Feminine Voices and Characters in *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver

Université de Toulouse Le Mirail.
Langues, littératures et civilisations étrangères.

MEMOIRE DE MAITRISE D’ANGLAIS

Rédigé sous la direction
de M. René Alladaye
Par Bénédicte Meillon
Juin 1999
The point is to find sense. How is a child to find the way to her own beliefs, unless she can stuff her pockets with all the truths she can find – whether she finds them on a library shelf or in a friend’s warm, strange-smelling kitchen. The point is for playground slurs to fall dead on her ears, meaningless as locks on an open door. I want to imagine those doors not just open but gone, lying in the dirt, thrown off their hinges by the force of accord in a house of open passage.

Barbara Kingsolver, « The Spaces Between »
High Tide in Tucson, Essays from Now or Never. 1995

Special thanks to friends and family who have supported me in writing this essay. Special attention to my father, without whose comfort I might have given up, and who has endured my worse moods....

Thank you very much to Mr. Alladaye, my research director, for paying attention and for helping me in turning this essay into what it is...I would also like to stress the thrust we have found talking to Mr. Lepellec, Mme Cochoy and other professors whose advice and encouragements we have sincerely appreciated.

I am ever so grateful to the Leff family, who took my brother away and tried to obtain forgiveness by introducing me to Barbara Kingsolver’s precious writing. Well done! Not only are you forgiven, I simply laud that day when I ran out of books to read and you opened that one world before me.

And the Sun, Who rises every morning......
CONTENTS
INTRODUCTION

1 - TREATMENT OF SPACE AND CHARACTERIZATION.
PLOTTING AND TRAVELLING:
FROM KENTUCKY, THROUGH OKLAHOMA, TO ARIZONA

1 - Pittman County, Kentucky : The Point of Departure.
   a) Homodiegetic Narrator's Background.
   b) Verisimilitude Effect: Taylor in the Driver's Seat.
   c) Naming and Constructing a Character.

2 - Oklahoma : Despair and Total Loss of Direction.
   a) The Land of Despair.
   b) Turtle in the Passenger's Seat : Beginning of a New Journey.
   c) The "Broken Arrow Motor Lodge".

3 - New Setting : Arizona.
   a) Two Synonymous Protagonists : Taylor and Lou Ann.
   b) Arrival in Tucson.
   c) Arizona and the Miracle of Life.
   d) Turtle's Revival : from Setting to Character.
   e) Aridity and Despair; Thirst and Hollowness.

4 - Reversal and Resolution.
   a) From Stagnation to Action : the Car Prop and Dynamism.
   b) Second Trip through Oklahoma : Reversed Trajectory.
   c) On the Road Again : Back to Arizona, the End of the Trip.
II - FEMININE VOICES :
MEDIUMS OF THE SYMBOLICAL RICHNESS
OF THE TEXT

1 - Central Voice : Metaphor and Gender

a) The Language of the Semiotic.

b) Taylor’s Evolution : A Belated Move into the "Diadic Order".

2 - An Almost Women -only Universe.

3 - Men Associated with Destruction : Feminist Stands.

a) Home and Family Destroyers.

b) Intertextuality : Man as a Fearsome Entity.

4 - Turtle as a Prophet.

a) Turtle's Character at the Core of the Extended Bean-Tree Metaphor.

b) Identical Rhyme : "Turtle" - "Purple".

c) Turtle’s Character and Intertextuality with the Bible.

d) Turtle : a "Whirling Dervish".

5 - Mattie's Place : a Fountain of Faith.

a) Mattie's Character : the Supreme Surrogate Mother.

b) "Jesus Is Lord Used Tires".

c) A Feminine, Revisited Version of "The Great Chain of Being".

III - BARBARA KINGSOLVER’S WRITING :
THE REDEMPTIVE POWER OF CREATION

1 - Blindness versus Consciousness : Unveiling the Truth.

a) Mattie's flashlight : a metaphor in absentia for Barbara Kingsolver's Writing.

b) Dialogues : Showing over Telling.

2 - Fiction and Realism.

a) Secondary Characters' Portraits : Stereotypes Depicting Reality.

b) Primary Characters' voices : Vindicating a Higher Degree of Tolerance of the Other.
3 - The Individual versus The Institution. 102
a) Denouncing American Institutions and Politics. 102
b) "Soundness of Mind and Freedom of Will". 105

4 - The Power of Representation. 108
a) Metadrama in the Novel. 108
b) A Pact of Reading. 112

5 - The Power of Imagery. 117
a) The "Anamorphic Eye". 117
b) Animal Symbolism. 121
c) Allegories: "How They Eat In Heaven". 125

6 - Ecofeminism in Literature. 130
a) Ecofeminist Theory. 130
b) Feminine Transcendentalism. 133

CONCLUSION 137
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY 142
INTRODUCTION
The Bean Trees, as Barbara Kingsolver’s first published novel, reveals the author’s mastery of the allegorical narrative. Published in 1988, the book under study in fact marks the beginning of Barbara Kingsolver’s career as an artist with special interest in and talent for the treatment of allegory as a literary form in which she excells. The Bean Trees was first published in the United States by Harper and Row Publishers Inc, in New York. Simultaneously, it was also published in Canada by Fitzhenry and Whiteside Ltd, in Toronto. The English version being unavailable in France, we have worked on a 1997 edition published in London by Virago Press, an edition which is actually the fourth time the book was reprinted. Before entering the analysis of the treatment of feminine characters within The Bean Trees
which we have undertaken, we would like to recall the principles at the root of allegory. M.H. Abrahams gives a very clear definition in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* which goes as follows:\(^1\):

> An allegory is a narrative fiction in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived to make coherent sense on the "literal", or primary, level of signification, and at the same time to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts and events. (…)

> The central device [in] the sustained allegory of ideas is the personification of abstract entities such as virtues, vices, states of mind, modes of life, and types of character. In explicit allegories, such reference is specified by the names given to characters and places. Thus Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* allegorizes the Christian doctrines of salvation by telling how the character named Christian, warned by Evangelist, flees the City of Destruction and makes his way laboriously to the celestial City; enroute he encounters characters with names like Faithful, Hopeful, and the Giant Despair, and passes through places like the Slough of Despond, the Valley of the Shadow of death, and Vanity Fair. (…)

In *The Bean Trees*, the text gives evidence of Barbara Kingsolver’s mastery of the allegorical narrative which she adapts to contemporary setting. The text is autoreferential in that it contains a mise en abîme of the allegorical writing strategy. Indeed, as the title suggests, the narrative is first constructed around an allegory based on the life cycle of the bean trees. The author’s desire to remain accessible to any kind of reader shows through the embedding of allegories which she brilliantly constructs. The bean tree allegory is indeed deciphered through the homodiegetic narrator’s voice at the end of the novel, who explains the relation between the evolution process of the vegetal world – condensed in the bean tree leitmotif – and the diegesis itself. The unattentive or unskilled reader who may have failed to notice and understand the dense symbolism instilled throughout the book is thus given a lesson of reading, prompting him to think back over the whole narrative and to grasp the allegorical dimension of Barbara Kingsolver’s text. The surface text is in itself allegorical, and the author’s skills show through the production of narrative fiction which is breath-taking in its realism, and simultaneously extremely significant on a second level of interpretation which the text itself points to. The carefully constructed plot combines with the subtlety of the narrative strategy in order to deceive the reader who is utterly tempted to believe in the characters and story which he is presented with. The characters in *The Bean Trees* are indeed «round » characters (i.e.the distinction made by E. M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) between «round » characters and "flat" characters), which endows these fictional entities with

---

qualities making them seem almost real. A "round" character develops and alters in the course of the story, which creates the illusion of reality, as opposite to "flat" characters who have a fixed value and whose attributes only serve one single purpose. They are merely there in order to embody one meaning or to accomplish one function, and they do not develop in any way throughout the text.

The Bean Trees actually blends two texts into one single narrative. On the first level of understanding, we get the gracefully-written story of Taylor, Turtle, Lou Ann and the rest of the characters. On the second level of understanding, the conceit is deconstructed and the subtext which precisely makes The Bean Trees a modern allegory of ideas offers another perspective onto Barbara Kingsolver’s writing. In this essay, we would like to establish how the treatment of feminine characters in The Bean Trees places Barbara Kingsolver as a major artist among contemporary American novelists. Utterly sensitive to and learned about life in the cosmos, the author maps her knowledge of the natural world onto her literary skills, embroidering fiction with non-fiction in a beautiful, compelling and intricate network of symbolism. Her talent as a writer also shows in the way she integrates the traditional treatment of allegorical narrative bequeathed by her predecessors, and then reverses classical patterns. Reversal is indeed a major issue in The Bean Trees, as regards the plot as well as the use of symbolism, and consequentially ideology and the value of language.

---


The above-volumes have been of great interest while studying Barbara Kingsolver’s work, whose cultural background requires a lot of research on the part of the reader in order to grasp the significance of the symbolism at the root of her imagery. Considering the amount of symbolical analysis in this essay, we will not systematically refer to these respective works in order to avoid fastidious repetitions which would be cumbersome to the reading. These works however appear in the attached bibliography.
In our first part, we will focus on the treatment of space in relation to characterization in order to establish how *The Bean Trees* is first and foremost a carefully constructed modern allegory. Secondly, we will study the impact of the feminine voices which dominate the novel. In doing so we will pay attention to the evolution of the relation between symbolic representation and gender which is essential in reconstructing the subtle allegorical value of the text. We will show how the characters’ progressions throughout the novel guide the reader in order to understand the following development in the treatment of symbolism. We will then be able to analyze the subtext underlying the surface narrative, which gives insight into the ideological dimension at stake in the allegorical narrative under study, and most of all in Kingsolver’s talent as an artist. Our third part will to that purpose establish how Kingsolver’s approach to literature and style is both inherited from her predecessors and specifically innovative.
I- TREATMENT OF SPACE AND CHARACTERIZATION.

PLOTTING AND TRAVELLING:

FROM KENTUCKY, THROUGH OKLAHOMA, TO ARIZONA
1) Pittman County, Kentucky : The Point of Departure.

Taylor's character acquires its full status as a literary construct only once the reader has perused *The Bean Trees* to its end. Indeed, on entering the novel, the reader is presented with an unknown homodiegetic narrator which in fact functions as a linguistic sign. As Philippe Hamon has studied in his essay "Pour un statut sémiologique du personnage", a character follows the same division as that established by French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure between "signified" and "signifier", only translated onto the scale of the diegetic universe. The value of the character is thus determined by his actions and words, attributed him by the author, which progressively fills the "discontinued signifier" (translation mine, from Hamon's "signifiant discontinu") which serves to refer to the character. The character will indeed be designated by a number of different signs, such as christian and family names, nicknames, and economical shifters which nevertheless influence our reception of the text. Consequentially, the reader must reconstruct the character along the path laid out by the text in order to grasp the essential role of Taylor at the basis of the novel.
So as to conduct such an analysis, the treatment of space needs be taken into account, especially since the first-person narrative under study is replete with landscape descriptions. Point of view becomes of utmost importance in that it provides crucial information about Taylor's development. The trip along which the reader accompanies the character - from Kentucky, through Oklahoma, to Arizona - metaphorically illustrates Taylor's internal maturation. *The Bean Trees* remarkably activates the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphoric concept[^4]. This journey may be envisioned as the intradiegetic progression of the character, as well as the extradiegetic voyage of the reader from the beginning to the end of the book. Hence, to Taylor's vehicle through space, that is her car, corresponds the novel itself, which represents the vehicle for Taylor's adventures. Treatment of space and characterization are unavoidably connected and exert an enriching, interactive influence. Hence Kingsolver’s statement about how she comes up with a consistent plot:

> I populate my setting with characters who’ll act out my theme, scratching their heads in wonderment all along the way until their interactions with the world and each other have finally caused them to cry *Aha!* and my question is answered. (Barbara Kingsolver’s web page, Dialogue section.)[^5]

We recognize the classical exploitation of the literary device consisting in imagining naive characters embarking on a trip along which they gradually discover realities which they have been until then unaware of. This recalls Voltaire’s *Candide* whose protagonist’s very name, through antonomasia, draws attention to his ingenuous quality. Similarly, the young Taylor at the beginning of the novel strikes the reader as far too innocent, and it is clear that the trip she undertakes will bring the character’s delusions to an end.


This analysis of the treatment of space owes a great deal to German linguist George Lakoff and the research he has done about metaphor in language and thought. Therefore we will adopt his terminology which accounts for the use of capital letters when writing about "metaphoric concepts". Our background relies on an extremely interesting document, entitled *Metaphor and Thought* compiled by Jean-Rémi Lapaire, a French linguist teaching at the University of Toulouse Le Mirail. We will also adopt the terminology taught by the latter when studying the relation between metaphorical thinking and metaphorical speaking. Certain schemas which influence our wording of reality are in fact drawn from our relation to space. When speaking of those we will systematically use the term "image schemas", which appears to us as highly appropriate.

[^5]: I.e the Harper Collins "Barbara Kingsolver website" -www.kingsolver.com. The author posts a monthly column there, answering the most interesting questions which she receives through the mail. The website includes many other information, including a complete bibliography.
a) Homodiegetic Narrator's Background.

The first-person narrative opens with a retrospective account of the protagonist's childhood in a chapter entitled "The One To Get Away", announcing the launching of the plot. The reader is introduced with a character and her surroundings, as well as specific characteristics which start to fill the initially empty shifter "I". Right from the beginning, Marietta Greer appears as endowed with a strong personality, forbidding her to submit to what her environment would tend to impose upon her:

Missy was what everyone called me, not that it was my name, but because when I was three supposedly I stamped my foot and told my own mother not to call me Marietta but Miss Marietta, as I had to call all the people including children in the houses where she worked Miss this or Mister that (…). (2).

This willingness to decide for herself coalesces with the foreshadowed departure. Suspense is raised as regards the unfolding of the plot:

Before that exact moment I don't believe I had given much thought to the future. (1)

The place she starts from, namely Pittman County, appears as the land of no future which the character wants to escape:

Pittman was twenty years behind the nation in practically every way you can think of, except the rate of teenage pregnancies. (47)

The pun contained in the county's name may read as an indicator of what a woman could reasonably hope for in such a place. It is indeed presented as a pitfall in which women would only be relegated to being a failure's wife:

(…) none of these sights had so far inspired me to get hogtied to a future as a tobacco farmer's wife. Mama always said that barefoot and pregnant was not my style. She knew. (3)

The oral quality of the narrator's speech pinpoints her background : she was raised among the low classes of rural Kentucky. Turning her back to her past, Marietta takes upon her to head towards broader horizons. Her aspirations go way beyond what Kentucky has to offer:

I had never done anything more interesting for a living than to help Mama with the for-pay ironing on Sundays and look after the brats of the people she cleaned for. (4)

Understandably, Taylor hankers for a less socially contemptible status, and is thus prompted to run away from low-promising home and future. Taylor’s background in many ways fits with the writer’s, as regards their geographical evolution for example, or the way they talk, using typical Kentucky
idioms. The apparently autobiographical qualities which Taylor is attributed in fact give evidence of the author’s conscientiousness in her writing:

There are little things that people who know me might recognize in my novels. But my work is not about me. I don’t ever write about real people. That would be stealing, first of all. And second of all, art is supposed to be better than that. If you want a slice of life, look out the window. An artist has to look out that window, isolate one or two suggestive things, and embroider them together with poetry and fabrication, to create a revelation. If we can’t, as artists improve on real life, we should put down our pencils and go bake bread. (Barbara Kingsolver’s website, Background section)

Taylor is not meant to represent anyone drawn from real life, however, Kingsolver proves her dedication to exactitude when creating a character which needs to seem real. The writer is obviously aware that a character’s value is to a high extent dependent on the words he is attributed. Kingsolver claims that learning about the importance of meticulously transcribing speech patterns is the most precious lesson she has profited from through her predecessors in Southern American literature, with writers such as William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O’Connor:

That’s the main thing they keep telling me as I read them over and over again: Pay attention to how people talk… What is Southern about me, I think, is the way I learned language. The speech of rural Kentucky is full of idiom and imagery, and people make stories out of every little thing. Language is valued for its own sake, not just as an efficient means of getting what you want. (Letter 6, 5 Nov. 1990)

Hence the specifically idiomatic speech which characterizes Taylor’s supposed childhood in Kentucky, and which values the lyricism contained in apparently ordinary, modern language. The character is indeed constantly made to remember and use phrases brought along with her as inherited from her mother and the place where she grew up. For instance, Taylor describes Lou Ann using one of her mother’s highly suggestive expressions:

I thought of another one of Mama’s hog sayings: « Hogs go deaf at harvest time. » It meant that people would only hear what they wanted to hear. Mama was raised on a hog farm. (87)

We see the attention paid to the way people say things, to the influence of one’s background over one’s conceptualization of reality and relationships, and over one’s specific use of language. On entering the tenth chapter, entitled "The Bean Trees", which - like the novel’s title itself – points to the extended bean

---

tree metaphor\(^7\), the narrator’s voice again uses idiomatic speech in order to get across the need to keep faith in a brighter day:

> Even a spotted pig looks black at night. This is another thing Mama used to tell me quite often. It means that things always look different, and usually better, in the morning. (141)

Taylor’s adventures which ultimately purport to convey an optimistic view of the future coalesce with her gradual awareness of the power of words. Indeed, her initiation brings her to make discoveries from which the reader benefits through her explanations which draw attention to meaning, deconstructing the sometimes opaque quality of appearances. Estevan, who brilliantly masters formal English as well as several other languages, as an English teacher from Guatemala, serves to cast light on the lyricism contained in language, as well as on the essential differences between languages:

> "I have always thought you had a wonderful way with words," he said. "You don’t need to go fishing for big words in the dictionary. You are poetic, mi'ija."
> "What’s miha?"
> "Mi hija," he pronounced it slowly.
> "My something?"
> "My daughter. But it doesn’t work the same in English. We say it to friends. You would call me mi’ijo."
> "Well, thank you for the compliment," I said, "but that’s the biggest bunch of hogwash, what you said. When did I ever say anything poetic?"
> "Washing hogs is poetic," he said. (118)

First of all, this passage shows how Estevan’s didactic rhetorics actually serve Kingsolver’s own purpose to educate her readers. Through the dialogues between Estevan and Taylor, the text often teaches the reader, calling attention to the power of language. In the above-episode, the text points to the different meanings of the concepts of daughter and son which, expressed in English refer exclusively to one’s children, whereas in Guatemalans’ use of Spanish they apply to the people you are strongly bonded to, regardless of blood ties. In turn, Kingsolver’s dedication to defamiliarize the reader with the English language aims at drawing our attention to the too-easily fixed representations which we acquire, and the way we tend to forget about their arbitrariness. The above-example puts in the forefront the Guatemalans’ higher sense of community, compared to Americans, whose very use of language translates common individualism.

\(^7\) The latter sums up as a message of hope in the power of renewal and rebirth contained in life, which brings happier events after times of crises.
Defamiliarization is an essential notion at the core of Kingsolver’s narrative strategy. This concept was coined and introduced by Viktor Shklovsky, an important member of the Russian School of Formalism. Basically, it consists in making fresh, new, different what is familiar and known. Defamiliarization allows the writer to change the reader’s habitual perceptions by casting light onto the atrifice of a text. The reader’s attention is thus focused on the peculiarities of the writing itself. Traditionally, among this school of thought, the interest of a text lied in form itself, as opposed to content, and those scholars were rather enthralled by texts which were not meant to be realistic. The literary technique of defamiliarization is closely connected with the concept of literariness. This concept was precisely the object of literary studies among the Russian Formalists, who emphasized that the defining features of a literary work resided in its form. We see how Kingsolver’s writing both agrees and disagrees with such an approach to literature. She clearly succeeds in creating masterpieces of literary work, where form is by no means neglected in favour of content. However, her texts are not restricted to aesthetic purposes, but put aestheticism and form to the service of an equally beautiful message. Hence the recurring stress on Estevan’s magnificent way of speaking, which strikingly defers from what we are used to:

> Often he would come down a little early and we’d chat while he waited for his bus. "Attending my autobus" was the way he put it. "Can I tell you something?" I said. "I think you talk so beautifully. Ever since I met you I’ve been reading the dictionary at night and trying to work words like constellation and scenario into the conversation." (117-118)

The text evidently induces the reader to be sensitive to the artfulness of its form. The very words "constellation" and "scenario" provide metaleptic references to the art of assembling words and narrative sequences together. However, just like Taylor, the implied author works in order to stitch a highly lyrical narrative, under which the latent threads of a "conversation" between writer and reader remain. The beauty and harmony Barbara Kingsolver instils in language go beyond their own sake, and in turn vehicle beauty and harmony found in real life. As we will see, Kingsolver’s writing systematically integrates past traditions in her art while simultaneously deconstructing them or adding her personal talent and approach to literature.
b) Verisimilitude Effect⁸: Taylor in the Driver's Seat.

The narrative strategy relies on what Coleridge coined "willing suspension of disbelief". Firstly, the homodiegetic narrator attempts to win the reader's trust:

I'm not lying. (1)

Secondly, the negative description of her background justifies her fictional decision to leave. And thirdly, the character's purchase of a car before she hits the road provides a subtle strategy in order to complete the illusion of reality. Whatever Barbara Kingsolver’s personal motives for writing, her awareness of the art of literature transpires through the careful plotting which the attentive reader can reconstruct as anterior to the narrative proper. The very first and basic principle ruling the writing of the book is that it should be interesting for the reader to peruse. Kingsolver’s mastery of social history and symbolism by no means takes over her dedication to the most elementary rules of fiction. When interviewed by the American magazine Publishers Weekly she declares:

"A novel can educate to some extent. But first, a novel has to entertain – that’s the contract with the reader: you give me ten hours and I’ll give you a reason to turn every page. I have a commitment to accessibility. I believe in plot. I want an English professor to understand the symbolism while at the same time I want the people I grew up with – who may not often read anything but the Sears catalogue – to read my books." (Barbara Kingsolver’s web page, Background section)

The Bean Trees will indeed arouse interest in any public, regardless of their literary skills and their competence at deciphering the huge amount of symbolism instilled throughout the novel and the consequentially underlying levels of interpretation. The author's plotting disappears behind the fictional, strong-willed character who seems in control of her existence. The falseness of fiction is obliterated by the author’s manipulation of the reader, who finds himself tricked by the feeling the text creates in him,

---

⁸ i.e. Cuddon, J.A., Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory. Third edition. London: Penguin Books, 1992. Verisimilitude effect, as defined by Cuddon consists in « [L]ikeness to the truth, and therefore the appearance of being true or real even when fantastic. But then fantasy is, or should be, rooted in reality. What might be called the inherent authenticity of a work (as well as its intrinsic probability), having made allowances for premises, conventions and codes, will be the criterion by which its "truth" can be assessed. If the writer has done his work well, then the reader will find the result an acceptable presentation of reality. Thus, works which may strain ordinary credulity (e.g. Rabelais's Gargantua and Pantagruel, Swift's Gulliver's Travels, Voltaire's Candide, Well's The First Men in the Moon) will be as credible as those which purport to be mundanely realistic (e.g. most of the novels of writers like Jane Austen, Zola, Thomas Hardy, Henry James and Arnold Bennett). In the end, verisimilitude will depend as much on the reader's knowledge, intelligence and experience (and his capacity for make-believe) as upon the writer's use of those same resources. » The French critic Roland Barthes has coined the term "effet de réel" (literally meaning "effect of reality") in order to designate this narrative strategy which lies at the root of many a novel's brilliancy.
which deceive the reader and make him believe in Taylor’s adventures. The reader is thus prompted to
devour the book eagerly, permanently concerned about what will happen next, almost as if the full-
blown characters were real-life people. Ontological metaphors are activated, simultaneously representing
the reading of the book as well as Taylor's diegetic life as journeys. As German linguist George Lakoff
would put it, the source-path-goal image schema plays an essential role. Lakoff’s contribution to the
analysis of metaphor is essential in the understanding of the several layers of interpretation of Taylor’s
trip. Lakoff explains that:

Metaphor can be understood as a mapping (in the mathematical sense) from a source domain (…) to a
target domain. The mapping is highly structured. There are ontological correspondences, according to
which entities in the [source] domain (…) correspond systematically to entities in the [target] domain.
Metaphor is not just a matter of language, but of thought and reason. (…)\(^9\) (206-207)

In our case, Kingsolver maps entities from the journey domain to the target domain of life. The cognitive
topology of the source domain of the journey is mapped in a relevant way on the inherent structure of the
target domain. More precisely, sources are mapped onto sources, goals onto goals, trajectories onto
trajectories and so on. Kingsolver therefore gives Taylor’s fictional life a plausible starting point and
motive to leave. Then she sets Taylor on a path, which is supposed to take her to some place about which
the writer for now withholds information, so that eventually, the reader automatically feels the urge to find
out about Taylor’s goals, spatially, as well as in her diegetic existence. The car as a vehicle for one’s
progression through space progressively becomes Taylor’s vehicle through life, (intradiegetically
speaking - of course).

Ontological metaphors combine with the description of the rudimentary vehicle, and participate
in creating more suspense as regards the character's eventual fall or rise:

I bought a car, a’55 Volkswagen bug with no windows to speak of, and no back seat and no starter. But it
was easy to push start without help once you got the hang of it, the wrong foot on the clutch and the other
leg out the door, especially if you parked on a hill (…). (10)

The humour contained in the second sentence added to the wanting parts of the car suggests that the
character may well be over-estimating herself. Her optimism is indeed counterbalanced by the

\(^9\) Lakoff, George. “The contemporary theory of metaphor.”. *Metaphor and Thought. A reader*. Compiled by Lapaire, Jean-
plurisyndetic conjunction in the last sentence, strikingly dominated by negative clauses. The car may serve as a metonymical representation of the trip Taylor is about to embark upon. The missing windows may stand for the protection she believes not to need. The absence of back seat indicates the character's intentions to raise no family. And finally, the starterless car points to the character's overbold self-confidence. The vehicle Taylor is provided with before launching on an initiatory trip strikes the reader as an unsecure one, which is rather worrying, knowing that if one’s vehicle breaks down, one’s trip is necessarily brought to an end, or at least momentarily impeded. The mother serves as a warning against the dubious reliability of Marietta’s vehicle and plans, insinuating that she may be overlooking events for which she might not be prepared. Though we see the character overcome her excessive fear of overfilled tires, the reader's suspicion is by no means abated as regards the sensibility of her judgement:

In this car I intended to drive out of Pittman County one day and never look back, except for Mama. (10)

This first setting is clearly abandoned, and suspense builds up with Marietta’s meager plans concerning her destination:

I had looked at some maps, but since I had never in my own memory been outside of Kentucky (…) I had no way of knowing how or why any particular place might be preferable to any other. (12)

The narrator also hints at failure in an elliptic manner, which further enhances the reader's eagerness to find out about the following events:

When I drove over the Pittman line I made two promises to myself. One I kept, the other I did not. (11)
And so what I promised myself is that I would drive west until my car stopped running, and there I would stay. But there were some things I hadn't considered. (12)

Taylor’s frantic drive from East to West inscribes itself in the American tradition which welds the conquest of the open space with the quest of self. Out in the open space the "narrating I" seeks to word itself, to name its identity, thus forging it on the road, and gives birth to the "narrated I", where essence becomes the raw material conveyed through language. Hence the intertextual echo with Kerouac’s *On the Road*, which casts light on literature as the textual space where the restless "I" attempts to write itself. The writer becomes the cartographer, drawing the maps of his inner spaces, themselves mapped onto the open spaces of America’s immense landscapes. The eye which explores the road rolling under its feet becomes the I, laid bare, who fathoms the universe within and outside of one’s self.
c) Naming and Constructing a Character.

The protagonist's evolution is retrievable from the dichotomy between "narrated I" and "narrating I". The unexperienced character is indeed referred to using the preterit tense, whereas the storyteller speaks of herself in the present tense. The discrepancy between the two is made obvious by the author's subtle strategy in naming the character. Indeed the protagonist's advance in her personality and experience of life is coupled with a change of names. Intradiegetically, this is justified as the character's desire to start afresh:

(...) I would get myself a new name. I wasn't crazy about anything I had been called up to that point in life, and this seemed like the time to make a clean break. (...) And so I am Taylor Greer. (11-12)

From an extradiegetic point of view, this underlines the sign-like value of a character, which is articulated in a double, migratory way. It is composed on the one hand of a discontinued signifier including all the verbal marks that refer to the character. On the other hand we get a discontinued signified, that is his "meaning" or "function" (translation mine, from Philippe Hamon's "sens", and "fonction"). This not only stresses the mobility of signs, but it also casts light on the author's subtle construction of a character, which calls for deconstruction and reconstruction on the part of the reader. This process may be achieved only at the very end of the book, the character being a two-fold accumulation of signified and signifiers.

Besides, it adds to the building of Taylor as a character. This radical change marks a moot point in Taylor's evolution, a kind of starting point of her creation.

Through antonomasia, we may see how appropriate the name Taylor is. One of the character's specific qualities indeed lies in the continual remaking and mending of things which she does not find suitable. Hence the verbal irony which the author relies on, casting a dialogue between Esperanza and Taylor about the meaning of one's name:

"Taylor doesn't mean anything that interesting. A tailor hems up people's pants and stuff like that." (148)

Whereas Taylor tends to belittle the meaning of her name and the activity it designates, the latter appears evermore precious. The profession of a tailor becomes the character's role in the novel. It is magnified
right from the start in that the character’s naming of herself underlines the magical value of a name. Naming usually coincides with one’s birth, and Taylor’s value as a character is stressed from the very moment when she seems to give birth to herself, or to another self kneaded out of her own mud.

Intradiegetically, Taylor appropriates herself her own genesis. The poor clay she sculpts herself from elevates her achievement when we realize the immense steps she has taken before becoming the character embodied in the narrating I. Again, the reader recognizes the influence of American writers, from Whitman, Kerouac and many others, to contemporary writers, stripping themselves of their European or Eastern origins and sifting the wilderness, like alchemists, to find a place where they could retrieve quintessential material of Existence, both from the macrocosm and from the mirror microcosm of the visionary self. The Emersonian "I" transpires through Taylor’s character, endowed with plural identities, enabled to divest herself of a cumbersome one and to thrust her way towards the unknown. In thrall to the open, Taylor is seen driving along the laid out roads of conquest, a conquest of the theatrical and grandiose I achieved through the conquest of the vastness of space. Hence the essential intertextual play with Whitman’s poem "Song of Myself" (1855), which opens as follows:

   1
   I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
   And what I assume you shall assume,
   For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

   I loaf and invite my soul,
   I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

   My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air,
   Born here of parents born here of parents the same, and their parents the same,
   I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
   Hoping to cease not till death.

