

THE DEPICTION OF QUEBEC SOCIETY THROUGH THE NOVELS OF GÉRARD BESSETTE AND MARIE CLAIRE BLAIS

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the portrayal of Quebec society during the transition from the Great Darkness to the Quiet Revolution through the analysis of two novels, "Le Libraire" by Gérard Bessette and "Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel" by Marie Claire Blais. The objective is to analyze the presence and effects of these two significant movements in Quebec francophone literature. The research addresses questions such as whether the socio-political changes of the 60s influenced the literature of that era, the reflection of the Great Darkness and the Quiet Revolution in the selected novels, and how the main characters and stories represent these themes in contemporary society. This study employs a qualitative methodology, relying on secondary data from various sources. The historical method is used to critically investigate past events to produce accurate descriptions and interpretations, while the analytical method helps define research needs and problems and establish a strategy for obtaining answers. The results reveal that "Le Libraire," captures the transitional phase by depicting the lingering conservatism of the Great Darkness alongside emerging new values. "Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel" vividly portrays the suffering and societal injustices of the Great Darkness era. These novels illustrate the social, economic, political, and cultural shifts in Quebec society during this transformative period. The findings suggest that these novels not only document historical realities but also highlight the ideological foundations and social challenges that shaped modern Quebec. By analysing the themes and narratives in both works, the study underscores the critical role of literature in reflecting and influencing societal change.

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INTRODUCTION

This study is relevant as it provides valuable insights into the cultural, social, and historical dynamics of Quebec, reflecting its unique identity and challenges. Chasse (2006) analyses Québécois identity in the novels of Marie-Claire Blais, emphasizing the evolving representation of this identity in contemporary literature. By analysing the works of these two prominent authors, the study highlights their contributions to Quebec literature and addresses critical issues such as identity, class, and modernity, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of societal transformations, particularly during significant historical moments like the Quiet Revolution and the Great Darkness. This study also fosters interdisciplinary connections between literature, sociology, and history, enriching our comprehension of the dynamics within Quebec society. The research question explores how the novels of Gérard Bessette and Marie Claire Blais reflect and critique the socio-cultural dynamics of Quebec society during transformative periods.

Society and literature maintain a reciprocal relationship, as the former profoundly influences the creation of the latter. Literature often serves as a reflection of social values, struggles, and aspirations, a concept particularly evident in the context of Quebec's literary landscape. Belleau (1980), the Québécois novels reveal insights particularly within the cultural context of Quebec literature. As Quebec society navigated the historical challenges of the Great Darkness and the Quiet Revolution during the nineteen sixties', writers became increasingly engaged in topics surrounding identity, language, and cultural preservation (Rochon, 2020). The Quebec literature of this era acted as a potent form of social commentary,

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critiquing the overwhelming influence of the Catholic Church and advocating for a society that embraced secularization and modernization (Beaudoin & Gagnon, 2022). Bolduc (1978) examines the complexities of human experience and societal influences on individual growth.

The impact of the Catholic Church was particularly pronounced in mid-20th century Quebec, where feelings of guilt, loneliness, and anxiety permeated daily life and were deeply intertwined with social conservatism (Tremblay, 2021). Maurice Duplessis's regime was frequently viewed as regressive and corrupt, stifling the growth and development of modern ideas (Lapointe, 2023). This context contributed to a pervasive culture of fear and scepticism, leading to a significant literary response. Over a decade, the volume of literary production more than tripled, with the novel emerging as the dominant genre (Fitzgerald, 2023).

During this transformative period, critical voices like Gérard Bessette and Marie-Claire Blais emerged to challenge traditional norms and illuminate the complexities of human experience. Bessette's novel *Le Libraire* encapsulates the essence of contemporary societal dynamics, portraying the struggles faced by individuals amid the sweeping changes brought about by the Quiet Revolution. At the same time, Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* vividly illustrates the unprotected childhood experiences of poverty and violence that marked Quebec society. The dual analysis of these novels allows for an exploration of the interplay between literature and society during a pivotal historical moment. In this context, Cancalon (1989) critiques societal norms and expectations, highlighting social issues through characters whose struggles reflect the hardships and constraints imposed by society.

