thought of the long humiliation in the orphanage. Occasionally, more out of pride than generosity, he would share his wealth with poorer boys. Already he knew that money buys prestige and respect.

In a few years, thanks to a healthy and copious diet, he had grown amazingly, acquiring solid muscles, strong shoulders and a glance that was piercing and determined. Nothing about him recalled the puny orphan he had been. A mysterious heredity was expressing itself triumphantly in him. From two strangers who had died shortly after his birth he had inherited this awakening power, and he would have liked to wrest their secrets from his dead, for he had few bonds with the living.

His character had undergone a transformation as total as that of his body. There were abrupt transitions from apparent submission to rebellion. He affected an attitude of disdain and sarcasm. He enjoyed expounding to all comers his personal opinions tinged with caustic humour. He loved provoking arguments for the pleasure of contradicting others.

His curiosity was insatiable, and he began to devour all the books he could lay his hands on. On his walks he would stop and talk to working men, believing that, like him, they must be tortured with the desire to know and understand. One day he would feel a great love for them, and wanted nothing but to devote his life to social reform. The next day he would be filled with contempt for the masses, feel himself above them and predestined for higher things. (pp.202-203)

Azarius, the head of the Lacasse family (Florentine's father) has always dreamed of spectacular successes for his family. He wastes both time and opportunities. He keeps moving from one kind of work to another. He does love his family and is sincere in his motives but is not practical. This puts additional burden on his wife Rose-Anna. On page 45 we are told about Azarius that he liked to create goodwill around him. On pages 157-158 we are told more about him:

Then this jobless man that he was tried to renew some contact with the other, the first man, the one who was still suffering at his own decline but didn't want to show it. At that time he had turned into a big talker, a speechifier, hanging around the tobacco stores and the little restaurants of that part of town, and he had developed his innate talent for rhetoric. That, too, was when he began to boast about the convents, churches and presbyteries he had built, and the others, if you could believe him, that he yet would build. In fact he had never built anything but little bungalows for newly weds, but the more he talked about churches and convents the more he actually believed he had built hundred of them.

In those days he had always thought he was on the verge of some great undertaking. Thus he had not hesitated to squander the two hundred dollars Rose-Anna had inherited from her father on a set of tools for building small and fancy pieces of furniture. He had remained certain he was doing big business until the day when he found himself staring at a workshop full of articles that would never sell, and a heavy debt to the lumberyard.

Far from being discouraged at this, he was pushed by failure to even greater risks. He had thought he was handy at every trade and just about to make his fortune one way or the other. He had scraped together a hundred dollars and sunk the lot into an ironwork and repair shop, along with a man whose name he barely knew. The little shop on St. James Street bore both their names on its sign: Lacasse and Tremblay. Then the partner had cleared out, leaving Lacasse in bad shape with their creditors; and a new sign was painted in black letters on the shop front.

But Azarius had still not lost his optimism. He still refused the odd jobs offered by friends through Rose-Anna's mediation, saying that he wasn't born to do chores for peanuts. That made his reputation in the neighbourhood: a heartless husband who sent his wife out to scrub floors rather than taking an honest job. Yet this wasn't true: every time he saw Rose-Anna go out as a cleaning woman he had been revolted. But he had said nothing. He'd show them all that he could earn a living for his family, and a good living at that. Just give him a little time. And first chance he had, he'd gone into a skit, as Rose-Anna called it.

Ultimately his son Eugene and he both join the army. 'War as solution' is one of the main ironic thrusts of *The Tin Flute* and this comes through at the end of the novel with Emmanuel's perception of the change he finds in Azarius and others.

On pages 236-237 we are told about Eugene's thoughts:

Everything was going to change in this house. It was his turn to take things in hand. His father hadn't been able to do a thing to save the family. Well, it was up to him now.