   Creeds and schools in abeyance,
   Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
   I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard
   Nature without check with original energy.
In the first chapter of *The Bean Trees*, echoes of Whitman’s voice are legion, and are actually of utmost importance in the analysis which we have undertaken.  

Taylor’s shifty departure and trajectory indeed reminds us of the poet’s own trajectory. Her background strikingly echoes Whitman’s first stanzas quoted above. For instance, Taylor presents herself as any other individual, apparently aware of the equality between men, which implicitly refers to Whitman’s conception of every man as an equivalent of the original, universal Man:

> Which is not to say that we, me and Mama, were any better than Hardbines or had a dime to our name. If you were to look at the two of us, myself and Newt side by side in the sixth grade, you could have pegged us for brother and sister. (…) But we were cut out of basically the same mud, I suppose, just two more dirty-kneed kids scrapping to beat hell and trying to land on our feet. (2)

The idiomatic speech which Taylor is given proves the writer’s subtle mastery of language. The oral quality of her speech participates in the verisimilitude effect, but simultaneously, through double entendre, the reader notices the implicit allusions to Genesis, referring to God’s creation of Man ("cut out of basically the same mud") and to Man’s Fall from Eden after the Original Sin ("scrapping to beat hell and trying to land on our feet"). Taylor’s language thus appears as the result of the writer’s craft, carefully choosing words that will not sound at odds with the background she has chosen for her homodiegetic narrator, and which simultaneously bear a second level of meaning. This is representative of the whole text which we are provided with in *The Bean Trees*, which incessantly calls for the reader’s alertness to the several layers of meaning Barbara Kingsolver skilfully superimposes.

Taylor’s apparent autonomy ironically recalls her status as a product of Kingsolver’s writing. The text relies on metadiegesis in order to draw attention onto the importance of onomastics. Barbara Kingsolver states on her web page:

> A name has to be just right : memorable, culturally appropriate, original but not silly. And ideally, it carries some meaning that coincides nicely with the person’s intentions and character.(…) (In The Bean Trees I had [Taylor] claim this name for herself after the town where she ran out of gas - but I already knew the name, so I looked on a map and got her to the right place.)

---


We will deal with the link between the poet and Barbara Kingsolver’s writing more deeply in our third part, when we will tackle the link between *The Bean Trees* and Transcendentalism. For the moment, we would rather concentrate on the construction of Taylor’s character. Though we would have liked to develop this parallel at large, we would have had to stray too far from our own subject.
"Taylor" indeed corresponds to the pretence of a self-made identity, but simultaneously serves to allude to the implied author:

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that a name is not something a person really has a right to pick out, but is something you're provided with more or less by chance. I decided to let the gas tank decide. Wherever I ran out, I'd look for a sign. (11)

Dramatic irony is boldly and amusingly introduced in order to call attention to the act of writing and to the power of signs. Taylor's independence already undergoes epanorthosis, in that we are reminded of the author pulling the strings. Contrarily to what the text infers, the character is deprived of any possible saying whatsoever. The reader is prompted to take heed of the undisputed fictional status of a character which can by no means become an autonomous entity.

Furthermore, Taylor's overconfidence is shattered by the author's choice to have her lose total control as soon as she has geographically gone beyond the world of her protected childhood:

Suddenly the steering wheel bore no relation to where the car was going. By the grace of some miracle I surely did not deserve, I managed to wobble off the highway all in one piece and find a service station. (13)

Hence the irony which stresses the superior position of the author as the supreme instance reigning over the text. Here, basically, Barbara Kingsolver is the one and only master of maps, clutches and steering wheels. She is, already, the "king solver" who has previously drawn the map of Taylor's voyage. As the European settlers who wanted to strip themselves of their past, Taylor is taken West, in search for a more luxuriant nature. One may think of Archibald Mc Leish's poetry:

East were the Dead kings and the remembered sepulchres,
West was the grass.12

This quest for freedom goes back to Walt Whitman, among many others:

To escape utterly from anchors and holds.13

---

11 Epanorthosis, from the Greek "setting straight again" is a figure of speech in which something said is corrected, denied, or commented on.
13 In this study of the treatment of space in relation to characterization, we owe a great deal to French Pierre-Yves Pétillon’s La grand-route. His essay explores a riding perspective across the one and a half century of fiction which goes from 1819 to 1969. In this book, we find an extraordinary analysis which brings together the historical conquest of America and its impact and expression through American fiction. Of utmost interest in the novel under study, we will borrow from Pétillon’s quotations, and will systematically refer to the pages in his book from which these text fragments are taken. As concerns this quote, refer to page 83.
13 Pétillon, Pierre-Yves. La grand-route.(68).
Taylor reminds us of the American Romantic Poets wanting to liberate themselves from their past in order to be free to sense the truth. Interestingly, the Romantic Poets were born from the desire to break with earlier Classicism, and they too claimed their right to a more personal individuality.

2) Oklahoma : Despair and Total Loss of Direction.

a) The Land of Despair.

The reader should bear in mind that no literary item is gratuitous, which incites one to consider the metonymical impact of the setting on our reception of the character as a textual construct. The first person narrative allows the author to add more information about the character through descriptions which betray her biased point of view. Focalization is a major device establishing correspondances between plot, character's inner feelings and the treatment of space:

The sight of it filled me with despair. (...) There was central Oklahoma. I had never imagined that any part of a round earth could be so flat. In Kentucky you could never see too far, since there was always mountains blocking the other side of your view, and it left you the chance to think something good might be just over the next hill. But out there on the plain it was all laid out right in front of you, and no matter how far you looked it didn't get any better. (12)

Taylor's sense of loss evidently shows through her perception of the landscape. The dysphoric quality of the description strikes the reader as ominous. It seems to foreshadow Taylor's collapse. The disillusion concerning her future is conveyed through ontological metaphors. The character's despair is felt through the activating of the metaphoric concept: HORIZON IS FUTURE. The flat lands confront Taylor with a larger vision, with the fear of the unknown, and with the fact that she actually has no set plans as regards her destination. She realizes the scope of her inchoate departure, her disheartened state communicating through another metaphoric concept here at play: HOLLOWNESS IS DESPAIR.

Oklahoma made me feel there was nothing left to hope for. My car gave out somewhere in the middle of a great emptiness. (12-13)

This is further enhanced by the periphrases and the hyperbolic elusiveness of the last sentence, which seems to imitate the void Taylor is faced with. The container-image-schema is also activated, as the
oxymoron "filled me with despair" shows (second quotation above). This proves how our understanding of abstract notions such as human feelings often depends on our knowledge of the concrete world. The overwhelming impact of the scenery onto Taylor’s inner feelings tails one of the prevailing attitudes among the Romantic Poets. Most of them tried to reach a state of fusion between Nature and Man. Thoreau, for instance, explains:

> What I need is not to look at all, but a true sauntering eye.14

The poet was supposed to possess enough vision to let the outside world inundate him and then, having deep insight and the talent for words, to translate his emotions into a natural, unconventional poetry. The poet made himself the spokesperson for the natural world. Hence the pervading synaesthesia in the narrative under study.

Here, both Taylor's and the reader's expectations for a more promising future seem compromised by the sterility expressed by the absence of trees in the landscape:

> The Cherokees believed God was in trees. Mama told me this. When I was a kid I would climb as high as I could in a tree and not come down until dinner. "That's your Indian blood", she would say; "You're trying to see God."
> From what I could see, there was not one tree in the entire state of Oklahoma. (13)

As we notice, Taylor's route starts by driving across the Cherokee territory, which in a way represents a return to her origins. Her quest for a new identity thus begins by going back to her personal roots, and though she does seem on the verge of giving up, the reader understands through secondary enunciation that dynamism takes over for plot purposes:

> I sat in the parking lot looking out over that godless stretch of nothing and came closest I have ever come to cashing and plowing under. But there was no sense in that. My car was fixed. (13)

The author obviously delays information so as to arouse our curiosity. Tension thus builds up as we become anxious to discover the mysterious plans in store as regards Taylor's fate. The reader shares the character's eagerness to travel fast:

> The sun was headed fast for the flat horizon, and then there would be nothing but twelve hours of headlights in front of me. I was in a hurry to get out of there. (13)

---

Despair and flatness coalesce with the emptiness of the character’s identity. Leaving Marietta behind, the author presents us with Taylor, the newly sprung character, whose value has just been laid bare. Obviously, the road is now free for the plot to unfold, which starts by giving her a fellow traveller.

In this first chapter, Taylor’s character strikingly recalls the ingenuous entity, classical in literary tradition, about to embark on an initiatory trip. The lessons learned by Taylor bear a didactic quality for the reader, and as we will see, the adventures recounted in *The Bean Trees* easily compare with many satirical fables and allegorical narratives inherited from earlier centuries of writing, such as Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* (1872) and John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678). Traditions bequeathed by previous artists necessarily influence on the construction of modern texts such as ours, with the devices evidently adapted to the twentieth century setting in America.

Moreover, still drawing from her predecessors, Barbara Kingsolver consciously or not echoes Kerouac’s despair in Taylor’s character and in her westward trip:

> Everything began to collapse. 15

Kerouac, one of the main firebrands of the Beat Generation, indeed at some point found himself enraptured in silence, crushed by the disappointing void which the barren lands of America had revealed to him:

> What is that feeling when you’re driving away from people and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing? – it’s too-huge a world vaulting us, and it’s good-bye. But we lean to the next crazy venture beneath the skies. (148) 16

As with Taylor, the protagonist is brought across Mississippi, Texas, Arizona, and many other southern states. The allusions to his car are legion and we get the same feeling that his whole future depends on his vehicle. Finding himself lost in a hollow maze, Kerouac eventually wanted to translate this feeling of annihilation through silence, the entropy of words. Hence the parallel with Taylor, fighting against despair and silence, two alarming and alike dangers:

---

For the above-quotation, extracted from Kerouac’s *On the Road*, refer to Pétillon, Pierre-Yves, *La Grand Route* (29).
I believe that flat places are quieter than hilly ones. The sounds of the cars on the highway seemed to get sucked straight out over the empty fields where there was nothing, not even a silo, to stop them from barreling on forever into the night. I began to think that if I opened my mouth nothing would come out. (19)

Clearly, Barbara Kingsolver’s knowledge of the past has helped her frame Taylor’s character. However *The Bean Trees* takes Taylor beyond the stage where she collapses and brings a new, more optimistic vision of space, of existence, and of literature.

b) *Turtle in the Passenger's Seat* : Beginning of a New Journey.

The car's metaphorical value as the vehicle on the road of life is even greater as it is chosen as a place of birth. This is where Taylor starts her journey, and also where she miraculously becomes Turtle’s mother. The child, to a certain extent, was born twice, both times taking place in the car:

"This baby’s got no papers. There isn't nobody knows it's alive, or cares. (...) This baby was born in a Plymouth." (18)

This episode obviously marks a turning point in Taylor's adventures. With a dumb, Indian child on her hands, Taylor refuses to remain stationary and takes on her to find courage. From that point on, the narrative becomes more and more strewn with euphoristic elements, foreshadowing an eventual resolution.

"Praise the Lord," I said out loud. "At least my car has headlights." (18)

The car, which holds a strong link with Taylor’s destiny is now presented as a reliable vehicle. The reference to headlights infers that the character travelling towards the unknown is provided with enough vision to see ahead of her, giving her the possibility to make plans in case of impediments. Taylor however ignores what the entire concept of raising a child encompasses, and her peculiar experience of motherhood seems all the more unfortunate since avoiding pregnancy was one of her very reasons to leave in the first place. The reader finds hints that Taylor will be granted the will and the way to set up a home with the child in the foreign land of motherhood:

We passed a sign that said some-odd number of miles to the Pioneer Woman museum. Great, I thought. Now we're getting somewhere. (19)
Thanks to the historical reference, the text implicitly suggests Taylor's future success. The comparison valorizes her temerity in leaving her home place for the unknown. She travels with a bundle-child, and keeps going until she finds a suitable place to settle. Moreover this extract paves the way for the intertextual play with Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, already with the striking difference related to a revisited, feminine version of the allegorical narrative. This points to the changes which the last decades have witnessed as regards the social status of women in Occidental civilizations. Previously, effect of verisimilitude forbade authors to choose feminine heroines as the main characters for allegorical narratives which relied on the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor. Women were indeed far too dependent on men to take the chances entailed by travelling on one’s own. Taylor’s adventures are totally plausible in the twentieth-century setting, where women have obtained the means to live entirely independent from men should they want to. Our heroine does not have to go on foot, horse or by coach. The allusion to the museum stresses the cultural allusion to the new way in which women are regarded. Indeed, though the early pioneers often had wives who went with them through the same hardships, responsibility was automatically put upon men, which in turn brought people to think of the Pioneer movement as a male achievement. Here the heroine seems in no more and no less danger than if she had been a male character. The main question is not related to gender, but to destination. Exactly as the early pioneers did, Taylor so far has no idea what to expect.

c) The "Broken Arrow Motor Lodge".

The encounter with the child marks a change of direction which is represented by the image of the broken arrow at the little motel where the characters stop overnight. The arrow is indeed a common symbol for destiny.

I passed under a neon sign of a pink arrow breaking and unbreaking, over and over, and went into the office. (20)
The pink colour of the flashing light moreover connects with the socially constructed conception of newborn baby girls. This is interesting since the reader has so far been given no clues as regards the child’s gender. Also, the two characters are already presented as tightly bonded:

The most amazing thing was the way the child held on. From the first moment I picked it up out of its nest of wet blankets, it attached itself to me by its little hands like roots sucking on dry dirt. I think it would have been easier to separate me from my hair. (22)

The comparison between the child and Taylor’s hair stresses how Turtle is one of the protagonist’s attributes. The construction of Taylor’s character is indeed highly dependent on Turtle’s, propelling Taylor in the adult world of motherhood for which she is unprepared. The broken arrow also casts light on the essential notion of trajectory. This may be interpreted in a three-fold way. Firstly, Taylor’s geographical voyage through American states may be drawn as an elementary, spatial trajectory. Secondly, the allegorical value of her trip follows the universal trajectory of man through life from childhood to adulthood. And thirdly, from an extradiegetic angle, the reader is enabled to deconstruct the trajectory of the plot, with its up and down movements, its catharses and resolutions.

By the end of the chapter, Taylor has already undergone a deep awakening to the real world. Her naivety starts to shrink when confronted with the horror of child abuse, which leaves her stunned and disgusted:

I thought I knew about every ugly thing one person does to another, but I had never even thought about such things being done to a baby girl; (…) I had to let her go. I doubled up on the floor at the base of the toilet and tried not to throw up (…). Nothing, not Newt Hardbine or anything else I had ever seen, had made me feel like this. (23)

Extreme violence suddenly hits Taylor in the face, shattering her deceptive world of innocence. Taylor however struggles against her initial shock and the chapter ends on a hint that she has made up her mind to keep the child. In the card she writes her mother, we read:

"I found my head rights, Mama. They’re coming with me." (23)

Apparently, from now on, Taylor's singleness will be left behind in favour of a twosome which promises many adventures. Suspense still hangs in the air as regards their geographical destination, but the text allows to assume that loneliness is not where Taylor will wind up.
If the character under study is moved along the same tracks as Kerouac (from superb elevation of self down to a sudden sinking into a loss of direction and identity), Barbara Kingsolver's motivation as regards the plot seems closer to Whitman's poetry:

Nothing collapses.¹⁷

Providing Taylor with a companion gives her the drive to head further West, reminding us of the transcontinental train which materialized the settlers' conquest of the American soil, from East to West. Opposite to Kerouac's baffled desillusion, Taylor is taken to Arizona where she discovers the miracle of life. Solitude is felt, then filled:

The child's hands constantly caught my fingers and wouldn't let go. "You little booger," I said, shaking my finger and the little fist. "You're like a mud turtle. If a mud turtle bites you, it won't let go till it thunders." (22)

Barbara Kingsolver creates other characters which become Taylor's friends. The comparison between the child and a mud turtle makes the author's plotting conspicuous, the infant being later given the name "Turtle". Mud also draws attention to the artifice of art. The writer's elaborate and gradual constructing of characters indeed compares with clay–sculpting. The allusion to the hands and fingers also points to the writer's hand, moulding the characters with her pen.

Most of all, Nature is mainly presented as alive, full with the presence of itself, of all the elements which are part of it. Kingsolver's writing is thus closer to that of French writer Yves Berger where introspection is endlessly fertile, than that of Kerouac whose trajectory ends in obscure sterility. Yves Berger has apparently madly fallen in love with the states of Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and New Mexico. In his book La Pierre et le Saguaro the eponymous protagonists are indeed no other than the rock and the saguaro¹⁸. The narrative has no story as such but rather resembles an ode to the overwhelming beauty of the land. A kind of prose incantation, it once again recalls the Romantic Poets' approach to poetry and Nature, with Yves Berger as the eye-voice of earth, sky, cacti and monoliths.

3) New Setting : Arizona.

a) Two Synonymous Protagonists : Taylor and Lou Ann.

From the second chapter on, the reader is given the key to understanding the essential role of Lou Ann's character in the novel. The shift from first-person narrative to third-person narrative which accompanies the momentary turning away from Taylor focuses on Lou Ann. The reader indeed no longer hears of the earlier protagonist, and is at first quite befuddled. The plot's careful construction permeates through chapter five, significantly entitled "Harmonious Space", which reestablishes coherence in the narrative strategy, dramatizing the meeting between Taylor and Lou Ann. Chapters two and four revolving around Lou Ann in Arizona at first seem at odds with chapters one and three. We are in presence of two different protagonists with their respective stories. However the reader does not fail to pay heed to the many parallels. Both characters are unexperienced single mothers, themselves from fatherless families, and obviously from the same Kentucky background. These similarities give credibility to their instant clicking, and are more or less summed up by Taylor in chapter five:

> Within ten minutes Lou Ann and I were in the kitchen drinking diet Pepsi and splitting our gussets laughing (...). We had already established that our home towns in Kentucky were separated by only two counties, and that we had both been to the exact same Bob Seger concert at the Kentucky State Fair my senior year. (72)

Their immediate connivence is essential for their relationship will bring them to interact upon their respective - though different - weaknesses as regards personality and self-confidence. These two characters which at first seem complementary opposites in fact become mirror vehicles of the same message, though they do not follow the same progression. Both their voices and actions will serve one single purpose, which we will deal with more thoroughly in our second and third major parts. The essential link between a character’s value and his words emphasizes the similarities between the two female protagonists:

> "It's been so long," [Lou Ann] said. "You talk just like me." (76)

---

Accordingly, the first four chapters turn out as introductions to two evenly important protagonists, and smoothly lead the reader to their reunion under the same roof. By the end of the novel, we perceive them as synonymous characters, both having achieved huge evolution, though taking different steps, and acceding to the same understanding of things in the end. The heterodiegetic narrator of chapters two and four may then be identified as Taylor's retrospective recounting of what she would have learned from Lou Ann herself, thus unifying their two voices and visions. Chapter five therefore restores harmony, compensating for the predicaments and loneliness dramatized earlier, gathering two half-couples, two half-families, and to a certain extent, two half-characters. The mutual support of the two characters may find its origins in their very making. Barbara Kingsolver explains:

> The two principle characters (...) were drawn from disparate aspects of my personality that have long been at war. As I wrote the novel, the characters grew to be close friends, and I realized how much these two sides of myself depend on one another for survival.

The tomato as a symbol for fecundity heralds their flourishing relationship. Before their meeting, in chapter three, we see Mattie comfort Taylor and surprise her with her backyard tomatoes growing in January. This is echoed in chapter four when Bobby Bingo tries to cheer Lou Ann up and offers her and her son extra tomatoes. Symbolically, this fruit bears the embryo, for it has seven seeds, which is the number of creation achieved. Similarly, we could regard the first four chapters as the embryonic stages of the diegesis. Having thoroughly introduced us only with the two main protagonists, Barbara Kingsolver completes the creation of the diegetic universe in chapter seven which shows us for the first time the seven characters at the core of the plot, like the seven seeds of the tomato. *The Bean Trees'* fertility, or richness of meaning, indeed sprouts from the adventures of the seven adult characters, namely: Taylor, Lou Ann, Mattie, Estevan and Esperanza, Edna Poppy and Virgie Mae.

The introduction of tomatoes into the narrative announces the core message of the symbolism in the novel, which provided the title "The Bean Trees". The tomatoes, like the bean trees, are set in the desert of Arizona, as a kind of answer to the wondering expressed by T.S. Elliot in *The Waste Land*:

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow

---

Out of this stony rubbish?

Vegetation is indeed of utmost importance in the text since it induces to a high degree of allegorical interpretation, and ultimately leads the reader to grasp the underlying value of the story, showing that man should keep faith in the fertility of life.

b) **Arrival in Tucson.**

The euphoristic description of the landscape which is given through Taylor's point of view once out of Oklahoma translates the character's recovery of hope. Moreover, she seems to assume responsibility and no longer bequeathes her destiny - intradiegetically speaking, of course - to the haphazardous whim of her car. Taylor has resumed her place in the driver's seat:

> We crossed the Arizona state line at sunup. The clouds were pink and fat and hilarious-looking, like the hippo ballerinas in a Disney movie (...).

> "This is the best thing I've seen in years." Whether my car conked out or not, I made up my mind to live in Arizona. (35)

The reader notices the shift from the personal pronoun "I" to the plural "We’’ which validates the union formed between Taylor and the child. Sunrise and blitheness announce a new beginning, which is sustained by the date we are given:

> It was the second day of the new year. (35)

More significantly, on arriving in Tucson, the characters are welcomed by a hailstorm, which, like battering rain, washes them clean of their past, and heralds a new birth, as a kind of baptism of their newly sprung relationship. Hence the multitude of signs foreshadowing positive happenings:

> The sun came out even before the hail stopped. There was a rainbow over the mountains behind the city, and over that another rainbow with the colors upside down. Between the two rainbows the sky was brighter than anywhere else, like a white sheet lit from the back. (37-38)

Double entendre and classical symbols are activated, promising a brighter day. The scenery is described in a caricatural way which might strike the reader who has never visited Arizona as pure invention. However, the writer prevents this and uses Taylor’s voice to stress the uncommon, bewildering climate,

---

20 Pétillon, Pierre-Yves. *La Grand Route*, (54)
landscape and colours actually characteristic of that state. Paradoxically, she has recourse to metadiegesis in order to instil the scene with realism:

> Arizona didn't do anything halfway. If Arizona was a movie you wouldn't believe it. You'd say it was too corny for words. (38)

Coincidence versus plotting is however brought back to mind, introducing a tarantula crawling out of the dirt. The attentive reader immediately deciphers the symbolism of spiders as related to fate. The idea of destiny is relevant insofar as the author has undoubtedly woven the threads of her plot into a fluid narrative, highly dense with imagery. The reader may deconstruct the pretence of destiny lying in Taylor's sudden flat tire which fortunately impedes her from going any further.

Arizona in fact rapidly becomes the land of motherhood. This new universe into which Taylor has been thrown appears in a promising light of happiness, though Taylor, understandably feels like a total alien in her new situation:

> "This is a foreign country, " I told [ the child ]. "Arizona. You know as much about it as I do. We're even steven."(...) [ A man's ] T-shirt said VISITOR FROM ANOTHER PLANET. That's sure, I thought. I should be wearing that shirt. (37)

Strikingly enough, Oklahoma's overwhelming flatness is replaced by pervading images of roundness, dispelling the notions of pregnancy and luxuriance:

> It was a kind of forest, except that in place of trees there were all these puffy-looking rocks shaped like roundish animals and roundish people. Rocks stacked on top of one another like piles of copulating potato bugs. Wherever the sun hit them, they turned pink. (35)

The homodiegetic narrator depicts a landscape replete with life and strewn with feminine images and implicit allusions to fecundity. The land is thus closely connected with woman, and Arizona clearly appears as the ideal setting where the first experiences of motherhood will be dramatized. The suggestive power of signs combine with the abundant humour in order to forecast a shift from dysphoria to euphoria. Moreover, the description of the setting combined with the metafictive allusion draws attention to

---

21 I.e Karen Thure’s *Introduction*, Thure, karen (Text) and Gill Kenny (Photographs). *Arizona*.Toronto: Oxford University Press (Canadian Branch). 1984.: "Arizona jumps out at you like a 3-D movie, immense, film-lab colorful, too scenic to be real. You drive home on a road that winds above a twinkly urban valley, lying lazy and radiant in the sunset’s peachy glow (...). The dramatic scenery is everywhere; much of it dear and familiar; crinkly purple mountains and prongy giant cacti are straight from the Westerns you watched as a kid.”
Kingsolver’s witty parody of pop art which she subtly inserts within her narrative. The learned reader will stress a parallel with artists such as Andy Wharhol and his followers in contemporary art.

c) Arizona and the Miracle of Life.

The Arizona-setting is not without recalling the traditional symbolism of the desert. Strongly influenced by ancient beliefs, our conception of the desert remains deeply linked with its great importance in religious symbolism. Against the apparent dryness, Taylor’s astonishment serves to dwell on the inexorability of hidden sources of many kinds, which nothing seems to be strong enough to keep underground:

What still amazed me about the desert was all the life it had in it. Hillbilly that I was, I had come to Arizona expecting an endless sea of sand dunes. I'd learned of deserts from old Westerns and Quickdraw Mc Graw cartoons. (161)

The striking metaphor "endless sea of sand dunes" underlines the paradoxical phenomenon of such life in the desert. It also deconstructs the antagonism between water and desert. The desert actually carries two essential meanings. It can represent the lack of differentiation between principles, or the superficial, sterile expanse, under which one must look for Reality. The Bean Trees clearly activates both approaches, but Taylor’s voice establishes the positive value of the desert which ultimately takes over the negative one.

Islam uses the same symbolism, insisting rather on the second aspect. The desert is seen as a vast land which needs be fathomed in search for Essence. One should notice how this relates to the Hebrew people’s wandering through the desert, as well as the legendary quest for the Graal. In any case, the desert is associated with hidden, treasured sources of life. In Ismaelien esotericism, the desert is equated with the outer being, the body, the world which is blindly travelled up and down without seeing the Divine Being hidden under appearances. Hence the link with Taylor's remark:

I was amazed. There seemed to be no end to the things that could be hiding, waiting it out, right where you thought you could see it all. (163-164)

Besides, in the Bible, according to Saint Matthew (12,14) the desert is inhabited by demons. *The Bean Trees* thoroughly draws from this paradoxical symbolism, paying great attention to potential threats:

I wondered how many other things were lurking around waiting to take a child’s life when you weren’t paying attention. (45)

The desert is moreover where Jesus withdraws in isolation and then comes back glorious, having overcome the torments which sprouted from introspection, a victory which he managed thanks to God’s presence only. The desert is thus strongly associated with a place where one may retire and deepen one’s understanding. Arizona is indeed the place where Taylor learns about the realities of life and reaches a more adult, insightful vision of things. Her misconception about the desert, as remains of her childhood, is highly representative of the limited vision she is given at the beginning of the novel. The trip she makes is in fact an initiatory one taking her from childhood to womanhood, from naivety to realism.

Throughout the book, the reader follows the steps of Taylor's awakening process. Unprepared as she is, she is at first constantly stunned in front of life's unexpected predicaments. She however progressively discovers that even the most atrocious realities can always be overcome, even when situations appear totally desperate. Hankering for total independence at the start, Taylor learns the redemptive power of ties through loving relationships. In a first movement, we witness Taylor's panic faced with the full consequences of being a mother. Also, her reaction is one of faithlessness, of dread that she is not up to such an involvement:

"It's so dry out here kids will dehydrate real fast," Mattie told me. "They'll just dry up on you." (...) I was useless. I was crazy to think I was doing this child a favor by whisking it away from the Cherokee Nation. Now she would probably end up mummified in Arizona. (44-45)

Far from that, Turtle will be "momified" (phrase mine) by Taylor's watering love.

Arizona turns out to provide an allegory for life, conveying a message of hope. The book's title "The Bean Trees" actually introduces the extended metaphor which runs throughout the text, and through metonymy, is a symbol of how life functions on the broader scale of the Natural World. Evidently, the bean trees stand out as the main symbol for earth's fertility and inexorable cycle of life. Mattie, who
embodies wisdom and life-experienced knowledge clearly draws attention to the unrelenting cycle of birth, death and rebirth, both for Taylor and for the reader:

"That's the cycle of life, Taylor," she said. "The old has to pass on before the new can come around." (77)

Secondary enunciation is here at play, having to do with the recurring title as a common feature within the landscape. This leitmotif actually sustains the notion of the miracle of life, as the following passage shows:

All winter Lou Ann had been telling me they were wisteria vines. They looked dead to me, like everything else in the park, but she always said, "Just you wait."

And she was right. Toward the end of March they had sprouted a fine, shivery coat of pale leaves and now they were getting ready to bloom. Here and there a purplish lip of petal stuck out like a pout from a green fat bud. (...) You just couldn't imagine where all this life was coming from. It reminded me of that Bible story where somebody or other struck a rock and the water poured out. Only this was better, flowers out of bare dirt. The Miracle of Dog Doo Park. (113-114)

The use of paralepsis in the handling of the narrative highlights the revisited version of Moses' miracle. The elusiveness of the allusion is coherent for Taylor is not supposed to be particularly educated. The reader nevertheless grasps the comparison, directed by the use of the shifter "that", even more since "The Miracle of Dog Doo Park" rings a bell as it also serves as the chapter-title. This passage is of key importance for we will learn further in the novel that wisteria vines are actually another kind of bean trees. The intertextual play sending us back to Moses reminds us that the desert is also a place where the Hebrew people at one point lost faith in God’s existence, in His love and in His kindness.

The impact of the extended metaphor of the bean tree is enhanced by the author's constant use of pathetic fallacy:

We hadn't had a drop of rain since that double hailstorm back in January, and the whole world was looking parched. When you walked by a tree or a bush it just looked like it ached, somehow. (153)

Obviously, the symbolism of the tree is of utmost importance as regards the whole novel. Its core values reside in the tree as a powerful symbol of the life of the cosmos, representing its growth and proliferation, its continual birth and rebirth. Through its annual dying and rebirth, the tree becomes a symbol for the earth’s fertility. Also, with its roots in the ground and its branches ascending towards the sky, the tree
connotes the underworld, earth and the heavens, with its roots, trunk and foliage. In the French dictionary of symbols\textsuperscript{23}, we find that:

L’arbre source de vie, précise Eliade (Elit 261), présuppose que la source de vie se trouve concentrée dans ce végétal ; donc, que la modalité humaine se trouve là à l’état virtuel, sous formes de germes et de semences.