This research seeks to investigate the significance of Bessette's and Blais's works as a means of understanding the socio-political climate of Quebec in the mid-20th century. By examining these literary texts, the study aims to illuminate how literature not only reflects societal changes but also serves as a catalyst for dialogue about social norms and values. Femande (1993) explores the political, social, and cultural movements that shaped the province's intellectual landscape. Utilizing qualitative literary analysis, this research will focus on thematic exploration, character development, and narrative structure to understand how these authors depict the human condition within the historical context of their time.

The objective of this study is to analyse the presence and its effects of the Great Darkness and the Quiet Revolution of the society in the Quebec francophone novels written by Gérard Bessette: *Le Libraire* and Marie-Claire Blais: *Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*.

The present study will first delve into the socio-political backdrop of Quebec during the Great Darkness and the Quiet Revolution, followed by an analysis of Bessette's *Le Libraire* and its reflections on individual struggles. Then it will examine Blais's portrayal of childhood in *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*, exploring its broader implications in understanding the societal fabric of Quebec. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the findings and reflect on the ongoing relevance of these works in contemporary discussions of identity and culture in Quebec.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In *Le colportage d'un nouveau printemps* (2006) by Brian Kennedy examines the conservative authorities and the repressive socio-political situation in Quebec, highlighting how these conditions made social revolution inevitable. He discusses how authors like Gérard Bessette and Marie-Claire Blais contributed to a literary parallel reflecting social ideological change, offering new hope to Quebecers. Jacques Michon's *Aspects du roman Québécois des années soixante* (1980) explores new ideas in Quebec literature, emphasizing its aesthetic and linguistic values as distinctive characteristics of contemporary Quebec novels. Similarly, in *Le titre du roman Québécois des années 1940-1960* by Berger (1981). Analyses Quebec's novelistic production from the 1940s to 1960s, focusing on historical, social, and psychological novels, noting the dominance of psychological novels in 1950s society. These works examine various aspects of Quebec literature and its evolution during significant socio-political changes. This present work differs from these previous studies as it presents a new perspective on Quebec society during a transitional period, offering fresh insights and reflecting the unique societal changes that occurred. By focusing on this transition, we try to provide an original contribution to the understanding of Quebec's literary and social evolution.

Socio-Political Backdrop

From nineteen thirty-six to nineteen thirty-nine then from nineteen-forty-four to nineteen fifty-nine, Maurice Le Noblet Duplessis was Prime Minister of Quebec. This era is called the Great Darkness which is sarcastically referred as the Dark Ages of Quebec by many due to certain level of conservatism displayed by political leaders and the powerful influence of the Catholic Church which repressed new ideas and liberal demands. Kennedy (n.d.) discusses the *Grande Noirceur*, exploring its historical and cultural significance in Quebec. The article delves into the era's impact on Quebec's identity, particularly its social and political landscape during the period of Duplessis' leadership. The Great Darkness precedes the Quiet Revolution that occurred in Quebec in the early nineteen-sixty. The consequences of the revolution included not only a change in the political sphere, but also a considerable wave of secularization, reform of education, health care, the economy, a change in relations between the Francophone and Anglophone populations in the province, and last but not least, the beginning of the Quebec nationalist movement and its desire for an independent Quebec, which became the number one issue for several decades throughout Canada.