The beginning of Chapter twenty focuses on Eugene. We are told:

Eugene's hangdog look disappeared the moment he left the house, and he went off whistling toward Notre Dame Street. At the corner of Beaudoin he took a deep breath and smiled to himself at the success of his ruse. He touched the ten dollars in his pocket to make sure it was safe, then unfolded a scrap of paper with a name and phone number. He thought of a pair of very red lips, eyes that were bold and full of mischief, and a small beret cocked over long, tangled hair. (p.239)

One page 242 we are told:

Eugene assumed a theatrically aggressive stance. He had noticed that these working men, full of common sense and moderation, glanced at him occasionally with unspoken admiration. He was carried away as he saw himself through their eyes, proud to represent that valiant, bellicose youth in whom the older, more mature, the weak and undecided saw their salvation. A defender of women, of the aged and oppressed, that's what he was. The avenging arm of society outraged. A fighting spirit shone in his eyes. (pp.242-243)

Then on page 244 we are told about him:

Outside, the air seemed light and heady. He felt that he was master of his life and floating sky-high.

Then there are the other male characters. These include Sam Latour and Emmanuel's friends like Alphonse, Pitou and Boisvert.

The relationship between Florentine and Rose-Anna is crucial. Rose-Anna takes over centrestage from her daughter. The saving graces of Florentine's character come from her concern for her mother and the sense of responsibility that makes her take up the waitress's job.

Towards the end of Chapter six when Florentine realizes, that her mother was pregnant once again (Rose-Anna was already over forty) she tries to reassure her:

Never mind, Ma, don't worry, we'll make out all right. We've been through worse. (p.87)

As for Rose-Anna she is a kind of 'Mother Courage' (Bertolt Brecht's famous character from his play *Mother Courage and Her Children*). She develops much more than symbolic power as she becomes the symbol for the monotonous round of the lives of St. Henri inhabitants. They are the economic prisoners of St. Henri. She has courage, she has tenderness and she has perseverance.

Rose-Anna sees her children disappear into the army, the church, the hospital. Little Daniel is dying. Yvonne suffers a lot mentally. Florentine suffers too as she has to settle for second-hand happiness. Pages 94, 95 and 96 tell us a lot about the collective misery of the St. Henri district of Montreal. On page 95 we are told:

Rose-Anna met several worker's wives who were, like her, walking slowly as they scrutinized the houses. In a few weeks there would be hundreds of them on the march. (p.95)

A page earlier we have this:

The worst days of their life! thought Rose-Anna. The rent allowance was practically nothing. Landlords laughed when you offered them ten dollars a month for four rooms. (p.94)

On page 98 we are told:

Every spring that hideous street was emptied, and every spring it filled again.

The description of 'Workman Street' is given on the previous page (p.97):

A crowd of ragged children were playing on the side-walk among the litter. Women, thin and sad, stood in evil-smelling doorways, astonished by the sunlight. Others, indoors, set their babies on the windowsill and stared out aimlessly. Everywhere you saw windows plugged with rags or oiled paper. Everywhere you heard shrill voices, children crying, cries of misery coming from the depths of this house or that, doors and shutters closed, dead, walled up against the light as if it were a tomb.

Later, in Chapter twenty four, we are again told about Lacasse family's compulsion of moving houses on a regular basis. One pages 277-78 we are told:

When Azarius came back, the kitchen was already filled with big boxes tied with cord and piles of utensils. They had the knack of moving swiftly, and could decamp in an hour like gypsies. Ingenious and skilful, they knew how to pack a multitude of objects in easy loads.