Hence the correlation of the many themes contained in \textit{The Bean Trees}. Moreover, associations between the Tree of Life and divine manifestation are legion. Archaic peoples worshipped trees as the home of spirits, and trees are commonly regarded as sources of wisdom. This coalesces with the information that we get from Taylor about Cherokees believing that God is in trees.

Pathetic fallacy conveys a highly symbolical value from the very fact that the story is set in Arizona, with all the connotations related to the desert as mentioned above present on the reader's mind.

The most telling episode occurs on the Indians' New Year's Day:

They celebrated it on whatever the summer's first rain fell. That began the new year. Everything started over then, [Mattie] said : they planted their crops, the kids ran naked through puddles while their mothers washed their clothes (…), and they all drank cactus-fruit wine until they fell over from happiness. Even the animals and plants came alive again when the drought finally broke. (161)

The intense and wholesome communion between Man and Nature, unified by water as a regenerating principle, points to the cycle of life in the Macrocosm. The novel in fact tackles the reproduction of life from the macrocosm to the lower scale of the microcosm. In the narrower universe of our novel, the reader is able to decipher the pervasive bean trees symbolism as shaping the character's destiny. Hence Taylor's rapid settlement, accommodating really fast to her new environment, and immediately finding a new job, house, and circle of friends.

d) Turtle's Revival : from Setting to Character.

Taylor's spontaneous affection and sorrow for the poor Indian child starts with total bewilderment in front of the almost lifeless infant. Hence the odd way she at first refers to it as if an inanimate object, rather than a human being:

something alive. It was a child, a round bundle with a head. It wasn't a baby, exactly. It was probably old enough to walk, though not so big that it couldn't easily be carried. Somewhere between a baby and a person. (17)

And further:

The poor thing must have been freezing but didn't make a peep. "Can you talk?" I said. I wondered if maybe it spoke something besides English. (19)

Shockingly, the pronoun "it" insists on the lack of identity and vitality. Progressively, Taylor's speech humanizes the genderless individual:

I could see that the child's big eyes were watching me in the dark. (19)

We nevertheless notice that the grammatical subject has recourse to synecdoche; it is not the child looking at Taylor, but merely her eyes, as if the real subject was incapable of action. Its inertia frightens Taylor, whose lurid imagination conveniently instils a sense of horror, combining with the mysterious child to create suspense.

After a while I began to wonder if perhaps it was dead. Maybe the woman had a dead child, murdered or some such thing, and had put it in my car, and I was riding down the road beside it, talking to it. (20)

The child's physical condition is indeed not very far from that of a corpse. However, as soon as Taylor gets familiar with her peculiar personality, she sympathizes with the atrocity of the little girl's situation, and takes upon her to name her after her characteristic way of clutching at Taylor:

By this time, I had developed a name for the child (...). I called her Turtle, on account of her grip. (36)

Turtle thus acquires value as a more meaningful character within the diegesis. Turtle is presented as a bonzaï-child whose past traumas would have impeded from growth:

On the basis of height and weight he'd assumed she was around twenty four months, the doctor said, but the development of cartilage in the carpals and metacarpals indicated that she was closer to three.

"Three years?"

"Yes. (...) Sometimes in a environment of physical or emotional deprivation a child will simply stop growing, although certain internal maturation does continue. It's a condition we call failure to thrive (...). The condition is completely reversible. (123-124)

This passage forefronts the essential parallel between Turtle’s character and the bean trees, which follow the same development, and illustrate how faith in the reviving season cycle must be kept. Additionally, it activates the symbolism of the tree which is utterly relevant as regards the character of the child. Through the use of reification, the metaphor in absentia which compares Turtle with a plant is retrievable from the semantic field contained in the doctor's scientific description of Turtle's ailing. Indeed his speech
activates the vocabulary usually applied to plants and may read as a game of double entendre. Turtle, with a dead mother, no father to speak of, and a total lack of love and care before her meeting with Taylor, is presented as a vegetal which, wanting water and sun, has her roots in a soil too poor to nurture her. We however witness her progressive recovery thanks to her surrogate mother's love. Hence the parallel between Turtle and the desert toads which are able to:

"(...) wait out the dry months kind of deadlike,(...) and when the rain comes, [to] wake up and crawl out of the ground and start to holler." (163-164)

Similarly, Turtle is watered by Taylor's affection and consequentially recovers speech, though she has until then remained totally dumb. Like a Turtle coming out of her shell, her character proves to be another embodiment of the allegory conveyed through the bean trees. Growing in the desert, thriving in a soil which at first glance appears entirely sterile, the bean trees actually survive because they are nurtured by microscopic insects that live underground and are part of the same ecosystem. They are thus naturally organized so that they all participate in sustaining the plant's growth. The bean trees provide another example of the continual, redeeming successive stages of births and rebirths. Basically, the bean trees convey an allegorical message of hope, which simultaneously illustrates the beneficial power of mutual support. Turtle - a kind of autistic child introverted as a consequence of excruciating suffering endured in her past - is given the same power to suck life out of apparently parched soils.

e) Aridity and Despair; Thirst and Hollowness.

As we have inferred before, despair is a notion widely tackled throughout the novel and is often conveyed through ontological metaphors. Terms pointing to the sensitive world facilitate our understanding of abstract notions. Interestingly, human desperation and want of love are often connected with images of poor soil and of a wasteland. The container-image schema is recurringly activated in order to express the concept of despair, and the text abides by Lakoff's "Invariance Principle". Interiors are

mapped onto interiors, exteriors onto exteriors, and boundaries onto boundaries. The body is presented as a container, which needs be filled with water, as a symbol for love which nourishes the physical metabolism. As a result, a thirsty soul (that is deprived of love) makes of the body an empty container. Hence the way Taylor perceives suffering:

I had never seen anyone whose entire body looked sad. Her skin just seemed to hang from her, especially from her arms above the elbow, and her jaw. (147)

Esperanza's suicide attempt takes the desperate atmosphere to a pitch. Pain is clearly materialized through language as Taylor's observation of Estevan shows. The latter is tortured by the dimension of his wife's acute woe:

Something in this man was turning inside out. (132)

Estevan's feelings are obviously materialized into "something" which moves by itself. Hence the use of the –ing clause which dwells on the phenomenon designated by the verb. The antagonism between "inside" and "out" again points to the spatial metaphor which rules our conception of the human being. Our individual essence lives inside our body, where our abstract attributes such as feelings and thoughts also live. The body is mainly perceived as a frontier between inside and outside, between ourselves and the external world. Emptiness is connected to hurt in the words chosen to describe Esperanza's appearance:

But her eyes looked blank. Dark, black holes. (148)

The hyperbolic redundance qualifying "holes" with two synonymous adjectives which express obscurity underlines hollowness. The identical rhyme between "blank" and "black" calls attention to the nominal clause, emptied of action, the syntax itself imitating what is described. It moreover draws the link between the two sentences, the second one in fact being an tautological development of the word blank.

Esperanza was staring at her empty hands. I wished I had something to put in them, something that would be wonderful for her to look at. (...) Her skin felt cold and emptied out, like there was nobody home. (148-149)

The division of the human being into body and soul takes up the Shakespearian view of the body as the castle inhabited by the spirit. The body as the frontier separating the inside from the outside is characteristic of Turtle and Esperanza:
"[People] think [Turtle] doesn’t take in any more than she puts out, but I know better, I can tell she understands stuff. It’s something about the way she looks at you." (148)

Taylor, as the one who constantly crosses borders, intuitively goes onward and outward, beyond the surface level of things, beyond barriers and frontiers.

Sadness and emptiness are again correlated, when Taylor, more or less suffering from a faith anorexia, crumbles in front of the world's cruelty:

I'd skipped dinner. I wasn't eating much these days. When I was young and growing a lot, and Mama couldn't feed me enough, she used to say I had a hollow leg. Now I felt like I had a hollow everything. Nothing in the world could have filled that space. (170)

The hungry soul transpires through one's eyes, the eyes being commonly considered as the mirror of the soul. Hence the importance of Turtle's blank gaze each time we see her in her catatonic state, making her appear as a kind of zombie.

Turtle was all in one piece as far as I could see, but [she] was changed. All these months we had spent together were gone for her. I knew it from her eyes : two cups of black coffee. (165)

As we have shown, the setting is personified in order to participate in characterization, and reversely, the characters' presentation makes a lavish use of ontological and spatial metaphors. Hence the correspondance between Taylor's inner feelings and the outside world:

It was a miserable time. As wonderful as the summer's first rains had been, they soon wore out their welcome as it rained every day and soaked the air until it felt like a hot, stale dishcloth on your face. No matter how hard I tried to breathe, I felt like I couldn't get air (...). Sometimes I wondered what was the point of working so hard to stay alive, if that's what I was doing. (172)

At that point, the character has been taken through the well-known steps from naivety to insight. The introspection prompted by the Romantic Poets and by many an American author, as seen above, may result in a confrontation with emptiness. The outside world seems unsound, too great and vast. And consequentially, the I which was trying to spread itself out onto space, possibly accessing a state of fusion with the cosmos, finds itself emptied out. A signifier without a signified.

It is probably at this stage that Taylor’s character most reminds us of Kerouac who, having travelled and seen the world as it is, collapses in front of those vast spaces where he has found nothing but an immensity which he does not believe that he could fill. The almighty I has been reduced to an
empty container, devoid of meaning. However, on the contrary of Kerouac, Barbara Kingsolver uplifts silence, and makes Taylor struggle with words:

I didn’t know how to explain the empty despair I felt (170)

Barbara Kingsolver forbids Taylor’s plunging into despair and silence, but confronts her with other characters, thus forcing her to speak out and crush the sense of nothingness within and outside of herself. Though Barbara Kingsolver does take her characters through these different phases, her novel makes up for the momentary and obscure conclusion that conquest of land and of self brings one to a state of non-being, in other words that the trip through life Man has to take is unworthy and absurd. Taylor is brought to the lowest point of the trajectory designed for her. The reader is led to dread a tragic outcome when Taylor, the optimistic stalwart, explains:

Sadness is more or less like a head cold – with patience, it passes. Depression is like cancer. (173)

This definition presents depression as something which grows and contaminates every part of the self. A vicious, incurable illness. However the narrative infers that it can in fact be healed when others are there to wrestle you out of your devouring sense of solitude.

4) Reversal and Resolution.

a) From Stagnation to Action: the Car Prop and Dynamism.

The temporary sinking into mournfulness which the characters are made to undergo is counterbalanced by an eventual transcendence of pain. If the world’s harshness brings winter into one's heart, we are shown how the cycle of life ruling Nature also applies to man's life. Taylor's progression has brought her to an extremely low point, and we see how close she has come to giving up the fight. This does not correspond to the personality she has been attributed since the beginning, and it reveals another side of her to the reader. The character's development in fact remains incomplete. She is certainly at that point granted much more lucidity, but insidiously, discovering the violence and danger inherent to existence has weakened her, as if her energy had been blotted out.
The hard-headed character who always takes action to surmount predicaments seems to have been substituted for a disheartened, sluggish wa iler. Lou Ann sustains this impression by reproaching Taylor with her reactionlessness:

"Taylor, don't. Just don't. You're acting like it's a lost cause (...). I cannot believe you're just ready to roll over and play dead about this, Taylor. I thought I knew you." (...) (175)

I couldn't disagree with Lou Ann (...). But I didn't know what was right. I just kept saying how this world was a terrible place to try and bring up a child in. And Lou Ann kept saying, For God's sake, what other world have we got? (176)

The reader finds himself just as puzzled as Lou Ann in front of a stout-hearted Taylor which has suddenly transformed into a submissive, passive character. Interestingly, at that point in the novel, the reader is shown a swap of roles between the two protagonists. This exchange stresses the mobility of the character-as-a-sign, and the evolution of its signified, or the value and function it embodies. As P. Hammon has studied, a character, envisioned as a sign, bears the influence upon its meaning through the process of opposition to other characters in the same novel. Differenciation and equivalence play an essential part in forging a character. Initially, Lou Ann's character was specified by her extreme lack of confidence and her tendency to inertia when faced with the urge to take responsibility:

[Lou Ann] had been thinking about herself and Angel splitting up for even longer than she had been pregnant, but she didn't particularly do anything about it. That was Lou Ann's method. She expected that a divorce would just develop, like a pregnancy- that eventually they would reach some kind of agreement without having to discuss it. (24)

Totally insecure, Lou Ann is presented as the embodiment of fear itself which provides the opportunity to instil great, farcical humour into the text, caricaturing Lou Ann's obsessive angst:

For Lou Ann, life itself was a life-threatening enterprise. Nothing on earth was truly harmless. (...) [S]he saved newspaper stories of every imaginable type of freak disaster. Unsuspecting diners in a restaurant decapitated by a falling ceiling fan. Babies fallen head first into the beer cooler and drowned in melted ice while the family played Frisbee. (84)

Lou Ann’s character recalls Don de Lillo’s couple in *White Noise* who are similarly totally obsessed with the fear of death. De Lillo is one of Kingsolver’s contemporary writers and though his book was published four years after *The Bean Trees*, we find many common points in the way both deal with post-modern civilization. Beyond the comical aspect of the humour exploited by both de Lillo and Barbara Kingsolver, such characters mostly serve to illustrate existential angst:

---

Who will die first? [Babette] says she wants to die first (...). She is afraid I will die unexpectedly, sneakily, slipping away in the night. It isn’t that she doesn’t cherish life ; it’s being alone that frightens her. The emptiness, the sense of cosmic darkness, (...) I tell her I want to die first. I’ve gotten so used to her that I would feel miserably incomplete. (...) No one there, a hole in space and time. She claims my death would leave a bigger hole in her life than her death would leave in mine. This is the level of our discourse. The relative size of holes, abysses and gaps. (100-101)

Don de Lillo is an American novelist who deals greatly with the emptiness contained in ultra-modern America, brought by the development of new codes tailing high-technological and scientific progress. He exposes the way signs have been dispossessed of their meaning, and the catastrophic influence it has on individuals who are unable to make up for that loss. Like Lou Ann, the characters in *White Noise* are totally vulnerable to signs, however disconnected those might be from reality. Signs indeed take over reality and individuals are shown as deprived of personal insight, too dependent on the language imposed upon them by their civilization.

Barbara Kingsolver to a certain extent deals with those existential problems, but she rescues her characters, pulling them out of the lethal descent into nothingness. In front of an apparently inaccessible reality, where Romantic poet Coleridge, desperate writer Kerouac, and De Lillo’s characters try to obliterate anguish through different kinds of drugs, Barbara Kingsolver offers another, saner medicine: the cure provided by the relationship with the other. In this respect, Barbara Kingsolver’s fiction resembles that of Louise Erdrich, whose book title *Love Medicine* is - for the moment - suggestive enough. If drugs may be seen, as Coleridge for example did, as a temporary liberation of the senses allowing to open to the outside world, it is mainly an escape from reality. Along those tracks, Kerouac’s quest for reality ended in a devastating attempt to run away through L.S.D. and other pet drugs of the Beat Generation. As it turns out, these substances mainly pinion the self in an isolated, fantastic world, cut from reality, and often worsen existential crises. The individual may then be overwhelmed with the frightening sense that he will never be able to inhabit any space at all, whether the unlimited outside world, or the one confined within the body, where the self suffocates.

---

We will develop this essential parallel more in detail in the third part of our essay, when dealing with ecofeminist writing. At this point in our analysis we would rather concentrate on how Kingsolver’s narrative strategy, focusing especially on the evolution of Taylor’s character, shows a reversal of traditional, masculine literature.

47
The zeugma contained in De Lillo’s title, *White Noise*, stresses the destructive effect of silence, noisier than sound, blank like void, and which in fact brings poisonous perturbations. Entropy is at stake because of the way American society has emptied words and signs, transforming language into some disturbing kind of white noise. Barbara Kingsolver seems to be fully aware of the power of signs and of the dangerous tendency of our societies to displace meaning. In *The Bean Trees*, isolation is overcome and silence is broken through relationships. The other indeed provides a new thrust, and also extricates one from a world without words. This is essential insofar as Taylor’s character is highly dependent on Lou Ann’s. Their beneficial exchange is clearly at the basis of their construction and reconstruction. Through their relationship, Taylor's apparently infinite boldness gradually wears off on Lou Ann, who learns from her to overcome her incapacitating, all-encompassing terror:

"And things work out, Taylor, they do. We all muddle through some way."

This from Lou Ann, who viewed most of life's activities as potential drownings, blindings, or asphyxiation; who believed in dream angels that predicted her son would die in the year 2000. Lou Ann who had once said to me: "There's so many germs in the world it's a wonder we're not all dead already."

(168)

Conversely, Taylor's mask as the one who never regards an embush as a dead end is pulled down as the plot develops. This brings attention to the opposite process as regards understanding the author's motivation in naming her characters. Taylor's name, through antonomasia, corresponds to her personality and function within the novel right from the beginning. On the contrary, Lou Ann's name, a variation of Luanna, meaning "graceful warrior", becomes relevent essentially by the end of the novel. She is indeed turned into one who won't surrender, even in the harshest times of crisis, and participates in pushing Taylor to fight the battle for Turtle's adoption.

Taylor's breakdown does not last, and we see her gather herself up. Significantly enough, her decision to find a solution to their many problems again resorts to the car prop. As a symbol of dynamism, Taylor is once more positioned in the driver's seat, and strongly rejects passivity.

"Listen, I've made up my mind about something. I'm going to drive Esperanza and Estevan to a safe house in Oklahoma. And while I'm there I'm going to see if I can find any of Turtle's relatives (…). What other choice have I got than to go? If I just sit here on my hands, then they take her (…). If her relatives want her back, then I'll think of something else. We'll cut that fence when we come to it." (183)
The reader is given the positive, pro-action Taylor back. The car as her vehicle is at that point identified with Taylor's own body:

I started the engine and it turned over with an astonishing purr, like a lioness waking up from her nap. "This is the good life, cars that start by themselves," I said. (188)

By animating the car as if it were a ferocious and powerful animal, the implied author also stresses how she has brought Taylor back to her roaring, thick-headed young gun attitude. We are however given insight into her feelings: under cover of roughness and automatic piloting, we may spot Taylor's efforts to disguise her anxiety:

I kept blinking my eyelids like windshield wipers, trying to keep a clear view of the road. (189)

Suspense is once again aroused since there seems to be many possible barriers erected in her way. Moreover, her destination is Oklahoma, which may seem as an ominous sign because of its analeptic reference to failure and distress:

[Mattie] said there was trouble in the air. Esperanza and Estevan were going to have to be moved to a safe house farther from the boarder. The two best possibilities were Oregon and Oklahoma. Flat, hopeless Oklahoma. (159)

The title of the chapter "Night Blooming Cereus" however serves as a counterpoise, containing many euphoristic elements foreshadowing the success of the characters' trip. Indeed, on the eve of their departure, the author inserts an episode which seems to describe some kind of heavenly protection over the characters:

We saw what looked like a bouquet of silvery-white balloons hanging in the air. Flowers.
A night-blooming cereus, Virgie Mae explained. The flowers open for only one night of the year, and then they are gone. (185)

The magical touch of this scene borders on the wonderful. The implicit generic intertextuality with fairy tales forecasts the happy end. The notion of hope is sustained by the predominance of the colour silver, and the eerieness veiled by the brilliancy which sparkles like the light of hope:

The petals stood out in starry rays, and in the center of each flower there was a complicated construction of silvery threads shaped like cupped hands catching moonlight. A fairy boat, ready to be launched into the darkness. (186)

Obscurity is thus illuminated and the text infers that radiance will eventually spread through and win the upper hand over "the Terrible Night" (i.e. the title of the previous chapter: "Into the Terrible Night").
Hence the insistence on astrology-related vocabulary, which gives the scene many features of a prediction from a superior instance. Lou Ann's practical superstition allows to stress such a quality:

Lou Ann's eyes were as wide and starry as the flower she stared into. She was as captivated as Turtle.
"It's a sign", she said.
"Of what?" I wanted to know.
"I don't know," she said quietly. "Something good." (186)

The narrative strategy softens the almost too obvious metadiegetic reference thanks to Taylor's unsuperstitious approach. Her earthliness checks Lou Ann's statement, but simultaneously sustains it, with the classical good weather sign:

If the night-blooming cereus was an omen of anything, it was of good weather for traveling. (187)

In turn, Turtle's babil allows to read the text as a hint that the author has decided to watch over her characters. Barbara Kingsolver appears as the ship's phantom skipper, sailing the boat of her novel, guiding her characters though rough waters and tidal waves, all the while soundly remaining at the helm. Hence the double entendre at play in the identical rhyme on p. 186:

"Cereus", I said. Even its name sounded silvery and mysterious.
"See us", Turtle repeated.

The episode under study dramatizes a mixture of awe and of humble prayer for a powerful blessing, which of course depends on the author's will. The chapter's last paragraph insists on deciphering signs:

Outside of town we passed a run over blackbird in the road, flattened on the center line. (189)

Our protagonists seem to be safe, the doom-bringer and messenger of death being left behind, metaphorically representing Taylor's success in deciding to trample misfortune and move ahead towards resolution.

b) Second Trip through Oklahoma : Reversed Trajectory.

The author delegates the driving powers to Taylor, sitting her again behind the steering wheel:

After my VW, driving Mattie's wide white car felt like steering a boat (…). Estevan and Esperanza didn't have proper driving licenses (…) so to be on the safe side I did all the driving. (192)

This second trip through Oklahoma first reiterates the dread of failure, echoing the beginning of the book:
On the second day we got into flatlands. The Texas panhandle, and then western Oklahoma, stretched out all around us like a colossal pancake. There was no way of judging where you were against where you were going, and as a consequence you tended to start feeling you were stuck out there (...). [Estevan] knew a Spanish word for the kind of mental illness you get from seeing too much horizon. (195)

The allusion to the loss of one’s mind as a danger of too much introspection points to the threat which lies in searching for meaning from one single point of view. The perspective is then boundless and the risk is that, as Kerouac did, one might feel lost in the hollow immensity of the world. On the contrary, in *The Bean Trees*, salvation comes out of the encounter with the other. In terms, isolation should be the place where one eventually seeks to conquer Existence by means of faith in another’s presence. Taylor’s trip and stay in the desert compares with that of Jesus in the Bible, when he is saved by the response he obtains from God, showing him the way to redemption. The word of the Lord goes along with *The Bean Trees*’ message: introspection is a necessary step which eventually permits one to come out of himself and turn to the other whom he should love. Taylor’s trajectory is reversed, having gone from East to West and conquered space as well as herself, she has acquired deeper insight and a tighter grasp on reality. She is then driven from West to East, accompanied by her friends in order to solve one another’s predicaments, grounding their redemption in their mutually supporting relationships.

Taylor is shown as suffering from the same internal and excruciating oscillation of the heart between faith and total loss of hope. Hence the analeptic reference:

The clue that tipped me off was a sign to the Pioneer Woman Museum. I remembered that. We found a two-lane road that I was pretty sure was the right one. (198)

Against the negative impact of the parallels between the previous drive and this one, we find a set of crucial contrasts levelling the scales between euphoria and dysphoria. The initial crusade away from motherhood has been reversed and transformed in a quest for happiness through motherhood. Coincidence versus plotting is highlighted by Taylor:

"For me, even bad luck brings good things (...). Do you know I spent the first half of my life trying to avoid motherhood and tires, and now I'm counting them as blessings?" (137)
Moreover, this time, Taylor and the reader possess solid landmarks. The most striking opposition lies in the antagonistic landscape which the characters discover, thus overturning the symbolical value of that state:

> It was nice to find out, after all, that Mama's and my ace in the hole for all those years did have a few diamonds in it: Lake Oologah, Lake o' the Cherokees. (205)

Water is introduced into the setting, charged with the familiar connotation of rebirth. Chosen motherhood seems to be more promising:

> Lake o' the Cherokees was a place where you could imagine God might live. There were enough trees. (206)

The narrative subtly welds the metaphoric value of the landscape as built by the text up to then, with the character's evolution. This is most striking in the description Taylor gives of Esperanza's sudden revival:

> Something was going on inside of Esperanza. Something was thawing. Once I saw a TV program about how spring comes to Alaska. They made a big deal about the rivers starting to run again, showing huge chunks of ice rumbling and shivering and bashing against each other and breaking up. This is how it was with Esperanza. (207)

The text once again pinpoints the body and soul dichotomy, together with the resemblances between life in the macrocosm and the microcosm. This recalls the Elizabethan concept of the Wheel of Fortune which spins endlessly, alternating falls and rises. Oklahoma is definitely established as best representing Taylor's evolution. It is twice the place where moot points are set, from Turtle's finding and the beginning of Taylor's enlightenment, to Turtle's final, official adoption, fully turning Taylor into a whole character as a mother. Interestingly enough, the time which elapses between Taylor's two opposite trips to Oklahoma, set in Arizona, spans a period of approximately nine months, from the end of December to August. As Mattie argues, the experiences Taylor has made in Arizona correspond to the nine-month-long pregnancy which any mother undergoes before carrying her baby into the world. Taylor's sudden jump forward into motherhood deprived her of that stage:

> [Taylor: ] "Remember when I first drove up here in January? (...) Tell me the honest truth. Did you think I seemed like any kind of decent parent?"
> [Mattie: ] "I thought you seemed like a bewildered parent. Which is perfectly ordinary. Usually the bewilderment wears off by the time a kid gets big enough to eat peanut butter and crackers, but knowing what I do now, I can see you were still in the stage most mothers are in when they first bring them home from the hospital." (176-177)
Taylor's character is thus completed in the end, followed by that of Turtle in the first place, and then that of Lou Ann. Indeed, Turtle is provided with the occasion to take out the traumas she has interiorized, as a witness of her biological mother's burial. Not only has she recovered speech, and is thus given a voice of her own - which is essential in the constitution of a character and the importance it is allotted in the novel - but she is now granted to assimilate her relationship with her foster mother. As regards Lou Ann, we have already broached the subject of her progression and will carry our analysis further in our second part, studying the link between women's voices and Lou Ann's character as a "graceful warrior".

c) On the Road Again : Back to Arizona, the End of the Trip.

The last chapter counts the ultimate resolution of the plot. Estevan and Esperanza are confided to other people secretly struggling to support illegal immigrants on American grounds. With the help of her friends, Taylor manages to fabricate fake papers validating the legal adoption procedures. Turtle thus remains by her side, and is presented as happy and outgrowing. Though much pain and predicaments are still unavoidable, the text provides the key allegory which conveys a message of hope. The intricate symbolic network is condensed in the chapter-title "Rhizobia", later explained through Taylor’s voice which casts light on the diegetic universe about to end. Significantly, the last chapter sends back to the book's title, offering a symbolical interpretation of a definition found by Taylor and Turtle in the Horticultural Encyclopedia, explaining the life cycle of the bean trees:

"(...) wisteria vines, like other legumes, often thrive in poor soil, the book said. Their secret is something called rhizobia. These are microscopic bugs that live underground in little knots on the roots. They suck nitrogen gas right out of the soil and turn it into fertilizer for the plant. The rhizobia are not actually part of the plant, they are separate creatures, but they always live with legumes : a kind of underground railroad moving secretly down the roots." (227)

This passage is replete with textual echoes calling for a metaphorical deciphering of the text. The reader is further guided by the author who uses Taylor's character, who acquires deeper insight throughout the book:
"It's like this," I told Turtle. "There's a whole invisible system for helping out the plant that you'd never guess was there." I loved this idea. "It's just the same as with people. The way Edna has Virgie, and Virgie has Edna, and Sandi has Kid Central Station, and everybody has Mattie. And on and on."

The wisteria vines on their own would just barely get by, is how I explained it to Turtle, but put them together with rhizobia and they make miracles. (227-228)

Taylor retrospectively assesses the main elements in our story and the way she wants to educate Turtle proves to be a subtle, metadiegetic lesson about how to read the novel. In writing *The Bean Trees*, Barbara Kingsolver destroys the American myth of individualism as the road to happiness. From an extradiegetic point of view, we may decipher the text as an implicit, didactic extract produced by the author, thus guiding the reader through the book. Hence the last paragraph which may be envisioned as the exit door of the novel. It is so dense with metaphorical meaning that the reader is incited to think back over the inordinate number of instances when the text should have been decoded along the same tracks:

The poor kid had spent so much of her life in a car, she probably felt more at home on the highway than anywhere else. (…)

But it didn't matter to Turtle, she was happy where she was. The sky went from dust-color to gray and then cool black sparked with stars, and she was still wide awake. She watched the dark highway and entertained me with her vegetable-soup song, except that now there were people mixed in with the beans and potatoes: Dwayne Ray, Mattie, Esperanza, Lou Ann and all the rest.

And me. I was the main ingredient. (232)

Metatextuality implicitly shows that Turtle's "vegetable soup song" may also refer to *The Bean Trees* itself, for it contains the same blending of ingredients. Moreover, the car-as-a-vehicle metaphor is for the last time activated, stressing through double entendre, the equivalence with the book - both of these intra and extradiegetic objects carrying characters and reader from the beginning to the end of the novel. The trip led by the writer's hand on the road laid out by the text is definitely a productive one, and is specifically characterized by the rejection of individualism in favour of mutual support. The characters' trip comes to an end simultaneously with the reader's, whose attention has strongly been drawn onto the hidden significance of signs. Only now can the characters be fully understood as completed textual productions. Taylor has risen to the status of a fully insightful character, which in the end fuses the narrated "I" with the narrating "I". Her ultimate comprehension of things underlines her earlier failure to see the depth of things, which acts as an incentive for the reader to go beyond the surface level of the text and to analyze how the voices we hear manipulate our reception of the text.
II - FEMININE VOICES :
MEDIUMS OF THE SYMBOLICAL RICHNESS
OF THE TEXT
The analysis of the treatment of space and characterization in *The Bean Trees* has led us to establish the deep influence of traditional American literature over the author’s plot construction. What is new, however, is precisely the reversal which she creates. Also, the female heroine which we follow along her initiatory voyage marks another break with the classical allegorical narratives which usually have male protagonists. The second half of the century has witnessed a great emancipation of women in society and this historical movement has clearly marked contemporary literature. The rise of feminism has also encouraged women to speak out and rebel against the inferiority and silence to which patriarchal societies had long kept them into. If some movements have gone way too far in extreme reactivism, feminism has also induced a general awakening to women’s need and desire to liberate themselves from many forms of unfair, male oppression. As a matter of fact, many female authors have emerged as major artists, placing women at the centre of their fiction.
Barbara Kingsolver is an author famous for her feminist and political activism, and apart from her literary works, she has also produced a great number of essays and articles dealing with the place of women in society. One of Barbara Kingsolver’s striking characteristics is that she writes mostly about women, and hardly ever voices male point of views. When asked about the reason for this literary choice, the author answers:

A novel is a rich collection of details all added together in a way that satisfactorily answers some of life’s universal questions. (…) [W]hen I write, if I hope to arrive at any convincing answers, I have to begin with characters whose details I know by heart. (Web page; dialogue section)

Woman’s point of view has been adopted not out of sexism but out of a yearning for exactitude. In her fiction, men are often depicted in a highly negative light and it might seem to the unattentive reader that her works reflect a reactivist, anti-male thinking. This is not, however, the case. In *The Bean Trees*, Taylor’s character is precisely led from typical feminist reactivism to a more open-minded vision of the relationship between man and woman, which is one essential facet of the character’s huge progression throughout the novel. As we will see, the evolution of Taylor’s character throughout the novel gives evidence of the author’s immense background knowledge, and her talent as a writer shows through the way she ingeniously uses her amazing culture in the construction of her characters.

