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In Knead of Interpretation: *Reimagining Marie Clements' post-dramatic play Burning Vision through the interpretive signpost of bread.*

BY **Zed Alexander Hopkins**

The rise of post-dramatic performance has caused a monumental shift in the relationship between the audience and the dramatic text. The theatrical form is no longer poised on the assumptions of audience passivity and structured narrative, but instead relies on the “percipience” of the audience in their individual “quest for coherent meaning” (Fenton 108). While this new era of “formlessness” has given birth to new possibilities within theatre, it has also created a sense of “interpretive anxiety” for the audience—that is, an anxiety derived from the complexity of the evolving dramatic text and the overwhelm that such complexity can induce (Fenton). Marie Clements’ ecologically focused post-dramatic play *Burning Vision* manifests much of this anxiety through a heavily fragmented narrative structure and a multifaceted socio-historical context. As a director trying to treat this anxiety as it is imposed onto the audience, David Fenton suggests that the theatrical device of signposts can be used (84). Mokotow defines signposts as “the use of a sign or symbol to help remind [the audience] of the ideas at hand”. Clements masterfully writes many visual and symbolic signposts into her work, the most notable of such being that of bread. The following discussion explores the ways in which the signpost of bread functions within *Burning Vision* as a counterweight to the interpretive anxiety that Clements deliberately stimulates in an attempt to guide the audience toward some form of catharsis.

At its most basic level, the signpost of bread functions as a didactic re-

flection of character. Most notably Clements uses bread to bring focus to the dramatic weight of Fat Man's character. He is quite possibly the most obscure and confusing character within this piece. The interpretive anxiety that is generated by Fat Man's narrative is primarily engendered by his unimpassioned tone and fragmented narrative arc. However, it seems that this feeling of uncertainty in relation to Fat Man has been deliberately pursued by Clements in an attempt to subject him to the audiences' subconscious metonymy. His hyper-realistic references to "beer," "Kraft dinners," and his "living room soldier" ideals create an image of a man (or nuclear-test dummy) who is so unpalatable to the audience that they objectify him by categorizing him as the objects with which he is so absorbed. His being a nuclear test dummy furthers this disassociation with the human form, making him unrelatable or in many cases unreachable for most audience members—thus producing interpretive anxiety.

The treatment of this anxiety is seen quite clearly through the role of bread as a reflective signpost. This anxiety is treated primarily through the association of Fat Man's image with other images of the play to create contrast and juxtaposition. Drawing on David Fenton's suggestion that signposts should be represented as palimpsests (83—that they must create in themselves an intertextuality with the other moments of the play—we can see a resonance between Fat Man and Rose. Clements uses the reoccurring image of bread to create a didactic representation of human growth, by juxtaposing these two characters. While we are led to accept the fact that Fat Man is in reality a 'test-dummy' and not human, we see Rose as a near-realist archetype for a working-class women. The two timelines blend delicately through Clements' weaving of narrative progressions, creating a unified representation of what we might consider the 'American condition.' We see Rose described as a "perfect loaf of bread" (Clements, 2003), representing the admirable 'ingredients' of the American culture. Conversely, Fat Man is a product of capitalist ideology, a mixture of the American culture of consumption and conformity, representing the more corrosive 'ingredients' which compose our American identity. Clements frames both of these characters' stories within close

proximity to each other for this exact reason; enticing the audience to view the full breadth of our American identity.

In understanding this we can see a parallel between Rose's opening scene and Fat Man's. In Rose's opening scene we are introduced to the importance of bread in Rose's life and the ingredients that are essential for it to rise in the oven, while Fat Man's opening scene depicts him standing in a monochromatic living room, appreciating his television and La-Z-Boy chair (the ingredients that make up his life). The signpost of bread creates an association between the characters and also functions as a metaphor for American ideals. We can see how bread acts as the reoccurring identifier between sub-narratives, allowing the audience to draw parallels between characters and the socio-historical background they represent.

The next level of analysis leads us to view bread as a symbol for commodification, finding the liminal spaces within sub-narratives in an attempt to evolve the play's social commentary. The roots of this play are built on a hierarchy of commodity: from the initial trade-offs of gold for the LaBine Brothers and bread for the Indians, to the exhaustion of environmental and human capital to extract the precious ore, this play seems to be littered with allusions to capitalist hierarchy. It is once again the complexity of the overlapping timelines and the sheer variety of commodities referred to throughout the play that generate the anxiety of Clements' map of socially charged imagery. Clements often references food resources, fish, touch, love, and life as separate commodities within the text.

