

WHEN SPORT MEETS ART: HOCKEY NIGHT IN CANADA

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Abstract. *The paper refers to the history of Olympic art competitions which at one point were part of the Olympic Games competitions. In that vein, the author of the paper analyzes the Canadian short story *Hockey Night in Canada* which is inspired by sport. The story illustrates how domestic objects could be turned into objects of art and how they help Schoemperlen reflect on her characters or apply her own technique of writing.*

Key words: *Sport, Art, Sport Stories, Art, Hockey, Olympic Games*

INTRODUCTION

If we put sport and art side by side, we can see that artists and sportsmen have more in common than we can ever imagine. They both strive for excellence and success which they achieve through hard work for the pleasure of winning the game or for creating a work of art. No wonder that many writers were inspired by sport in their creative writing and many sports events and manifestation or cultural phenomena serve as the subject of their works of art. Therefore, a great number of short stories are inspired by sports events. A case in point in this paper will be a short story by the Canadian short story writer Diane Schoemperlen (1987) *Hockey Night in Canada*.

It was Pierre de Coubertin who included art within the Olympic Games. Though art exhibitions were not always competitive, the best works were awarded medals from time to time between 1912 and 1948. In the eyes of de Coubertin, art competitions were an equally important part of the Olympic Games as sports competitions. For the Olympics in Stockholm in 1912 de Coubertin succeeded in making arts part of the Games. During these games the sculpture “An American Trotter” by an American author Walter Winans was awarded a gold medal (Rios 2015). Over the next few decades, the arts competitions were underestimated and in 1948 were finally abandoned.

It is said that literature saved the Olympics. The Olympic Games were already dead when in 1833 a Greek editor, Panagiotis Soutsos, published his poem “Dialogue of the

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Dead”, which featured the ghost of Plato, and which breathed life into the Games. It is also believed that Robert Browning’s poem “Pheidippides”, the poem about the first marathon runner, inspired the International Olympic Committee to include the marathon in the 1896 games. Apart from these examples, the intersections between sport and art are numerous.

This paper refers to the history of Olympic arts competitions which at one point were part of the Olympic Games competitions. In that vein, the author of the paper analyzes the Canadian short story *Hockey Night in Canada*, written by Diane Schoemperlen, which is inspired by sport as other sports stories are but, as a matter of fact, does not have much to do with hockey.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF THE PROBLEM

‘The objects of domestic art’: *Hockey night in Canada*

Diane Schoemperlen (1954 -) is a Canadian short story writer and novelist, one of Canada’s most innovative authors today, who deals with metafictional experimentation in her prose work with an attempt to weave metafiction into factuality giving her story a social and cultural commentary and enriching her stories with a new sense of her creative imagination. In search for new techniques of realism, she often oscillates between metafiction and biographical factuality, striving to achieve some new mental literary lens through which she frames the imaginative patterns of fiction. In her stories she shows how playing with common speech can bring one back to realistic representations and meaning and how she orders and explains the emotional and mental chaos of contemporary life. However, Schoemperlen emerges not as a manipulator of language, but rather a well-focused and shrewd observer of the social and cultural reality (Andrzejczak, 2005, 24-25). Behind Schoemperlen’s imaginative constructions unfolds a reality of contemporary working- and middle-class small-town Canada. Her characters are usually young or middle-aged women who talk about their lives, love affairs, children. They tell us what life is like in a world run by men, controlled by men and consumerism, permeated with paradox and terror.

Schoemperlen’s technique includes a broad assortment of illustrations, ranging from diagrams to drawings or collages created by the author herself. They form an important part of the story. Certain illustrations of objects, or the descriptions of objects, like the collection of stamps she describes in *Hockey Night in Canada*, generate and shape the narratives rather than merely illustrate them. When watching hockey games, Ted and Rita roared, while Violet was arranging her stamp collection. Russia was Violet’s favorite country for collecting stamps because their stamps looked bigger and grander and they displayed a variety of Russian culture: “The Russians had hockey players, cosmonauts, fruits and vegetables, wild animals, trucks and ballerinas, in red, blue, green, yellow, even shiny silver and gold. We had mainly the Queen in pastels” (Schoemperlen 2009, 264). Violet’s preference for Russian stamps juxtaposes the two great countries of hockey players showing her disinterest in the game her husband and her friend are watching.