In this second part we will focus on the impact of the feminine voices in *The Bean Trees*, starting with Taylor’s evolving insight, of utmost importance to the reader’s reception of the text as a consequence of her status as the homodiegetic narrator. We will pay great attention to Barbara Kingsolver’s inordinate use of symbolism. This grants further insight into the subtle writing of *The Bean Trees*, a text luxuriant with imagery.

1) Central Voice: Metaphor and Gender.

a) The Language of the Semiotic.

Feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva, in *La révolution du langage poétique*, has coined the term "semiotic order" which she defines as a conceptual framework ruled by symbols other than the phallic
Barbara Kingsolver’s writing validates this theory as evidenced by the language she creates for Taylor, her homodiegetic narrator. The "language of the semiotic", Julia Kristeva argues, diverges from the "language of the symbolic" in that it translates a conceptual system which is different from the traditional, patriarchal ones as known in Occidental societies. This is mainly retrievable from the use of symbols in language, through the deconstruction of the received genderization of symbols, and the way this very genderization is interpreted. In every culture and since the beginning of man’s interest in symbols, which actually goes back to the most ancient civilizations, every symbol has been genderized. In Oriental tradition, the world’s harmony and wholeness lies in the complementarity in all things of male and female principles, respectively referred to in Chinese tradition as the Yang and the Yin. Every symbol is thus connoted as a feminine or masculine one.

Taylor’s evolution from a limited vision to a highly deep insight has been widely dealt with above. We will see that this progression affects her language and the images which she draws from, showing her shift from plain feminist reactivism to a more balanced attitude, encompassing the revelation that one needs the other as a complementary entity. The predominance of feminine symbols which pervade Taylor’s representational system draws attention to the genderization of symbols. This is essential in that misinterpretation of symbols has helped justify the binary system of representation which sees dualities as antagonistic rather than complementary opposites. The words "maculine" and "feminine" should not be understood exclusively in terms of biological, sexual identity, but on a higher and vaster plane. In the following analysis, we greatly rely on research which we have done in the French dictionary of symbols already mentioned above.

Hence, the soul is a combination of male and female principles. The male produces the power of life, a principle which is liable to death. The female bears life, she animates. The distinction between

---

This book is discussed in Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory. An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996. This book was extremely useful and interesting as regards theoretical background, especially in our analysis of Taylor’s evolution from a psychoanalytical angle. When discussing Kristeva’s theory, we will adopt the English terminology as translated by Eagleton.
male and female marks a separation. According to the first version of the myth of Genesis the first human being was originally undifferenciated, androgynous (Genesis, 1, 27).

Mysticism (a religious practice in which people search for truth, knowledge, and unity with God through meditation and prayer) considers the spirit as a male principle and the soul which animates the flesh as a female one. It is the famous duality composed of *anima* and *anima*. Even from a purely anatomical point of view, man and woman are obviously not entirely masculine or feminine. Man possesses a feminine element and *vice versa*. Every symbol, either masculine or feminine, presents an opposite characteristic. When the words « masculine » and « feminine » are raised to a spiritual level, they do not designate sexuality, but gift and receptivity. In this esoteric signification, the celestial is masculine and the terrestrial feminine. As soon as one interprets masculine and feminine along biological lines, one is liable to the biggest confusion.

The fact that Taylor’s language in *The Bean Trees* draws mostly from feminine symbols part of the water-earth-moon-yin chain of symbolism is by no means an expression of an antagonistic relation between feminine and masculine. On the contrary, it follows the principles of Oriental beliefs, especially developed by the Chinese under the names of "Yin" and "Yang". They basically express universal dualism and complementarity. Yin and Yang exist only in relation to one another. They are inseparable. Unity is polarized in Yin and Yang: it corresponds to the separation in two halves of the cosmic egg, or the Egg of the World. The symbolism of the Yin and the Yang is represented by a circle divided into two equal halves by a sinuous line, one part is black (Yin), the other white (Yang). However, each side bears a round spot of the opposite colour, which represents their interdependence.

---


29 In the second account of Genesis, Eve was created out of one of Adam’s ribs (Genesis, 2, 21-22). However, recent studies have been wondering about the accuracy of the various translations of the original manuscripts written in Hebrew and the hypothesis according to which Adam’s “rib” should have been translated "side" is presently being discussed by feminist intellectuals. In any case, the myth of the original man as a hermaphrodite does exist in the Bible, as in many other myths about the Original Man.
Along those lines, the language of the semiotic does not express an antagonistic relation between opposite symbols, whereas the "language of symbolic" usually does, placing the phallic symbol at the centre of our conceptual system. On the contrary, the language of the semiotic gives evidence of an understanding of the unity which lies in binarity, and is more common among female authors who tend to be more sensitive to such a vision of the world. In The Bean Trees, Taylor’s language and progression as studied above clearly establish a reversal of phallogocentric thinking. Interestingly, Taylor’s intradiegetic reversal of phallogocentric society coalesces with Barbara Kingsolver’s reversal of phallogocentric literature.

Kingsolver’s handling of allegory relies on solid background on the part of the reader. She mixes symbolic esoterism with intertextual plays sending back to the evolution of English and American literature, together with a thorough understanding of the complicated workings at the root of a society’s changes. Kingsolver’s novels indeed deconstruct myths established over the decades leading to today’s United States and stress the pitiful consequences of an earnest belief in the newly born myth of self-sufficiency, which sprouted out of American society. Kingsolver declares:

People believe in the myth of self-sufficiency - which is, of course, a myth. Not one of us is self-sufficient, nor is that a desirable state. This is what I keep coming back to in my writing: what community means. (...) Why we silly independent Americans should stop running away from it. (Letter, 5 Nov. 1990)

In The Bean Trees, Taylor’s trip gives her insight into the interdependence between all the ingredients which are necessary for the "vegetable soup song" sang by Turtle. Their adventures provide the means to explore universal realities and the narrative in many ways prompts for deeper insight into essential matters. This also accounts for the pervading symbolism which in fact relies on ancient civilizations’ beliefs, which have been thrown into oblivion by more contemporary thinking. To Taylor’s

---

30 I.e.; J.A. Cuddon’s Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, which gives the following definition of the word "phallogocentric": "A term invented by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. It is a conflation of phallocentric (‘phallus-centred’) and logocentric (‘word-centred; epistemologically, ‘truth-centred’). Terry Eagleton has translated it (happily) as ‘cock-sure’. Applied to, for example, society, it denotes one which controls or attempts to control by means of sexual/social influence and power. Thus, a patriarchal society would be predominantly logocentric as well as phallocentric. Post-structuralists would describe modern Western society (or some aspects of such societies) as phallogocentric. As far as literature is concerned, the term might be applied to novels in which the male characters have the upper hand and the female characters are sex objects. (...)” (704)
reverse trip across American states corresponds the reverse trip promulgated by Kingsolver’s texts through the evolution of American thinking. The richness of her writing characteristically induces the reader to go backwards through space and time in order to question actual values which many people observe as universal truths when in fact mere products of American society. She indeed takes the reader from a starting point grounded in typical, preferably insight-limited American background, to another point far away from the first one in space, time, and mostly in conceptual space. In doing so, Barbara Kingsolver largely draws from foreign civilizations, enstranged from American thinking in space or time. Hence the importance of grasping the pluridimension of the symbols in *The Bean Trees* which helps to travel backwards to more ancestral, original thinking.

b) Taylor’s Evolution: A Belated Move into the "Diadic Order".

In *The Bean Trees* internal focalization never involves any male character. The focalizing agents are indeed systematically female. As mentioned earlier, the main corpus of the text uses Taylor's voice embodied in the homodiegetic narrator, except for chapters two and four. However in these two chapters, the point of view is again a feminine one since Lou Ann serves as the focalizing point - the omniscient narrator presumably being Taylor translating what Lou Ann has recounted her about her past:

Lou Ann Ruiz lived in Tucson, but thought of herself as just another Kentuckian a long way from home.

(24)

This is essential insofar as the reader's reception of the text is clearly influenced by the narrating voice, all the more since even the dialogues barely involve men at all. Estevan stands out as the male exception in that respect as in many others, for the author very often imagines dialogues in which he largely participates. But then, this coalesces with the fact that his character has been chosen to be the only man whom Taylor does not regard in a negative light. On the contrary, she sets him on a pedestal, clearly having fallen in love with him. Otherwise, hardly any insight is given into masculine feelings and vision. Taylor's progression as a character, regarding her relation to man, will show through the gradual change in the way she refers to male characters throughout the book.
However the diegetic universe remains on the whole populated by women’s voices, which, as a consequence, not only makes it possible to analyze the evolution of female characters, but also gives a highly feminist vision of the world. In the very first chapter, we encounter a protagonist brought up in a matriarchal home who has never even known her father nor his identity. Closely bound to her mother, Taylor appears at the beginning of the story as firmly tied to the umbilical cord.\(^3\) Hence the childish, affectionate way in which Taylor speaks of her mother:

> There were two things about Mama. One is she always expected the best out of me. And the other is that then no matter what I did, whatever I came home with, she acted like it was the moon I had just hung up in the sky and plugged in all the stars. Like I was that good. (10)

On the positive side, Taylor's mother has instilled in her the notions of love and tenderness, and has succeeded in moulding Taylor's personality with a high degree of self-confidence. As we have studied, Taylor's boldness and her ability to react provide springs for the resolution of the plot.

However, problematically enough, Taylor's vision of the world does not encompass an objective representation of man, which she knows very little about. From a psychoanalytical point of view, her fatherless childhood has impeded her from entering what Lacan calls the "symbolic order", referring to the stage in which a child's development reaches the point of gender-differentiation, which follows the mental assimilation of the clear-cut separation between his own body and that of the mother:

> She gave me the biggest hug and said, "Missy, I have never seen the likes of you." (…) I felt better with her there, the two of us moving around eachother in the kitchen making boiled greens and eggs for the dinner while it finally went dark outside. (10)

A linguistic analysis of this passage helps pinpoint Taylor's incomplete assimilation process of the outside world. As the linguist Roman Jakobson has established, the two primary operations of human language are metaphor and metonymy, which would respectively correspond to Saussure's 'combination' and 'selection' processes. Deciphering the unconscious drives at work in Taylor's use of language, we may underline the remnants of Taylor's passage into the "dyadic" structure—an expression coined by Lacan in order to refer to the stage in which the child is entirely dependent on his mother and perceives the

---
\(^3\) Our analysis relies at great length on the chapter dedicated to psychoanalitical theory in *Terry Eagleton’s Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996.
external world as the mother's body only. She indeed proves not to have gone beyond the pre-Oedipal stage, remaining in the "state of fusion" between her mother and herself. Hence the plural which seems to designate their couple as a single entity:

(...) we, me and Mama, (2)

Taylor's character as framed at the beginning, is far from being given a genuinely mature view of the world. Taylor, is in fact initially presented as perceiving from within what Lacan calls the "dyadic" structure. As a result, her conception of the outside world is seriously limited because of the mother's image, which still prevails and comes before anything else. As opposed to the "symbolic" representation of the outside world which a child normally acquires in a sound environment, including a mother and a father (the father allows to integrate the phallic symbol within the child’s perceptive system and consequentially propells him into the "tryadic" order) Taylor's conceptual system reveals her stagnation and confusion.

In the passage quoted above, it clearly appears that Taylor perceives the outside world as something obscure and unsafe, as opposed to the coterie including mother and daughter where Taylor seeks protection. Taylor is shown as longing to be back in the mother's over-protected womb, hence the reference to food which shows that - like an infant - Taylor is still highly dependent on her mother even as regards the most basic, reassuring concepts such as nurturing. The allusion to the "eggs" also evokes the notion of pregnancy and acts as a catalyst in order to connote creation and the cocoon-world which the fœtus benefits from. Taylor's particular use of speech betrays her metaphorical conception of the world, which is especially striking when her voice serves to give landscape descriptions. Hence the images of roundness pervading the text, implicitly referring to motherhood and pregnancy:

The scenery grew more interesting by the mile. At first it was basically flat but it kind of rolled along, like a green, rumpled bedsheet. Then there were definite hills. We passed through little towns with Indian names that reminded me in some ways of Kentucky. Here and there we saw trees. (205)

As studied above, Taylor associates flatness with despair, and roundness - charged with a symbolic value for motherhood - with hope and protection. We notice how Taylor still unconsciously looks for her mother's shelter:
For some reason I had in the back of my mind that we were headed for Kentucky. I kept picturing Mama's face when we pulled up in the driveway. (192-193)

Taylor is indeed recurrently presented as home-and-mother sick, especially in times of trouble. In fact, Taylor's heart is still totally connected with the pounding of her mother's:

While the water glugged out over the sweet peas I noticed Mattie looking at me with her arms crossed. Just watching. I missed Mama so much my chest hurt. (81)

When Taylor falls in love with Estevan, the first man to win her heart, her feelings spontaneously connect with the very first love object which until then filled all the space in her soul:

Moonlight was pouring in through the bedroom window like a watery version of my mother's potato soup. Moon soup, I thought, hugging myself under the covers. (140)

Taylor's conceptual system being limited (at least at that point in the novel), the symbols which permeate her language often translate her unconscious, psychological and cognitive lack of maturity. The author goes even further to show how Taylor's experience influences her use of language. Taylor tends to attribute feminine values before masculine ones to symbols which are in fact ambivalent, such as the tree or the desert. With Taylor, they are given a feminine value of fecundity, inserting these symbols in the earth-water moon-yin chain mentioned above.

Taylor's background was carefully chosen in order to justify her feminist stands and the way she rebels against patriarchal society. Barbara Kingsolver explains:

These characters are my slaves. They have to do exactly what I tell them to do, to illustrate my theme and make the plot work. (...) I invent people from scratch. I think about what they'll need to do, then work backwards, inventing entire life histories that will render them believable. (Barbara Kingsolver's web page; Dialogue)

Taylor rejects man as something cumbersome and unwanted. Obviously, she has inherited her mother's negative vision of men, and, by proxy, through her mother's desires, is convinced that men are a burden in a woman's life:

[Mama] had already been through a lot of wild times before she had me, including one entire husband by the name of Foster Greer. (...) He was famous for drinking Old Grand Dad with a gasoline funnel, and always told Mama never to pull anything cute like getting pregnant. Mama says trading Foster for me was the best deal this side of the Jackson Purchase. (5)

Taylor is handicapped in her relationships with men in that she automatically despises them. Her unconscious, stereotyped representation of man makes her spontaneously resentful and suspicious:
I drove by slowly and checked the place out, but the guy in the office didn't look too promising. (...) In the Broken Arrow Motor Lodge there was a gray-haired woman. Bingo. (20)

Interestingly enough Taylor's apparently innocent use of a fixed metaphor betrays her fear of men:

"Only two things are worth making so much noise about: death and sex," Estevan said. He had the devil in him tonight. (164)

The motive for the unconscious selection of her words eludes Taylor, for whom this is just an idiomatic way of saying that Estevan's audacious sense of humour is unusual. In fact, his incisive remark does not correspond to the special way Taylor normally perceives him. Estevan is in Taylor's eyes the exception among men, as someone astonishingly sweet and full of kindness. Thus she discharges him with being responsible for his words, but still connects death and sex with evil. This compound metaphorical network is brilliantly epitomized in the snake:

(...)its muscular coils looped around a smooth tree trunk.(164)

Beyond the too obvious phallic symbol, the snake also dwells on man's physical power, insisting on its muscles and on its oppressive quality. The word "coil" moreover plays on double entendre, meaning ring as well as the contraceptive method that is placed inside a woman's womb. It thus carries a reference to killing babies, an egg-murderer. Its strength is enhanced by the description of its position:

The rattle was poised upright but did not shake. (164)

We may read the latent allusion to erection, related to soundness, and thus clearly standing as the opposite of the fragility and harmlessness which the text also dramatizes, as the snake's potential game.

All these elements add up to establish Taylor's fear of men within the text, without necessarily putting it as such. We see how language is used in speech and conveys messages which go beyond the first-impression meaning. Connotation is of utmost importance, since it allows for metaphoric understanding and deciphering of one's words. And, interestingly, we notice how one does not always consciously master his choices for wording a specific meaning, but is also influenced by workings of the mind of which he may well be unaware.
Taylor's instantaneous confidence in women contrasts sharply with her natural mistrust of men. Her childhood in Pittman County has given her an entirely disparaging image of man, whether in the role of father or husband. Hence the dialogue which illustrates the influences she has received:

"Jolene, why [did you marry] Newt?" (…)
"Why not, my daddy'd been calling me a slut practically since I was thirteen, so why the hell not? Newt was just who it happened to be. You know the way it is."
I told her I didn't know, because I didn't have a daddy. That I was lucky that way. She said yeah. (9)

As a matter of fact, Taylor views pregnancy as a dreadful accident which she should make sure to avoid. Pregnancy is associated with trouble, presented as a rampant illness or a kind of evil plague:

Believe me in those days the girls were dropping by the wayside like seeds off a poppyseed bun and you learned to look at every day as a prize. You'd made it that far. (3)

The spatial metaphor of life as a journey is once again activated in the last sentence. Taylor’s words, relying on the source-path-goal image schema, point to pregnancy as a trap which puts an end to one’s evolution and thus keeps from reaching one’s destination. The explanation she gives Sandi about how she ended up taking care of Turtle is extremely significant:

"She’s not really mine," I said. "She’s just somebody I got stuck with."
Sandi looked at both of us (…). "Yeah, I know exactly what you mean." (52)

Dramatic irony stresses the quiproquo created by Sandi’s answer. The reader understands that Sandi in fact does not know about Taylor’s situation, but assumes that "somebody I got stuck with” on the part of Taylor, corresponds to her own situation. Sandi, as we learn, is only fourteen years old and already the mother of a twenty-one-month boy. Hence the way she sees a child as a burden which she would have rather not have had.

The frame of mind ruling Taylor's social attitude and expectations is definitely a reactive feminist one, at least as we see her before she has travelled. At the beginning, Taylor in fact rejects her feminine identity and any qualities which should be expected of her because of her gender. Her initiation to life eventually permits her to integrate man as a possibly harmless, even loveable entity, and simultaneously to accept and even enjoy being a woman. Her behaviour is thus at first excessively rebellious against men, hence her systematical revolt against male bullying. This accounts for the quarrelsome rhetorics which help her fight back against typical, overbearing and machoistic attitude towards women:
The gray-hat cowboy slid the ketchup bottle down the counter so hard it rammed my cup and spilled out probably five cents' worth of coffee. "You think being busted is a joke?" I asked him. I slid the bottle back and hit his beer mug dead center, although it did not spill. He looked at me and then looked back at the TV, like I wasn't the kind of thing to be bothered with. It made me want to spit nails. (16)

Because of her unconscious innate association between man, violence, alcoholism and undelicacy, Taylor turns to women as the only source of affection. The homes and circles she is attracted to are therefore restricted to that with women-dwellers only.

2) An Almost Women-Only Universe.

Taylor is actually made to repeat the patterns she has assimilated during her childhood. Her first companion whom she adopts on the road is the harmless little baby-girl she then decides to raise as her own child. Her friendship similarly naturally seeks female partners, her first real friend and fellow worker being Sandi, another single mother. Once fired from the Burger Derby for standing up to her impudent boss, she ends up working as Mattie's helper in a car-repair shop. The author's choice to dramatize women owning and running a garage strikes the reader as pretty unusual, but once again, it wittily deconstructs the social division between male and female spheres. Also, Mattie's originality is what wins Taylor's admiration:

I had never seen a woman with this kind of know-how. It made me feel proud, somehow. In Pittman County if a woman had tried to have her own tire store she would have been run out of business. That, or the talk would have made your ears curl up like those dried apricot things. "If Jesus is indeed Lord," I said to myself, "He surely will not let this good, smart woman get blown sky-high by an overfilled tire. Or me either while He's at it." (43-44)

Mattie's motherly welcome foreshadows the way in which she later takes Taylor under her wing:

"Just make yourself at home, hon." (43)

Mattie immediately tends to quenching Taylor and Turtle's thirst and hunger, offering them food and drinks. Her behaviour heralds her role as surrogate mother. Mattie's place activates the DESPAIR IS FLATNESS metaphoric concept, further entailing the following ones: AIR IS VOID / VOID IS DEPAIR / FOOD AND WATER ARE LOVE.
The reader bears in mind Taylor's crossing of Oklahoma. Taylor indeed associates flatness - the opposite of roundness, with all the connotations studied earlier - with silence, despair and death. The only thing Taylor consciously fears is overfilled tires that might explode. Nothingness is thus dreaded as a destructive force. Significantly enough, Taylor's arrival in Arizona with flat tires corresponds with her internal crumbling into pieces. Her resorting to Mattie's help pumps her up and makes her recover from her sudden loss of strength. Interestingly, Mattie does not inflate Taylor's car tires but nurtures Taylor and Turtle with real food as well as comfort:

"Why, honey, don't feel bad. I wasn't trying to make a sale. I just thought you two needed some cheering up." She pried the cup out of Turtle's hand and refilled it. (44)

We notice how the container-image-schema is once again activated in order to symbolize abstract feelings.

The reconstruction of matriarchal homes continues with Taylor and Turtle moving in with Lou Ann and her baby. Lou Ann herself comes from a women-only family, her only on-going relationships with relatives being with her mother, Mrs Logan, and her grandmother, Granny Logan:

[ Lou Ann : ]" Mama, when Daddy was alive..." She wasn't sure what she meant to ask. Did you talk to eachother? Was he the person you saved things up to say to, or was it like now? A houseful of women for everything, for company? (55)

From exactly the same kind of background, Taylor and Lou Ann's strategic reunion provides the means to reiterate the female gathering process. Their neighbours similarly constitute a couple with no man around, Virgie Mae looking over blind Edna Poppy.

Taylor and Turtle are soon integrated in a cluster of reliable, mutually supportive friends, counting no male character except for Estevan. But then, Estevan is clearly the exception, who succeeds in softening Taylor's bitterness against men. Interestingly, Estevan The Moor was the name of the first Spanish explorer who came to Arizona. As Roland Barthes vindicates:

---

The importance of names in Barbara Kingsolver's fiction is undisputed. In Estevan's case, the historical allusion is significant if we consider that Arizona has proven to be the place where Taylor opens to the world, and since Estevan is actually the very first man who is permitted to conquer Taylor's heart.

"I'll swan, Taylor, you talk about men like they're a hangnail. To hear you tell it, you'd think man was only put on this earth to keep urinals from going to waste." "That's not true, I like Estevan." My heart sort of pumped when I said this. I knew exactly how it would look on an EKG machine: two little peaks and one big one. (111-112)

The little community uniting our characters along the rhizobia allegory is almost uniquely composed of women, relying on one another for friendship and care:

"I know I can depend on you, Lou Ann. (...) If we sink, you'll pull us out." (94)

Estevan slightly counterbalances the exclusiveness of tenderness and love as attributes of female characters, and is progressively accompanied by secondary characters such as Father Williams, who participate in sustaining the brotherhood-chain centre to the novel, but yet hardly appear in the narrative.


a) Home and Family destroyers.

The very first chapter contains highly negative references to male characters who are flagrantly associated with violence. Jolene Shanks, for example, is dramatized in a horrific episode following an outburst of male fighting:

Jolene started telling me how it was all Newt's daddy's fault, he beat him up, and even hit the baby with a coal scuttle. (9)

Taylor who is at that point working in a hospital as a medical assistant, concludes from this butchery scene that men are responsible for blood-pouring and for destruction brought upon earth:

Jolene looked like the part of the movie you don't want to watch (...). There was a wet tongue of blood from her right shoulder all the way down to her bosom, and all the color was pulled out of her lips and face (...). [I] couldn't help thinking about bloodstains all over the creation. (7)

---

When they are not held responsible for tearing women to pieces, men are presented as escape artists:

Mama swore up and down that [my own daddy] was nobody I knew and long gone besides. (2)

Lou Ann's husband is given the qualities of both a phantom and an evil bringer. Hence the ironical word play on his name, which calls attention to his character as a kind of fallen angel. The comparison between Angel and a ghost is highlighted by the irony created by his departure on Halloween’s day. Onomastics carry the pun even further, using Mrs. Logan's supposed malapropism:

[Lou Ann's] mother, Mrs. Logan, still pronounced neither Angel's first name nor last name correctly, saying it something like Ruins. (27)

Double entendre allows to read the failure of their marriage which, like Angel's last name, is brought by him upon his family. Angel is not presented as warped since the beginning of their marriage, but as shattered by the unbearable loss of his physical power. His stump is endowed with phallic connotations, and shows that he cannot put up with his amputation which he experiences as a kind of castration. Incapable of dealing with the loss of his virility, Angel is so repulsed by his artificial leg that he eventually turns into a ghost and abandons Lou Ann regardless of her gentleness:

After his stump had healed, it did not bother [Lou Ann] to touch it, what Angel himself would never do. It had a smooth, defenseless look that reminded her of a penis, something she had always thought seemed out of place on a man's body. (26)

Lou Ann's innocent last thought, communicated through internal focalization, proves that she too has assimilated masculinity with power, strength, and violence; understandably, her own father is not exempt from responsibility in that matter:

Ivy brought the bags of food and her suitcase, which was held together with a leather belt. Lou Ann recognized the belt as one she had been whipped with years ago, when her father was alive. (57)

The portraits of these women emphasize the affliction imposed upon women in patriarchal society, and exemplifies the way the contemporary American woman is often left on her own, with the burden of earning money and raising children all by herself. Lou Ann has integrated contempt as a quality inherent to man, and as a result, she submits to Angel's revolting attitude. He is indeed presented as a vile husband, gratuitously mean, humiliating, and ruthless towards Lou Ann's feelings:
"What the hell is this?" [Angel] called from the bathroom. (…)
"It's water from Tug Fork, the crick at home that I was baptized in. Me and I guess practically everyone else in my family. Granny Logan brought it for baptizing Dwayne Ray." (…)
She heard the chugging sound of the water as he poured it down the drain. The baby's sucking at her felt good, as if he might suck the ache right out of her breast. (64)

These accumulated descriptions instil hatred towards machoistic attitudes, all the more since the novel focuses on the disastrous consequences of man's rudeness.

b) Intertextuality: Man as a Fearsome Entity.

Taylor's language is strewn with references to man as an evil figure reminding us of childhood representations of the devil. Her unconscious associations are connected to the landscape descriptions she gives, allowing her to transfer her latent dread of man onto the cacti:

Around their heads, at this time of year, [the saguaros] wore crowns of bright red fruit split open like mouths. And the ocotillos were the dead-looking thorny sticks that stuck up out of the ground in clusters, each one with a flaming orange spike of flower buds at its top. These looked to me like candles from hell. (162)

Pathetic fallacy combines with the pervasive symbols in order to show Taylor's transfer of her feelings towards men onto her perception of the outside world. As John Ruskin indeed established, pathetic fallacy applies not to the "true appearances of things to us", but to the "extraordinary, or false appearances of things to us, when we are under the influence of emotion or contemplative fancy"34.

We see that erection is perceived as aggression, and entails hurt for the female genitals. Both metaphor and synecdoche are here at play, first displacing the fear of men onto cacti, and second taking a part of what scares Taylor - that is the man's penis - for the whole - that is man. The most striking element is the saguaros' "crowns of red fruit split open like mouths." The evocation of blood through the pervading colour red in this context points to sexual intercourse in terms of a rape. The torn, gaping mouths seem to be letting out a soundless scream. And similarly disturbing, the text compares men with overbearing kings, impudently exhibiting the trophees of their sexual assaults. The ocotillos' "orange spike[s]" pinpoint Taylor's vision of the world as still under the spell of childhood representations. The

focalizing agent indeed applies the devil stereotype onto the vegetation. The devil is traditionally represented with horns, brandishing a threatening flaming spike, and dressed in red from head to toe.

The issues of rape and sexual abuse are central to the book’s plot, mainly as regards the character of poor Turtle. Implied intertextuality with the tale of the "Little Red Riding Hood" influences our reception of the text, and heightens our sympathy for Turtle. The narrative indeed activates revisited versions of the Big Bad Wolf figure, waiting out secretly in the woods to assail defenseless children. In the chapter entitled "Into the Terrible Night" Turtle is made the prey for some pervert who tries to molest her. The parallels with the famous tale are legion: the park where Turtle is playing after dark is the equivalent of the scary forest; also Turtle is accompanied by blind Edna Poppy who substitutes for the old, ill grandmother. The end of the tale however undergoes a feminist remaking, in that the wood-hatcher who rescues the little girl is replaced by female boldness, Edna striking the man away with her cane.

These echoes stir feelings of horror related to childhood, and in turn enhance the impact of the episode upon the reader. The narrative strategy prompts us to side with Taylor and Turtle, arousing sympathy for their torment. Moreover it creates the same anger and revolt against pedophilia as that recounted by Taylor at the beginning, when she discovers how badly Turtle has been treated:

When I pulled off the pants and the diapers there were more bruises. Bruises and worse. The Indian child was a girl. A girl, poor thing. That fact had already burdened her short life with a kind of misery I could not imagine. (23)

The elusiveness of Taylor's account - with no direct wording of what has happened - renders the scene all the more unbearable. The abominable quality of child abuse is doubled by the reiteration of a similar event within the plot. "Into the Terrible Night" takes the story to a catharsis, dramatizing Taylor's collapse in front of the cruelty of the world:

I sat on my bed for hours looking up words. Pedophilia. Perpetrator. Deviant. Maleficient. I checked books out of the library but there weren't any answers in their either, just more words. At night I lay listening to Turtle breathe, thinking: she could have been killed. So easily she could be dead now. (169-170)
This passage contains a metatextual reference which implicitly calls attention to the essential approach to literature one should have. Indeed, the reader will not grasp the real meaning if he confines to the denotation of a sign. Rather he must go beyond plain definitions and try and decipher the connotations at play which produce a larger network of significance. This passage shows that there is no possible understanding of such wrongdoing, whatever definition one might formulate.