The response of the neighbours is almost cruel:

Hey! The Lacasse family's moving! Looks like they're in a hurry.
(p.278)

A line later we are told:

Too often had they moved in the light of day, when their yellowed mattresses, rickety chairs with legs in the air, scratched old tables, rusty metal bedsteads, blotched mirrors – all the visible signs of their indigence – took their place in the great procession of families filling the streets each first of May, on the move, their tatters flying in the wind. (p.278)

So, in a sense, Rose-Anna takes their shifting during night in a better frame of mind so her reaction to the neighbours' remark is:

Rose-Anna heard the remark and blessed the night that covered their departure, obscuring their poor belongings. (p.278)

The new house to which the Lacasse family move in Chapter twenty four has the disadvantage of being close to the tracks. On page 281 we are told:

Shortly after midnight she had felt a long tremor at the approach of a train. She understood at once, and with the courageous goodwill that sustained her, resigned herself to the fact: there was always a drawback. There had to be. Sometimes it was the lack of light, or a factory nearby, or not enough rooms. Here, it was the railroad. (p.281)

Rose-Anna's thoughts are that the reason for their getting the house cheap was the closeness to the tracts. She thought that she would never get used to the noise. Next we are told:

But she didn't give up. Not yet. She never gave up that quickly. (p.281)

In the previous chapter (Chapter twenty three) Florentine takes the decision to persevere with what little was left in her life:

Her love for Jean was dead. Her dreams were dead, and with them her youth. At the idea that her youth was dead she felt a last twinge of pain, as slight as a spreading circle on the water which leaves only calm behind. (p.270)

The saving part is:

In her heart the need to live in spite of everything found its expression in a stubborn defiance. This was not the end. Because she couldn't have what she wanted, she refused whatever was offered; but there must be miracles, she thought, for people like herself, bold and self-sufficient. Her eyes, heavy with sleep, were fixed on the thin ray of sunlight growing stronger in the room. (p.271)

In Chapter twenty nine she decides firmly to hold on to Emmanuel:

This time she would be completely lost. More than her safety and salvation were at stake. It seemed to her that Emmanuel might succeed in restoring her lust for life, her pride, her joy in being well-dressed

and irresistible. It was through him she had rediscovered that she was pretty and passionate. Could she let all that be taken from her? (p.332)

The Tin Flute:
Characterization and
Technique

As for Emmanuel he is a great source of strength. He is responsive and responsible. He merges well with the St. Henri people. He is understanding. When he comes back to St. Henri after having travelled, he looks out it with a new enthusiasm. We are told on page 285:

Emmanuel, who had travelled now and matured rapidly in a few months, returned to the suburb with the clear eyes of an observer. He saw St. Henri as he had never seen it, with its complex yet open weave. He liked it all the more, as we like our village after returning from some expedition, simply because everything is still in its familiar place, and everyone says hello! (p.285)

We can easily see that in her characterization Roy mainly works by character contrasts. Emmanuel and Jean are contrasted, Florentine and Rose-Anna are contrasted and contrast also works at the level of minor characters. She seems to approve of certain types of people and disapprove of certain other types of people. Thus there is a contrast even between the attitude towards Florentine of Emmanuel on the one hand, and some members of Emmanuel's family on other. They hurt Florentine whereas Emmanuel is very understanding and full of warmth. In the same way, characters are contrasted through their attitude to the War and to the fact of their being French-speaking.

To recapitulate, characterization in *The Tin Flute* has largely to do with Roy's portrayal of Rose-Anna, Florentine, Emmanuel and Jean Levesque. The two male characters just named complement each other. Both figure in Florentine's life. So let us look at her character.

Florentine is a waitress in the restaurant of a store. She is the eldest of the Lacasse children. She is impulsive and romantic and comes to be pregnant when she takes Jean Levesque home. She likes the good life. Life has certain lessons in store for her. She ultimately gets married to Emmanuel. This amounts to 'bargain - basement' happiness, which is what the French title of the novel stands for.

Rose-Anna, the mother, is the centre of the social side of the novel. She is also her family's moral mainstay. She is aware of her impotence against forces beyond her control. She is like Mother Courage from Bertolt Brecht's famous play *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Rose-Anna is the determined mother of ten children. She manages a cramped and impoverished household.