However, superficially, she gives the audience no way to sort or categorize the relevance of these images. We see the Miner and the Radium Painter exchange both love and touch in a similar way to Rose and Koji, while also being exposed to images of commodity exchange in the form of business, consumption, and power. Yet we still cannot identify these images as symbols for broader meaning. The signpost of bread acts more like cement than an overarching symbol between these fragmented images in that it guides the audience's focus without feeding them the answers. In these circumstances, the image of bread

creates a parallelism between humanity and its commodities. The final image of the play catalyzes this realization in its depiction of several human characters turning into sacks of flour. This moment makes a wide array of symbolic suggestions, most simplistically attributing a human quality to bread and further implying that humans are being used as commodities under the capitalist ideals represented by the LaBine Brothers. Furthering this, bread acts as a unifying symbol for commodity and the way our commodities define us as individuals. This is exemplified in the parallel between Rose's obsession with bread and the Widow's obsession with her dead husband's clothes. It is as if these commodities become a part of the characters (as do many of the other commodities within the play). Like our own flesh, bread becomes a symbol for how commodities are a part of us. This in itself also comes to represent another range of 'ingredients' that make up each character's social perspective.

Going further, we see Clements using bread to signpost a deeper critique of the ignorance within a capitalist society, wherein the lower classes are left misinformed and misrepresented. An excellent example of this is when Rose says that "there's no harm if [dust] gets in dough," reflecting her inability to comprehend the true damage caused by uranium extraction. The generous and kind gesture of baking becomes a process of accidental poisoning. This image of bread as a matter that absorbs from its environment links to the 'Radium Painter' who is unknowingly killing herself by painting watches for the war effort. The signpost of bread continues to uncover a blissful ignorance that ultimately leads the audience to one of the most profound realizations of the play: that they, like bread, are commodities to those who are above them in the social hierarchy.

The final layer to the signpost of bread is its ability to inspire a genuine empathetic connection between the audience and the characters onstage. While the uniqueness and dramatic complexity of the play's characters is praiseworthy, their overlapping presence and complete separation from the common stereotypes of contemporary realism aggravate audiences' interpretive anxiety. Superficially, many of these characters are near-impenetrable by the audience's gaze alone, requir-

ing an evolving association with the piece's thematic structure to be understood—even more so if they are to be empathized with. This is not to say that these characters are inaccessible to the audience, but merely that they work against the audience's preconceptions of a character-audience relationship. This is largely due to the diversity of the cast and their non-linear timelines, which in their very nature are implemented to disorientate.

In overcoming this anxiety, the signpost of bread seems to attribute significance to the moments within all of the characters' sub-narratives that resemble one other. One of the most profound of these resemblances is Rose's moment of obsessive bread preparation and the Widows' obsessive stare into the flames as she holds her husband's remaining clothes. The miscellaneous timelines of these two characters become opposing life cycles as one woman awaits her time to join her husband on the other side of the flame and the other prepares to bake bread for her lover from that same flame. It is in this coincidental association that we see the true weight of these characters and their role within the opposing narrative arc. These moments show how each character reflects every other, suggesting that their individual 'recipes' have been constructed with similar 'ingredients.' The signpost of bread acts as a metaphor for humanity in the way that it encapsulates the stories of each of these characters, framing them as products of a flawed and corrupt system, longing for something more. It is through this realization that the audience finds clarity in these characters and their interwoven timelines. The layered association of meaning invites the audience to look into their own feelings of longing and purpose, thus stimulating an empathetic vulnerability toward the characters.

The true weight and dramatic value of the interpretive anxiety stimulated by the post-dramatic form can be validated only by the effective implementation and expression of signposts. In *Burning Vision*, the use of bread as a multi-functional signpost allows the audience to overcome the sometimes fallacious and numbing effects of interpretive anxiety. Bread is applied as a didactic reflection of character, a symbol for commodification and an overarching metaphor for human connectivity. Inevitably the culmination of these functions sheds light

on a deceptively well-crafted and complex signpost that is and will continue to be at the crux of future readings and renditions of this play.

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ZED ALEXANDER HOPKINS '20 submitted this paper in Fall 2016 for Professor James Taylor's ID1 course, *Our Troubled World Imagined: Theatre and the Environment*. It is one of the three papers that received honorable mention from that semester.