Another intertextual play is signalled by the bean trees leitmotif which also provides the title for the novel. This calls attention to the multifold analogy between Turtle's story and the traditional English tale of "Jack and the Magic Beans". Centre to this parallel is the figure of the ogre who revels in devouring young flesh and, to a certain extent, stands as the tale version of an embodiment of pedophilia. His lust for children recalls the atrocious sexual abuses Turtle has been subjected to by adult, stronger men. Taylor's innocence renders the subject even more poignant:

"There's so much damn ugliness. Everywhere you look, some big guy kicking some little person when they're down." (170)

Additionally, Estevan sometimes calls Turtle by an endearing nickname derived from the Spanish, "Tortolita", which may strike the reader as an indirect reference to V. Nabokov's *Lolita*. The inordinate number of instances when man's evil is dramatized takes hatred of men to a pitch. The only possible remedy seems to lie in a woman's power to love, under the shield of her tender nature:

I put down my book and accepted [Lou Ann's ] hug. I couldn't remember when I had felt so hopeless. (170)

The rift separating men from women seems to build a wall between a world of foulness and destruction, and a world of love and care represented by the mother. This permeates Taylor's language when she loses her temper in front of a social worker, trying to explain how Turtle's traumatic experience must have anihilated the special pregnancy Taylor has offered Turtle:

"She's just been scared practically back into the womb is all." Turtle hadn't spoken once in the days since the incident, and was back to her old ways (...).
"I've just spent about the last eight or nine months trying to convince her that nobody would hurt her again. Why should she believe me now?" (168)

The metaphoric conceptual entailment related to motherhood which goes as follows: MOTHER IS PROTECTION / MOTHER IS LOVE / LOVE IS FOOD / FOOD IS LIFE / MOTHER IS LIFE - as
opposed to MAN IS DEATH - is best illustrated thanks to the progression of Turtle's character throughout the novel.

4) Turtle as a Prophet.

a) Turtle's Character at the Core of the Extended Bean-Tree Metaphor.

As studied before, Turtle's recovery places her at the core of the extended bean tree metaphor. Not haphazardly, the first word Turtle is made to utter is "bean". The narrator subtly invites the reader to decode the child's language:

But neither of us could interpret the significance of Turtle's first word. It was "bean". (97)

The use of paralepsis prompts the reader to scrutinize Turtle's awakening process, materialized in her recovery of language - which, amusingly but significantly, revolves uniquely around horticulture:

I had originally planned to make navy-bean soup in celebration of Turtle's first word, but by the end of the week, she had said so many new words I couldn't have fit them all in a Hungarian Goulash. She seemed to have a one track vocabulary (…) [ which ] ran to vegetables. (100)

The bean trees are in fact directly related to children. The two respectively need water and love to help them grow. Taylor offers Turtle beans, which stands for the gift of life:

Mattie suggested that I give her some of her own beans to play with and I did (…). These are for you to keep". I explained to Turtle (…). For the next half hour she sat quietly between two squash hills, playing with her own beans. Finally, she buried them on the spot, where they were forgotten by all until quite a while later when a ferocious thicket of beans came plowing through the squashes. (98)

This is also interesting since it casts light again on the intertextual play with the legend of "Jack and the Magic Beans." Taylor's gift to Turtle would be the equivalent of the tale's old man's gift to Jack when he promises the boy that the beans will bring him good fortune and happiness. Hence the consecutive images of abundant flourishing. Furthermore, in "Jack and the Magic Beans", the little boy escapes the ogre thanks to the bean tree which has grown up into the clouds and connects the earth with the monster's castle on a dark and vast land. Chased by the greedy ogre who climbs down the bean tree behind him, Jack luckily touches the ground in time to get hold of a hatchet and cuts the tree. The ogre collapses to the ground and dies, and Jack and his mother can then live in peace.
The bean trees are put forward as demon chasers, and also as ladders from earth to the sky. In other words, the bean trees, like a ladder, provide access to places otherwise out of reach, which may be symbolical for one’s unconscious. The bean trees bring a revelation. Firstly, on the extradiegetic level, the meaning of the rhizobia allegory is indeed revealed to the reader through the bean trees; like a ladder, it connects the text with the subtext, which the reader is enabled to access thanks to the symbolism of the bean trees. Secondly, on the diegetic level, the bean trees indeed allow both Jack and Turtle to deal with earlier traumas related to their childhoods, though in different ways. Jack is provided with the opportunity to tread upon the ogre’s domain and to take revenge for his father’s loss, previously murdered by the monster who seized the man’s fortune. As for Turtle, the bean trees given her by her adoptive mother dispell her anxiety and introversion, and the way they grow also teaches her the principles in order to map rebirth onto the scene of her biological mother’s death. Turtle is moreover endowed with visionary powers, making her, in Taylor's own words "a horticultural genius" (227), and allowing her to draw the connection between wisteria vines and bean trees, which indeed prove to be of the same family.

b) Identical Rhyme: "Turtle" - "Purple".

Antonomasia casts light on the author's motivation for naming her character "Turtle", activating the symbolic value attached to the animal. With its shell, round as the sky on top and flat as the earth underneath, the turtle is a representation of the universe at large. It constitutes a cosmography all by itself. It is often seen, like our bean trees, as a mediator between earth and sky, and is endowed with powers of knowledge and divination. Hence Turtle's intuitive knowledge about the wisteria vines and the narrator’s comment:

Turtle was staring up at the wisteria flowers. "Beans", she said, pointing (...). "Bean trees", she said, as plainly as if she had been thinking about it all day. We looked at where she was pointing. Some of the wisteria flowers had gone to seed, and all these wonderful green pods hung down from the branches (...). "Will you look at that", I said. It was another miracle. The flower trees were turning into bean trees. (143-144)
The turtle, as a kind of omniscient and beneficial ancestor, is often made a familiar companion of the house of men; every family in the Dogon country who lacks a patriarch owns a turtle - as it is with the families designed in *The Bean Trees* - and it is given the first daily bite of food and drop of water.

Turtle's name is connected, through identical rhyme, with the colour "purple", ever present and associated with the bean trees. Purple is the colour of temperance - obtained through the blending of an equal amount of blue and red - of lucidity, of balance between earth and sky, between the senses and the mind, passion and intelligence, and love and wisdom. The Arcane 14 of the Tarots, called Temperance, shows an angel holding two vases in his hands - a blue one and a red one - in between which runs a colourless fluid, the essential water of life. Purple is often considered as the symbol for alchemy, possibly indicating a spiritual transfusion (i.e. the coalescence between the symbolism of beans, of the turtle, and the tree and the search for quintessential self as studied above), and the influence which men have upon each other, through suggestion, persuasion, hypnotic influence, mesmerizing domination, potentially magical - hence another link with the power of the bean trees and the way they land into Jack and Turtle’s hands. We may also spot the relevance of such a symbolical analysis as regards the intradiegetic influence of the characters upon each other, as well as the extradiegetic influence of the text over the reader. The dogma of reincarnation is clearly represented by this card, as in ancient Greece, the act of pouring from one vase into another was held synonymous of metempsychosis.

The reader should also draw a link with the legendary purple bird, the Phoenix, who is supposedly endowed with the power to rise from its ashes. One may know that Phoenix is actually the capital city of the state of Arizona, which again highlights the unbelievable power of life in the desert. Interestingly, the use of the stream of consciousness compares Turtle's miraculous recovery with the amazing power of birds to thrive in an apparently poor environment:

[ The Doctor ] put up more of the x-rays in the window, saying things like "spiral fibular fracture here" and "excellent healing" and "some contraindications for psychomotor development". I couldn't really listen. I looked through the bones to the garden on the other side. There was a cactus with bushy arms and a coat of yellow spines as thick as fur. A bird had built her nest in it. In and out she flew among the horrible spiny branches, never once hesitating. You just couldn't imagine how she’d made a home in there. (124)
The genderized personification of the bird once again underlines the transfer of Taylor's thoughts, in this case about Turtle, onto the natural world. Turtle’s strength, striving to recover and to make her way through life is mapped on the bird’s skillful and brave labour. The spiny cactus turns out to be a metaphor \textit{in absentia} for the harmful world in which Turtle however succeeds in thriving.

c) Turtle’s Character and Intertextuality with the Bible.

Purple is thus related to the inexorable cycle of death and sublimation, followed by a new birth or reincarnation, which perfectly relates to our analysis of the extended metaphor for the miracle of life in the diegesis. Turtle's recovery from aphasia thanks to her new mother's love is implicitly compared to Christ's Resurrection. In "The Miracle of Dog Doo Park" the issue is repeatedly tackled, and Lou Ann and Taylor find out that the little girl's original first name was "April". This establishes a clear parallel with God's power to revive Jesus Christ, the speaker of His word, just as Turtle to a certain extent, serves as the author's spokesperson. Our miniature Moses' cryptic speech recalls the belief in prophets who receive from God the power to deliver His messages and who speak in tongues, a language esoteric to the common people. Turtle's prophecy appears as a promise of salvation through motherly love. The child's way of addressing people forefronts her confusion between woman and mother, which in turn highlights the woman's power to give birth, and the equation between love-giving and life-giving:

[Turtle] called every woman Ma something. Lou Ann was Ma Wooahn (…), and I was just Ma. We never told her these names, she just came to them on her own. (115)

Through dramatic irony what at first appears as incomprehensible gibberish is in fact, through double entendre, loaded with meaning. Barbara Kingsolver often plays at deconstructing our conventional use of language, calling attention to other means of expression. For example, aphasia and dyslexia, which are defined by linguists and doctors as mental dysfunctionings which incapacitate our speech ability, here become magically talkative and precious:

[Jewel] had a son with dyslexia, which she explained was a disease that caused people to see things backwards. (…) "But then there's other things where it doesn't matter. Like you take the word WOW, for instance. That's his favorite word, he writes it all over everything. And the word Mom, too". (181)
The palindrome with the word Mom stresses the immovable value of its signified. The overall importance of motherly love has a power which reveals itself way beyond the surface level of signs. Turtle's enigmatic speech and behaviour are in fact highly symbolical. Defamiliarization helps the reader to ponder over our socially received approach to things, which often overlooks quintessential material. Taylor at one point stresses the need to pay more attention to what the three-year-old stands for:

It's funny how people don't give that much thought to what kids want, as long as they're being quiet. (209)

Biblical intertextuality is also grounded in Turtle's early childhood, making her a kind of martyr, with her own cross to bear. Moreover, the way she is found in many ways resembles that of Moses: abandoned wrapped in a bundle of cloth, and miraculously saved by a brave woman who undertakes to raise the infant.

d) Turtle: a "Whirling Dervish".

The remark given to Taylor is followed by an implicit, highly significant reference to the famous painting of the whirling dervishes. This provides an example of Barbara Kingsolver's embroidering of her narrative with latent, symbolical meaning which calls for the reader's active participation into the text. The picnic episode enriches the value of Turtle's character, assuming that the learned reader will possess the cultural background required in order to have insight into the comparison:

It looked like a corny painting (...).
Turtle still had a good deal of energy, and was less interested in eating than in bouncing and jumping and running in circles around the trees. (...) Turtle looked like a whirling dervish in overalls and a green-striped T-shirt. (209)

The allusion to the painting activates the symbolic value of the whirling dervishes in Islamist religion. In the eighth century, Muslim Djalal al-Din Rumi, one of the leaders of Islamic thinking, founded for his followers the Mawlawi tariqua (the muslim name for "brotherhood of dervishes") in Konya. The dervishes are famous for their dance, through which they expressed their beliefs and practiced their faith. Turtle's swirling dance may thus be decoded along the same lines as that of the whirling dervishes. It is
supposed to designate the spiritual method and way leading to the practice of the Law which has been revealed, until one reaches Ultimate Reality. The gestures enacted by the Mawlawi illustrate the rites advocated for life together within Muslim brotherhoods. The latters’ characteristics agree with the rhizobia allegory: they laud infinite tolerance, regardless of religious differences, and induce to love science and beauty under any form. Their rites were extremely blithe, with a strong emphasis on music and group-activities. The famous dance of the Mawlawi, in fact serves as a real liturgical service, each gesture carrying a symbolical meaning.

The dervishes start with spinning round three times, each spin standing for one of the steps getting one closer to God, and which could also apply to Taylor’s own progression throughout the novel: the sharia, or the road to science; the tariqua, the path which gradually grants insight; and the haqqa, the way taking you to union. The dervishes dance with their arms spread out like wings, the right hand turned towards the sky to gather Grace, the left turned towards the earth, spreading there what the other has welcomed from above. Spinning round themselves, they also dance around the room - this circle symbolizes plurality united, together with the cycle of life, from rock to man. It symbolizes the law of the Universe, and the planets spinning around the Sun and on their own axis.

This dance thus brings one back to the quintessential aspects of Existence, which are fundamental and much more ancient than contemporary Occidental beliefs. *The Bean Trees* focuses on the same principle, with Turtle as the visionary reminder of the core essence of things:

> It's also interesting how it's hard to be depressed around a three-year old, if you're paying attention. After a while, whatever you're mooning about begins to seem like some elaborate invention. (209)

The comparison between Turtle and a whirling dervish shows her as the advocator of community-life, understanding the essential principles of life in the cosmos which come before and go way beyond individual worries about one’s own problems in life. Brotherhood, as *The Bean Trees’* plot illustrates, is the way to redemption, whereas individualism and materialism seem to be the best way to remain focused on and bogged in one’s earthly problems. In a way, these very problems arouse in the first place because of our civilizations which have invented and imposed principles and a certain way of life to which any
member must submit, or else will suffer the consequences of being an outcast. Turtle’s dance stresses the discrepancy between the rites and concerns of earlier civilizations and those of modern American society. Kingsolver’s sense of community influences all her novels in which she pays great attention to other forms of thinking the relationship with the other, in contrast to the American belief in self-sufficiency:

Community comes from a gut certainty that you depend on others for survival, and they depend on you. In a rural place that’s more apparent because you know all the people around you and can enumerate specifically how your lives are connected: this man will help me if lightning strikes my barn; this woman will look after my garden when I go away… In an urban place these relationships seem to get lost (...). [We] forget how noisy and joyful [community] is. (Letter, 5 Nov. 1990)\(^5\)

As a matter of fact, Barbara Kingsolver’s other works go even deeper in presenting the way communities different from the modern American ones function.\(^6\) As we will further explicit in our third part, Barbara Kingsolver's dedication to the respect of life in the cosmos transpires in her writing. *The Bean Trees*, as every other novels, short-stories, essays and articles which she later wrote, appears as a kind of hymn to creation. Her hand presents the same double symbolism as that of the whirling dervishes' Sama, that is their spiritual concert: a cosmic symbolism, or the whirling of every moving element, from the atom to the planets; and a mystic symbolism, souls whirling around supreme Reality without being able to reach it. Essential to *The Bean Trees* is the message of hope carried throughout the novel, and best illustrated by the way Barbara Kingsolver has carefully designed the network with Mattie at its centre.

**5) Mattie's Place : a Fountain of Faith.**

a) **Mattie's Character : the Supreme Surrogate Mother.**

As studied earlier, Mattie's garage is central to the plot dramatized in Arizona. The bean trees, set in Mattie's backyard, serve as a prop which points to Mattie as the pillar of the rhizobia allegory:

Mattie was like a rock in the road. You could stare at her till the cows came home, but it wouldn't budge the fact of her one inch. (80)

---


Hence the metaleptic value of the dialogue which takes place on Mattie's warm welcome of Taylor and Turtle:

"Here's the bean trees I was telling you about."
Sure enough, they were one hundred percent purple: stems, leaves, flowers and pods.
"Gosh", I said.
"The Chinese lady next door gave them to me (...). They're originally from seeds she brought over with her in nineteen-ought-seven (...). Can you picture that? Keeping the same beans going all these years".

Through double entendre, the text brings into focus the question of representation ("Can you picture that?"). Mattie, who embodies wisdom, clearly draws attention to the unending cycle of birth and rebirth, and moreover acts as a catalyst for abiding faith in the power of life. The bean trees combine with the value of Mattie's character, who is shaped as the guide of forlorn people wandering desperately through the desert of life's hardships. Mattie's role indeed incarnates reliance on renewal and rebirth, as shows her reaction after the "killing frost" which has devastated her beautiful, endeavourly tended garden:

The night before, she'd listened to the forecast and picked a mop bucket full of hard little marbles off the tomato vines, and this morning she had green-tomato pies baking upstairs. (...) [ It ] honestly smelled delicious.

Mattie's discrete effort to mend catastrophes and suck nourishing produce out of a ruined harvest presents her as queen-bee in a beehive. The reader may connect "Jesus Is Lord Used Tires", run by Mattie with "The Whistle Stop Cafe", run by the daredevilish tomboy Idgie and her friend Ruth in Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*. 37 Barbara Kingsolver's literature indeed fits in a trend of south American novelists, which blend humour and drama, and often tells the stories of women secretly risking their lives in the struggle for intercultural tolerance and survival of life under any form. In both of these novels, the reader is moved to tears by the characters' adventures which weld fiction with historical facts, and eventually deliver messages of hope beyond the pain inflicted by life, counterbalanced by laughter and love.


Barbara Kingsolver’s writing shares many common features with South American novelists. However, since our study is especially focused on Barbara Kingsolver’s first novel, we cannot develop this subject as much as we would like to. In our third part, we will nevertheless tackle the status of Barbara Kingsolver’s writing in contemporary American literature based on our analysis of *The Bean Trees*.
b) "Jesus Is Lord Used Tires".

The bean-tree allegory finds an echo in the metaphor in *absentia* which compares Mattie's place with a bee hive. The secret rhizobia (or "microscopic bugs that live underground in little knots [and] suck nitrogen gas right out of the soil to turn it into fertilizer for the plant") highly resemble bees, whose activity consists in extracting pollen from flowers and transforming it into honey. The identical rhyme between "bees" and "beans" pinpoints the parallel, and underlines the healing power of sweet-tasting honey. Also, the Biblical value given to honey dwells on its divine origin and its healing powers as food and drink for both the body and the soul. Honey is celebrated for its virtues of fecundity and immortality. The presence of God is repeatedly alluded to, in close connection with the natural world. The description of Roosevelt Park where a large part of the story is set, opposite to Mattie's garage introduces the heavenly quality of the place:

> The wisteria vines were a week or two past full bloom, but the bees and the perfume still hung in the air overhead, giving it a sweet, purplish hue. If you ignored the rest of the park, you could imagine this was a little heaven for people who had lived their whole lives without fear of bees. " (143)

The narrator's humour gives a realistic dimension to her comparison. But simultaneously, the lyricism contained in the text - expressed through synaesthesia with references to the senses of smell ("perfume"), sight ("purplish hue"), and tactile sensations ("hung thick in the air"); through zeugmas ("the bees and the perfume still hung"; "sweet purplish hue") - gives a magical touch to the setting and the episode at hand. Such stylistic devices actually characterize the whole novel, giving it the same qualities as those just stated.

The peculiar name of Mattie's repair-shop could be analyzed as a promise of salvation for life-exhausted characters on the road to heaven:

> Mattie's backyard looked like the place where old cars die and go to heaven. (46)

The great number of women gathered around Mattie goes along with the desert as it is designated in the Apocalypse (12, 10, 14) : as an echo of the first exodus of the Hebrew people in the desert, the woman (equated with Israel, the people chosen by God), persecuted by the dragon, seeks refuge in the desert.
where God sustains her with miraculous food. As a matter of fact, Mattie's place also serves as a "sanctuary" for illegal immigrants from Central America, for whom Mattie becomes a kind of temporary guardian. One of the main links of what she calls the:

Underground Railroad, by which she mean[s] these churches and the people who carry refugees between them (217-218)

Mattie is also the soundest entity of the chain of women working hard for the preservation of life. Hence the intratextual echo with the definition of rhizobia as:

A kind of underground railroad moving secretly up and down the roots. (227)

The covert activism of Mattie's place goes along with the colour purple of her bean vines. Interestingly, she was offered the seeds by a Chinese woman, which prompts us to draw a parallel with the Oriental belief in beans as evil chasers. Also, "Mattie" is a variation of the name Martha, who is the patron saint of homemakers.

c) A Feminine, Revisited Version of "The Great Chain of Being".

Such a pervading imagery heralds the happy outcome of the novel, and acts as a catalyst for the book's overall message of hope. The diegetic universe we are presented appears as a modern, revisited version of the Elizabethan concept of The Great Chain of Being, with God's angels working on earth embodied in women. Through the voice of Mrs Greer, the text unvalidates the notion of a natural hierarchy:

"The way I see it," she said, "a person isn’t nothing more than a scarecrow. You, me, Earl Wickentot, the President of the United States, and even God almighty, as far as I can see. The only difference between one that stands up good and one that blows over is what kind of stick they're stuck up there on." (5)

Onomastics play an essential role in that the Spanish name Esperanza plays on the polysemic value of linguistic signs. The name Esperanza comes from the Spanish verb "esperar" which has a three-fold translation in English; it indeed corresponds to the verbs "to wait", "to expect", or "to hope". The careful reader will thus perceive how the text connects hope with motherhood, all the more since "Hope" is precisely the name Esperanza is given on leaving Arizona - running towards a safer shelter - when she needs to bear a name which could match with American citizenship. Clearly, onomastics carry the idea,
underlying most of the text, that hope lies in the power of life which is first and foremost attributed to
woman's power to give birth. Taylor's voice brings this up when she learns from Estevan that in Spanish,
another way of saying to deliver a baby into the world is:

[T]o give [a baby] to the light. (154)

Light is a common image for hope, life and salvation, which maps the characters' quest onto that of the
Hebrew people for the Promised Land. As opposed to faith in life connected with motherhood, we find
man's evil lust for domination and destruction which is shown as the main ambush on the way to
heavenly love and happiness. This is strikingly illustrated in the chapter "Into the Terrible Night", which
incarnates man's evil in the traditional, phallic symbol of the snake:

The flashlight beam had found a snake, just at eye level, its muscular coils looped around a smooth tree
trunk (...)
The rattle was poised upright but did not shake.
"I didn't know they could get up in trees," I said.
"Sure they'll climb After bird's eggs." (164)

Man's potential harm towards woman and earth's progeniture, as symbolized by the egg which
conventionally stands for creation, clearly separates the female sphere, associated with construction and
reconstruction, from the male universe, where destruction seems to be the main result of their deeds. The
snake as a symbol for evil is one of the pet issues discussed by feminists who demand a revision of the
way Genesis has been interpreted. For a long time, woman has been regarded as the evil bringer, unable
to resist the snake’s incentive to bite into the forbidden fruit. Because of the patriarchal interpretation and
translation of the text found in the English version of King James' Bible, men have for a long time
socially transmitted a warning against woman’s dangerous power as a temptress away from
righteousness. This was especially the case among Puritan thinkers, and was held as a justification of
woman’s confinement to the private sphere of the house. Woman has been held responsible for man’s
fall, an idea which the feminist movement wants to prove erroneous, because of the disparaging image of
woman which it vehicles.

The many references to creation take on a metadiegetic dimension, in that Barbara Kingsolver -
the implicitly omnipresent author from whom the text originates - may be seen as the supreme, God-like
entity reigning over the diegetic universe she has given birth to. Barbara Kingsolver has herself compared the writing of her first novel with her first pregnancy with her real-life daughter, Camille. The parallel between children and books is stressed at the very end of the novel when we see Lou Ann and Taylor discuss how to protect a child from the world, and the mother’s role towards a child as her genitor:

"But nothing on this earth is guaranteed, when you get right down to it, you know? I've been thinking about that. About how your kids aren't really YOURS, they're just these people that you try to keep an eye on, and hope you'll all grow up someday to like each other and still be in one piece. What I mean is, everything you get is really just on loan. Does that make sense?"

"Sure," I said. "Like library books. Sooner or later they've all got to go back into the nightdrop." (231)

The comparison between children and books through the two female characters’ dialogue relates the mother’s power of creation with the writer’s own delivery of a creative work. The Bean Trees thus reveals itself as a narrative stitched along an extended metaphor which conveys a message of hope thanks to the different forms under which the power of creation can come. The novel at hand precisely becomes the baby which Barbara Kingsolver "give[s] to the light." The narrative strategy indeed uses feminine voices in order to transcribe the equation between faith in the power of creation and redemption through God, through the mother, and through the writer.

Women are endowed with saintly attributes, with particular insistence on their eagerness for purity. Hence the recurring references to the Virgin Mary:

(…) I caught sight of [Turtle] on Esperanza's lap, playing with Esperanza's hair and trying on Esperanza's sunglasses. (…) the two of them looked perfectly content: "Madonna and Child with Pink Sunglasses." (198)

Taylor's vision is used in order to portrait the purity of mother and child love. Many of the female characters bear names that somehow echo that of the Virgin. Taylor's previous name, for instance may be interpreted as Little Mary (Mari-etta). Also, the way Taylor welcomes this unexpected child which miraculously lands in her car, and agrees to the responsibility of becoming the infant’s mother recalls the Virgin’s "Yes" when asked to bear God’s son into the world. In addition, "Virgie Mae" is not without phonetic resemblance to "Virgin Mary". The above-passage moreover takes place in the chapter entitled "Guardian Saints" which dramatizes the beginning of Esperanza’s rebirth. Her character, like Turtle’s, is indeed brought back from a state of complete introversion to the will to live again. She thus serves as another embodiment of a recovery through faith in the power of life. Interestingly, this passage strikes the
reader as an analeptic reference to an earlier passage of utmost importance in order to grasp Barbara 
Kingsolver’s text. In chapter four, Taylor walks into a shop which exhibits objects Taylor is unfamiliar 
with, and asks the shopkeeper for explanations:

"What’s it supposed to be?"
"It’s non-representational," she said, looking at me like I was some kind of bug she’d just found in her 
bathroom. (48)

Through the pervading colour pink, it provides an oblique allusion to contemporary artists such as Andy 
Wharhol, Basquiat, and their followers who created a new post-modern trend in experimental art. This 
was a form of anti-art and marked a radical innovation. One of its basic principles was to express the 
artist’s eccentricity and the results were totally delirious.

Through double entendre, the words "comic relief" contain an implicit reference to art, and especially to 
literature, for the term comic relief is precisely a literary device. In Cuddon’s *Dictionary of Literary 
Terms and Literary Theory*, we find that the term refers to

[comic episodes or interludes, usually in tragedy, aimed to relieve the tension and heighten the tragic 
element by contrast. …] The humour involved tends to be wry or sardonic. (171)

Once again, we grasp the extent of Barbara Kingsolver’s subtle strategy, who takes up and reverses fixed 
meaning, using it to her own purpose. Here, the sardonic quality of the term "comic relief" is preserved,
but it is subverted in order to present non-representational art as comical. This subtle parody presents such an approach to art as ridiculous. Indeed, as the text itself shows and as Barbara Kingsolver explains when she comments upon her own writing, her literature does not set an antagonistic relation between the aesthetic and the representational principles of art. Rather, both the text and the author clearly establish the complementary relation between the two principles. This brings us to our third part, which seeks to prove how Kingsolver’s writing differs from contemporary theory which rejects representational art, and how *The Bean Trees* illustrates the purpose which art can be endowed with, precisely when it succeeds in producing works that are both representational and beautiful in their form.
III- BARBARA KINGSOLVER’S WRITING: THE REDEMPTIVE POWER OF CREATION
1) Blindness versus Consciousness: Unveiling the Truth.

a) Mattie's flashlight: a metaphor in absentia for Barbara Kingsolver's Writing.

Taylor's progression throughout the text - taking her from naivety to insight into the world as it is - urges the reader to follow her and, by proxy, to feel the strong emotions she feels when discovering crushing realities. Her innocent, well-meaning foolery at the beginning is abated by her heartbreaking kindness and the soft heart we immediately are shown under the tough-cookie appearance:

I didn't want to believe the world could be so unjust. But of course it was right there in front of my nose.

If the truth was a snake it would have bitten me a long time ago. It would have had me for dinner. (159)

The comparison between truth and a snake emphasizes the bitter sting the character is made to feel when confronted with reality. However the use of the conditional ("if" + -ED) unvalidates this hypothesis. As we will see further on, it is precisely the contrary of truth, that is to say lies and ignorance, that are in fact embodied in the snake figure, thus stressing the insidious, poisonous impact of intellectual blindness.

Taylor's initial cocoon world indeed at one point collapses, when she has acceded an objective vision of the hurtful realities and potential danger inherent to the world. Mattie clearly plays the role of the guide towards enlightenment, activating the TRUTH IS LIGHT metaphoric concept:

Fortunately Mattie, who was troubled by night-blindness, had thought to bring a flashlight. (163; l.39-40)
The tautological compound noun "night-blindness" stunningly highlights the symbolic value of the flashlight as a necessary prop, standing for the revealer of truth. Mattie is indeed the embodiment of awareness, which is gradually instilled in Taylor's character as well:

> [Mattie to Taylor] "[The toad frogs] are here all along, smarty. Burrowed in the ground. They wait out the dry months kind of deadlike, just like everything else, and when the rain comes they wake up and crawl out of the ground and start to holler." (163)

The pervading semantic fields connoting stealth and creepiness breathe through the text a horrific quality, making us aware of invisible realities. To Mattie's flashlight corresponds Barbara Kingsolver's pen, with which she uncovers the hidden face of the world, extricates truth from shadow, and renders them visible to the reader's sight:

> The flashlight beam had found a snake, just at eye level, (...). With the flashlight [Mattie] followed the coils to the end and pointed out the bulbs on the tail. (164)

Here again, Taylor's unconscious fear of men is implicitly suggested by the text. Taylor, as opposed to Mattie, suffers from blindness in front of the truth. The text casts light on what Taylor fails to see. The "bulbs on the tail" may be regarded as an oblique reference to a light bulb which would "point out" to the transfer of Taylor's fear of men onto her seemingly irrational fear of snakes:

> A little noise came from my throat. I wasn't really afraid, but there is something about seeing a snake that makes your stomach tighten, no matter how you make up your mind to feel about it. (164)

This quote shows how the text paves the way for an active reading which should allow the reader to unveil the latent foreshadowing of the plot. The reception of the text is planned by the author, who assumes that the symbolical richness which she instils in the narrative will activate a shared frame of unconscious responses, common to our conceptual system. Barbara Kingsolver exhibits the evolution of Taylor's character which is textually retrievable from the distance between the "narrated I" and the "narrating I".

