

THE FLAME-LIGHTER WOMAN

Catherine Anthony Clark's Fantasies

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THOUGH CATHERINE ANTHONY CLARK is acknowledged as “Canada’s first serious writer of fantasy and the only one who has produced a substantial body of work,”¹ most critics minimize the significance of her contribution to Canadian literature because of her apparent reluctance to provide a truly Tolkienian “subcreation,”² a clearly defined and totally separate fantasy world. Sheila Egoff’s response to Clark’s imaginary worlds is typical: “Clark seems doubtful about her own medium and is seldom willing to take more than two steps into the world of fantasy.”

But then, should one expect more of a writer fettered by a culture which is simply too young to allow the creation of acceptable fantasy? As Egoff remarks:

Canada lacks most of the requisites that provide a hospitable context for the production of fantasy. For one thing, there is no tradition of “faërie” comparable to the oral literature of older countries. Canadian writers in general have hardly sniffed at the fumes of fancy or the nonsensical.

The problem with such discussions is that they tend to judge a fantasy in terms of what it is *not* rather than allow it to be what it is. What I will examine in this paper is what one does find in Clark’s work: a unique approach to the entire concept of fantasy, one which suggests that Canadian culture does not make fantasy impossible. Rather it provides influences (specifically, Indian legends) which produce a kind of fantasy which is rather different from that found in the European tradition.

The key to understanding Clark’s approach can be found in the first sentence of her first book, *The Golden Pine Cone* (1950): “Not very long ago, and not very far away lived two children, Bren and Lucy, with their parents in a big log cabin.” The brief introduction announces immediately that this fantasy will not exist in the dark past of fairy tales or myths, but in the still living tradition of Indian legends, a tradition in which it is often difficult to distinguish between the natural and the supernatural, the real and the fantastic, or as Clark suggests, between the Inner and the Outer Worlds. The fantasy, the magic, the influence of the supernatural are always there — in the *real* world — awaiting the imagi-

native, sensitive person. Thus Clark's refusal to write traditional fantasies allows her to explore the actual mythology of the lands in which her stories take place. But she does not turn to these legends simply because they are the most accessible or the most authentic remnants of Canadian mythology. Rather, she does so because they provide the most effective framework for presenting certain deeply felt beliefs about the community of man in a troubled world. Clark's six fantasies present a clear portrait of a utopian world in which each man must accept his social responsibilities and ultimately his place in the world. By transporting her protagonists to the land of Indian myth, Clark does not create a new world, but instead simply describes the magical world that actually exists within the beliefs of the Indian culture. In doing so, she may well be providing what is a distinctly Canadian fantasy, one which reaffirms the basic cultural traits that define Canada, at least as she envisions the country.

Perhaps the most obvious distinction to be made between Indian and European fantasies is their differing attitudes toward good and evil. Simply stated, Indian legends do not portray life as a constant struggle between absolutes. Egoff criticizes Clark's fantasies because they reflect this belief:

There is never a gigantic struggle between good and evil — a theme that is at the root of many fantasies, such as Lewis's Narnia books, *The Tree That Sat Down* by Beverley Nichols, *The Doll's House* by Rumer Godden, and a host of others. It is the edge of darkness that gives the best fantasy much of its depth, meaning, and value.

But are such absolute distinctions necessary for "true" fantasy? Clark clearly does not think so, and I do not feel that this belief in any way diminishes the meaning that one can find in her tales. Rather than focus on "gigantic struggles" between good and evil, Clark chooses to concentrate on the dilemma of the individual. Again and again, she tells the tale of how an isolated, alienated person finally comes to recognize and accept his social responsibility, his place in his family or tribe. In this world, man is neither good nor evil. He is simply a fallible human being who must learn the value of belonging to his society.³

Nasookin, the "villain" of Clark's first book, *The Golden Pine Cone*, is a good example of her approach to the problem of good and evil. Nasookin is at first presented as a frightening demonic force with the power to bring chaos to his entire world, but Lucy, the child-heroine of the story, hears his drum song and knows immediately that he is not an ogre but a lonely man:

"I do not know what makes me cry. I think it's the drum. The drum talks against your words — it has its own speech. And it keeps saying that you are sad and never at peace, for you have been a wicked man."