Jean Levesque is Florentine's male counterpart. He wants to succeed in life whatever that may cost. Roy does not seem to approve of his kind of character. Both Rose-Anna and Emmanuel have a special place in her imagination.

Azaricus is an incurable dreamer. Emmanuel too is an idealist and dreamer but he is ready to assure responsibilities and make sacrifices. He is capable of bonhomie also when he is with his friends.

From among the minor characters, Sam Latour and his wife are quite interesting. So are Emmanuel's friends and Florentine's brother Eugene.

Florentine dominates the first few pages. The very first chapter sets the tone. It tells us about Florentine:

The fever of the bazaar rose in her blood, a kind of jangled nervousness mingled with the vague feeling that one day in this teeming store things would come to a halt and her life would find its goal. It never occurred to her to think she could meet her destiny

anywhere but here, in the overpowering smell of caramel, before the great mirrors hung on the wall with their narrow strips of gummed paper announcing the day's menu, to the summary clacking of the cash register, the very voice of her impatience. Everything in the place summed up for her the hasty, hectic poverty of her whole life here in St. Henri.

As far as Rose-Anna her fortitude and her character contrast with Azarius are both striking. She becomes symbolic of the courage of the poor people of St. Henri. Like a Brecht character she represents the life-spirit.

On the whole, Roy's characters interact a lot with one another. There is an element of fortitude in most of them but most of them have trapped lives. The sense of being part of a community is quite strong. In a sense the St. Henri district is also a character.

16.2 TECHNIQUE IN *THE TIN FLUTE*

In this section our focus is going to be on Roy's narrative technique in *The Tin Flute* with special reference to her handling of urban-social realism and naturalism. In range to whole not Canadian writing find writers match her in these two domains.

16.2.1 Urban-Social Realism in *The Tin Flute*

The Tin Flute draws sustenance from the Depression and from the tension between socio-physical topographical entities and from the desire of youths to break out of a claustrophobic trap. The effect of war on the lives of the inhabitants of St. Henri is captured quite well.

At first, this novel was to have been the story of the younger generation of the waitress Florentine Lacasse and machinist Jean Levesque. The focus would have been only on the attempts of these two to escape the grinding poverty of St. Henri and their bitter, abortive romance. As it turned out, Florentine's mother Rose-Anna became the centre of the novel. With her as centre, the story became one of the play of forces on the Lacasse family, a microcosm of St. Henri and in a larger sense of the working class poor in Quebec society. She trudges through the slushy street looking for yet another cheaper cold-water flat for her large family. She comes to be the symbol for the monotonous dispiriting round of the inhabitants. They are the economic prisoners of St. Henri. Bearing her yearly child, she is condemned to see her children disappear into the Church, the army, the hospital. Her eldest son Eugene and her husband Azarius find a way to help the family but only at the price of leaving it as volunteers for overseas military service. The novel is a blend of accurate observation and individual vision.

A few pages from the start we have a vivid description:

New customers were crowding toward the counter. it was the usual rush between twelve and one: a few neighbourhood working men in heavy drill; store clerks from Notre Dame Street with white collars and small felt hats which they tossed on the counter; two social service nuns in grey cloaks; and a taxi-driver and several housewives who, between shopping trips, came to perk themselves up with a cup of scalding coffee or a plate of French fries.(p.13)

On page 17 we have this:

She could see St. Catherine Street, the department-store windows, the elegant Saturday-night crowd, the florists' displays, the restaurants with

their revolving doors and tables set almost on the sidewalk behind gleaming bay windows, the brightly lit movie theatres, their aisles disappearing into the dark behind the cashier's glass cage amid tall, glittering mirrors, polished banisters and potted plants, rising towards the screen that brought the most beautiful visions in the world. (p.17)

***The Tin Flute:*
Characterization and
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All these passages are very much in the realist mode made current by writers like Gustave Flaubert from France. Flaubert (1821-80) is famous for his 1857 novel *Madame Bovary*. It is the story of the adultery of a doctor's wife in Normandy. Flaubert's special brand of 'realism' emanated from mythological representation and the accumulation of circumstantial detail. Roy is more like Joyce. She immortalises the St. Henri district as Joyce had immortalised Dublin in *Ulysses* (1922). The main difference is that Roy does not use the stream of consciousness technique so favoured by Joyce. She shares with Joyce the trait of 'naturalism'.