The text contains many elements which call attention to the unconscious processes at work in language. As we have analyzed, the pathetic fallacy allows to read the subtext beneath Taylor's words, in order to grasp how she projects her inner feelings onto the landscape. The syntax in the following sentence highlights the gapse between the manifest and the latent, in language as a mirror of how our mind works:
A cool breeze came up behind us, sending shivers along the spines of the mesquite trees. (161)

The coma separates two clauses, the second one being introduced by an -ING verb infers that there is a logical link between the two fragments. However, what we expect to effect a consequential entailment turns out to be an explanationless coordinator. The comma, playing on double entendre, could thus be seen as logic put asleep, leaving a blank in the text. It is indeed striking how the sentence moves from the personal pronoun "us" -referring to the characters which should be feeling the wind - to attributing inanimate objects with humane qualities.

Both our language and our understanding are in fact punctuated by comas, relegating the real connections between two objects into a place which remains out of reach. The author's strategy in bringing Taylor to remember one of her dreams subtly illustrates Lacan's statement:

The unconscious is structured like a language.38

Estevan's perky remark indeed activates Taylor's memory which suddenly crops up an element which has until then dwelt in an obstructed region:

I remembered a dream about him from a few nights before, one that I had not until that minute known I'd had. A very detailed dream. (164)

We do not get an explicit description of that dream. The blank which is left as regards content is left for the reader to fill. Here again, the unconscious processes elements to render them acceptable to our consciousness. Hence the puzzling oxymoron, contained in "dry stream beds" (161), may represent a wording of Taylor's unconscious frustration in front of her empty bed. What we keep latent often provides us with a protection, helping us to repress desires which we cannot yield to. This is justified by Taylor's reaction:

I felt a flush crawling up my neck and was glad for the dusk. (164)

References to light and darkness are legion in the text, and may be interpreted as oblique allusions to the conscious versus unconscious dichotomy:

I was amazed. There seemed to be no end to the things that could be hiding, waiting it out, right where you thought you could see it all. (164)

This appears as a metatextual reference which calls for deciphering what we read as a kind of 'dream-text', as Terry Eagleton has phrased it, meaning that a text undergoes the same 'dream-work', activating unconscious mechanisms. In other words, the failure to say which is unavoidable in language, may be compared to the failure to see - blindness being a common metaphor for misunderstanding. Moreover, the very word "to understand", if we come to think of it, means "to stand under". This implies that understanding lies in going under the surface of things, beyond the manifest into latent meaning. The beginning of our passage thus takes on a metalinguistic value:

> It looked something like a huge blue-gray shower curtain being drawn along by the hand of God. You could just barely see through it, just enough to make out the silhouette of the mountains on the other side. (161)

We may perceive this as an illustration of the mind, divided in between two different places which hardly communicate at all. Simultaneously, the landscape becomes the text, with its enlightened side and its obscure, paradigmatic doubles. Obviously, the text at hand plays with the following metaphoric concepts:

**AWARENESS IS LIGHT. UNCONSCIOUSNESS IS DARKNESS. UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING.**

The elusiveness of Taylor's speech gives evidence of her shunning of the truth. Taylor's insight into reality is still a very limited and blurred one. Hence the recurrent understatements, such as "It looked something like…" and "just barely". The enunciator is made to fail in reading the latent beneath the manifest. On the contrary, the reader, cognizant of language as a sign-system, should be able to decipher the symptoms of the text, which are metaphorically compared to "white ribbons":

> From time to time nervous white ribbons of lightning jumped between the mountaintops and the clouds. (161)

The extended metaphor shows how subtle a work is that of the unconscious. The text seems to whisper softly through the words, conveying further meaning.

> The birds were excited, flitting along the ground and perching on thin, wildly waving weed stalks. (161) The wildly waving stalks may stand for the text, calling out for attention as regards the signs which contain seeds of meaning, as thin as the surface layer might be. Therefore, the alliteration in [w] imitates the wind which is alluded to, and which runs beneath the skin of things, prompting to fathom the depth of a text. The quotation here above not only conveys a description of the landscape, but metaphorically
stands for Taylor's repressed desire for Estevan. The birds are indeed a recurrent symbol for women throughout the novel, and "perching on thin wildly waving stalks" is rich enough with erotic connotations.

Furthermore, through double entendre, the reader may interpret the quotes involving Mattie as metaleptic references to Barbara Kingsolver's own activity through literature. Indeed, her narrative never hesitates to show in broad daylight what many people would rather not confront. Hence the equation between Mattie’s "flashlight" and Kingsolver’s pen, grounded on the similar way in which both «point out» to invisible realities hidden under the surface text. We will try to establish how Mattie’s role in the novel as an insightful guide for the characters towards a better understanding of the world, inciting them to confront the truth, is comparable to the text itself. Both indeed reveal the evil of the world and at the same time stress the superior beauty and hope which is inherent to life. The reader, following Taylor on the tracks leading to insight is guided towards a revelation which he is given the means to accede through the gradual unfolding of the plot. The latter indeed simultaneously offers the key in order to decipher the allegorical value of the text. Kingsolver’s fiction preserves a realistic dimension in the portraits and lifestyle of her characters, as well as in the historical facts blended with the plot:

When I begin a novel, I don't start building the story around pre-existing characters or incidents. I begin with theme. I devise a very big question whose answer I believe will be amazing, and maybe shift the world a little bit on its axis. Then I figure out how to create a world in which that question can be asked, and answered. (...) Fiction is invention but it's ultimately about truth. (Barbara Kingsolver's web page, Dialogue.)

The verisimilitude effect serves the writer's purpose, aiming at the greatest impact over the reader. The later should not fail to identify the social and political issues which the novel forefronts. Kingsolver’s statement as regards her approach to literature coalesces with The Bean Trees which is a modern allegory. Kingsolver’s treatment of the allegorical narrative recalls Oscar Wilde’s preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray 39:

The artist is the creator of beautiful things.
To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim. (…)
The nineteenth-century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.

The nineteenth-century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.

(3)

In *The Bean Trees*, the underlying text indeed gives a realistic portrait of today’s society in the United States, and the surface diegesis is in fact a conceit for a beautifully written description of present day institutions and mentalities which the artist has deep insight into and reveals to the public through the means of art. The end of our second part focused on how the text itself discredited non-representational art. It seems that Kingsolver has a firm knowledge of Oscar Wilde’s theories as regards the purpose of literature, some of which she clearly agrees with, some which seem more problematical. In this third part, we will try and relate our study of Kingsolver’s allegorical narrative to Oscar Wilde’s preface, which seems of utmost interest as regards the different theories one may vindicate concerning art’s purpose. Already, we may establish the common points between Wilde’s stands in defence of Realism and Romanticism and the analysis of *The Bean Trees* which we have led so far, as a text in the trend of both Realism and Romanticism.

b) **Dialogues : Showing over Telling.**

Out of Henry James' dichotomy which explains the writer's need to choose between "showing" and "telling", Barbara Kingsolver opts for the first one when dealing with political and social issues, and she therefore integrates many dialogues within her narrative where the characters steal the show. Their voices are, apparently, the only ones which we hear, and direct speech makes it harder to dodge what is stated. In the chapter entitled "Ismene", Estevan - whose profession is strategically that of a school teacher - completes Taylor's education about the political situation in Guatemala. Himself a Guatemalan refugee, he thus appears as well informed and reliable. The narrative counts Estevan and Esperanza's fictional story, and doing so, it also gives a description of the actual living-conditions of the population, encompassing a great number of historical facts not necessarily known to the American public. Estevan voices an accusation towards Americans who ignore their own country's actions abroad:

"I can see that it would be easier not to know." (135)
Taylor’s answer however counterbalances his opinion, explaining how disconnected most people are from political decisions, which is even worse. It indeed exposes how the American Government, to a certain extent, is disloyal towards the people. Taylor’s bafflement illustrates how one could feel cheated by the leading politicians who betray the voting people, keeping many things secret for fear of too strong a disapproval. Taylor’s point of view participates in the defence of blind Americans, who have no idea whatsoever of what might be going on:

"That's not fair, you don't see at all. You think you're the foreigner here, and I'm the American, and I just look the other way while the President or somebody sends down this and that, shiploads of telephones to torture people with. But nobody asked my permission, OK? Sometimes I feel like I'm a foreigner too.” (135)

Making Taylor oscillate and then advance, continually, between unbearable discoveries and her natural sense of revolt proves to be the author's strategy who uses Taylor's character to tackle delicate issues. Taylor is gradually dispossessed of her alazon-quality, and her initiation to life provides the occasion to expose abnormal suffering imposed on individuals by the warped workings of society. The name of the couple's daughter, "Ismene", draws an intertextual link with Sophocles' Ismene in Antigone. Both characters are ignobly made victims of warring groups fighting for power, torn between enemies who set no boundaries to their determination to win their battle. Barbara Kingsolver comments on her motivation when choosing the child's name:

Originally I named the child Iphegenia, the innocent daughter sacrificed to war. Perfect, right? But Iphegenia turned out to be distractingly odd and also too perfectly symbolic… So in a later draft I shifted to Ismene because it’s a reasonable name for a Central American child (i.e., I've heard it before), and I hoped it would carry some of the same meaning—again, the innocent daughter. (Letter, 17 Jan. 1991)

Kingsolver's writing in The Bean Trees undeniably achieves major success in the beautiful story which casts light on the importance of strategy, and purpose as possibly the main ground for the text's production in the first place. Such an argumentation is obviously encouraged by the explanations given by the author when she criticizes her own work, which however does not stand in the way of art’s aesthetic purpose. On the contrary, as we will see, it is precisely through the beauty of art that Kingsolver hopes to "shift the world a little bit on its axis" (i.e. quotation above). Nevertheless, Kingsolver’s appraisal
of her own art shows that aestheticism is clearly not her one and only goal as a writer. Oscar Wilde declares:

No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved. 
No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonnable mannerism of style. (3)

From what Kingsolver claims, she does not share Wilde’s point of view about the artist’s lack of involvement within his work as regards his ethical sympathies:

But once you’ve fixed your soul to the page and sent it off for publication, you’re nailed down. You’ve committed youself to an elaborate set of opinions about truth, justice, and the ways of the world. Furthermore, you’ve set your prose in stone, revealing to the world your stylistic grace and mastery of the fictional form – or not. (Barbara Kingsolver’s web page, Dialogue Section)

Oscar Wilde dissociates the man, who can have and express his ethical principles, from the artist, whose only task is to devise beauty in a form devoid of personal opinion.

2) Fiction and Realism.

a) Secondary Characters’ Portraits: Stereotypes Depicting Reality.

The author imagines Taylor's many encounters and thus uses secondary characters in order to depict typical, condemnable thinking. The perfectly harmonious little universe which Barbara Kingsolver creates and sets in Arizona may obviously be placed in the tradition of Thomas More’s *Utopia*. This book is a masterpiece in the treatment of allegorical narrative.

We remember Taylor’s thought on arriving in Arizona for the first time, making her feel like a VISITOR FROM ANOTHER PLANET, as an inscription on a man’s T-shirt has it. Taylor’s trip strikingly resembles that of the young Englishman who serves as the main character in Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon*. In this other masterpiece, the protagonist stumbles over an unknown country and discovers a society and its system of rules, previously foreign to him. For instance, they perceive illness as a crime and claim that unhealthy people should be punished and segregated by respectable people. Hence the

---

parallel with Taylor’s account of her childhood to Estevan, when she remembers how she was treated as an outcast because of her mother’s financial destitution:

"And then there were the rest of us, the poor kids and the farm kids. Greasers, we were called, or Nutters. The main rule was that there was absolutely no mixing. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yes," he said. "In India they have something called the caste system. Members of different castes cannot marry or even eat together. The lowest caste is called the Untouchables." (133)

Estevan’s response casts light on the link between the diegetic and extra-diegetic facts. The reader is thus made aware of the realistic dimension of the text, denouncing systems validated by present-day societies. The chapter later takes up this dialogue, and points to the fact that disparaging labels are often pinned onto those who can be spotted because of colour-difference, the visual sign of one’s otherness:

"In the fall, the kids that lived in the country would pick walnuts to earn money for school clothes (...). It stained your hands black, and then you were marked. That was the worst part, to go to school with black hands and black fingernails. That was proof positive you were a Nutter." (133)

The reader may grasp the indirect reference to today’s racism, based on the rejection of the other on the mere grounds of skin-colour differences. Moreover, we may see an implicit allusion to the American history of Slavery, which was justified by white men’s assumption that complexion entitled an individual to a certain rank in a socially constructed hierarchy, placing non-whites as inferior to whites. Lastly, the modern setting also provides an oblique reference to present-day racism which endures to a certain extent. The text thus shows the dangerous consequences upon individuals who are clearly victimized by society.

Sandi, for instance, serves as the recipient for the characteristic destitution of single-mothers in America. Abandoned by her entire family as well as her son’s father, her courage and vigour are however put forward through Taylor’s admiration. She thus exemplifies the bravery of young mothers who often have to carry the burden of split families and must manage combining household duties, child-raising and bread-earning all at once:

"Life had delivered Sandi a truckload of manure with no return address (...). But nothing really seemed to throw Sandi. She knew all about the things like how to rub an ice cube on kid's gums when they were teething, and where to get secondhand baby clothes for practically nothing. (66-67)

Mrs. Logan and her mother's racist pre-conceived ideas are introduced in order to exhibit the evil of colour discrimination:
Mrs. Logan disliked Angel because he was a Mexican. (27)
"It's a sin to be working on Sunday. He ought to be home with his family on the Lord's day." Granny Logan said, and sighed. "I guess I oughtn't expect better from a heathen Mexican." (58)

Virgie Mae's resentful comments with which she bluntly reproaches immigrants echo such disparaging intolerance:

"Before you know it the whole world will be jibbering and jabbering till we don't know it's America. (...) Well, it's the truth. They ought to stay put in their own dirt, not come here taking up jobs." (106-107)

The Bean Trees actually largely tackles a wide range of different forms of oppression on account of colour and gender discrimination. Choosing characters with such disparate ethnic origins - that is Indians from Guatemala, Mexicans, Native Americans represented by the Cherokees, and Blacks - the novel eventually reunites them through the voices and actions of the primary characters. Obviously the realistic descriptions which we get of contemporary vice sustain Wilde’s explanation:

Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art.
Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art. (3)

As we have already largely dealt with, The Bean Trees is indeed a beautiful painting, if we may say so, of vice and virtue as seen by the writer among twentieth century America.

b) Primary Characters' voices: Vindicating a Higher Degree of Tolerance of the Other.

Strategically enough, the primary characters always comment upon segregative thinking, thus winning the upper hand as regards the ideological argumentation which is discretely inserted within the rest of the plot. Lou Ann's character turns into the "graceful warrior" struggling for cross-cultural understanding, and is to that purpose involved in relationships with men of non-white origins. Against her relatives' lack of tolerance, Lou Ann softly but firmly takes upon her to stand in defence of difference:

In Tucson, she tried to explain to her mother, there were so many Mexicans that people didn't think of them as a foreign race. They were doctors, bank clerks, TV personalities, and even owned hotels. (27)

Moreover, we are informed of how such discriminating mentalities are mostly the result of ignorance. This stresses the danger of stereotypes maintained by poor knowledge:

Mrs. Logan (...) lived in eastern Kentucky and had never even seen a Mexican. (28)
Lou Ann's voice furthermore reverses the scales, prompting admiration and respect towards the rough conditions and hard labour immigrants have to deal with:

"It's shift work (…). He's just got to go in when they tell him to, and that's that. And he's not a heathen. He was born right here in America, same as the rest of us." Just because he wasn't baptized in some old dirty crick (…). (58-59)

The character of Lou Ann serves to establish a parallel between the hardships the earlier immigrants who settled in the New World had to face and the modern predicaments of another, new version of immigrants, similarly struggling to adapt to the harsh conditions of today’s «New World».

Lou Ann’s evolution is all the more essential since her inherent, nonsical feeling of inferiority aims at deconstructing the preposterous idea that an individual should be considered superior to another on the grounds of gender. Her character's progression denounces the disastrous effects of the domination currently imposed by men onto women, within the mould shaped by patriarchal ideology.

In this novel which dwells at great length on the man versus woman antagonism, we are shown two different female attitudes embodied in Lou Ann and Taylor, who will eventually enrich one another with a more positive and balanced position. However, at the beginning, opposite to Taylor's belligerance, the reader is shown Lou Ann's crumbled self-confidence. She is afflicted by a sense of guilt for her missing father and her departed husband, as a result of stereotypes imposed by society, making her see herself as a failure:

[Lou Ann :] "I guess I was [glad when Angel left]. But still, you know, something went wrong. You're supposed to love the same person your whole life long till death do you part and all that. And if you don't, well, you've got to have screwed up somewhere."
[Taylor :] "Lou Ann, you read too many magazines." (87-88)

The roads laid out by society as the righteous ones evidently don't fit in the case of Lou Ann. Given the portrait of her couple, the reader indubitably blames its fall on Angel. We nevertheless witness the pressure put on Lou Ann because of what she has been taught. As a result, her self-esteem has been reduced to null, turning her into walking insecurity. For instance, Lou Ann seems to hanker for the same physical appearance as that exhibited in women's magazines, proning models as the definition of female beauty:
Lou Ann despised her looks, and had more ways of saying so than anyone I’d ever known. "I ought to be shot for looking like this," she’d tell the mirror in the front hall before going out the door. "I look like I’ve been drug through hell backwards," she would say on just any ordinary day. "Like death warmed over. Like something the cat puked up." (99)

If the reader is tempted to laugh at the amusing comparisons, the negative image which Lou Ann has of herself remains convincingly shocking. Her self-disparaging comments in fact repeat what she receives from the outside world as the belittling and distorting view of herself and of women in general. For example, she cannot ignore the image of woman which is encouraged by the pornographic shop next to Mattie’s, significantly called "Fanny Heaven":

There was something innocent and primitive about the painting on the door, as though the leopard-bikini lady might have been painted by a schoolchild, except that she was positioned in such a way that the door handle, when a person pushed it, would sink into her crotch. This door always gave Lou Ann the shivers, though she tried not to give it a second thought. (30)

Lou Ann's lack of self-confidence flows out on Angel's departure, when she is suddenly forced to go job-hunting:

"Who would want to hire me? I can't do anything." (126-1.25)

Taylor, as Lou Ann's friend, understands Lou Ann's unreasonable complexes:

My theory was that Lou Ann suffered from the same disease as Snowboots: feeling guilty for things beyond your wildest imagination. (144)

Taylor's concern for her friend also provides an example of how different the two characters are at the beginning of the novel as regards the way they react to things and the images they possess of themselves. Taylor's confidence almost borders on impudence, making her do things such as wearing a T-shirt which says "DAMN I'M GOOD." But at least, she does not fear to fight back and is unimpressed by the media and fashion:

I wanted the mirror to talk back, to say "shush, you do not", but naturally it just mouthed the same words back at her, leaving her so forlorn that I was often tempted to stick little notes on it. I thought of my T-shirt, Turtle's now, from Kentucky lake. Lou Ann needed a DAMN I'M GOOD mirror. (99; l.19-23)

The dialogues between Taylor and Lou Ann denounce man's encroachment upon women, which stresses how The Bean Trees is to a large extent a book about invasion, in which the author exposes the insidious way men pervade women's values, and tend to dictate subordination:

Lou Ann shuddered. "That's the door what gets me. The way they made the door handle. Like a woman is something you shove on and walk right through.(...)"
"Don't ignore it, then," I said. "Talk back to it. Say, 'You can't do that number one to me you shit-for-brains', or something like that. Otherwise it kind of weasels its way into your head whether you like it or not. (...) What I'm saying is you can't just sit there, you got to get pissed off." (150)

The spatial and ontological metaphors comparing a woman to a territory and man's mistreatment of her with a venomous snake or a worm - some kind of reptile or crawling animal in any case - draws a parallel between female subordination and the everlasting fight for domination acquired through land-possession which History is replete with. Taylor's voice once more serves so as to rebel against patriarchal lust for power, and her attitude wears off on Lou Ann who is eventually given the strength to reject sexual harrassment, instead of silently ingurgitating and developping feelings of inferiority:

[ Lou Ann : ] "[ The job interviewer ] kept on calling me sweetheart and talking to my boobs instead of my face, this big flabby guy with greasy hair and you just know he reads every one of those porno magazines they keep behind the counter. (...) Jeez, the whole thing gave me the creeps from the word go." (149)

Here again, we may decipher the underlying incentive at the root of the whole novel to react against a man-made environment and to march towards a more harmonious space, an ontological metaphor for Existence.
3) The Individual versus The Institution.

a) Denouncing American Institutions and Politics.

The text contains a great deal of underlying statements inferred by Taylor’s explicit or elusive comments following other characters’s open statements through direct speech. The reader fills the blanks which call for meaning, which is in fact contained in the careful construction of the text, playing with the connotation of the images sowed throughout the book. For example, the author uses Estevan’s innocence, making him confused about the alligator which is the emblem of the Lacoste trademark:

He asked me if the alligator was a national symbol of the United States, because you saw them everywhere on people's shirts, just above the heart.
"Not that I know of," I told him. It occurred to me, though, that it might be kind of appropriate. (192)

The elusive remark given to Taylor draws attention to the irony contained in the text. What Estevan naively perceives as a patriotic attitude is no more than a boastful exhibition of one's wealth, of one's claim and pride to belong to the priviledged upper-class. Positioned on the heart, the alligator effigy reveals a general lust for possession and materialism. The quiproquo is all the more significant as regards the symbolic value of the animal, stressed by the underphrasis in Taylor's speech. We find that the alligator is a common substitute for the serpent, as the masters of water and fire. Hence, American materialism is compared to a snake or an alligator which has taken over the rules and elements of Nature.

We see how subtly the text illustrates the erroneous conception of culture as the antagonism of nature, where culture is moreover made the master of nature. Here appears Kingsolver's research when writing a book in order to be as subtle as possible in the rich symbolism she uses in her writing. Indeed, we find that in South American myths, the alligator is generally the turtle's antagonist.41

In the Bible, the crocodile, under the name of the Leviathan, is described as one of the monsters of primitive chaos. It withholds an inside, extremely ancient, unsensitive life, capable of ruthlessly

destroying the life of man. It is also a negative symbol in Occidental thinking, for it expresses an obscure and aggressive attitude sprung from collective unconsciousness. Ignorance is once again charged with evil qualities, as the demon of meanness, embodied in the crocodile. The fact that it reigns in water is not without recalling the purity-and-life chain of symbolism widely studied earlier. We see how the criticism of patriarchal dominion pertains to many different aspects of the text. Taylor’s ironical underphrasis also stresses her evolution since the beginning of the novel. We notice how the symbolism of the snake as an evil bringer no longer applies to man as the male half of humanity, but simply and more accurately to any form of evil found in Man, regardless of gender. Hence the way Taylor qualifies Virgie Mae whose cruel tongue serves to express racist, selfish thinking:

I think I would have told that old snake to put down her fork and get her backside out the door. (107)

The text actually reverses its initial tendency to activate the snake as a phallic symbol, representing the male sex as responsible for the world’s destruction. Interestingly, even this previous association was a reversal in itself, inverting the traditional interpretation of the Bible, where Eve is tempted by the snake, and is thus held responsible for Man’s Original Fall. In this second movement, the text infers that the snake should represent Evil in general, regardless of gender, for obviously, man and woman are equally liable to commit sins.

The alligator symbolism fits the blame on American policies as regards the treatment of the Native Americans who were coerced into living in the aridity of Oklahoma:

It was clear to me that the whole intention of bringing the Cherokees here was to get them to lie down and die without a fight. The Cherokees believed God was in trees (...). From what I could see, there was not one tree in the entire state of Oklahoma. (13)

Taylor’s voice serves to denounce historical injustice, and even accuses the American Government in a very explicit manner, furious and shattered by the extent of the misery brought upon people because of corrupt politicians hungry for power:

"(...) the whole way of the world is to pick on people that can't fight back(...). Look at those guys out in the park with no place to go (...). And women, too. I've seen whole families out there (...). You'd think that life alone would be punishment enough for these people, but then the cops come around waking them up mornings, knocking them around with their sticks. You've seen it." (170-171)
The description Taylor gives strikes the reader as a very realistic portrait of scenes he must have witnessed himself. Also, the shifter "you" addressing Lou Ann can be interpreted, through double enunciation, as the implied author crossing the diegetic border-line, and calling for the reader's agreement, trying to confront him with what one might tend to forget, or worse to bluntly ignore:

"And everybody else saying hooray, way to go, I got mine, power to the toughest. (…) What I'm saying is nobody feels sorry for anybody anymore, nobody even pretends they do. Not even the President. It's like it's become unpatriotic." (171)

Taylor's voice and revolt destroy the American myth of the Land of Freedom, of the United States as the Promised Land of happiness. The American Government is not however the only target, but rather any form of power which seeks to crush the weakest. What is denounced is oppression of the smallest, carried out by the strongest - regardless of the consequences upon humanity. Hence the accusation launched against both the Guatemala City Police and the U.S.A. who connive as regards atrocious massacres perpetrated in Central America:

"In Guatemala City the police use electricity for interrogation. They have something called the 'telephone', which is an actual phone (…) [with] its own generator, operated (…) with a crank," [Estevan said ]. "The telephones are made in the U.S." (134)

The reader follows Taylor's descent into hell, where it becomes impossible to keep a speck of faith in our countries' governing bodies. The narrative under study actually unvalidates the credentials of the judicial system as implemented by patriarchal societies. Taylor stresses the absurdity of the Law construct:

"You know what really gets me? (…) How people call you 'illegals'. That just pisses me off, I don't know how you can stand it. A human being can be good or bad or right or wrong, maybe. But how can you say a person is illegal? (…) You just can't (…). That's all there is to it." (195)

Taylor's reflexion about the arbitrary link between signified and signifier serves to pinpoint the distorting use of language which participates in manipulating people's mentalities. Indeed, referring to an individual as an 'illegal' puts him in a highly negative light, denoting fraud, disrespect of the Law, and incidentally, a potential danger to the public’s safety. People who are thus educated may well never realize the ideological manipulation which words permit. Indeed, what Taylor’s remark proves is that what the system labels as "illegal" simply comes down to “unwanted”. The text calls attention to the relativity of
today's conception of Justice. It seems that the signifier "justice" has been dispossessed of its original meaning, and has instead been filled with the signified contained in the word 'authority'.

b) "Soundness of Mind and Freedom of Will".

As studied before, Taylor's evolution through the plot takes her character into the "tryadic order". At the start, we encounter Marietta, clueless about men, bogged in the dyadic structure formed by her mother and herself. Late in attaining objectivity, she is however brought to discover what man is. Her reconciliation with the opposite sex is achieved thanks to Estevan's character, and permeates the excessively positive descriptions we get of him. As Lacan has established in his psychoanalytical research, it is only this entrance into the tryadic order which allows an individual to position himself as an individual subject. This is of utmost importance for Taylor precisely identifies herself as a responsible human being with the gradual comprehension of the binary thinking of the world – conveyed by our use of language, which may well be derogatory and creates powerful antagonisms such as man versus woman, right versus wrong, culture versus nature, and so on. Taylor's maturity shows through her change of attitude. We indeed see the stalwart, unimpressed Taylor grow into an adult and understand that you simply cannot shun the hardships of life:

"There's no way around the hurt, is there? You just have to live with it." (219)

Her thirst for purity and truth which the novel magnifies remains unabated, but she is brought to realize that evil cannot merely be removed from the world, but that an individual always preserves his freedom to think by himself and to act righteously on his own microscopic level. This is revealed to her by Mattie, dealing with the issue of motherhood:

"Nobody can protect a child from the world. [The right question to ask yourself] (...) if you're really trying to make a decision (...) [is]: Do I want to try? Do I think it would be interesting, maybe even enjoyable in the long run, to share my life with this kid and give her my best effort and maybe, when all's said and done, end up with a good friend."
"I don't think the state of Arizona's looking at it that way"
"I guarantee you they're not." (178)
Mattie urges Taylor to struggle for Turtle's custody and explains that state homes and other such institutions could only bring Turtle to become a social misfit. Once these institutions have been strongly discredited, the novel dramatizes Taylor's battle against the system, learning about:

(...) what there [is] to know about loopholes. [Mattie] was pretty sure that there were ways a person could adopt a child without going through the state. (176)

Taylor is granted her friends' help, illustrating the rhizobia allegory.

Cynthia's character is essential in what she represents: the social worker, earning a meager salary, but still deeply involved in the respect of human rights and the pursuit of happiness. She knows and works for the Law as implemented by society, but she however preserves her own sense of right and wrong, and takes action for the defence of human values. She indeed turns out to be on Taylor and Turtle's side, and is the one who provides them with the tips in order to dodge the rules so as to obtain individual justice. The allegory at the core of the novel in fact casts light on the possible, non-violent rebellion of individuals against the Institution, through mutual support and give-and-take relationships grounded in humane values. The antagonism between a country and its citizens which resides in Kingsolver's fiction illustrates foolish belief in governments' interest in helping the needy.

To Mattie's earthly and humane heaven, called 'Jesus Is Lord Used Tires', we may oppose the typical, modern American 1-800 The Lord phone-line which Taylor discovers through a commercial. In the last chapter, we see Taylor who finally rings up in order to play on them their own trick, having finally understood the warped working of many a thing:

The line rang twice, three times, and then a recording came on. It told me that the Lord helps those who help themselves. Then it said that this was my golden opportunity to help myself and the entire Spiritual Body by making my generous contribution today to the Fountain of Faith missionary fund. If I would please hold the line an operator would be available momentarily to take my pledge. (226)

The account given by the homodiegetic narrator pinpoints the typical rhetorics of money-making organizations, baiting people with a promise for comfort when in fact they have no concern whatsoever for people's desperate need for support. Undeluded, Taylor reverses their own principle which consists in pretending that you are willing to give when in fact you are merely eager to take:

"Thank you for calling," she said. "Would you like to state your name and address and the amount of your pledge?"
"No pledge," I said. "I just wanted to let you know you’ve gotten me through rough times. I always thought, ‘If I really get desperate I can call 1–800-THE LORD.’ I just wanted to tell you, you have been a Fountain of Faith.”

She didn’t know what to make of this. "So you don’t wish to make a pledge at this time?"

"No," I said. "Do you wish to make a pledge to me at this time? Would you like to send me a hundred dollars, or a hot meal?"