In her interview with Darryl Whetter, Schoemperlen explains that her “short stories are playing with form” (Wetter 1996, 131) but the most important thing in a short story or a novel is “that you must have a story to tell” (Wetter 1996, 131). As a student at the Banff Centre School of Writing in the summer of 1976, where she studied under such writers as W. O. Mitchell and Alice Munro, Schoemperlen was trained in the spirit that, as she says, “when you’re telling a story to a friend or anyone, you’re trying for a certain effect. [...] you tend to make the story ‘better’ maybe than it really was. You tend to structure

things in a certain way. You tend to exaggerate, embroider on what actually happened” (Whetter 1996, 132-133). She concludes her thoughts on the art of creative fiction that “much of [her] fiction does derive its impetus from something that actually happened” (Whetter 1996, 133). Thus a well-known show *Hockey Night in Canada* becomes an inspiration for Schoemperlen to write her short story.

In the country where multiculturalism is synonymous with cultural varieties and ethnic differences which coexist together in the same space and where regional differences are as great as the differences between nations and their cultures, hockey becomes an easy recognizable means of connecting people. And when one may feel entirely out of place, hockey becomes a means of adapting to the land. For Jason Blake, “hockey is not universally adored in Canada, but it is universally recognized” (Blake 2010, 21). Hockey becomes the unifying spirit that brings the nation together, and during hockey nights and games it brings families together as well. The unifying hockey spirit may strengthen the family ties or may even destroy them.

Despite its title *Hockey Night in Canada*, the story has nothing to do with hockey. The story is about the tense relationship between a young woman’s mother Violet, father Ted, and mother’s friend Rita and it takes place while the *Hockey Night in Canada* show airs on TV in the background. It is about a middle-class family who spend Saturday evening together watching a hockey game between Montreal Canadiens and Chicago Blackhawks. Schoemperlen depicts a typical home atmosphere in the home of hockey fans. It opens up this way:

“We settled ourselves in our usual places, my father and I, while the singer made his way out onto the ice and the organist cranked up for ‘O Canada’ and ‘The Star Spangled Banner’. Saturday and we were ready for anything, my father half-sitting, half-lying on the chesterfield with his first dark rum and Pepsi, and I in the swivel chair beside the picture window with a box of barbecue chips and a glass of 7up” (Schoemperlen 2009, 262).

Violet, Ted, their daughter and their friend Rita seem to be bored with everyday life as they are “ready for anything” and, not knowing what to do exactly, spend the evening watching a game.

The opening of the story illustrates well enough Schoemperlen’s technique and devotion to domestic objects of material culture and her devotion to establish control over her experience of objects and people. Her characters usually demonstrate the willingness to control or the lack of control. The very beginning of the story points to the fact that the characters are settled “in [their] usual places”. The word “usual” signifies something stable, unchangeable, which refers to the lives of the characters Schoemperlen introduces. The opening of the story illustrates Schoemperlen’s preoccupation with things, with houses and the objects that fill them, with the material objects of domestic space. In her writing Schoemperlen clearly demonstrates her devotion to forms, especially to the forms of domestic material culture. The focus in this excerpt is on the “chesterfield” sofa and “swivel chair”. The chesterfield sofa symbolizes status and is one of the most recognizable pieces of furniture. It is luxurious and with a long tradition, classic in style, it derived from the long tradition of gentlemen’s clubs and stately homes of the British Empire. The swivel chair, or more often the rocking chair, occupies the centre of almost every story written by Schoemperlen. The swivel chair points to the ambivalence, the possibility of a different point of view as it may be turned around, but, unfortunately, it comes full circle and can be returned to the starting point, leaving sometimes no hope of change.