She differs from realists like Fielding and Dickens in that comic effects are not sought by her in the way they are sought by those two. She avoids caricature and maintains a certain kind of seriousness with regard to her materials. The element of 'play' is kept to a minimum or is virtually not there. In this respect also she differs from Joyce and postmodernist practitioners of magic realism. Hers is a down-to-earth realism with a strong tilt towards 'naturalism'. This 'naturalism' also is of a greatly functional kind. In a sense her work is more in the line of writers like Arnold Bennett (1867-1931). Bennett, like Roy, was greatly influenced by Zola and his books mainly concern life in the industrial towns of the northwest Midland in England. He also emphasizes the influence of environment on character and builds his artistic wholes by means of a patterns of mundane details.

In Chapter two Jean Levesque's house is touched upon. On page 29 we are told:

The house where Jean had found his little furnished room was just in front of the swing bridge of St. Augustin street. It could watch the passage of flatboats, tankers that stank of oil or gasoline, wood barges, colliers, all of them giving a triple blast with their foghorns just before its door: their demand to be let out from the narrows of the towns into the wide, rough waters of the Great Lakes.

The distinction of the house is that it was not only on the path of freighter.

It was also near the railway, at the crossroads of the eastern and western lines and the maritime routes of the great city. (p.29)

The topography is further reinforced thus:

To its left were shining rails. Directly in front of it shone red and green signals. In the night, coal dust and soot flew around it, amid a cavalcade of wheels, the frenzied gallop of puffing steam, the long wailing of whistles, the short, chopped blast from the chimneys of the flatboats; among these sounds tripped the shrill, broken ringing of the alarm and, prolonged beyond this clamour, the slow purring of a ship's screw. (p.30)

Another remarkable description is on pages 32-33:

He stopped in the middle of St. Henri Square, a vast area furrowed by the railway and two streetcar tracks, a crossroad planted with black and white posts and level-crossing gates, a clearing of asphalt and dirty snow, open between bell towers and domes to the assault of howling locomotives, the peal of the great bells, the raucous street-car gong and the unending traffic of Notre Dame and St. James streets. Almost every night now, adding to the anguish and darkness of St. Henri, came the

distant tramp of heavy boots and the roll of drums, sometimes coming from Notre Dame, sometimes from as far away as the armouries up on the heights of Westmount, when the wind below down from the mountain. (p.32-33)

In Chapter four Emmanuel appears at Ma Philibert's restaurant. His three friends Pitou, Boisvert, and Alphonse are there too. A striking description on pages 74-75 reads:

Masons, white with mortar, carpenters with their tool boxes, housewives hurrying to get home before their husbands, workers in their caps, lunch boxes under their arms, girls from the textile or cigarette factories, mill hands, puddlers, guards, foremen, clerks, shop-keepers. The six-o'clock flood caught in its stream not only the workers from the neighbourhood but those coming home from Ville Saint Pierre, Lachine, Saint Joseph, Saint Cunegonde and even Hochelega, as well as those who lived at the other end of town and started here their interminable tram ride. (p.74-75)

We are told that the Depression had affected Azarius early on, as he was a carpenter. Too proud to take just any work, he had tried to find it only within his own trade. Then he had become discouraged, and, like so many others, had finally accepted government relief.

A touching reference on page 98 reads:

Every spring that hideous street was emptied, and every spring it filled again.

This shows how difficult life was for poor people. They had to shift residences with great frequency.