The implication is obvious: the drums sing the song of Nasookin's soul, a soul which obviously wishes to leave behind this life of evil:

"Yes, it is a sad song after all," said Nasookin in a muffled voice. "But it is too late for me now, Little Squirrel."

But of course, it is not too late. Because of the courage and perseverance of the two children from the Outer World, Nasookin is redeemed. Ironically the culmination of *The Golden Pine Cone* is not the return of the magical pine cone, but the wedding of Nasookin and his beloved Onamara, a ceremony which symbolizes the return of order to a previously troubled world.⁴

Clark's portrait of Princess Onamara provides a clear example of what happens when one abandons all social responsibility. Doomed to live on a floating island when she betrays her family, she becomes, literally, heartless. When her heart is restored at the end of the story, she returns to her world, having learned the terrible loneliness suffered by the heartless.

The ice-cold flesh of the Princess was growing warm; there was pink in her pale-brown cheeks. Standing there, laughing with joy, she was lovelier than she had ever been. And then she wept, thinking of the wasted years behind her, until her lover took her hand. Then she laughed again with pure happiness that loss and loneliness were all gone by.

IN HER SECOND BOOK, *The Sun Horse* (1951), Clark develops more fully the personalities of her protagonists. Mark is an orphan who has recently been forced to move to a new home in the wilds of British Columbia. Here he meets Giselle, a young girl who is trying to learn the fate of her father, a man who has apparently abandoned his entire family in his search for the legendary Sun Horse. Thus, both protagonists feel betrayed, obvious candidates for the kind of escape offered by the world of fantasy. But Mark and Giselle do not retreat or escape into some kind of dream world. Rather they consciously set forth on a quest to find Giselle's father, a journey which involves a courageous confrontation with the supernatural, the fantasy world. Clark's protagonists are never passive dreamers; they are active doers.

The precarious psychological state of these protagonists does allow them, however, to learn more from their adventure than do the rather innocuous brother and sister of *The Golden Pine Cone*. In addition, Clark's decision to make her protagonists more complex allows her to develop more fully her examination of the alienated man, for now the protagonists, too, must learn the value of becoming useful members of their families and their community. Initially, Mark and Giselle simply learn to respect, trust, and love one another. Ultimately, however, they come to appreciate the value of all social commitment, of caring for one's fellow man. This realization is symbolized by their rediscovery of their own

families. Giselle's father returns, and the family is once again together. Mark, too, finds that he is no longer an orphan; he has a place:

The Gunnings were overjoyed to have their boy Mark safe back again. . . . Aunt Bessie got home in time to see Mark safe and sound, but she wept a good deal when she hugged him for she had given him up for dead. . . . Both uncle and aunt could not do enough for Mark. . . . Yes, they had loved him before, but now he was like their own son to them.

And yet, despite these rather sentimentalized reunions, *The Sun Horse* is far more than the story of the emotional growth of two disturbed children. It is also about the sacrifices that must be made to re-establish a stable community, to save man from his often destructive desires. Michael, the old sourdough who helps the children redeem Giselle's father, has consciously chosen to remain in Forgetful Valley. In his youth he had killed a man in revenge, and this remote valley is his self-imposed prison. Thus, the children must convince him not only of the value of others, but of his own worth. And the children do redeem this bitter man, through their love, but more importantly, through their selflessness. For Michael recognizes that there is something special about these two outsiders, something that evokes hope:

"You see, Giselle, you and Mark are the only persons who have come to this country for an unselfish reason. You have a sort of magic of your own. I feel it and your father has begun to feel it. Perhaps you will win out in this plan. Nothing is hopeless — you make me feel that."

And this something special, this "sort of magic," does save both Michael and Mr. Martin. But it is a magic that comes from within, not from without, for the most consistent quality in all of Clark's heroes and heroines is their courage, their refusal to quit, whatever the odds might be. In Clark's world, the heroine does not wait for the sudden intervention of a miraculous fairy-godmother, nor does the hero carry a magical sword and wear a cloak of invulnerability. Like their counterparts in Indian legends, Mark and Giselle must fight their own battles. They defeat their adversary, the Thunderbird, only after an arduous trek to his nest, and their lives are protected not by some mystical force of good, but by a bat whom Giselle befriended on her first day in the Inner World. It is precisely this kind of courage that receives the praise of the most curious creature that the children meet in this wondrous world, the magical Flame-lighter Woman:

"You two have shown more gumption than I expected. Grow up as you are now and you may amount to something. In my time, children were expected to act for themselves early and not to sit round waiting for things to be done for them. They helped themselves and worked. That's how the Great West opened up."