The story opens with a boring middle-class evening where everything is not “real” in the family. The young lady Violet and Ted lead a make-believe life. They even pretend to be real hockey fans:

“We were not violent fans, either one of us. We never hollered, leaped out of our chairs, or pounded ourselves in alternating fits of frustration and ecstasy. We did not jump up and down yelling, ‘Kill him, kill him!’ Instead, we were teasing fans, pretend fans almost, feigning hostility and heartbreak, smirking and groaning gruesomely by turns, exaggerating our reactions mainly for the benefit of the other and sometimes just to get a rise out of my mother, who was by this time humming with pins in her mouth, smoothing pattern pieces onto the remains of the dress, and snipping merrily away with the pinking shears, while scraps of cloth and tissue paper drifted to the floor all around her” (Schoemperlen 2009, 263).

This is typical for people and families with relationship problems which are a consequence of dissatisfaction with regular life, unfulfilled emotional needs which result in not being able to be what they really are. They never express their feeling the way they were; they never experienced the intensity of their emotions.

The problem of all the characters in the story is how to make a meaningful relationship with another human being and how to overcome the boredom of everyday life. Rita is Violet’s friend whom she had met in the summer at Eaton’s where Rita was working at the Cosmetics counter. At the time when the action of the story takes place, she works at Ladies Dresses, having passed briefly through Lingerie and Swimwear in between. Rita is a typical representative of middle-class people who divide their time between their work and their family. However, Rita’s everyday routine is violated by the death of her son and her husband Geoffrey who killed himself. That caused a trauma for Rita and since then she has been trying to find a way how to heal it. She became a lonely person and joined Violet and her husband Ted in finding a way to heal her trauma.

One way out of the everyday boredom is maintaining a love affair. Schoemperlen often writes about the love affairs of ordinary women in her stories. As the story unfolds, we face an anticipation of the love relationship between Ted and Rita. It is not only emotional but it is also a sexual relationship which is implied in the passage when Ted’s daughter finds him and Rita “alone in the house [...] and they were drinking rum at the kitchen table, with the record player turned up loud in the living room. They seemed neither surprised nor sorry to see me. There was something funny about Rita’s eyes when she looked up at me though, a lazy softness, a shining, which I just naturally assumed to be an effect of the rum” (Schoemperlen 2009, 274). They find comfort in each other due to their common feeling of being lonely. Ted was neglected by Violet emotionally and Rita, who lost her family, was blamed and isolated by her husband’s family because her husband had hanged himself.

What the young lady, the narrator, witnessed upon getting back home, is the scene of the quarrel between Ted and Violet over Rita. Ted seemed to try to justify and defend his and Rita’s behavior. But the whole argument ends with no resolution to the problem:

“But he was defending her [Rita], and himself too, protecting her from some accusation, himself from some threat that I’d missed, something unfair.

‘Well, I *know* that, Ted.’

‘Don’t forget it then.’

‘That’s no excuse for anything, you fool.’

‘I didn’t say it was.’

‘Be quiet, she’ll hear you,’ my mother said, meaning me.” (Schoemperlen 2009, 275)

Though Violet knows the truth about Ted and Rita’s relationship, she will do nothing to change it. The story ends with the anticipation that nothing will change, they will go on with their make-believe lives, “living and partly living”, not being able to bear to face the reality.

The unnamed teenage narrator in the story is a lonely woman, like Rita herself, and she sometimes fabricates familiarity with other people by imagining the lives they have, dwelling on the objects they possess which could be clues to their inaccessible lives. Visualizing the apartment of her parents' friend Rita, the narrator lets her imagination run wild:

“The apartment would be quite small, yes, and half-dark all the time, with huge exotic plants dangling in all the windows, shedding a humid green light everywhere. The rooms smelled of coffee and black earth. The furniture was probably old, cleverly draped with throws in vivid geometrics. The hard-wood floors gleamed and in one room (which one?) the ceiling was painted a throbbing bloody red” (Schoemperlen 2009, 273).

The apartment's imagined, almost exotic, description is related to the teenager's mindset with the idea of a woman living alone. Though “such an arrangement was new to [her] then, it seemed to be a future possibility that became “more and more attractive” (Schoemperlen 2009, 273), the more she thought about it and the more she learnt about the trials of married life. It certainly marks the transformation of the narrator's identity, the change in her point of view.