The first paragraph of Chapter twenty one reads:

Florentine had grown more or less immune to the charms of spring. April was gone, May was making a timid start in the neighbourhood of St. Henri, and the old trees along the streets, imbedded in cement, had budded and grown green without winning a single glance from her as she walked twice a day between her home and the store. But tonight, as she left the Five and Ten, she couldn't help stopping in wonderment at the softness of the air, as if she had awakened to a transformation that had taken place while she was absent, missing its different stages. The sun still warmed Notre Dame Street, despite the late hour. Above the cobblers' shops, the fruit stores and other small establishments, apartments windows opened on interiors which added their intimate murmur to the sounds of traffic outside. Between the loud passage of a train, a heavy truck or a streetcar, the faint sound of a distant church bell might find its way into those open windows. (p.246)

This is a good example of Roy's remarkable powers of observation and reproduction. Whatever she does with descriptions is done with great accuracy and economy. The exactitude is cultivated as a value in itself.

The Laccase family's best times had always been just before a move. When they shift, onlookers comment:

Hey! The Lacasse family's moving! Looks like they're in a hurry. (p.278)

The next sentence is:

Rose-Anna heard the remark and blessed the night that covered their departure, obscuring their poor belongings. (p.278)

The next passage is revealing too. It reads:

Too often had they moved in the light of day, when their yellowed mattresses, rickety chairs with legs in the air, scratched old tables, rusty metal bedsteads, blotched mirrors - all the visible signs of their indigence -- took their place in the great procession of families filling the streets each first of May, on the move, their tatters flying in the wind. (p.278)

The second paragraph of Chapter twenty five gives a graphic description:

It was a warm, languorous evening, pierced regularly by the siren's wail, and perfumed by the biscuit factory. Along with this insipid smell, but very faintly, a whiff of spice rose from the lower regions along the canal and rode on the breeze to this slight elevation in St. Henri.

Such examples abound. Roy takes pride of place among realist novelists of the twentieth century. Her realism is different from Jane Austen's and George Eliot's. She foregrounds the cityscape much more than they do. She is partly in the line of French Symbolist poets, who did not shy away from squalor and city-life. This gives a substantial 'naturalist' dimension to novel like *The Tin Flute*. Character, environment and thematic strands merge, giving the novel a rich texture without having to resort to any embellishment. Her 'naturalism' is somewhat different from the naturalism of writers who give ugly and shocking details for their own sake. She merges it well with the social angle.

The diverse reactions to the War expressed in *The Tin Flute* underline the complexity of the society portrayed by Roy and this happens to be an important aspect of her realism. The peace-loving Rose-Anna sympathises women everywhere whose loved ones are engaged in war. Azarius and Jean Levesque react a little differently.

There is no doubt that Roy's vision of the individual, social and global levels in *The Tin Flute* is marked by tragic overtones. At times the very existence of the characters whose lives she reveals and not only their harmony are threatened by internal and external forces. This makes the War itself one of the important factors in the novel. The war is discussed by most characters and it affects the lives of nearly everybody. She has a strong sense of social stratification.

Now we shall briefly comment on the contribution of naturalistic description to the overall technique of *The Tin Flute*.

16.2.2 Naturalism in *The Tin Flute*

In literature, Naturalism is a style of thought writing, especially associated with the novelist Emile Zola. It was a development of Realism. The Naturalists believed that imaginative literature (especially the novel) should be based on scientific knowledge, and that imaginative writers should be scientifically objective and exploratory in their approach to their work. This means that environment should be exactly treated, and that character should be related to physiological heredity. Influential in French and Germany, the movement counts for little in Britain; the novelists George Gissing and Arnold Bennett show traces of its influence in the treatment of environment in relation to character.

