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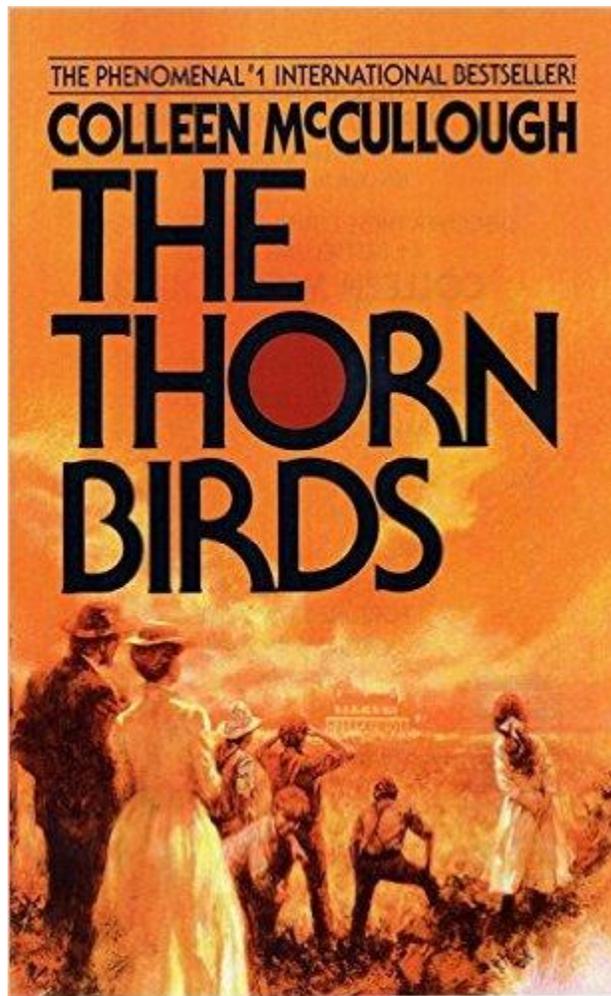
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English: Literature and Social Issues

**Metamorphosis of Meggie Cleary in Colleen McCullough's
*The Thorn Birds***

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Abstract

The Thorn Birds by Colleen McCullough is a popular generational saga set in Australia. It spans the Australian continent and three generations of Cleary descendants between 1915 and

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1969. The central character is Meggie Cleary, whose frustrating life-long suffering dominates the plot and underscores the theme of female suffering in the novel. Colleen McCullough substantiates the cruel effects of women's exclusion from men's worlds and of the harm done by relegating women to subordinate roles and to suffering. She points out how literature examines the ways in which women have been exploited and suppressed. Meggie Cleary, the protagonist of this novel is the first woman in the Cleary family who is able to get rid of the marital bond of women and to transform herself from the meek and docile subordinate, to the strong, self-reliant and independent woman. This paper shows the Metamorphosis of Meggie Cleary from a dependent girl to an independent woman.

Keywords: suffering of women, human predicament, Colleen McCullough, *The Thorn Birds* independent women, empowerment of women

Colleen McCullough



Colleen McCullough

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colleen_McCullough

Colleen McCullough is a renowned Australian writer. Her novels are stuffed with human predicaments that prompt her male and female characters to confront and extricate themselves from those predicaments. *The Thorn Birds* is her second novel and her most widely read work to date. Its publication propelled her to immediate literary stardom and ensured her status as a widely read author. She has written this novel with great intensity and learning, leaving the reader with a thirst to read unperturbed, as well as awakening the consciousness of the society for transformation.

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The Thorn Birds expertly explores the empowerment of women by enhancing their status ascribing to familial, societal and economic independence. The women characters are portrayed as more powerful individuals who rewrite their predicament as dependent souls and emerge as self-reliant women. This novel particularly focuses on the protagonist Meggie Cleary, the central character and the only daughter in a family of six sons.