The Quiet Revolution is a period of remarkable transformation that separates and distinguishes modern Quebec society from that which existed before. Rocher (1973) examines the social and political transformations in Quebec, analysing the changes that shaped the province's identity and its relationship with broader Canadian society during a period of significant upheaval. It is seen as the end of the "Great Darkness" and the beginning of the modernization of Quebec. The Quiet Revolution, with its radical socio-political changes, had a direct influence on the literature of this era. Long an

agricultural society and the Catholic faith, it underwent remarkable evolution in the 20th century in the form of accelerated urbanization and rapid modernization. This transformation manifests itself in all elements of society and literature. The Quiet Revolution, also was a period of profound social, political, and cultural change in the province of Quebec, Canada, lasting from approximately the late nineteen-fifties to the early nineteen-seventies. Before the Quiet Revolution, Quebec characterized by a conservative society strongly influenced by the Catholic religion. The Catholic clergy plays a central role in social, political and educational institutions, which limits the modernization and emancipation of the people. The aims of the Quiet Revolution were to modernize Quebec, secularize institutions, promote culture, and establish a welfare state to improve living conditions.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The nature of the study is qualitative. We obtained and analysed the information found in literature from various sources. This present study is based on secondary data. A lot of secondary information has been studied in the form of books, articles published in magazines, journals, newspapers, press articles, etc. To accomplish this study, we required to apply the historical and analytical method. The historical method is a process of critically investigating past events, in order to produce an accurate description and interpretation of those events. The analysis method is a research strategy that invites the researcher to stay in contact with the field and reality which is to learn to define the needs and problems of an investigation, while establishing a strategy for obtaining answers.

DISCUSSIONS

G rard Bessette, got Grand Jury Prize for Letters, was born on twenty fifth February in ninety twenty, and died on twenty-one February, two thousand five in Quebec. He was one of the important writers of contemporary Quebec literature. Bessette studied at the University of Montreal, where he earned a doctorate in literature. He taught literature at the University and was a professor of French at the University of Sherbrooke. His literary work includes novels, essays and short stories. He is known for his satirical and ironic style of writing, where he often criticized conservative and traditional aspects of Quebec society. One of his most famous novels *Le Libraire*, is published in nineteen sixty which was praised for its social satire and its criticism of traditionalism in Quebec. The study of this novel will help us to better appreciate the originality and quality of the work where ideologies, social forces, Characters and human conditions are represented successfully through the plot and characters of the novels.

Le Libraire, takes place between the nineteen fifty's and nineteen sixty's during the transition period between the Great Darkness, an era dominated by religion and conservatism, and the Quiet Revolution, characterized by the liberalization of morals. A satirical story of ten chapters in the form of a fictional diary, Bessette's text attacks the traditionalism of Quebec society by presenting the story of *Herv  Jodoin* who taught in an educational institution before working for a provincial bookstore in *Saint-Joachim*, a small town in the heart of a rural environment totally different from the metropolis of *Montreal* that he left. There he works as a bookstore employee where reading is strictly monitored and censored by the religious and political elite. « *des livres   ne pas mettre entre toutes les mains* » (*Le Libraire*). He started writing a diary and recounts his uninteresting routine. But his boss *L on Chicoine* entrusts him with responsibility for the Capharnaum, the room filled with forbidden, "amoral" books intended to be sold to very private customers. *Herv * sells one of these books to the wrong person, a high school student. This gets him in trouble. Despite this oppressive situation, *Herv * leads a fight against taboos and social restrictions.

« *Au bout d'un certain temps, M. le Cur  est descendu et m'a demand  de la m me voix confidentielle si nous n'avions pas en stock "certains livres dangereux". Je l'ai regard  l'air perplexe en relevant les sourcils et l'ai pri  de m' clairer sur ce qu'il entendait par "livres dangereux".* » (Bessette, 1993)

He began selling books condemned by religious authority, which were carefully hidden in a secret closet. In addition, he indulges in drinking daily and begins a sexual affair. Bessette uses his antihero *Jodoin* to challenge religious authoritarianism, the multiple taboos and ideological oppression in Quebec society in the first half of the 20th century.

Marie-Claire Blais is a novelist, playwright and poet, born in Quebec, Canada, on fifth October in the year nineteen thirty-nine and died on thirty November in the year two thousand twenty-one in Florida. Among the best-known and most studied Canadian authors, she has published approximately 50 literary works. In his works, inner and outer desolation pursues asocial people, exiles, prostitutes, homosexuals and, above all, mothers and children through loveless relationships. *Blais* recreated a harsh environment of crushing poverty, populated by victims bound by ignorance.