Although Clark's third fantasy, *The One-Winged Dragon* (1955), begins as

a rather straightforward account of the quest to restore a lost relative, in this case the mysterious Kwong Ho's daughter, it quickly strays from the actual quest and focuses instead on the two central figures, Michael and Jenni, and their growing understanding of themselves and their families because of their association with this other world. Michael and Jenni are clearly the most complex pair of adventurers in any of Clark's books. Michael has just moved to the country with a family burdened by a father who selfishly puts his writing above his family. Jenni, on the other hand, is one of those emotionally troubled younger children whose fear of being ugly and unloved causes them to be incredible brats. Thus, the "aliens" in *The One-Winged Dragon* are the children themselves, and the quest they undertake is more internal than external. Though they do rescue and return Kwong Ho's daughter Kuniang, they also discover themselves in the process. They change from troubled, isolated individuals into selfless, giving members of society. Like Mark and Giselle, they must first simply learn to get along with one another, but Jenni's overt paranoia makes even this relationship difficult to achieve. Fortunately, Michael immediately recognizes the root of Jenni's problem:

And the lonely, frightened look he had seen on her face when they had quarreled came back to him. There was one thing that really frightened Jenni, and he knew inside him what it was. She was afraid that no one would ever love her. He couldn't help feeling sorry for Jenni; she was so often in trouble.

Within the fantasy of the Inner World, Jenni comes to recognize her problem, and as her relationship with the kindly Yatunga develops, she begins to admit her innermost fears:

"I know I say crazy things, but I get the awfulest feeling sometimes that nobody loves me because I'm so ugly. Then I get mad and do bad things. I used to be bad at home because I was miserable and hated myself."

Like Michael in *The Golden Pine Cone*, Jenni must learn first to appreciate herself; only then can she rejoin the world about her. And the significant responsibilities of the quest help Jenni grow and gain confidence in herself. But her real growth is the result of the selfless love given to the child by Yatunga, Jenni's surrogate mother:

This Indian woman loved her dead daughter so much, and Jenni wondered sadly if it really made any difference at home that she herself was gone. It was a dreary thing not to be loved and very dreary not to feel love. She had felt, without knowing it, that there was something wrong with herself. She was always mad and cross with people. People wouldn't be as she wanted; they had little time for her. Perhaps it made a difference being outside of time, as the Luck-Spirit told them they were. Oh, she could love now. She loved the affectionate Indian woman whose heart was so open.

Once she is outside of time, forced to look carefully at her life, Jenni sees how ridiculous it is always to demand that people be what she wants them to be. Once free of her selfish demands, she can both love and be loved.

In *The One-Winged Dragon*, Clark stresses once again the need for all isolated individuals to return to their societies, in particular their families. Kuniang is returned to her father, and the two children return to their homes, finally able both to give and to accept the love necessary to keep any family alive:

Jenni was carried into the house, clinging to her father's neck; and then she was in her mother's arms with all the joyful family round her, kissing and exclaiming over her. The little girl knew then that she had her own place in the family — that the others had missed her and wept when she was gone. Yes, it was just as Yatunga had said — every child has his love-place in the lodge though much may not be said about it.

Michael's reunion is equally ecstatic, for his father has finally recognized his familial obligations. As Yatunga suggests, "It made a difference being outside of time."

In *The Silver Man* (1958), Clark once again concentrates on the psychological dilemma of her child adventurers. Gilbert Steyne, another orphan, becomes so disillusioned trying to fit into his Aunt Rhoda's household, an environment dominated by her Saturday bridge lunches, that he decides to escape. While awaiting the boat that will take him to his freedom, he wanders into a museum, where after admiring a grand Arctic fox and a Yukon mammoth, he is suddenly drawn mysteriously into a museum office, where he sees a crystal held in an eagle's claw:

He bent over and picked up the crystal, turning it so that the rainy light of day streamed down on to the dew drop at its centre. The drop gleamed; it dazzled his eyes. They were full of flashes, as if the crystal were now all about him and he could not see. Then his breath was torn from him and he felt as if he were whirling through space. Everything was dark.