She sounded irritated. "I can’t do that, ma’am," she said. (226)

Here again, Taylor’s new insight is not only amusing for the reader. The dialogue encourages the reader to be aware of the false appearances of things, and the tricky manipulation which society may exercise through language. The text indeed plays on the different meanings of the word «pledge». We find in the dictionary:

**A pledge is a solemn promise or guarantee to do or provide something, especially one that is made by a government, politician, etc.**

5. **A pledge is also something valuable that you leave with someone else as a guarantee that you will pay a much larger amount or fulfil an agreement later.**

The discrepancy between the phone line’s appellation (suggesting that it is a charity organization which has "pledged" to help people out of trouble) and the dialogue which takes place between Taylor and the phone operator underlines the irony of the text. It indeed reverses Taylor’s earlier expectations – which could unsurprisingly be shared by the reader – since it in fact activates the second meaning of the word "pledge", and inverts the roles between asker and helper. Kingsolver moreover gives a humouristic twist to the dialogue:

"Okay, no problem," I said. "I don’t need it anyway. Especially now. I’ve got a whole trunkful of pickles and baloney."

"Ma’am, this is a very busy line. If you don’t wish to make a pledge at this time."

"Look at it this way," I said. "We’re even." (226)

The main interest of the passage lies in the way Kingsolver reveals the deceptive power of words, when their meaning is diverted in order to abuse people with limited insight. Hence the name of the phone line which has been calculated so that mostly religious people should call. And hence the reprocessing of the Lord’s words ("the Lord helps those who help themselves"), together with typical Christian righteousness rhetorics ("Spiritual Body" "generous contribution" "Fountain of Faith" "missionary") put to the use of money making.

---

42 **Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary.** London: Cobuild, 1990.
Interestingly, this episode follows the chapter about Turtle’s legal adoption, entitled "Soundness of Mind and Freedom of Will". This occurs at the end of the novel and marks the end of Taylor’s trip. The character’s initiation to life has indeed been completed. The title of the chapter corresponds to the actions which the characters are made to accomplish, having "sound[ly]" thought of a way to put their "will" at the service of their "freedom". The text again activates verbal irony in that the chapter title is precisely part of the documents which the adoption procedures require that the biological parents should sign before handing their child over to adoptive parents:

> We do solemnly swear and testify to our soundness of mind and freedom of will. (216)

This statement is the only relevant part in the whole adoption procedures, which is otherwise a complete forgery. Dramatic irony prompts the reader to grasp the essential discrepancy between that sentence and the rest of the passage. In doing so, he is guided by the writer who has purposely created an analeptic echo sending back to the title, thus bringing it in the forefront of the text.

4) The Power of Representation.

a) Metadrama in the Novel.

The mise en abîme of representation is a recurring device used by the author in order to cast light on its power. A striking example of this is found in the scene where we see Turtle burying dolls as a reenacting of a real - intradiegetically speaking of course - situation, that is her mother's burial. By way of acting out, the child is actually able to face the terrible truth of her mother's death, and may then overcome the suffering derived from her experience, and move on with her foster mother. Turtle's command shows how faithful she is in rebirth, and through double entendre, may be understood as an incentive to trust in the healing power of representation:

> After a while I told Turtle, "You already know there's no such things as promises. But I'll try as hard as I can to stay with you."
> "Yes", Turtle said. She wiggled off my lap and returned to her dirt pile. She patted a handful of pine needles onto the mound. "Grow beans", she said. (211)
The scene shows Turtle's assimilation of her mother's loss, which allows her to deal with her future. Leaving her miserable past behind, the text focuses on her new relationship with Taylor, whose immense love transforms the child into her own. Turtle's words reactivate the bean tree allegory and its underlying message of hope. The child once again speaks the words conveying the faith one should gather from the symbolic value of the bean trees.

The dialogue following Turtle's legal adoption shows that the latters' language, though unusual, is nevertheless an accurate version of the truth at hand. No matter the words or pronunciation of signs, what counts is the accuracy of the link between signifier and signified, regardless of restricted and imposed conventions. At least, the words are filled with a meaning chosen by the characters - intradiegetically speaking, of course - in full cognition of the facts:

"I know it's been confusing, there's been a lot of changes in the management. But from here on in I'm your Ma, and that means I love you the most. Forever. Do you understand what that means?"
"That beans?" She looked doubtful.
"You and me, we're sticking together. You're my Turtle."
"Urdele," she declared, pointing to herself.
"That's right. April Turtle Greer."
"Ableurdledear."
"Exactly." (225)

Exactitude does not lie in the received interpretation of form but in meaning mostly. Given the complexity of language, interpretation is shown as an essential, potentially problematic step between meaning and understanding. This passage forefronts the need to go beyond the surface level of a sign which may easily be delusive. Turtle's seemingly absurd speech is grasped by Taylor, and extradiegetically by the reader who has been given the keys to seeing by himself how the text functions. The identical rhyme, for instance, between "means" and "beans" points to the place where the reader must enter the text and participate, to a certain extent, to its creation, or rather to the recreation of meaning. In addition, the name Turtle has supposedly chosen by herself for her doll, that is Shirley Poppy, again relies on the reader's ability to decode onomastics. Through double entendre, the doll's name refers to a flower which, in the language of flowers means "rejuvenation". Poppies supposedly are flowers which grow over the tombs of the dead. The doll's name thus appears cunningly accurate, considering that the doll stands for Turtle's dead mother.
The extent of Barbara Kingsolver’s mastery of language shows through such passages which reveal her cunning talent as a writer. Here is a good example of how difficult a task the translation of her books is. Indeed, Kingsolver revels in playing with the subtleties of the English language, which could not be literally translated into another language without risking to lose some of the work’s brilliancy and essential reliance on double entendre. The French version of *The Bean Trees* helps pinpoint Kingsolver’s subtlety in its form and the richness of meaning which it conveys, which unfortunately has been impoverished through the translation. For example, the doll’s name has been kept as it is in English and cannot strike a French reader as carefully chosen because of its implicit meaning. Similarly, Turtle’s name has been kept as such, and thus the character’s value is diminished since it is deprived of the meaning conveyed by its signifier. Also, the dialogue mentioned above between Taylor and Turtle has been translated as follows:

"Tu comprends ce que ça veux dire ?
Veux rire ?" (330)

The translator has chosen to keep the identical rhyme, but only the form of it. Indeed the whole point of the identical rhyme was to send back to the title and to the symbolical dimension which is essential to the reader’s insight into the text as the writer has constructed it. The child’s apparently esoteric language loses all its magical power of connotation. Kingsolver’s use of poetical devices does not simply aim at making up for the oral quality of Taylor’s speech. On the contrary, as we have seen, Kingsolver precisely manages to create a language for Taylor which suits her origins from Kentucky, and is anything but (emphasis mine) ordinary language. Or to put it differently, Kingsolver succeeds in making ordinary language poetical.

Turtle’s twin-like character, Esperanza, is similarly resurrected thanks to the power of representation. Metadrama is at play when we see the characters playing invented roles in order to get through the required adoption procedures. Esperanza and Estevan enact the parts of Turtle's biological

---

parents. Esperanza is wittily used by the implied author in order to express her own attempt to make things better, even if one’s only tools are that of fiction:

"Estevan, do you understand what happened back there in that office, with Esperanza ?
"Yes. (…) A catharsis."
"A catharsis,"I said. And she seemed happy, honest to God, as happy as if she’d really found a safe place to leave Ismene behind. But she’s believing in something that isn’t true. Do you understand what I’m saying ? It seems wrong somehow."
"Mi’ ija, in a world as wrong as this one, all we can do is to make things as right as we can.” (220)

Metadrama first of all casts light on the redemptive power of representation. Estevan’s answer to Taylor correlates with Ernest’s cue in Oscar Wilde’s *The Critic as Artist*:

Why cannot the artist be left alone, to create a new world if he wishes it, or, if not, to shadow forth the world which we already know, and of which, I fancy, we would each one of us be wearied if Art, with her fine spirit of choice and delicate instinct of selection, did not, as it were, purify it for us, and give it a momentary perfection. (55)

Furthermore, the dialogue between Estevan and Taylor contains a metaleptic explanation of Barbara Kingsolver’s own writing, not meant to be real, though close to the truth, but which is still the result of her desire to improve the world. Through secondary enunciation, the reader is guided in order to differenticate the notion of truth from those of right and wrong. This passage gives insight in the purpose the implied author endows literature with. Interestingly, we may establish a parallel with Oscar Wilde concerning the way literature should be regarded :

Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault.
Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.
There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all. (…)
The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium. 45

Kingsolver obviously sees art as a way to reveal the vile aspects of the world, but mostly to redeem these aspects by revealing the superior beauty and life which lies in all things. Hence the statement by one of Barbara Kingsolver’s critics :

Her medicine is meant for the head, the heart and the soul - and it goes down dangerously, blissfully, easily.46

“Ecofeminist” writing, which we will explain further as a literary trend which Barbara Kingsolver seems to be part of, has often been qualified as stories which aim at healing wounds. Barbara’s recourse to fiction and metadrama thus draws attention to the essential role of the reader who should partake in the interaction between writer and reader through the text.

b) A Pact of Reading.

Our thinking is highly dependent on the way we conceptualize ideas in our mind, and the influence of our teaching upon our conception of reality tends to be overlooked. Barbara Kingsolver's writing aims at questioning fixed representations and thus urges one to grasp the importance of independent thinking. Taylor and Lou Ann’s characters serve to show how dangerous it may be to believe and assimilate a conceptual system framed and taught by others without minimal awareness of how misleading it may become47. Education proves to be of utmost importance, in that it may very well serve as a treacherous way to inculcate a biased perception of reality. Misrepresentation and mistranslation of reality through a subversive or ignorant use of language are actually Barbara Kingsolver’s pet targets. This we may conclude from Taylor's sudden awareness of how deluded her beliefs are, themselves the result of ingurgitated representations which she has studiously learned, beholding them as ultimate, indubitable truths. The author subtly discloses the discrepancy between the knowledge Taylor has acquired at school, and the disconnected truths which she learns through a more introspective attitude. Hence her false, preconceived ideas about Mayans:

"What's Mayan exactly?"
"Mayans lived here in the so-called New world before the Europeans discovered it. We're very old people. In those days we had astronomical observatories, and performed brain surgery."

This issue is seriously tackled in Barbara Kingsolver’s latest novel, The Poisonwood Bible, which is a political allegory. The surface narrative amazingly explores shifting point of views. The story dwells at large on the consequences which may stem from narrow-minded interpretation, basing her analysis on interpretations of the meaning of the Bible.
This passage calls attention to the arbitrary link which may relate a signified to its signifier. Estevan's underphrasis ("the so-called New World") emphasizes the inaccurate use of language which is made when referring to 1492 America as a "new world" insofar as it was only new to the Europeans, but not to the peoples that had already been living there for centuries. *The Bean Trees* is not only a novel about invasion, moreover it reveals the insidious way in which rampant corruption endures through time. The text unveils the ideological manipulation perpetrated through the educational system, once again under the control of the governing powers.

The give-and-take relationships which are valorized by the novel also apply to the extradiegetic level as a pact of reading between author and reader:

> Fiction is a better tool for education than nonfiction.  

Barbara Kingsolver is aware of the rift between what children learn through the educational system and truth. As a writer, she believes in her unique duty to weld unvisible realities within her fiction in order to disclose them to the public. The reader is highly present on the writer’s mind when she decides on her narrative strategies. Speaking of Nathan Price, one of the main characters in *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver explains:

> He's a character, invented by me, for no other purpose than to serve my plot. As a writer of fiction, I count on my readers to have the subtlety and intelligence to understand this relationship between character and theme. (Barbara Kingsolver’s web page ; Dialogue section)

Indeed the reader's careful attention is systematically called upon in order to decipher the symbolical value of the text, which reveals the extent of its richness and its strength. Turtle's language acts as a catalyst for the beyond value of signs. Her name also contains a reference to the act of writing in that the animal often represents the spiritualization of matter. Also, the retraction of the turtle into its carapace may be seen as an appropriate illustration of writing which condenses meaning within the surface text:

---

The sloped desert plain that lay between us and the city was like a palm for a fortuneteller to read. (161)

The sloped desert plain thus becomes the text, and the fortuneteller turns out to be no other than the reader, who is called upon so as to fill in the blanks left by the surface text. As our extract clearly forefronts, the desert is anything but empty, only the reader must scan the text like a palm in which he may read future events. In this respect, one may be alarmed by the lavish use of cataphoric references to a catastrophe. For example:

A storm was coming up from the south, moving slowly. (161)

This clearly has a symbolical value for a portentous event. Attention should also be paid to the spatial metaphors which abidingly dispell the notion that latent meaning has been slidden under the manifest. As a consequence, the "hand of God" now conveys a metafictional allusion to the entity of the implied author. This metaphorically validates the act of writing as drawing a curtain over a subtext, the readable text being the curtain itself. The same metatextual component resides in a logical interpretation of:

You could just barely see through it. (161)

The shifter "You" at first seems to make an impersonal reference to the group of characters taking part in the episode. But it could also go beyond the flashback and more cunningly be an address to the reader. Here Kingsolver's writing, prompting the reader to decode the multitude of symbols in her narrative, contrasts sharply with Wilde's condemnation of symbolical interpretation of a work of art:

All art is at once surface and symbol,
Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril,
Those who read the symbol do so at their peril,
It is the spectator and not life, that art really mirrors.

Considering the numerous attacks Oscar Wilde has been inflicted during his career on the grounds that his books were immoral and incited to vice, we may reasonably claim that part of his preface to The Portrait of Dorian Gray was written as a preventive defence of his own writing, more than a real condemnation of the use of symbols in literary analysis. His statement, the way we understand it, mostly goes against literary criticism which tries to analyze the author, through finding parallels between the text and the author's real life. Such biographical and psychoanalytical approaches have been of great
importance among literary criticism, and have been condemned by many. Also they have served in order to spread strong prejudice against Oscar Wilde’s work, making him the victim of many a scandal among the Victorian elite. Because of the way people at that time read literature, Oscar Wilde’s books were charged with being morally subversive and corrupt. Hence the defence statements which clearly relate to Oscar Wilde’s own writing and to the subjects which he wrote about:

> The highest, as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography. (…)
> No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything. (3)

However, when a text points to its own symbolical value and contains an incentive for the reader to precisely go "beneath the surface", it would seem unconscionable on the part of a critic not to obey the text’s own command. Moreover, dealing with texts like those of Barbara Kingsolver, it goes without saying that it would considerably empower the richness and ingenious coherence of her writing. Finally, on the grounds that Barbara Kingsolver herself explains her work as dense with symbolical meaning, and even states that she relies on the learned readers to decipher the surface text, we believe that it is our role to do so.

The trip along which we accompany Taylor turns out to be directed towards a reversal of the already existing thinking which has raised from the United States’ gradual access to power. What we are shown is a "Pioneer Woman Museum", where women voices assert the need to capsize the boat of patriarchal domination:

> We passed a sign that said some odd number of miles to the Pioneer Woman Museum. Great, I thought. Now we're getting somewhere. (19)

This passage on Taylor's first crossing of Oklahoma is echoed when she takes the reverse trip, before the plot’s resolution. Hence the double entendre at play in Taylor's inner thoughts:

> The clue that tipped me off was a sign to the Pioneer Woman Museum. I remembered that. We found a two-lane road that I was pretty sure was the right one. (198)

Taylor's sense of security gained from finding new landmarks corresponds to the reader's progression through the text. Moreover, what is of utmost importance is the fact that resolution is achieved through Taylor's passage from a subjective and distorted vision (partly due to her lack of self awareness, and

---

50 Kingsolver, Barbara, The Bean Trees.(161)
partly to her very little sense of criticism as regards what she has been taught) to a superior insight
derived from introspection and from a questioning of the received values which she held as the truths one
should abide by in order to define righteousness. Hence Kingsolver’s statement, which stresses her desire
to provide her readers with a vision of things different from that which they already have:

Fiction exists in your heart and your imagination. So long as its truth sustains you from one page to the
next, while a new way of looking at the world settles in beside your own, it’s true enough. (Barbara
Kingsolver’s web page)

In *The Bean Trees* once Taylor has sensitively rejected her previous landmarks, she is forced to go on and
set new ones for herself, grounded in a more comprehensive vision. The author is obviously driving both
Taylor and the reader towards greater awareness, and more tolerance of the other. Though the novel
clearly highlights the corruption in what was originally the Land of Freedom, it however ends on a
positive note, urging one to deconstruct the system and to become the new settlers in a revisited version
of the New World. Obviously, for Kingsolver, the good reader is he who can forget about his personal,
fixed convictions while reading her books, and turn to the many questions which her novels raise as
regards the accuracy and origins of man-made ideology. Thus should he agree with Kingsolver’s
dedication to try and grasp the essence of things.

Hence the historical reference stressing the parallel between the characters in the novel and the
early immigrants:

"I always tell Turtle she's as good as the ones that came over on the Mayflower, (...). They landed at
Plymouth Rock. She just landed in a Plymouth."

The word play illustrates the discrepancy between the two worlds, modern society having undergone the
metamorphoses created by industrial and technological development. The text prompts for a new road
which needs be dug, or built, which would deconstruct the present ideology instilled by our hierarchal
cultures, in order to access a fairer implementation of justice and equality. Though different, both worlds
are however plagued by the same evil, that is the eternal lust for domination, and both confront
individuals with its own kind of wilderness. Turtle, like the early pioneers from Europe, has to strive in
order to conquer the wilderness, only paradoxically, not the savagery of an unknown, apparently
uncivilized country, but on the contrary, the barbaric injustice perpetrated by society and civilization themselves.

The intertextual play between *The Bean Trees* and John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* becomes highly significant. Taylor, like Bunyan’s Christian, encounters virtues and vices on her road towards salvation, enacted by the people she meets or discovered through other’s life stories. The seventeenth-century novel may be seen as an allegorical narrative representing the "Manifest Destiny" which was the ideology of many of the early pilgrims who went to conquer America. The idea was held that the settlers had the duty to go and civilize this wild land. Barbara Kingsolver’s novel thus appears as a modern version of Bunyan’s allegorical narrative, where the pilgrims’ manifest destiny has evolved because of modern society, and has reversely become to undo the wilderness instilled in the country by man’s very civilization. Like Christian, Taylor is moved by an earnest desire to achieve happiness through righteousness and love. Both have to tread upon a long road - metaphorically equated with man’s journey through life – and both have to go across several cities, ranges of mountains, and series of hardships before they reach the land of happiness. To Bunyan’s Celestial City corresponds Arizona, and more specifically Mattie’s place, which as we have shown, is the characters’ own little heaven. *The Bean Trees* gives a portrait of America which casts light on the paradoxical inhumanity which has stemmed from an initial attempt to humanize a wild land.

5) The Power of Imagery.

a) The "Anamorphic Eye".

As we have studied earlier, the homodiegetic narrator’s belated maturity is part of the narrative strategy chosen by Barbara Kingsolver in the handling of this modern allegorical narrative. Stylistically, it provides the writer with the means to revel in the use of pathetic fallacy, which transcribes a vision of the world as seen by an "anamorphic eye". Anamorphosis is a visual trick which uses perspective to alter the appearance of an image. The term "anamorphic eye" was coined by French critic
Eric Athenot in his essay entitled "Speaking through Children : Katherine Mansfield’s Art of Fiction.\(^{51}\)"

Discussing Mansfield’s short stories, Athenot explains:

Anamorphosis, or here the on-going metamorphosis of things or people carried out through their descriptions, is a recurring feature of Mansfield’s writing. Not only in the children’s way of deciphering the world, but also in the way they speak do they come up with arresting similes or downright grotesque metaphors bordering on catachreses, or flawed metaphors. They also provide the writer with what appears to be her fundamental method of troping — drawing on a particular character’s sensibility to things to develop far reaching and evocative metaphors, her own adaptation of Ruskin’s *pathetic fallacy*.

(64)

We take up this terminology on purpose since Barbara Kingsolver’s work includes an excellent collection of short stories which, like Katherine Mansfield’s, bear the mark bequeathed by Chekhov to his successors. On the cover of our edition\(^5\)\(^2\), Russell Banks, from the *New York Times Book Review* comments:

Extraordinarily fine. Barbara Kingsolver has a Chekhovian tenderness toward her characters… The title story is pure poetry.

This can accurately be said of Barbara Kingsolver’s short stories as well as her novels. We cannot expand this comparison for it would take us in too long a digression from our own subject. However we will dwell a little on Barbara Kingsolver’s mastery of the "anamorphic eye" technique in *The Bean Trees*, which we hope will hint at her talent in her later works.

In this allegorical narrative which denounces society’s systematical abuse of the weakest individuals, children play an essential role in that they represent a world of innocence and purity. The catharsis which takes Taylor to the lowest point into despair indeed initially stems from the unbearable treatment which the child she has adopted has been inflicted all her life:

"What's that ugliness supposed to teach people. It's no wonder kids get the end of the hurting stick. And [Turtle]'s so little, so many years ahead of her. I'm just not up the job, Lou Ann"(…)
"Well, don't feel like the Lone Ranger," she said. "Nobody is." (171)

Children evidently stir the reader’s sympathy easier than adults do, firstly because of the universal knowledge in today’s societies as regards children’s fragility. And secondly, since consciously or not, most men are profoundly attached to the world of their childhood and to the different perception of things

---

which they used to have. Children indeed have this magical imagination which, on account of the early stage of their cognitive system, often permeates their apprehension of reality. This confusion provides them with a distorted vision of objects and people in the outside world which is often highly metaphorical, and in any case allows for more enchantment. Pathetic fallacy did not need literature to invent it, for every children possesses this special gift to animate inanimate objects and to see things through the wonderful filter of their imagination. From Athenot’s quote, we can easily draw the link with our analysis of the essential role of Turtle’s character at the core of the extended bean tree metaphor.

Hence, children’s point of view offers many possibilities to the writer who wants to explore the technique of anamorphosis in literature. As we have studied, every detail about Taylor’s entity as the homodiegetic narrator of *The Bean Trees* is the result of the writer’s meticulous plotting and writing in order to obtain the desired impact over the reader. Also, Taylor’s limited vision throughout most of the novel is in fact comparable to that of a child, in that it reflects a highly naive deciphering of the world. The first page of the novel familiarizes the reader with Taylor’s voice, who though recounting an analeptic episode from her childhood, has preserved the words and vision of a child:

> I have been afraid of putting air in a tire ever since I saw a tractor tire blow up and throw Newt Hardbine’s father over the top of the Standard Oil sign. (...) But when I saw [Newt’s] daddy up there like some old overalls slung over a fence, I had a feeling about what his whole life was going to amount to, and I felt sorry for him. (1)

The use of reification (a figure of speech which consists in making animate objects appear inanimate; the opposite of personification) is typical of children’s way to look at the world. Hence, right from the start the reader gets accustomed to the ingenuous voice whose moving innocence provides us with many passages filled with gentle humour:

> My Mama said the Hardbines had kids just about as fast as they could fall down the well and drown. This must not have been entirely true, since they were abundant in Pittman County and many survived to adulthood. (1-2)

The homodiegetic narrator’s guileness – enhanced by the litote (« must not have been entirely true ») - participates in winning the reader’s feelings towards the character. Kingsolver’s special talent for

---

winning the reader’s kindness towards her characters is mostly elaborated through such recourse to the anamorphic eye, which gives a moving vision of the world and reflects purity and sensitivity. This draws another resemblance with Oscar Wilde’s preface:

From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician. From the point of view of feeling, the actor’s craft is the type. (3-4)

Kingsolver’s characters cling vividly to the reader’s mind and heart, which proves the writer’s skill in the sketching and colouring of her characters.

We have already largely tackled the brilliant use of pathetic fallacy integral to the narrative strategy, and we may directly establish Barbara Kingsolver’s talent in the use she makes of metaphors and comparisons in *The Bean Trees*. As a result, the text is luxuriant with beautiful and meaningful imagery, which instils in the narrative a great deal of lyricism pointing to the writer’s gift for poetry. For instance, the episode which takes place on Indian New Year’s Eve amazingly blends a realistic account of a plausible event with blissful lyricism:

One of the plumes of rain was moving towards us. We could see big drops spattering on the ground, and when it came closer we could hear them, as loud as pebbles on a window. Coming fast (…) All four of us were jumping and gasping because of the way the sudden cold took our breath away. Mattie was counting out loud between the lightning and thunderclaps: six, seven, boom! …four, five, six, boom! Estevan danced with Esperanza, then with me (…) – it was a flirtatious, marvelous dance with thunder for music. (…) That’s when we smelled the rain. It was so strong it seemed like more than just a smell. When we stretched out our hands we could practically feel it rising up from the ground. I don’t know how a person could describe that scent. It certainly wasn’t sour, but it wasn’t sweet either, not like a flower. (162-163)

In this passage the use of synaesthesia conveys Taylor’s feelings, who is totally aroused by the scenery as much as by her innundating love for Estevan. The whole scenery seems animated, the natural elements are described in clauses using verbs of action (the rain "move[s]", "come[s] closer"). All the senses are evocated: sight ("we could see"), hearing ("we could hear", "music"), smell ("we smelled the rain"), touch ("cold", "we could practically feel"), and taste ("sweet", "sour"). The delirious fusion between all the senses ("When we stretched our hands we could practically feel [the scent] rising up from the ground ") expresses the exhilarating feeling of communion which the character experiences with the world at large:

[N]ow I was madly in love with him, among other people. I couldn’t stop laughing. I had never felt so happy. (163)
Hence the comparison between thunder and music, which participates in conveying the euphoric quality of the passage. The use of onomatopeas ("five, six, boom!") enhances the enlivening of the passage, and also points to the way a child-witness would perceive the same scene. The difficulty to "describe" is overcome through the suggestive power of lyricism. This passage resembles prose poetry, with a touch of Whitmanesque fusion between the cosmos and the poet. We see how important the anamorphic vision is to the construction of *The Bean Trees* and how rich Barbara Kingsolver’s use of this strategy.

b) **Animal Symbolism.**

Being familiar with Barbara Kingsolver’s work, we have paid much importance to the symbolism which she instils in her fiction. Her education as a biologist and her knowledge about ecology provides her with a solid scientific background which she enriches with the research and field trips which she makes when writing a novel. Novels such as *Animal Dreams*, *Pigs in Heaven* (which by the way tells the following adventures of Taylor and Turtle), and *The Poisonwood Bible* reflect the author’s inordinate culture. In the first two novels, the details about life among Native Americans are bewilderingly precise, fascinating and accurate. Similarly, in *The Poisonwood Bible*, which is set in Belgian Congo, the narrative fathoms African language, religion, rites and life style with a depth beyond imagination. Barbara Kingsolver gives an account of the amount of research it has taken her before she could write this novel and concludes:

> If this laundry list of disparate observations seems excessive or odd, I can only say that this is what it takes to be a novelist. You have to be madly in love with the details. (Barbara Kingsolver’s web page, Dialogue Section)

Her interest in other cultures, myths and religions definitely influences her writing. Barbara Kingsolver happens to have lived in central Congo during her childhood. This coalesces with her desire to present the

---


reader with a different vision of the world. Studying Barbara Kingsolver consequentially requires a deep analysis of the significance of the plethora of symbols related to various cultures and traditions.

In *The Bean Trees*, the snake-leitmotif is systematically called upon, under various forms, to represent evil, and proves to be the epitome of the chain of masculine symbols within the novel. At first an expression of Taylor's unconscious fear of men - the snake easily associated to man's penis - it then takes on a larger significance. In the end, the snake stands for evil in general, and especially for the harmful lust for power which has of all times been inherent to patriarchal societies. The reader's response to the text has carefully been planned by the writer who manipulates our reception of her writing thanks to the power of metaphor. In this novel which dramatizes at large the oppression of the weak, another recurring animal symbol intervenes so as to win the reader's feelings over to the defended causes. Many quotations already cited above contain implicit or explicit comparisons between characters in a state of fragility and birds.

The bird is a traditional symbol for the soul, and special attention has been paid to little birds which are equaled with children's souls. Turtle's character (as one will not have failed to notice in a great number of extracts cited above) is often referred to with vocabulary usually applying to a bird. The most striking example takes place after the child has been thrown back into her catatonic state by the aggression she has undergone. Taylor is so panic-stricken that she cannot go towards Turtle and comfort her. She however transfers her attention onto the song-sparrow which has seeped into the house, conveniently serving as the recipient of Taylor's feelings and thoughts about Turtle:

> Slowly I moved in on the terrified bird, which was clinging sideways to the screen. You could see its little heart pounding through the feathers. I had heard of birds having heart attacks from fright. (…)
> "Easy, we're not going to hurt you, we just want to set you free."
> The sparrow darted off the screen, made a loop back toward the hallway, then flew to the open screen door into the terrible night. (168)

The anamorphic eye through Taylor's vision allows the author to describe Turtle's situation, substituting her for the sparrow. It seems as if her soul had escaped her body and turned into a bird, thus delivered from the cage of her heavy and wounded limbs. Her traumas indeed characteristically frighten her into her shell, where she retracts and finds herself entrapped in silence. This image is sustained by a
description given by Taylor watching over the sleeping child, which comes just before Turtle actually manages to utter her first sound:

(...) Turtle's mouth was open to the sky. (...) Even from a distance I could see her eyes dancing around under her eyelids as thin as white grape skins. Turtle always had desperate, active dreams. In sleep, it seemed, she was free to do all the things that during her walking life she could only watch. (95; l.5-11)

The text points at symptoms of the unconscious which manifest one’s inner suffering, and underlines the image of the bird wanting to liberate itself and soar towards the sky, for celestial protection. The symptomization of unbearable pain into a kind of paralysis of the whole body is reenacted in Esperanza, and the reader again deciphers the body-versus-soul dichotomy, introduced through the bird-figure:

[Esperanza]'s eyes flew up at me like a pair of black birds scared out of safe hiding; (148)

The bird nevertheless conveys a predominantly euphoristic value, since it is symbol of the immortality of the soul (Coran, 2, 262; 3, 43; 67, 9). Supposedly, in poetry, the bird plays a role as the mediator between earth and sky. The comparison between turtle and a bird is also highly talkative since birds, like Turtle’s character, are supposed to have a language of their own, more precisely that of angels who reveal spiritual knowledge. As we have seen earlier, Turtle’s cryptic language in fact gives the key to decoding the bean tree allegory. Interestingly, the last we read about Turtle’s character, the little bird figure, is precisely her "vegetable soup song" which sends back to the creation of the novel. The reader may thus foresee the eventual salvation of Turtle and Esperanza's angel spirits. The promise for redemption is acutely foreshadowed during Taylor's perilous attempt to drive Esperanza and Estevan towards freedom:

Esperanza and Estevan were transformed in an unexplainable way over the next two hours. They showed a new side, like the Holy cards we used to win for attendance in summer Bible school: mainly there was a picture of Jesus on the cross, a blurred, shimmering picture with flecks of pink and blue scattered through it, but tip it just so and you could see a dove flying out of His chest. That was the Holy Ghost. (204)

Transmogrification depicted as such, we come to perceive the couple of refugees as martyrs who will be saved. Interestingly enough, in Islamic tradition, one believes that martyrs' souls will fly to heaven in the form of a green bird. Hence the obvious significance of Estevan's words:

He told me that the national symbol of the Indian people in Guatemala was a quetzal, a beautiful green bird with a long, long tail (...). If you tried to keep this bird in a cage, it died. (192)
The harm done to Guatemalan citizens which Estevan charges the American Government with is illustrated by the symbolic antagonism between the quetzal and the alligator images. The bird is indeed another opposite of the snake, as the symbol of the celestial world against that of the terrestrial world. In African art, the bird is an extremely common image. It symbolizes thrust and life, and is often held to represent fecundity. On African vases, we often find the theme of the struggle between the bird and the snake, which illustrates the struggle between life and death. Green as the colour of hope combines with the luxurious imagery connoting freedom to express desire for liberty. This echoes the encoded appellation of Mattie's "underground railroad", struggling to undermine men's refugee-hunting:

[M]attie asked me something like had I ever heard of a sanctuary. (…)
"Sure", I said. "It's a place they set aside for birds, where nobody's allowed to shoot them."
"That's right. They've got them for people too." (78-79)

Besides, "bird-watching" is the phrase coined in order to refer to Mattie and her helpers' covert activities.

