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Depressing State of Affairs

"Horses of the Night" in Margaret Laurence's collection *A Bird in the House*, published in 1970, serves as a pivotal story for comprehending the overall narrative of the collection. The story's depth comes from its nuanced exploration of personal aspirations and the harsh realities of life. Chris struggles with the restraints put upon him while trying to function and find his way during the Great Depression, thus retreating to fantastical stories and unachievable goals. The story's protagonist, Vanessa, also grapples with the conflict between inner life and external reality. Chris, a dreamer, often escapes into his imagination to escape the bleakness of his existence. His continuous "distancing himself from the absolute unbearability of battle" (143) reminds Vanessa and the reader that sometimes individuals detach from reality to avoid acknowledging the truth. Chris's series of ambitions—from attempting college in Winnipeg to trying his hand as a travelling salesperson and finally enlisting in the army—highlight a tragic disconnect between his dreams and the grim truth, culminating in his psychological breakdown. Remaining hopeful to the very end, the circumstances and his reducing fortitude broke his mind and body so that though "they could force his body to march and even to kill, …what they didn't know was that he'd fooled them. He didn't live inside it anymore" (142). In contrast, Vanessa's and Aunt Edna's more successful navigations through life underscore the vital role that external forces, such as family support and societal stability, play in achieving one's goals. Their accomplishments illustrate the interplay between individual aspirations and the enabling structures of society, showing that while personal drive is important, the conditions and support

systems around us significantly shape our possibilities for success. Despite Chris' persistent efforts, the harsh realities of his environment continuously undermine his progress, causing him to escape, withdraw and lead to an ultimate downfall.

Chris' philosophy of manifestation encapsulates the central conflicts of dreams vs reality and the individual vs societal expectations. The struggle of the Great Depression affected millions, and Chris is among those who compensated for the lack of control over their external environment by pretending they could alter their fates if they concentrated and strived for it enough:

> I got this theory, see, that anybody can do anything at all, anything, if they really set their minds to it. But you have to have this total concentration. You have to focus on it with your whole mental powers, and not let it slip away by forgetting to hold it in your mind. If you hold it in your mind, like, then it's real, see? (129).

In Chris' perspective, simply wanting something is enough regardless of outside forces. This belief allowed him to escape into a world of dreams where the limitations of reality did not apply. On the other hand, Vanessa shows a more grounded approach. As she matures, she adeptly navigates her ambitions with a keen awareness of the external world's influence and active engagement with it, asserting her role as "a professional listener" (9). While Chris clings to his dreams to the extent of disconnecting from reality, Vanessa recognizes the importance of aligning one's ambitions with the realities of one's circumstances, emphasizing a more pragmatic and ultimately more successful approach to achieving personal goals.

One of Chris' favourite escapes is through stories of a pair of fictional racehorses that represent freedom, power, and control—qualities he lacks in real life. Vanessa is fascinated and

puzzled by Chris's dreams and his ability to detach from reality. When she was young, Vanessa had an active imagination to cope with the unpleasant or frightening aspects of her living situation. Vanessa would "compose in [her] head stories of spectacular heroism in which [she] figured as [a] central character" (5), suggesting that her method of escape is similar to Chris'. Initially, she innocently takes Chris' stories as true, not questioning them, alluding to the fact that she also wants to live in this fantasy far from their real world. A grown Vanessa, with her knowledge and experience, is able to eventually understand Chris' final fate, knowing "for some years now, without realizing it, that the pair had only ever existed in some other dimension" (135). This shift in perspective shows Vanessa's development as she moves from a child's simplistic understanding to a more mature grasp of the complexities of life.

Chris' approach to life's adversities is passive. His interactions with Grandfather Connor, who embodies the older generation's rigid expectations, also demonstrates his escapism. Unlike Vanessa, Chris deals with his grandfather's hostility through a markedly non-confrontational approach. She notices "he simply appeared to be absent, elsewhere" (123). Chris's response to Grandfather Connor's remarks is not open rebellion but quiet defiance through disengagement and withdrawal into his mind, allowing him to maintain a sense of control and peace.

Contrasting Chris' passivity with Aunt Edna's pragmatic approach underscores two distinctly different responses to life's challenges. Chris retreats into his imagination, where possibilities appear boundless yet yield little real-world results. Indeed, "if every sixth person in town would get a subscription to Country Guide, he could make a hundred dollars in a month" (132), but "he didn't stay in Manakwa a full month" (132). On the other hand, Aunt Edna embodies a pragmatism focusing on the tangible aspects of life. Her approach, centred on hard work and direct engagement, demonstrated by her flat response to Jimmy begging her to return

with him to Winnipeg, "with no job? Don't make me laugh" (70), values realism and perseverance despite her grandfather Connor's hostility and her undesirable living situation. The story shows the varying effectiveness of escapism versus pragmatic action through their outcomes.

An analysis of Chris's character gives a deeper understanding of the other characters in the book, forming a contrast between them and a compelling exploration of how individuals respond differently to their circumstances. The disparity between fantasy, the harshness of reality, and the lack of opportunity provide insight into all the character's development. The Great Depression, once over, was the external wall that was impeding everyone's progress, and it had finally come down, allowing Vanessa and Aunt Edna, who had adopted a more practical approach, to have successful lives in the end. Laurence's story serves as a reminder to confront life's challenges directly rather than retreat into the comfort of imagined worlds. The pragmatic ones ultimately moved on from the Brick House.

Works Cited

Laurence, Margaret, *A Bird in the House,* Penguin, 2017.