When he awakens he is on a forest trail, and the fantasy begins. Thus, for the only time in her career, Clark suggests the possibility that the fantasy is nothing but a dream. The Arctic fox and Yukon mammoth miraculously reappear in the Inner World, and when the fantasy ends, Gilbert is staring at the same crystal.

Whether the story is a dream or not does not really matter, but what this unique entry into the fantasy world does ensure is the reader's complete involvement in the development of Gilbert. It may or may not be his dream, but it is certainly his story. In order to make the focus on Gilbert even more intense, Clark has Gilbert go alone into this mysterious world. Once there, he is joined by two young girls: the enigmatic Fringa and the kind and generous Kawitha, sister of Kunshat, the Silver Man. The quest that these children undertake is a

familiar one: they must rescue the enchanted Kunshat and return him to his troubled family and tribe.

As in *The One-Winged Dragon*, however, the quest to the lost relative is not the primary one in *The Silver Man*, for Gilbert's most significant discovery is his realization of the enduring value of a truly selfless life. This theme is enunciated specifically by Uncle Barker⁵ when he compares Fringa and Kawitha:

The great bearded man looked keenly at Kawitha under his grizzled eyebrows. "Ai, you long for him. You have a loving heart, Kawitha. It is a great thing to have much love, though one suffers from it. Love has a magic, powerful enough."

Kawitha clearly possesses the magical quality talked about in Clark's first fantasy, and Uncle Barker realizes that Fringa does not possess it:

"Perhaps Fringa was born without a heart — or with a small one. She cares nothing for our trouble.

One suspects that Clark is also gently comparing the love that she finds in the culture of the Indian with the culture of the White Man. But whatever Clark's designs might have been in her creation of these two characters, it is quite clear that Gil compares them, and in doing so learns a great deal about his own moral commitments. In perhaps one of the most truly heroic moments in all of Canadian children's literature, he gives up his life with Kawitha to save the life of her brother. And though the loss is bitterly felt, somehow the act brings with it a peace and serenity he has never known.

UNFORTUNATELY, MOST SERIOUS CRITICAL examinations of Catherine Clark's fantasies end with *The Silver Man*, the final two books being simply dismissed as "more of the same": the same two adventurers, the same Indian environment, and the same basic characters. But though there are obvious similarities, there are also significant changes which occur. To ignore them is to ignore perhaps the most important development in Clark's literary career, for in these last two books Clark does not try to synthesize the European and Indian traditions. Finally realizing the basic incompatibility of the two cultures, Clark turns, happily one suspects, to the Indian culture and an environment that need not be populated by imps, goblins, water spirits, and frog skins.⁶

These final books also return to the far less complicated portraits of the adventuring children that one finds in her first two books. In fact, the central figure in *The Diamond Feather* (1962), is not a child at all, but an unnamed prospector who is simply referred to as the Frozen Man. Unlike the various enchanted men and women of earlier stories, this man has consciously abandoned his family and all his social responsibilities. It appears initially that he is merely a victim of

“silver lust” — the insatiable desire for wealth. But his motivation is far more complicated, for the reader soon learns that he has left his family because he feels trapped, oppressed by the responsibilities of taking care of them. He desperately desires to be free.⁷ When his wife accuses him of being a totally selfish man, he realizes immediately the inherent truth of her accusation. When he leaves, he takes with him the diamond feather of the magical bird that once charmed his children and is the sole joy in his family's life and a constant reminder of his own deficiencies:

“I got mad and I said to her, ‘Then I'm going for keeps and what's more I'll take that darned Feather with me.’ And I tore it off the wall and locked it up in the iron trunk with my ore samples.”

But not long after he leaves, an avalanche buries the house, and when he returns he finds nothing. His punishment for his crime is to be chained to this place forever, a frozen man in a frozen world:

“But I was chained here, you might say. Every time I went off the place something happened to me so I had to turn back. I knew something was working against me. This place got colder and colder and me with it.”

With the warmth of human love missing, the man has become frozen; his insatiable desire for freedom binds him instead to the place where he abandoned his family.