Her most famous work, "*Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*," written in 1965 as a response to the genre called "*Roman du terroir*," is centred on a family whose members suffer from poverty, child abuse, of the reform school, the monastery and premature death. It is a novel of realities of the misery and suffering inherent in rural Quebec life in the mid-20th century. This story deals with a poor family. The novel is divided into seven chapters, each of which focuses on a specific event. Through the characters *Blais* represents the transition period between the Great Darkness and the Quiet revolution.

After the analysis of the selected novels, we can state that the characteristics of the Great Darkness (*Le Grande Noirceur*) and the Quiet Revolution (*La Revolution Tranquille*) are reflected impressively through the theme, plot and characters of the novels.

The evolution of Quebec society, since nineteen sixty, is characterized as an "exhibition of freedom" and a "need to break constraints and to transgress taboos". *Le Libraire* was written in nineteen sixty, which is to say at the very beginning of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec. The author therefore wanted to denounce the censorship imposed by the clergy and the Church at that time. The themes that the novelist exploits in the novel which corresponds to the contemporary society i.e. the era known as "the Great Darkness", evoked from the start by the plan of the city upon the arrival of *Jodoin* in Saint-

Joachim and which dates from nineteen thirty-six, precisely the date of Maurice Duplessis's seizure of power and the rise of the National Union, a right-wing party. Through the voice of *Jodoin*, Bessette denounces the situation of the contemporary society in *Le libraire*. However, the work of *Marie Clare Blais* reflects the decline of the Church and shows the liberation of the society. Because, in place of ecclesiastical authority, the elite religious authority is the guardian of public morality.

Le Libraire is a perfect representation of the transition period between the Great Darkness and the Quiet Revolution, all the characters are torn between their desires and the need to comply. Indeed, the protagonists undertake contrary actions to the values established by the Church at that time. Thus, although *Léon Chicoine* expresses a desire to free himself through the initiative of Capharnaüm, selling books conveying morals said to be questionable by the clergy and ideas likely to divert parishioners from the right path, he ultimately rejected the fault, when caught in the act, on *Hervé Jodoin*, all in order to preserve his reputation. However, he does not bow down with joy, he does it simply because the Church holds the power. « ...Eh ben, ce n'est pas bon pour la santé de contrer les curés. Les ficelles, c'est eux autres qui les ont, vous comprenez... » (Bessette, 1993)

Gérard Bessette underlines that a considerable effort is necessary if we want to change things, hence the difficulty of the transition from the Great Darkness to the Quiet Revolution. Furthermore, *Hervé Jodoin* refuses to see what is happening, literally as in society. He deliberately blinds himself because his ideas diverge from those of the majority.

« Moi, j'ai voulu à la lueur de la raison et de mes connaissances juger par moi-même et j'ai par suite mis de côté un tas d'opinions léguées par des gens qui tirent leur autorité de notre paresse cérébrale et du fait qu'ils ont vécu des siècles avant nous. » (Bessette, 1993)

Léon Chicoine denounces censorship and advocates individual freedom during a period, the Great Darkness, characterized by the control of the Church. On the other hand, he does it with hesitation, especially when he discusses it with *Hervé Jodoin*. Indeed, he criticizes the extreme censorship exercised by religious people in front of *Hervé Jodoin*, without however making any comments directly incriminating him.

« Quoi de plus noble, Messieurs, quoi de plus admirable que de répandre ainsi la culture et le goût du beau chez les masses ouvrières, que de semer la bonne parole. » (Bessette, 1993)

The character of *Rose Bouthiller*, through her search for immediate pleasure, also highlights a value contrary to those of the time. When she gets drunk with *Hervé Jodoin*, her words and actions clash, her desires going against what she knows to be the norm. Just like *Léon Chicoine*, she refuses to commit herself completely. Thus, *Gérard Bessette*, by describing protagonist's incapable of fully assuming their ideas different from the dominant culture, shows how difficult it is to move from the conservative values of the Great Darkness to the progressive values of the Quiet Revolution.

