

*Michela A. Calderaro*

## THE RIVER'S SONG



A feeling of uncertainty and a sense of foreboding – of some unknown, impending danger – seizes the reader of *The River's Song* right from the first lines of its opening page and never lets up until its last. What the reader experiences early in Jacqueline Bishop's delicious debut page-turner is best defined by the term *Unheimliche*, or the uncanny. The uncanny effect has been described by Sigmund Freud in his essay *Das Unheimliche* as something leading to a "state of complete bewilderment," a sense of intellectual uncertainty, the feeling that a familiar scene might hide, beneath its tranquil surface "something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light." It is, in short, the "horror of the familiar."<sup>1</sup>

Questions begin to mount in one's mind while reading these opening lines. Who is the narrator? Who is Annie? How is she related to the narrator?

None of these questions would remain open for too long, but right after quickly flipping the page looking for some answers you're taken back to the past through the use of time-shift.

From the somber and disquieting beginning, dominated by silence and sorrow, you are transported to a place full of joyous "sounds of early morning coming into the house through the jalousie windows," a place where the dark-blue mountains – the blueprint of Kingston – come into view, casting a spell over the narrative, the narrator, and also the reader.

Shortly, you meet the characters the narrator will have to say goodbye to: a coterie of friends, neighbors, relatives who live around the "tenement yard." And you notice the repetitive use of the term *will*, and realize it has a structural importance: not only stressing the idea of

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<sup>1</sup> "The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar." Sigmund Freud, *Das Unheimliche* (1919). English Translation (p.1-20) by Alix Strachey in <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~amtower/uncanny.html>.

inevitability and destiny, but also, as Gloria, the narrator, will prove, of individual determination.

Her story unfolds amidst daily chores, events of the tenement, and legends of old times – the “notorious sabonsan, hairy monster with large blood-red eyes,” and the “dreadful rivermumma” who is said to entice little girls to “comb her long green hair and sing with her at night, luring other girls to their deaths.”

The perturbing, or *uncanny*, effect, experienced by the reader on the opening page, is reinforced and sustained by the introduction of the figure of the *double*.<sup>2</sup>

The *double* here is a mythical figure, dominated by opposite passions and desires; a being with the dual nature of woman *and* fish; a creature who must make a choice, knowing all too well that whatever road she takes she will long for the other.

This is the fate of the mermaid. Mermaids are present in many Caribbean women writers’ poetry and fiction. They might be portrayed as terrifying creatures with “moss-green hair” trying to take their daughters to their “watery kingdom at the bottom of the river,” but also as poetic muses, or vengeful and protective mothers – as in Ms. Bishop’s previously published poetry book, *Fauna*, and specifically in the poems “Calling me back Home” and “Xaimaca”.

In *The River’s Song* the double nature of the mermaid becomes central, strengthening the feeling of the uncanny throughout the novel, and standing for all that is hidden and uncertain, both familiar and frightening, comely yet horrific, and also representing Gloria’s own double, as she stands at the crossroads of her future life.

There are various dual combinations of characters who think alike, feel alike or are juxtaposed one against the other as through a looking glass, and who are connected through a series of images and references: Gloria and Annie, Gloria and her mother, Annie’s family and Gloria’s family, Gloria and Rafael.

Ethnic, social and socio-economical differences serve as background to Gloria’s and Annie’s troubled relationship. These complex and challenging issues are dealt with delicacy yet sheer clarity. Ms. Bishop explores such issues as class and color, the clash between the haves and have-nots, the nouveau riche and those of old money, setting up events and showdowns in parallel forms, once again resorting to the phenomenon of the double. The mermaid’s feeling of not belonging, her sense of alienation, solitude and isolation is mirrored in the Annie’s mother/Gloria’s mother pair. They both long or longed for acceptance, and often faced rejection: The first by both Kingston black high-class society and the “home-grown whites” (“When I first

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<sup>2</sup> According to Freud, the uncanny feeling is often a combination of intellectual uncertainty and the phenomenon of the double.

came to this island [...] no one talked to me. Everyone was furious at Roy for bringing home a white woman.” p. 139), the latter by the rich of the hills, blacks or whites (“Sad, lonely Mama. [...]. Not once had her home been selected to host a cocktail party. Not once had any of her ‘friends’ dropped by to visit her.” p. 146).

Gloria is the central intelligence through which events and memories are processed and filtered. Through her we meet all the other characters and get to hear their stories. All will go through a transformation in the course of the novel. *The River’s Song*, therefore, is a *bildungsroman* – a coming-of-age story of a young girl – but it is also a psychological novel where *all* characters’ motivations and feelings, not only Gloria’s, have greater importance than outside events. With the exception of Rafael, perhaps, all other characters undergo an inner change; each of them will have to cope with disillusionments and losses, endure psychological turmoils that will change their lives or their outlook on life forever.

Struggling to survive amidst constricting relationships and burdensome ties Gloria *appears* to be the love object of her mother, of her closest friend Annie, of her boyfriend Rafael. In truth, rather than being the object of love, she is, for those who claim they love her, a sort of talisman, a modal object that could help them get what they really want. Only by keeping her hold on Gloria could her mother fulfill her own frustrated desires – graduating from All Saints and moving up in the hierarchy of the Kingston social circle; only by maintaining her hold over Gloria could Annie have her dreams come true – a college life together in Canada (never openly disclosed is a delicate hint at Annie’s possible homosexuality); only by keeping his hold on Gloria, could Rafael – who wants a “woman who will never change” – achieve the life his mother had planned for him.

Torn between past and future, stuck in a present that is often determined by others, Gloria will have to make difficult decisions to be free to determine the course of her life on her own. The feeling of uncanniness, of the Freudian *Unheimliche*, will only be dispelled at the end of the novel, when the mermaid will be revealed as a sad and benign creature, afraid of humans, yet capable of granting people their “heart’s desire.” Finally, like the river-maid Dora, the mermaid whose presence we felt throughout the narration, Gloria will be able to sing “her song of individual dreams.”

Following her muse, Ms. Bishop proves herself a perceptive artist, capable of stirring emotions without losing control of her writer’s tools, finely building a story and navigating with a sure hand at the helm of her creation.

# Calabash

A JOURNAL OF CARIBBEAN ARTS AND LETTERS

Volume 5, Number 1 / Summer-Fall 2008

**Information about this work:**

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*THE RIVER'S SONG*

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**Start Page:** 151

**URL:** <http://www.nyu.edu/calabash/vol5no1/0501151.pdf>

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*Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters* is an international literary journal dedicated to publishing works encompassing, but not limited to, the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Dutch-speaking Caribbean. The Journal is especially dedicated to presenting the arts and letters of those communities that have long been under-represented within the creative discourse of the region, among them: Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles, Maroon societies, and the Asian and Amerindian societies of the region. Calabash has a strong visual arts component.

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*Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters*  
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