The notable thing about *The Tin Flute* is that for the Quebequois it arraigned the monster of big-city poverty with an accuracy that caught the last syllable of the

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market vendor's cry and the rhetoric of the Saint-Henri bum; to the English Canadian it spoke brutally of a city which he had known only on occasional night-club sprees on Canada's 'Big White Way'. What it gives us is an image of modern life that has all the clarity of nightmare... We are caught in the phantasmagoric world of rail road crossings and soot and factory whistles.

As stated earlier, a key figure in 'Naturalism' was the French writer Emile Zola. The trend amounts to great accuracy of the kind one finds in photographic realism. Unpleasant details are not shunned. The first example is:

Beyond them, streets with low houses descended in two directions toward the areas of greater poverty, on this side to Workman Street and St. Antoine, and, on the other, down to the Lachine Canal where St. Henri stuffs its mattresses, spins its thread of silk or cotton, runs its looms, reels off its spools, while the earth trembles at the rushing trains, and the foghorns blast, and the ships, engines, screws, rails and whistles spell out the adventure of the world. (p.34)

In Chapter twenty one there is another description:

The sun still warmed Notre Dame Street, despite the late hour. Above the cobblers' shops, the fruit stores and other small establishments, apartments windows opened on interiors which added their intimate murmur to the sounds of traffic outside. Between the loud passage of a train, a heavy truck or a streetcar, the faint sound of a distant church bell might find its way into those open windows. (p.246)

The way the street comes alive is really remarkable.

On page 284 we have this:

Emmanuel saw the steeples of the parish church above the clouds of train smoke. His neighbourhood carried on with its everyday life, indifferent to the constant gaps caused by travel and departures. On Notre Dame the woman from the fruit store was wrapping vegetables. Her busy form went to and from behind the store window. The vendor of French fries passed with his van drawn by a wretched nag with a long, sad neck. The bookseller nearby was selling cards. In front of The Two Records, passersby slowed down to hear the radio, its voice pervading the street. Housewives were hurrying, hugging large bags of provisions. Above the roofs the switchman in his cabin leaned out from time to time through a sooty window to see the crowd pass by from his bird's eye vantage point. All the windows were open, and the sounds of living, clattering dishes and conversation floated in the air as if the partitions of the world had been abolished and human life was on display in all its warmth and poverty.

Life is thus caught by Roy in its plenitude and in its poverty. The purpose of Roy's naturalism is to capture life in its fullness and not to keep out unpleasant aspects. This was also her contribution to making the ruling Ontarians aware of the fact that Quebec people (especially the poor) had their own problems.

In this unit we have given some longish excerpts from the novel to show the exactitude of Roy's portrait of the St. Henri district. Where she differs from some other practitioners of Naturalism is that she tries to merge her vision of humanity with the details that she offers whereas in some writers detail is given largely for its own sake. Many major modernist writers celebrate actuality for its own sake and take that celebration to be a value in itself. This is also the case with poetry written in the

Imagist mode and poetry influenced by Imagism. Some of T.S. Eliot's early poems like 'Preludes' and 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night' show this quality.

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Roy's distinction is that she tries to invest every detail with a human element. All the squalor and dirt and soot which permeates the life of the inhabitants of St. Henri is an integral part of their existence. Her point seems to be that things could have been much better for these people had they not been French-speaking and Quebec citizens. The War comes to these people as a kind of salvation because it has the potential of taking them away from the grind of their poverty and from the daily round of hardship which they face. They live lives that are entrapped and constricted in every way. It is for them a choking and suffocating existence. Their being together at the cafe's, restaurants and bars is a way of partly loosening the stranglehold of their circumstances over their lives. It is in this sense that joining the army is a way out.

Roy's photographic realism is very special because the snaps which she gives us of St. Henri's life are extremely poignant and accurate. She genuinely intends to touch our hearts with the grim reality that she portrays.