Schoemperlen is in love with her objects which often fashion her characters. Preoccupied with the idea of control, Schoemperlen shows that the description of a room or a house offers the possibility of controlling experiences along with space. The fixed boundaries of domestic spaces make them seem controllable. However, the sense of control that one might possess or experience from domestic material culture is not enough sometimes. She is committed to exploring the same objects and spaces further, in greater material detail, and to exploring how they influence the lives of her characters. The furniture or decorative objects her characters are surrounded with offer a clearer, more positive image of themselves. Her characters take pleasure in seeing themselves reflected in their furniture, belongings, and the material things they possess.

Schoemperlen's story dramatizes the way in which social meaning is constructed by individuals' interactions with the manipulation of objects of material culture. As Matthew Johnson points out in *Housing Culture*: “we can all monitor someone's occupation, status, class, gender, even their political views, quite accurately from a few seconds perusal of their homes and the material culture they possess, the objects they choose to put within that space. Further, we all know how to manipulate such impressions, creating our own identities and affiliations through our own homes and material culture” (Johnson 1993, viii). The young narrator, when she imagines Rita's house, as well as Schoemperlen herself, are certainly aware of the power objects could convey about their makers, users, owners. They also contribute to the process of self-fashioning through material culture every day. Telling the story of the unnamed narrator's character transformation, Schoemperlen demystifies what is quite a mysterious phenomenon of growing up and imposing control of the world around us.

CONCLUSION

The text shows that a character's personality can be reflected both in the things or objects one possesses or choices that one makes. De Coubertin's choice to integrate art competitions into the Olympic Games tells a lot about his need to have arts as part of sports competitions and about the inevitable tie between the two walks of life. Schoemperlen, on the other hand, uses sport, or more precisely the game of hockey, as an inspiration for writing a short story. An everyday event, a hockey night in Canada, has been elevated to a higher artistic level by this short story writer. For Schoemperlen, the sports event becomes an impetus for the imaginative recreation into a story. Schoemperlen equalizes the common pleasure and

excitement of watching a hockey game with the reading of an inspiring short story. The simple domestic objects, illustrations, things which she manipulates in her story reflect a lot more about her characters, the culture, social interactions. This is the point where the trivial and the sublime intersect. The trivial becomes the source of the sublime, increasing the awareness that the things Schoemperlen surrounds her characters with generate effects, sometimes beyond the ones she intends to convey. She ponders on those trivial things which only ordinary bourgeois people may fuss over sometimes when they have nothing more meaningful to occupy their minds with, and draws the higher pleasure and thrill of manipulating the same objects of domestic art. She shows how household objects as material culture are shaped by the self that uses them or how they in turn shape that self, pointing to the role of domestic objects in the construction of characters. The comparison can be made between one's choice to have art competitions as part of sports competitions reflecting man's need to enjoy both the artistic and sports aspect of competitions, because the thrills and the enjoyment are equally rewarding in both walks of life.

For Schoemperlen, mundane and local activities and tasks of life are put almost on the same level for the sake of artistic pleasure. The focus on the importance of certain domestic activities or objects of domestic art grow out of a sense of powerlessness to effect change in the world outside home. The manipulation of material objects in everyday life could be related to the dynamics of power relations. There is "the dialectic of domination and resistance" that could be traceable in people's manipulations of material culture within a society. For example, Violet's resistance to watch a hockey game represents her everyday resistance to domination based on gender. She fashions herself in a new light via material culture which she engages in on a smaller scale when she takes to arranging the collection of stamps. On the other hand, de Coubertin's attempt to insert art competitions into the Olympic Games creates the impression of the domination of culture in a society.

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SUSRET UMETNOSTI I SPORTA: VEĆE HOKEJA U KANADI

Rad se bavi istorijom Olimpijskih igara u periodu kada su takmičenja iz umetnosti bila prateći deo igara. U tom duhu autor rada analizira kanadsku kratku priču Veće hokeja u Kanadi, koju je napisala Dijana Šemperlen, i za koju su igre hokeja bile glavna inspiracije iako se priča ne odnosi mnogo na sam hokej. Priča govori o tome kako kućni objekti mogu postati deo umetnosti kada posluže kao objekti kroz koje se reflektuju likovi u priči ili kao posebna tehnika da se ispriča priča.

Ključne reči: sport, umetnost, sportske priče, hokej, Olimpijske igre