What saves this tortured man is love or, more specifically, the love of Firelei, the tiny girl who, with her brother Jon, journeys to this enchanted world. The uniqueness of this little girl is recognized immediately by the Wise Owl, the first of the creatures that the children meet in this magical place. Because of the courage and love of the children, the Frozen Man is finally reunited with his own children. This reunion allows Clark to enunciate her belief that man must learn to forgive, to leave behind his hate and revenge. While the Frozen Man's children hate him, they too are prisoners, a state symbolically represented by their imprisonment in Whitebird Valley. They free themselves when they finally forgive their father and follow him to the land where their mother walks with the dead — the land of Heart's Desire. In death the family is finally reunited.

In *The Diamond Feather* Clark introduces her audience to a far more elaborate view of the community of man than that presented in her earlier works, for she now considers not only the living, but the dead as well. It is clear, for example, that the Frozen Man finally finds his serenity not in this world, but in the next. When Firelei finds it impossible to discover the reason why her friends had to die, the mystical Singer consoles her, and in doing so provides the reader with a simple but eloquent explanation of the place of death in the universal cosmos: “everything in its season.” Omantha's response is more specific:

"They are happy. They are free," said Omantha, softly. "They have gone to their mother. They had the courage to try and save their father, but his time and their time had come."

Freedom from the concerns of man comes only with death. It is this freedom that the Singer describes throughout the story, the belief that man is free only when he learns to recognize his place in this world and in the great world beyond:

Now he sang with power and the people sat silent thinking of the beauty of the world; of budding Spring and burning Summer; of the changing colours of Fall and of the changeless death-white snow. He sang of the stars in their courses, of silver dawns and the day's burning close. And the song mounted and spoke to them of love and of loss, of joy, and deep rest. The whole of life flowed by.

CLARK'S PORTRAIT OF THE COMMUNITY of man culminates in her final book, *The Hunter and the Medicine Man* (1966). The story begins when two somewhat alienated children climb a mountain to escape, albeit briefly, from the oppressive housekeeper who is caring for them while their mother is in hospital. While on the mountain, they find a mysterious lake, and when a great fog shrouds the lake the fantasy begins. They have moved from the Outer to the Inner World.

In this story, however, Clark's main interest is not in the invading adventurers; she leaves the children as quickly as possible to focus on the true hero of the tale, the enigmatic Hunter, blood brother of the Indian chief, whose rescue is the object of the quest and the basis of the children's adventure. Totally disillusioned with man and his selfish ways, the Hunter has abandoned his tribe. When Richard, the young boy, suggests that "there's nothing wrong with the world but people," the Hunter quickly agrees. But through the intercession of the children and the kindly Mrs. Buck — the female equivalent of the prospector who appears in most of Clark's novels — the Hunter decides to return to man's world and save his brother, realizing, finally, that true peace must be earned. And the Hunter does find his peace, although (like the Frozen Man and his family) only in death. Through the Hunter's courage, the victory is won and now the children can return home. But this time the children do not move from a specific Inner World back to a specific Outer World. They do not awaken in a cave or a museum, suddenly discovering that their journey into fantasy is over. They simply ride over the mountain, knowing that Mrs. Buck is always on the other side awaiting their visits. As Mrs. Buck says, "You're one side of the mountain and I'm the other. We sure won't forget each other."

Thus, in her last book, Clark finally discards any pretense of presenting two separate worlds; she returns to the time of Indian legends, when there were no

distinctions between what was reality and what was fantasy. Here there is only one world, one in which magic is just across the mountain.

When the children return to their homes, they find that order has also been restored there — their mother has come home:

“What’s that in the yard?” she cried. “It’s not the truck. Oh Rick! It’s the *car*!”

“Mum and Dad, they’re home! Home!” cried Richard, and he pressed Heron in the flank. Side by side the children galloped up the lane between the pastures, shouting and hallooing as they rode towards the ranch-house and its open door.

This open door is a remarkably apt image for Clark to leave the reader with as she ends her career as a fantasist, for in a sense it suggests her own quest. Initially she may have tried to formulate a Canadian mythology which brought together the Indian and European traditions.⁸ She once even tried to include the Chinese tradition. But she ultimately found that the tradition which most clearly reflected her own view about man and his possibilities was the one outside her own open door, the myths of her beloved British Columbia wilderness.