Meggie

Meggie was born in the year 1911. Meggie's life is filled with depression and disaster, which clearly shows the living predicament of Australian women at that time. Meggie is quite conventional, and has never thought of struggling for her own contentment. The only thing that young Meggie longs for is to have her own family and her own children. As it is mentioned in the novel, "No rebel, Meggie; on the contrary. All her life she would obey, move within the boundaries of her female fate." (*The Thorn Birds*, p.107)

As the only daughter of the Cleary family, Meggie has never received any special care. She is often disregarded by her mother Fiona for the simple reason that she is a girl: "Fee cast her no more than a passing glance before leaving; there was no mystery to Meggie, she was female. Fee knew what her lot would be, and did not envy or pity her. The boys were different; they were miracles, males alchemized out of her female body." (*The Thorn Birds*, p.21) Due to her traditional ideas, Fee has paid little attention to her only daughter.

Meggie's Depressed Life

Meggie's depressed life is a reflection of all women's life at that time. Meggie is a traditional woman who embodies every perfect female character. In spite of all the bitterness she has tasted, she never complains. It can be said that Meggie has never realized the unfairness in her life. All she does is to accept whatever befalls her. However, being silent and submissive has never brought her any kind of happiness. On the contrary, it deepens her bitterness and misfortune.

The Priest and Meggie

Meggie is just a common woman who cannot get rid of her love emotions. The first big collision that Meggie experiences in her life comes from her love and admiration towards Father Ralph de Bricassart. Meggie met Ralph at the age of nine. During her childhood, Ralph has always accompanied her, which made the young girl Meggie, to gradually fall in love with Ralph. At the same time, Ralph also falls in love with this beautiful, lovely girl. The love between Meggie and Ralph is pure, but it is hopeless from the start for the simple reason of Ralph's identification as a Catholic priest. Ralph could not accept her because Catholicism demands its priests to remain chaste. It is advocated by Christian ideology that men, especially the monks, should get rid of their carnal desires in order to serve God better. Catholic priests

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have to obey their vows and cannot get married in their life. Because of this exclusion, Meggie can never marry her dearly loved Ralph.

As McCullough points out in *The Thorn Birds*, “That no earthly things come between the priest and his state of mind—not love of a woman, nor love of money, nor unwillingness to obey the dictates of other men.” (*The Thorn Birds*, p.69) Obviously, for Ralph, there is a contradiction between his vow as a priest and his love towards Meggie. In Ralph’s life, he is always trying very hard to suppress his love. Here, celibacy becomes an obstacle for the growth of human nature. It not only leads to Ralph’s bitterness and struggles in heart, but also brings the greatest blow to Meggie.

Passive

Meggie, the traditional woman, is not aware of being her own master. When Ralph is leaving, all she does is to accept silently. “No outcry, no weeping, no storm of protest. Just a tiny shrinking, as if the burden sat askew, would not distribute itself so she could bear it properly. And a caught breath, not quite like a sigh. (*The Thorn Birds*, p.196). Although very sad, Meggie says nothing, no complaint. Teased by fate, she has no power to struggle, nor the right to make her own choice. She has not realized that as an independent human being, she also has the right to chase her own happiness. Being “passive yet enormously strong”, (*The Thorn Birds*, p.107) she accepts all the misfortunes and goes on with her life.

Patriarchal Marriage with Luke O’Neill

In order to get over her love for Ralph and to realize her dream of her own family, Meggie decides to marry Luke O’Neill, who, ironically looks like Ralph. But it is a pity that while Meggie is looking forward to a brand new life, much more unpleasantness is waiting for her. In order to get rid of her admiration for Ralph, Meggie finally decides to marry Luke. Through this marriage, she also wants to get her own family and babies which she has always been longing for. Eventually, Meggie becomes Mrs. O’Neill and leaves Drogheda with Luke. However, like most of the women in her time, Meggie does not get her own pleasure in marriage. On the contrary, marriage brings her a lot of miseries. Luke O’Neill is a clever, arrogant, extremely hardworking man with a strong craving for money. With the hope of marrying a rich girl, he sets his eyes on Meggie, the only heiress in Drogheda. Shortly after marriage, Luke suggests to her to sign over all her money and property to him. Meggie, without any clear understanding or self-confidence as an independent woman, immediately accepts Luke’s suggestion. Luke treats Meggie just as an accessory.