Gérard Bessette, through his characters, he focused on the conflict between the desire to evolve and the obligation to act according to standards, reducing *Léon Chicoine* to conformism and *Hervé Jodoin* to immobility. Always through the characters, we observe the birth of new ideas: the right to freedom of thought for each individual. In *Le Libraire*, *Gérard Bessette* represents a transition period, highlighting the conservatism of the Great Darkness while presenting new values which will become the foundation of the Quiet Revolution.

The novel *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* represents the misery and suffering inherent in rural Quebec life in the mid-20th century. This novel is divided into seven chapters, each of which focuses on a specific event. It would take a long time to introduce everyone in this family but the characters represent the theme of unhappy consciousness in a firm manner. Chardin (1998) examines the concept of "unhappy consciousness" in literature, providing insights into the intricate dynamics of consciousness within narrative form.

The family is led and dominated by grandmother *Antoinette*. She is the mother of an unnamed woman who is more of a baby-making machine than a human being, and who is married to an unnamed man whose only paternity instinct is to mercilessly beat the child who found nearby. As the novel starts, the woman has just given birth to her sixteenth child, *Emmanuel*.

The poverty, misery and ignorance of a traditional rural family are omnipresent. The plot begins in winter with the birth of *Emmanuel*, at the time of the First or Second World War, as confirmed by this single passage which allows us to date the novel: « C'est un bien mauvais temps pour naître », confie Grand-Mère *Antoinette*, « nous n'avions jamais été aussi pauvres, une saison dure pour tout le monde, la guerre, la faim et puis tu es le seizième » (Blais, 1965)

Emmanuel's brothers and sisters are *Pomme*, *Héloïse*, "Septième" (his real name *Fortuné-Mathias*) and *Jean-Le Maigre*.

The author wanted to show the radical transformation of Quebec society, of which she evokes the withdrawal into itself, even the Great Darkness, which preceded the awakening of the sixties. In this novel we find the mother-priest coalition, the absence of the father, the domination exercised by religion, the impossibility of living for children who sink into despair or take refuge in writing (a means of escape), the past itself, death, ultimately failure.

Contestation of religion, such as it is practiced and taught in the Quebec of the Great Darkness. The orphanage and the novitiate are the places where people coexist with an ideal of perfection vice and lust, just as the convent that *Héloïse* attends. The younger, *Jean Le Maigre*, the *Septième* and two other brothers, engage in collective masturbation; the first two still have fun with a parody of confession.

This era of obscurantism described in the novel which evokes the domination exercised by the Catholic clergy. The alienation, the submission, the numerous allusions to large families, the little importance given to education, the omnipresence of religion, these are all elements which relate to the traditional society.

The winter season in which *Emmanuel* was born, evokes a dark season of Quebec society, represents the Great Darkness which fortunately gives a way to spring, announced at the end. Hope is reborn, or so it seems, because,

Grandmother Antoinette says « l'hiver a été dur, [...] le printemps sera meilleur [...] ce sera un beau printemps » (Blais, 1965)

The priest is the supreme authority in the village who preaches the greatness of large families to ensure the survival of the race. The father is against education and progress.

In this novel, each character wants to escape from life because of the difficult situation of the family and contemporary society. They would like to fly like a bird: « Je prendrai mes ailes et je m'envolerai. . . Toi, tu resteras ici. Tu te lèveras à six heures et tu iras couper du bois Moi je volerai dans le ciel comme une colombe. » (Blais, 1965)

In the character of *Jean-Le-Maigre* we find the representation of the Great Darkness and the Quiet Revolution at the same time. *Jean-Le-Maigre*, the only child who could really contribute to society in a meaningful and lasting way. *Jean* is growing up poorly, but he is intellectual. Somehow, even in the midst of this environment, he is in love with books and is eager to read whatever comes to hand. But his father doesn't like his instincts, and Jean is often beaten for reading. Later, he is beaten when he is found writing poetry. Instead, he develops tuberculosis and is sent to the Novitiate (a form of religious sanatorium) either to die in peace or to heal himself. In this context, we can mention the words of Jean-Le Maigre « *la vie est impossible* ». (*Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*). The sicker and weaker he becomes, the more his genius for words becomes more pronounced. When he dies, the family has a moment of enlightenment, briefly realizing his intelligence and worth. But this revelation makes no sense. He would like to be a poet, but because of contemporary conservative society and his family situation his dream ends with his death.