Different kinds of birds appear in the narrative, each conveying a precise meaning. For instance, the episode which heralds Turtle's aggression is strewn with portentous signs:

The night was full of sounds - bird calls, a high, quivery owl hoot, and something that sounded like sheep's baahs, only a hundred times louder. (163)

We see how strikingly the imagery paves the way for the reader's reception of the text. We are able to sense the ominous signs foreboding the helplessness of some innocent, yet unidentified entity. The animal symbol of the owl vehicles the theme of life destroyer. Because the owl cannot face daylight, it is a symbol for woe, for obscurity, solitary retreat, and for melancholy. Interestingly, in ancient China, the owl played an important part: a ferocious animal, it would devour his mother. Besides, in Mayan tradition, the owl was regarded as a messenger of death. Hence the correlation between the episode under study and the popular saying: When the owl sings, the Indian dies. The insistency on creepy and disgusting elements is urged by the figure of the toad:

Mattie said they were spadefoot toads. All that noise came from something no bigger than a quarter.(163)

The humour plays down the elements of fear, but the two combine in giving the text a quality of the grotesque genre. Though we are at some points amused by what we read, we cannot really release our tension. The toad perfectly illustrates the grotesque. Fear of this crepuscular animal indeed commonly
makes it a symbol of ugliness and clumsiness. Through history and legends, it has often been held responsible for death on earth as an evil spirit. However, the ambiguous symbolism of the toad sustains the ambivalence which runs throughout the text between euphoristic and dysphoric elements, as has been studied so far. Eventually, we may assume that this passage foreshadows the ultimate happy outcome. For the Mayans, the toad was the God of the rain. In Aztec iconography, it represented the earth and fertility. Also, a female symbol - associated with the moon and the water - it is supposed to forecast when the rains are about to come.

The reader may thus draw a parallel which suggests that Taylor and Turtle will overcome their predicaments, for we are told that the first rains - which provide the occasion for the characters' outing-also marks the Indian's New Year's Eve. The toad, linked to water, earth, to women and humidity, is held to be a wound-healer, and is also said to be invulnerable to the snake's bite. It would be able to paralyze the snake trying to swallow it. It is often compared to the earth which the sun - that other snake - cannot harm through its bite. Finally, like all the symbols associated with the earth-water-moon complex, it expresses the concepts of death and renewal.

However, the eventual happy outcome may also be deciphered from implied intertextuality with the Bible, in Iziah, 11; 6-8, about Paradise:

Wolves and sheep will live together in peace,  
(...) even the baby will not be harmed  
if it plays near a poisonous snake.

Again, the reader’s attention is brought onto Faith. The Bean Trees clearly encourages to struggle for a better place, hoping that some day will come when man will reach the promised land of happiness and will be out of evil’s reach.

c) Allegories: "How They Eat In Heaven".

The rhizobia allegory which provides the main thread for the ideology stitched through the novel is taken up and revisited using Estevan's voice. This occurs in the seventh chapter entitled "How They Eat in Heaven", which provides the perfect moment to introduce this parable about brotherhood, mutual
support and paradise. This chapter indeed completes the bringing together of the seven adult characters who form a cluster of close friends: in addition to Taylor, Lou Ann, and Mattie, we meet with Esperanza and Estevan, and Edna Poppy and Virgie Mae.

Number seven holds a very special place among the interpretation of numbers which is among one of the most ancient symbolical sciences. Plato, Pythagoras and many early scientists regarded numbers as the instruments of knowledge. Indeed, since men in ancient civilizations did not believe in fate, they assumed that the number of things and events in the cosmos showed the way to a true comprehension of beings and events. They therefore observed the natural laws ruling the universe in order to grasp the essence of cosmic harmony. Number seven is of utmost importance since it sends back to the seven planets and to the seven days which it supposedly took God to create the world, according to Genesis. The science of numbers is closely related to astrology, and both are at the origin of many principles according to which men have lived of all times. Today’s technical and scientific progress tends to throw these ancient beliefs into oblivion, and to ignore them as if they were merely irrelevant superstitions. Nevertheless, these sciences still exist and are paid much more attention in Oriental civilization. In Occidental mentalities such beliefs are belittled and presented as foolish. However much of today’s organization actually derives from these sciences. Measure of time was fixed according to the planets by the Greek five hundred years B.C. For instance our weekly schedule, ruled by the division of a week in seven days was originally computed in relation to the planets. Hence the names of the days: Sunday (the day of the sun), Monday (the day of the moon), Saturday (the day of Saturn) and so on.

Thus number seven has symbolically been endowed with a meaning of perfection and often represents a completed cycle and a positive renewal.

Hence the coalescence between the title of the chapter, its content, and its place in the novel. The creation of the diegetic universe of *The Bean Trees* indeed seems achieved in this seventh chapter, and is

---

55 We do not give the other days of the week for their names have lost their obvious etymological link with the planets in their translation. It is more flagrant in French: Lundi (le jour de la Lune), Mardi (le jour de Mars), Mercredi (le jour de Mercure), Jeudi (le jour de Jupiter), Vendredi (le jour de Vénus), Samedi (le jour de Saturne), et Dimanche (le jour du Soleil, ou dies Dominica).
also illustrated by the final organization of the house shared by Taylor and Lou Ann - their chores being dispatched between them in a perfect way. The subtle humour contained in Taylor’s comment, parodying Genesis, draws attention to what number seven connotes:

"And on the seventh day we wash bean turds." (100)

The text also paves the way for this symbolical interpretation through the use of the popular symbol of the rainbow, which to everyone’s knowledge commonly announces a new beginning. The rainbow indeed illuminates the sky with a seven-coloured arch which forecasts the return of good weather. It is thus commonly used as a euphoristic sign. We see that no element in Kingsolver’s text is gratuitous and that every detail carries a hidden significance. Hence the description of Esperanza’s dress, which perfectly matches the value of her name:

[Esperanza] wore a long, straight dress made of some amazing woven material that brought to mind the double rainbow Turtle and I saw on our first day in Tucson: twice as many colors as you ever knew existed. (102-103)

This quote echoes the passage when Taylor and Turtle arrive in Arizona, and thus reactivates the foreshadowing of happy events – as we have studied in our first part - contained in that episode.

The occasion for the dinner which brings together the seven characters essential to the bean tree allegory is provided by a meal supposedly organized because of their common desire to watch Mattie speak on TV. The later is being interviewed and vindicates more generous policies coming from the Immigration and Naturalization service:

Signatory to the United Nations something something on human rights, Mattie was saying, and that means we have a legal obligation to take in people whose lives are in danger. (103)

Mattie’s main point is clear, as opposed to the detailed argumentation given by Mattie which we do not get, supposedly on account of the garbled connection of the TV set. Too obvious media-like rhetorics would probably not be welcome, all the more since the rest of the narrative is sufficient to illustrate and uphold Mattie's discourse. The construction of the chapter carefully examplifies the love-message carried throughout the book. Hence Estevan's delicacy, who isn't made to react in the face of Virgie Mae's insulting remarks:
But Estevan didn't seem perturbed, and I realized he must hear this kind of thing every day of his life. I wondered how he could stay so calm. I would have murdered somebody by now (…). (107)

Kingsolver needs Estevan to be non-violent in order to have him suit her allegory, however he is strategically endowed with an extraordinary gift for speech. His didactic quality shows through his diplomatic preaching, relying on an allegorical tale supposedly addressed to Turtle to comfort her distress, struggling with the chopsticks and failing to reach her mouth. Double enunciation is activated, simultaneously giving a lesson to Virgie Mae and to the reader who does not fail to spot the subtlety of his discourse, with rhetorics taking up Virgie’s own:

"This is a South American, wild Indian story about heaven and hell (...). If you go visit hell, you will see a room like this kitchen. There is a pot of delicious stew on the table, with the most delicate aroma you can imagine. All around, people sit, like us. Only they are dying of starvation. They are jibbering and jabbering (...) but they cannot get a bite of this wonderful stew God has made for them. Now why is that? (...) They are starving because they only have spoons with very long handles (...). With these ridiculous spoons, the people in hell can reach into the pot but they cannot put the food in their mouths. Oh, how they swear and curse to each other! " (107-108)

Estevan's story turns out as an allegorical condemnation of individualism, selfishness and greed. On the contrary heaven is discribed as the place where people help one another, which Estevan concludes by enacting the very end of his parable:

"Now, (...) you can go and visit heaven. What? You see a room just like the first one, the small table, the same pot of stew, the same spoons as long as a sponge mop. But these people are all really happy and fat. (...) Perfectly, magnificently well-fed, and very happy. Why do you think?"
He pinched up a chunk of pineapple in his chopsticks, neat as you please, and reached all the way across the table to offer it to Turtle. She took it like a newborn bird. (108)

This episode shows that happiness does not really depend on the world we live in, but rather on individuals' potential to take care of one another, which of course relies on the metaphoric concept: LOVE IS NURTURE.

However difficult a task, Barbara Kingsolver suggests that any individual has some means to change the world, which should follow the road of mutual support thus laying the grounds for a better world of tolerance. Hence the deconstruction of the notion of heroism which takes Taylor from the status of our novel's heroine to a mere representation, through the world of fiction, of what any human being should and could aim at:
"Estevan and Esperanza are my friends. And, even if they weren't, I can't see why I shouldn't be doing this. If I saw somebody was going to get hit by a truck I'd push them out of the way. Wouldn't you? It's a sad day for us all if I'm being a hero here." (188)

This quotation could also be interpreted as a metadiegetic reference to Barbara Kingsolver's own writing. Her concern for others indeed shows through her many activities fighting for human justice, and also through her fiction which she claims sprouts out of her desire to make the world a little more beautiful:

I’ve always had this absolute belief in my ability to change things. I do what I do because that’s the only moral option for me.  

We understand how Barbara Kingsolver attempts to deconstruct the idea that literature and politics are two totally isolated domains. Once again, where society tends to see an antagonistic relation, Barbara Kingsolver believes in the enriching interactive influence which the world of art and the human world may have over one another. As seen above, The Bean Trees points to individual responsibility, and it clearly appears that Barbara Kingsolver regards her writing as her own, personal way of trying to improve the world. We may compare her to the character of Estevan. The mise en abîme of the allegorical narrative through Estevan’s parable establishes a metadiegetic reference to Barbara Kingsolver’s own writing. Estevan’s profession as a teacher, his extreme awareness of the power of language, metaphor, and history correspond to the qualities which we have already studied as characteristics of Barbara Kingsolver as a writer. The above-episode shows us how Estevan, or the implied author, masters didactic rhetorics, and opts for showing over telling. The parable is much more talkative and subtle than political or moral preaching would have been. Ultimately, the whole narrative of The Bean Trees must be seen exactly in the same light, as a beautiful piece of fiction, dealing with human and social issues, which casts light on a subtext embroidered underneath the surface layer of the allegorical narrative.

6) Ecofeminism in Literature.

a) Ecofeminist Theory.

Over the last few decades, the political and social scenes have witnessed a fusion between feminist theory and ecological matters. This has given birth to a new ideological trend under the name of "ecofeminism", a phrase coined by French philosopher Françoise d'Eubonne in 1974. Ecology and feminism share many essential points. Both movements have been taken to extremes, but are nevertheless rooted in similar values which are originally first and foremost non-violent ones. Ecology basically sprouted out of concern for the damage done by Man and civilization to the natural world. And feminism emerged with women’s desire to emancipate themselves and to be entitled to the same rights as the opposite sex, instead of being relegated to the domestic and private spheres without any access to the public and social ones. Both ecology and feminism then appear as trying to deconstruct the abuses led by patriarchal society over natural entities, namely planet earth and woman. Ecofeminism aims at destroying the superiority of men who possess power over whatever they arbitrarily declare should be dominated. Ecofeminists want to prove that the hierarchies established by our ancestors are evidently social constructs which are by no means the best way towards harmony and respect of life under various forms.

For instance, Ynestra King, one of the major ecofeminist philosophers, suggests:

Life on earth is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy. There is no natural hierarchy ; human hierarchy is projected on to nature and then used to justify social domination. Therefore, ecofeminist theory seeks to show the connections between all forms of domination, including the domination of non human nature, and ecofeminist practice is necessarily anti-hierarchal. (19)

Ecofeminism vindicates that by observing the natural world we may change the present conceptual system which, having built a set of antagonisms such as man/woman, culture/nature, white/nonwhite and so on, asserts and carries the oppressive superiority of one over the other. Already, we may relate with The Bean Trees, whose very title draws attention to how the whole allegorical meaning of the narrative is

---

first derived from observing the development of life in the natural world. Hence the excessive use of symbolism found in Barbara Kingsolver’s novel, related to natural elements.

Ecofeminism aims at teaching people how every living principle is interconnected with another, and how this dependency is necessary, and highly enriching, in both human and non human nature. Judith Plant claims in her introduction to Healing The Wounds:

Man’s world is on the very edge of collapse…because there is no respect for the « other » in patriarchal society. The other, the object of patriarchal rationality, is considered only insofar as it can benifit the subject. So self-centered is this view that it is blind to the fact that its own life depends on the integrity and well-being of the whole.(2)

Faced with the destructive impact of our societies’ systems, ecofeminist thinking encourages people to understand the fundamental belief in what Ynestra King has coined the "practice of hope". It is in such a perspective that Barbara Kingsolver has declared:

I am a political activist and proud of it. (30)

However surprising this may seem on the part of a writer, we will try to show the relevance of such a statement, drawing the link between Barbara Kingsolver’s writing in the novel under study and ecofeminist theory. The rhizobia allegory at the core of The Bean Trees already clearly illustrates the ideology at hand. Moreover, Kingsolver’s strong sense of community may point to her declaration as referring to the original meaning of the word "political", which comes from the Greek politikos (from polis meaning "city") and basically designates anything related to the life of the city. In that sense, given Kingsolver’s personal motives for writing and the way she perceives Beauty’s impact, we have no problems with the writer’s claim. Also, it would be interesting to know if when she makes such a statement, she is precisely speaking about her writing or simply about her many other hobbies which indeed include political activism of many kinds. In any case, we are definitely far away from Oscar Wilde’s principles as regards aestheticism:

We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.
All art is quite useless. (The Picture of Dorian Gray, The preface . 4)

Barbara Kingsolver’s use of language, symbolism, and fiction superimposes masterful artistic achievement and the desire to change pre-existing mentalities, or rather contemporary ones. She is an extremely skilled writer, who in fact uses her knowledge in other fields as well as her personal beliefs as a spring for her fiction. Having majored in biology at De Pauw University of Indiana, she then received a Masters of science degree at the University of Arizona in Tucson where she pursued graduate studies in biology and ecology. Simultaneously, she has always been involved in writing classes where she developed her skills as an author. Having discovered Dorris Lessing in her early twenties, Barbara Kingsolver comments:

I read the *Children of Violence* novels and began to understand how a person could write about the problems of the world in a compelling and beautiful way. And it seemed to me that was the most important thing I could ever do, if I could ever do that. (Web page, Background Section).

Barbara Kingsolver’s treatment of feminine voices in her writing agrees with Louise Erdrich’s declaration in a 1987 interview:

[Women] are taught to present a demure face to the world and yet there is a kind of wild energy behind it in many women that is transformational energy, and not only transforming to them but to other people… I have an urgent reason for thinking about women attuned to their power and honest nature, not the socialized nature that says "I can’t possibly do this."\(^60\)

Erdrich’s writing, as Kingsolver’s, somehow aims at « healing the wounds ». Studies have been made in the United States which precisely compare the two authors in the light of ecofeminist writing.\(^61\) One obvious common point between the two writers is their concern for Native Americans and their interest in Indian culture. Non of these two authors hesitate to write about whites’ encroachment over the rights of Native Americans. Hence the intertextuality between Kingsolver’s *The Bean Trees* and Erdrich’s *Tracks\(^62\)*, dealing with the way Native American tribes were dispossessed of their lands:

All my life, Mama had talked about the Cherokee Nation as our ace in the hole. She’d had an old grandpa that was full-blooded Cherokee, one of the few that got left behind in Tennessee because he was too old or too ornery to get marched over to Oklahoma. (...) It was clear to me that the whole intention of bringing the Cherokees here was to get them to lie down and die without a fight. (*The Bean Trees*,13)

Erdrich, in *Tracks* writes about the whites making

---


wholesale purchase[s] of [the Indians’] allotment land. (98)

We read further in the novel about a whole family on the verge of giving up the struggle to live, but for Margaret’s courage:

We might have laid there like fools and starved had it not been for Margaret. She finally got bored with suffering and berated us as she rose and put on her wrappings (172).

As in *The Bean Trees*, we read about the disastrous effect on community life, its members often being separated:

The question of money settlement [became a] feud that would divide our people down the middle, through time. (109)

In this recently emerged trend of ecofeminist writers, Barbara Kingsolver's work consists in a non-violent, beautiful fight for social improvement with the tools provided by literature. Starting very young, Barbara Kingsolver has moreover continually enrolled in political movements defending more justice for oppressed minorities. Such a background obviously permeates her writing and not only places her as one of the best ecofeminist writers, but is moreover relevant as regards her position in American literature exploiting the voyage allegory.

b) Feminine Transcendentalism.

The common points between ecofeminism and Barbara Kingsolver’s literature are undeniable. *The Bean Trees*, just as the author’s later novels, under the form of a modern allegory proves to share ideological stands with ecology and feminism as explained by Ynestra King:

The task of an ecological feminism is the organic forging of a genuinely antidualistic, or dialectical, theory and practice… rather than to succumb to nihilism, pessimism, and an end to reason and history, we seek to enter into history, to a genuinely ethical thinking - where one uses mind and history to reason from the ‘is’ to the ‘ought’ and to reconcile humanity with nature, within and without. (116)63

This quotation sends us back to the analysis led in our first part, where we have studied the American literary tradition dealing with a text as the place where one inscribes his journey through space, and

---

through Existence. Barbara Kingsolver’s treatment of the allegorical narrative welds reality and fiction, and tries to take the reader further than our ancestors, refusing to submit to entropy, whatever the waste which is part of history. *The Bean Trees* appears as a beautiful story which represents in various ways a reversal of the traditions inherited from patriarchal civilization, whether in literature or in social behaviour as the diegisis illustrates. The allegory at the core of the novel indeed offers an optimistic message of hope, whether in the power of life in general, or in the redemptive power of language through literature. Along ecofeminist ideology, the specific literary handling of the female homodiegetic narrator’s adventures shows that progress is unlimited, and prompts to change direction, turning away from materialism and individualism and advancing towards unity through complementarity.

The allegory of ideas under study, enlightened by ecofeminist theory and linguistic analysis in addition to purely literary analysis, casts light on the nature of the ideology underlying the text. Interestingly, as opposed to most allegories produced until then by four centuries of writing, *The Bean Trees* neither restricts to a historical allegory, nor to a political one, nor to a religious one. But it is rather a blending of the three. Out of our analysis, we may conclude that the ideology which Barbara Kingsolver turns into a piece of fiction does not confine to one fixed set of thinking derived from a single religion nor political party. Nor does she content herself with absorbing what she has learned from her literary predecessors in order to blindly agree with and reiterate approaches taught by others. As we have seen, the main point which the text makes is that ideas should be grounded in personal insight, rather than in a conceptual system created by and earned from others. The ideology – also a kind of philosophy - which lies under the textual surface of the bean tree allegory is rather related to the principles found in Nature, which as the text has shown, provides reality and truth in its quintessential form, before Man’s appropriation of the world through the distorting power of language:

> For me, the natural world provides metaphysics and metaphor and a context for my own life: I’m a species among species, not particularly more important than an eggplant, definitely not as enduring as a redwood or a crocodile, just adding my own moment to the continuum… I feel a happy kinship with the flowers in my garden, the insects that eat them, and with all the layers of life gone by that have become petrified into the rocks under my house. (Letter, 5 Nov. 1990)
Barbara Kingsolver’s fiction in fact seems closest to Walt Whitman’s poetry, both writers trying to commune with Nature and to sing the song of truth which overwhelms them when they open to the life in the cosmos. Walt Whitman himself claimed to be the poet of the whole universe, using the term « Kosmic poet ». The nineteenth-century prophet which he saw himself as had been strongly influenced by the theories of Transcendentalism. Like Barbara Kingsolver, he claimed that he could sense God in every object and human being, which gave evidence of the oneness of the whole universe. Barbara Kingsolver’s personal sensitivity to the omnipresent essence in the natural world strikingly resembles Whitman’s (as expressed through his poetry):

I felt in a certain light that animals could talk. I believed in trees, and that heaven had something to do with how dead trees gentle themselves into long, mossy columns of bright-smelling, crumbling earth, lively inside with sprouting seeds and black beetles. I could not make myself believe in a loud-voiced God on his throne in the clouds, but I was moved to tears by the compost pile.64

Whitman and Barbara Kingsolver moreover have in common the way they see their writing as the only thing they can do to help the cause of democracy. Whitman indeed wrote many politically engaged texts, some of which were anonymously published. Despite the evils of nineteenth-century or twentieth-century America, such as slavery, pedophilia, torture and so on, both writers believe, or believed, in the inherent goodness of Man. We wonder if Barbara Kingsolver had in mind a word-play with « underground literature » when she wrote The Bean Trees. At any rate, her work does resemble that of writers from the 1950’s to 1970’s who were predominantly anti-war, anti-establishment, and often wrote a poetry of protest inspired by traditional folksong.

Hence the issue of reversal essential to The Bean Trees, widely tackled in this study, which points back to elements as they were and as they are in the natural world, regardless of Man’s destruction of harmony, achieved mainly through an erroneous use of language which divides and opposes where it should seek to reunite complementary elements. This accounts for the extreme use of symbolism which Barbara Kingsolver systematically activates in her literary works, which does not follow today’s modern, occidental, dualistic system of representation, but goes back to the origins of the world, and thus draws
from the elements as found in the universe at large. The ideas conveyed through Kingsolver’s literature paradoxically prompt for rejection of rejection, as *The Bean Trees* illustrates. We may speak of ideology in that the allegory of *The Bean Trees* definitely carries a message which speaks the author’s personal beliefs (as Barbara Kingsolver herself comments when explaining her own motives for creation) as regards the best road towards happiness for humanity. Hence the coalescence with Walt Whitman’s Preface to *Leaves of Grass* 65:

[ The English language ] is the powerful language of resistance – it is the dialect of common sense. It is the speech of the proud and melancholy races, and of all who aspire. It is the chosen tongue to express growth, faith, self-esteem, freedom, justice, equality, friendliness, amplitude, prudence, decision and courage. It is the medium that shall wellnigh express the inexpressible.

The common philosophy is obvious. Moreover, their styles may be compared in that both explore in depth the possibilities provided by orality of speech, each with the respective languages of their times. The ideology underlying *The Bean Trees* could be called « feminine transcendentalism » (phrase mine), feminine not because of its stands but merely on account of the voices heard in *The Bean Trees*. One may of course disagree with the author’s ideological stands, criticism of others’ theory being - as we understand it – precisely what her literary works call for. Here it might be essential to remind our reader about the original meaning of the word "criticism" which is not rejection but commentary grounded in analysis. This is exactly what we have aimed at doing in this work on Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Bean Trees*, trying to analyze her text as it is, however hard it may be to distance oneself from the personal feelings and admiration which we have for the author under study.

CONCLUSION
In this essay, we have aimed at showing how the mise en abîme of allegory in Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Bean Trees* gives evidence of the author’s skills in manipulating this form of literature. We know of the link between the author’s personal ideas and *The Bean Trees* because of the way she speaks out on her motives when creating a work of art. But what interests us most in our critical analysis is the way the text speaks for itself and how the author beautifully exploits the possibilities provided by modern allegorical narrative.

Most interestingly, it was brought to our attention that *The Bean Trees* raises an important problem which a literary critic should deal with. Barbara Kingsolver brings together her writing and political activism which raises the issue of the relevancy of allegorical narratives as literary works in contemporary literature. Russian Formalists and Structuralists have insisted largely on the text as having no other meaning than itself. It is true that the evolution of literature has deeply affected conceptions of what can be defined as "artistic", and that the seventeenth-century allegories have been outdated by later artistic development. At the time, those works such as Bunyan’s, More’s and Voltaire’s were indeed the
result of a social, historical and cultural context which regarded literature as a mode of expression of philosophical, religious, and ideological beliefs. Fortunately, literature has since then explored the possibilities inherent to language, creative writing and the various ways in which words could provide a stunning, beautiful work of art. Therefore, contemporary artists who claim that their writing makes them "political activists" could sound extremely suspicious as far as their literary skills are concerned.

This debate has endured for a long time in the history of literary criticism, and it would be an enthralling challenge to discuss this issue more largely applied to Barbara Kingsolver’s entire work, which would require a much broader analysis. We would then have to deal with the history of literary theory as well as all the written works which Barbara Kingsolver has published. However anyone familiar with Barbara Kingsolver’s work will not only make the difference – which she obviously does – between the political articles and essays which she has written and her literary works, including novels, poetry, and short stories. We will not go further into this subject, our analysis being that of the treatment of feminine characters in The Bean Trees. However, we would like to refer to the collective work Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction, Postmodern studies 5, and especially to the essay by Makolm Bradbury66 in which we have found a very brilliant approach to the problematic issue at hand. In order to leave the subject matter open to further study, we will quote the two missing sentences which complete Oscar Wilde’s definition of art:

Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new complex, and vital.
When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself.67

The words "new complex, and vital" seem highly appropriate to describe Barbara Kingsolver’s writing. As her first novel, *The Bean Trees* appears as the first steps of an equally elegant and technical "dance between truth and fiction". Her latest novel, *The Poisonwood Bible* is another "vegetable soup song" which, as the title suggests offers the reader an enthralling mastery of language, symbolism and of the Bible. Another allegorical narrative, this time the author has worked on a more complex narrative, shifting point of views and constructing her chapters around a fascinating, extremely insightful intertextual play with the Bible. Her gift for poetry and stylistic creation reveals through the stunning uses she makes of palyndroms. As in *The Bean Trees*, her subjects are the mysteries of man, life, and language. Compared to this giant masterpiece, *The Bean Trees* appears as the first seedling of a recently sprouted, luxuriant imagination – a feminine voice which is worth paying attention to.

Writing a critical analysis of *The Bean Trees*, we have been confronted with the same need for precision which communication requires of any one trying to get meaning across to someone else with a yearning for exactitude as that referred to by Barbara Kingsolver. Our work has brought us even more insight both in Barbara Kingsolver’s talent in her mastery of language, and in Oscar Wilde’s definition of the literary critic’s task:

> The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things. (ibid)

Indeed, our research director has helped us grasp the essential need to always try and make sure that what we meant was rightly conveyed by the words we chose to say so. It has definitely not always been the case and understanding how important it is to be aware of terminology just provided us with another example of what we believe Barbara Kingsolver meant when writing the following simile in order to convey the difficulties of communication:

---

68 i.e. Barbara Kingsolver’s Dialogue Section : “The writing of fiction is a dance between truth and fiction.”
Magda looks across at Annemarie, out the window, and Annemarie tries to follow her line of vision. There is a parking lot outside, and nothing else to see. A sparse forest of metal poles. The unlit streetlamps stare down at the pavement like blind eyes.

"I don’t know," Magda says. "Seems like that’s just how it is with you and me. We’re like islands on the moon."

"There’s no water on the moon," says Annemarie.

"That’s what I mean. A person could walk from one to the other if he just decided to do it." 69

This image is strikingly talkative as regards the difficulty to communicate in real life, and stresses that it however remains possible. All that it takes is a matter of will. Similarly, it appears to us that the literary critic is that who takes upon him to tread on a moon-text in order to show the way leading from writer to reader, or in other words from the island of creation to the island of reception. As a conclusion we would like to quote Oscar Wilde one last time, drawing from Ernest’s questions about the use of literary criticism:

It seems to me that the imagination spreads, or should spread, a solitude around it, and works best in silence and isolation. Why should the artist be troubled by the shrill clamour of criticism? Why should those who cannot create take upon themselves to estimate the value of creative work? What can they know about it? If a man’s work is easy to understand, an explanation is unnecessary. 70

This gives us the key to understanding the rift between Kingsolver’s approach to literature and that of Oscar Wilde who claims:

Art should never try to be popular. The public should try to make itself artistic. 71

This is precisely what we believe to be the critic’s task: to make the public artistic, or to render art to the public. This coalesces with Barbara Kingsolver’s vision of literature as a means to educate the public, as well as with her incentive not to reject the other nor to consider him as inferior simply because he is in fact different. As opposed to Victorian thinking, we personally share Whitman’s and Barbara Kingsolver’s idea of Beauty as something which does not especially lie in the sophisticated intellectual elite of the priviledged, upper-classes of society.

---

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY
1. Corpus:

2. Other Works by Barbara Kingsolver:


3. Concerning Barbara Kingsolver:


Harper Collins "Barbara Kingsolver website" -www.kingsolver.com. (Includes Dialogue Section, Background Section, Update Section, and a complete Bibliography.)


4. Literary Criticism and Theoretical Background:


5. Other Works Cited in Relation to The Bean Trees:


Thure, Karen (Text) and Gill Kenny (Photographs). *Arizona*. Toronto: Oxford University Press (Canadian Branch). 1984