In this patriarchal marriage, Luke has the total ownership over his wife Meggie and her property. Simone de Beauvoir has said, “In marrying...she becomes his vassal. He is the economic head of the joint enterprise, and hence he represents it in the view of society. She takes

his name; she belongs to his religion, his class; she joins his family, she becomes his better half' (Beauvoir, 449). Meggie is also trapped in this situation, but she is unable to question the unequal treatment inflicted on her. Luke does not want to take the responsibility as a husband. After marriage, Luke immediately finds a job for her so that he need not provide the money for her living. And all her wages will be paid straight into Luke's bank account. Luke absolutely controls their life after marriage. He decides their lifestyle without discussing it with Meggie.

Life Change

When Meggie sees Luke in his true colors, she decides to modify her life completely. After all her struggles and bitter feelings of resentment toward her husband for years, Meggie's self-esteem finally awakens and in the following days of her life, she becomes more active and mature.

The unhappy marriage with Luke makes her become more aware of her situation. When she sees Ralph leaving her again after the birth of Justine, she begins to understand it is the Church and God that prevent her from having Ralph. Meggie complains: "It isn't fair! ... because of the celibacy of priests I have had to go away from Ralph, make my home and my life with some else, have someone else's baby...I resent the Church's implication that my loving Ralph or his loving me is wrong!" (The Thorn Birds, p. 372-373) Meggie learns to think independently, and begins to question the religious norms which subjugate her. Moreover, she even begins to question God. Her former reverence towards God gradually turns into hatred and condemnation. She is no longer the little girl who was seized helplessly by fate, but is becoming an independent woman with a strong will and a spirit to fight.

Meggie Meets Ralph Again

Meggie meets Ralph again during the holiday on Matlock Island. This reunion is quite important as it scripts her transformation. Meggie finally gets Ralph's love. Anne Herrmann once pointed out that "In the series of love scenes, Meggie was always in the dominant situation and Ralph was the object of her love desire". (Herrmann, 4) Meggie has changed her passive role and has become a dominator. When Meggie is pregnant with Ralph's child, she considers her pregnancy as a beginning of her fighting against God. Disregarding all those secular bonds, Meggie resolutely leaves her husband Luke, and bravely ends the unhappy marriage. Back at Drogheda, Meggie begins her brand new life, and soon gives birth to Ralph's son Dane. From this, one can see that Meggie's self-consciousness as an independent human being has awakened. As an adult female, she finally begins to control her own life.

Autonomous Facing Patriarchy

Meggie's life is completely autonomous in Drogheda. She raises her two children alone and takes care of herself well. She devotes all her sincere love towards Ralph and to their son

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Dane, whom she thinks she had stolen from God. Thus she wages a battle against the patriarchal God and the unfair fate of women. In the latter part of her life, Meggie is able to get rid of her miseries all by herself and she gains a lot of happiness from her wise decision. However, Meggie's happiness does not prevail for long. On a holiday in Greece, Dane is drowned while performing a sea rescue. Dane's death might be a reflection of McCullough's idea of fatalism, but on the other hand, it also reflects the deficiency of women's growth in Meggie's time: "But there was never a woman born who could beat God. He's a Man." (The Thorn Birds, p. 541)

In the field of Drogheda, Meggie confronts the hegemonic patriarchy alone. Her story shows her great transition from a dependent girl to a brave, independent woman. Meggie has not been able to beat those social bonds as a common woman yet.

Women's Gain and Loss in Their Way To Independence

McCullough is not a typical feminist writer, but *The Thorn Birds* objectively shows women's gain and loss in their way to independence and growth. Meggie is the female protagonist of this novel. Her life is a metamorphosis from unawareness to revolution. She is the first woman in the Cleary family to free herself from the entanglements of marital bond. Compared to her ancestors, she has made a great progress. Meggie's development and battle are not quite complete; it is reasonable to say that Meggie has become an icon for the women to emulate. And the task of women's metamorphosis will continue in the future. *The Thorn Birds* is undoubtedly a history of women's hard journey of growth.

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