One point which has a bearing on our reception of the novel is fact that the whole flair of the original French does not come through in translation. In the English-language text we cannot fully realise the uncanny fidelity with which Roy captures the accent and idiom of French-Canada whether it is rural 'patous' or Montreal 'argot'. Quite often the relaxed simplicity and comic overtones of the idiom get largely lost in translation. If the translator attempts to substitute the nearest equivalent of some expression of English slang then much of the flavour of both speaker and setting is lost.

The accuracy and the extent to which Roy captures the life of St. Henri is stunning. She was able to catch the last syllable of the market-vendor's cry and tragic rhetoric of the St. Henri bum. She also captures remarkably well the smells of cheap perfumes and cheap food in Florentine's store and the noise and the jostling that is there. The atmosphere that is established through the detailed description of the restaurant's bustling activity and the faithful transcription of the customers' talk points to Roy's abilities as a journalist. She had reported on Europe back to Canada when she had visited Europe. This makes her a lot like the great American novelist Ernest Hemingway, who also had covered Europe as a journalist. She captures the fierceness of wind and snow as also the thick atmosphere of soot, foghorns, slaughterhouse smells and the wails of sirens and children. The trembling and reverberating caused by a passing train is also caught quite well.

Roy recreates brilliantly the data of the senses pointing to the axiom that for a writer the prime stuff of life is sensation. She has a great ear for nuances of the spoken languages and is also acutely sensitive to the objects that surround her. As a result, many of her images came to have something of the weight of symbols.

Roy's overall interest is always in the specific event and the meaning of the specific event as applied to individual character or the character of the society. It is, as though, she has the capacity to look at the experience so intently that the language peers through the tangled surface of the experience to reveal its deeper relevance. Sometimes Roy's involvement in the lives of her fictional character became so intense that they continued to preoccupy her even after a book had been completed. This happened with *The Tin Flute* also. In a sense all her works have a deep sense of continuity and unity. Her own existential and social concerns shine through all the time.

On the psychological level, the novel reveals a certain naturalistic tendency in its portrayal of the cycle of the generations. Although Florentine's youthful dreams may be contrasted with Rose-Anna's fatigued litany of troubles, the contrasts (of Florentine's grim wedding day and Rose-Anna's joyous one, for instance) more often heighten the disadvantages with which Florentine enters the same course of existence.

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Their simultaneous pregnancies symbolize their shared subjection to inexorable processes. Florentine's face with its "faiblesse héréditaire, la misère profonde qu'elle perpétuait" ("hereditary weakness, the deep misery of which she was an extension") already reveals the stupefied image of the old woman she will become, while Rose-Anna, in spite of herself, falls into the warnings and maxims of her mother; even into the resigned and helpless gesture of stroking the edge of her chair, and, like her own mother during the visit to Sain-Denis, fails to provide support for her daughter when it is most needed.

This interest in familial relations and emotional complexities continues in Roy's later works; what is distinctive about *The Tin Flute* is the degree of socio-economic analysis. Although not Roy's only somber novel, it is the only one which functions in large part as a social critique, implying at least a direction for change. In later works suffering seems to be a product more of human nature than of social organization and so to be less easily resolvable.

16.3 CONCLUSION

Technique-wise Gabrielle Roy is in the realist tradition represented by noted French writers like Stendhal and Flaubert. She is also a master of 'Naturalism' as it was practised by the French writer Emile Zola. Her grasp of the nuances of the lives of poor people in Montreal is really breathtaking. The economy of her style is also quite remarkable. Her characters are quite representative and people of flesh and blood. She represents feelings and responses that are quite normal. This also pushes her in the realist tradition. In the form of Rose-Anna she has given us a most remarkable character. Rose-Anna is like a character from the plays of the German playwright Bertold Brecht.

QUESTIONS

1. Who are the main characters in *The Tin Flute*? Who emerges as the most arresting character from among these?
2. Comment on Roy's handling of the hardships of the poor people of the Saint Henri district of Montreal.
3. Comment on the special brand of Roy's realism.

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