Catherine Clark’s six fantasies preach a common sermon, one which is somewhat unusual in the world of fantasy and which may help in some way to explain the uniqueness of the Canadian culture that nurtured her stories. She demands that man be a doer, that he have the courage to confront his problems and achieve his goals. She does not allow the intercession of fairy-godmothers or ever-benevolent gods. Man must fight his own battles. Above all, she demands that man be selfless, that he care for his fellow man and realize his inherent duty to mankind. She not only chronicles the rewards given to those “special” people who are selfless, but she also suggests the bitter loneliness of those who are selfish, whether they are trapped on a silver island or frozen in an icy cabin. Finally, Clark demands that we recognize our place in the great cosmos, that we realize that “everything [has] its season.” Once man realizes his place — his relative insignificance in the great scope of beings — perhaps then he will realize the ridiculousness of pride and join his fellow man. Her heroes do not aspire to be leaders or to find great treasures. Instead, they simply try to find their place — to realize that they belong to a community and have certain obligations to it. The children return to their families, the hunters to their tribes.

Catherine Clark’s fantasies are not without faults. But I have tried to overlook these and concentrate on her very significant accomplishments. Above all, Clark is true to her own demands. She is a doer — a writer of six fantasies in a country with absolutely no tradition of fantasy. And she is a dreamer — a woman who sincerely believes that the world would be a better place if we left ourselves behind and moved toward others. But she is not a hopeless idealist; she wholly realizes the difficulty of the task. She reminds one of the marvelous Flame-lighter

Woman of *The Sun Horse*, who each night goes forth on her lonely quest to save mankind:

"Three times is all I'm equal to," she croaked. "I have got rheumatism with the mud. But I'll find a way yet to make all flames burn as one flame. When I do, I shall learn the secret of men's souls. For souls burn like solitary candles. I could break a soul's shell if I could shatter a flame. For a moment souls can meet like flames but they go back to their solitary burning and I have not found the way to change it. If I could, there would be no more wars and no more hatred. Ah, me!"

NOTES

- ¹ Sheila Egoff, *The Republic of Childhood*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Oxford, 1975), p. 70.
- ² J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), pp. 3-84. See particularly Tolkien's discussion of the creation of Secondary Worlds, pp. 36-39.
- ³ This emphasis on the fallible nature of man is clearly seen in the legends collected by George Clutesi. Son of Deer, for example, is initially presented as the heroic saviour of his world, but dies ingloriously because he kills without sufficient reason. See George Clutesi, *Son of Raven, Son of Deer: Fables of the Tse-Shant People* (Sidney, B.C.: Gray's, 1967).
- ⁴ Compare this with the conclusions of most traditional fantasies, in which the emphasis is on the defeat of the antagonist rather than on his rehabilitation. Modern fantasists such as Tolkien and C. S. Lewis are clearly within such a tradition, for they present life as a struggle in which order can be restored only after the destruction of the forces of evil.
- ⁵ Uncle Barker is a kindly prospector who befriends the children, a figure who appears in some form in all of Clark's fantasies.
- ⁶ One need only examine the list of characters that Clark provides at the beginning of each book to discover *The Diamond Feather's* obvious movement away from the influence of the European tradition. One simply does not find the assorted Squareheads and Frogskins that populated her earlier fantasies. Only the curious Rock-Puck bears any resemblance to the goblins and elves of the fairy tale, but Clark includes this figure for a very specific reason. He becomes an overt image of what can happen to Jon if he continues in his mischievous ways. When the Rock-Puck offends the Glass-Witch, he is imprisoned in a body of stone, thus becoming little more than a clumsy gargoyle. Thus Clark gives both Jon and the reader a concrete example of what happens to those who follow only their own selfish whims.
- ⁷ Clark's obvious criticism of this inordinate desire to be free of all responsibilities contrasts sharply with the glorification of such figures in American children's books, the boy heroes of Mark Twain being the most obvious examples.
- ⁸ Joan Selby investigates the influences on Clark's early fantasies in "Catherine Anthony Clark: Myth Maker," *British Columbia Library Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (January 1961); and "The Creation of Fantasy: the Fiction of Catherine Anthony Clark," *Canadian Literature*, 11 (Winter 1962).