Héloïse wanted to live well at the beginning. But she has become the victim of lust by a social institution and is lost in obscurity. Later, she started leading a life as a prostitute. There, she was also mentally and physically abused. All these events in his life bring him into an unhappy situation. Attacked by a social institution, Seventh's mental and physical state deteriorates. Later, he started stealing and was beaten almost every day by the people which led him to an unhappy state.

The father experiences a sense of doom as he struggles to ensure a happy family life. Current social conditions prevent him from earning enough money to support his family. Unfortunately, this caused him to become very harsh, often abusing his children for no reason. He also feels isolated within himself.

After the discussion, we can state that the socio-political changes during the year nineteen sixty significantly influenced Quebec literature, with Gérard Bessette's *Le Libraire* and Marie-Claire Blais's *Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* reflecting the transition from the Great Darkness to the Quiet Revolution. Both novels vividly portray the oppressive religious conservatism and censorship of the Great Darkness and the emerging liberalization and intellectual freedom of the Quiet Revolution. Viswanathan (2006) explores the complexity of the protagonist and the narrative techniques used to develop the character in the context of Quebec literature. Through characters like Hervé Jodoin and Jean-Le-Maigre, the novels illustrate the tension between personal desires and societal expectations, highlighting the human cost of oppression and the transformative potential of societal change. Thus, these works effectively encapsulate the themes and effects of the Great Darkness and the Quiet Revolution on contemporary Quebec society.

CONCLUSIONS

This article examines the socio-political landscape of Quebec before the year nineteen sixty, focusing on the conservative and oppressive influence of the Church, which demanded the sacrifice of the present for the future in the name of religion. The study highlights how this repressive environment, characterized by prohibitions and taboos, stifled freedom of thought and action. Through the lens of Gérard Bessette's *Le Libraire* and Marie-Claire Blais's *Une Saison dans la Vie d'Emmanuel*, the article explores the transition from the Great Darkness to the Quiet Revolution, reflecting the conflict between traditional values and emerging progressive ideals. Guindon (1988) examines the interplay of tradition, modernity, and nationhood in Quebec society, highlighting their role in shaping Quebec's cultural and political identity.

The findings reveal that Bessette's work captures the slow shift in mentality leading to the Quiet Revolution, portraying characters who struggle between the desire to evolve and the obligation to conform. Similarly, Blais's novel symbolizes this transformation through the cyclical change of seasons, with winter representing the Great Darkness and spring symbolizing the hope and renewal of the Quiet Revolution. The unique contribution of the paper lies in its detailed analysis of how these novels reflect and critique the socio-cultural dynamics of Quebec society during periods of transformation. Tremblay (2004) explores how fiction reflects the evolving identity and cultural dynamics of Quebec during this period.

The theoretical implications suggest that literature can serve as a mirror to societal changes, providing insights into the socio-political climate of an era. Managerially, the study recommends promoting literary works that reflect historical and social changes to encourage a deeper understanding of cultural evolution. The research is limited by its focus on a specific period and region, which may not be generalizable to other contexts. Future research could expand this analysis to include a broader range of literary works and explore similar transitions in different cultural settings.

The article underscores the importance of examining literature as a tool for understanding socio-political changes, offering recommendations for educators, policymakers, and literary scholars to incorporate these insights into their practices. Future studies should consider a comparative approach, analysing how other regions and periods of significant socio-political change are depicted in literature, to further enrich our comprehension of the interplay between literature and society.

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