



Crossing the Threshold by/around Water: A Critical Reading of the Liminal Experiences of Adolescents and Young Adults in *Feeding the Moonfish* and *Our Place*

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Abstract

This study seeks to examine water as a liminal symbol that reflects and symbolizes the liminal identities of adolescents and young adults in two selected plays for young adults: *Feeding the Moonfish* (2011) by Barbara Wiechmann and *Our Place* (2015) by Terry Gabbard. *Feeding the Moonfish* deals with the young adults Martin and Eden who suffer from traumatic experiences. They go to the dock by the lake to rediscover themselves, and, eventually, heal by the water. In a similar setting, *Our Place* comprises five stories that revolve around adolescents and young adults' feelings of loss, fragmentation, frustration, love, and death. In both plays, the characters go through the three stages of liminality defined by Arnold van Gennep: the pre-liminal, the liminal, and the post-liminal and, finally, emerge as reborn/healed. Water is a complex liminal symbol that reflects the experiences of adolescence and young adults, and combines contradictory meanings which are essential, expressive, and, most importantly, complementary for the development of the characters and for their eventual recovery. Using the concept of liminality and adolescent psychology to read scenes in which liminal experiences (confusion, indecisiveness, and disorientation) are present, this study argues that the depiction of liminal experiences near water in these plays for young adults offers complex symbols for the study of young adulthood and for encountering and responding to traumas experienced in adolescence.

Keywords Water · Liminality · Adolescents · Young adults · Feeding the Moonfish · Our place · Young adult theater

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Water is a powerful dynamic natural force. As a symbol of life and death, “it is both a connector and separator; a source of life and fertility as well as a danger of unknown depths. It is both a purifier and a putrefying agent, it is a source of wonder, comfort and fear” (Lundock, 2022, 2). The duality of water is clearly described in the books of the Abrahamic religions. In the Old and New Testaments, water is a symbol of fertility: “Who hath divided a watercourse for the overflowing of waters, or a way for the lightning of thunder; To cause it to rain on the earth” (Job 38:24–25). Similarly, the Holy Quran is laden with numerous verses about water: as the source of various benefits for man, as an instrument of destruction and punishment, and as a test: “It is God who sends water down from the sky and with it revives the earth when it is dead. There truly is a sign in this for people who listen” (*The Holy Quran*, The Bee, 2005, 65–66). The same diverse meanings of water have been transmitted to tales, myths, and literary works: water is a symbol of purification in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, death in *Hamlet*, and dangers and threat in *Moby Dick* and the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, to mention but a few examples.

One basic function and meaning attributed to water as a symbol is its liminality: “One aspect of water which is often visualized across cultures is its liminal value, a place of transition from one state to another” (Lundock, 2022, p.2). The linkage between water and liminality arises from the fact that water is always in a state of flux; it is ever-changing. Therefore, as John D. Dawson (2004) argues, there is a “hidden correspondence between the formlessness of water and the shifting mutable character of the natural world” (p.226). The term liminality is, as Melanie Otto (2016) states, “derived from the Latin word *limen*, ‘threshold,’ the experience of liminality is one that characterizes a period of transition, accompanied by confusion and disorientation, from one state of being to another” (p.139). Michael Joseph (2011) describes liminality as “the quality of being socially segregated, set apart and divested of status, and relates to associated characteristics and qualities: indeterminacy, ambiguity, selflessness, and becomingness” (p.138). Originally, the term was used, as Laura M. Jewett and Jolanta S. Santana (2013) argue, “by cultural anthropologists and other scholars to explore the cultural processes and rites of passage that define such in-between spaces, situated on the margins at the thresholds of powerful systems of knowledge and power” (p.191). Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1960) first introduced the concept of liminality in his book *The Rites of Passage* “as part of rituals within small-scale, traditional societies” (p.139). According to van Gennep, “humankind’s existence comprises continuous transition or translation from one spatial state, symbolic situation, or social group to another, and that these transitional rites and/or liminal moments characterize the very essence of the human condition” (Downey, Kinane, and Parker, 2016, p.7). Van Gennep states that rites of passage “accompany every change of place, state, social position and age” (Turner, 1969, p.80). Following in the footsteps of van Gennep, anthropologist Victor Turner further explored the concept of liminality, arguing that “liminality is ... the in between and marginal state, in which an individual resides before becoming integrated into his or her new position in society” (1967, p.125). The contribution of Turner is seen in his collaboration with the theatre critic Richard Schechner to extend the term liminality to include theatre. He thus widened its scope from “tribal societies” to “contemporary civilizations in which the realms of art, literature, and theatre emerge as important

liminal spheres for negotiations of beliefs and values” (Achilles, 2015, p.38). In this respect, the term liminality is currently not limited to anthropology, but is also used in literary genres and studies.

As an interstate, liminality has been linked to both adolescence, which is an interstate between childhood and adulthood, and young adulthood. According to Michael Joseph (2011), “during the 1990s, ‘liminal’ appeared frequently in research touching on adolescence, generally qualifying an adolescent subject with regard to the ambiguous-ness of his or her social position and/or ... identity” (p.138). This interconnection between liminality and adolescence stems from the fact that adolescence “has always been viewed as a period of transition, of moving upward from one stage of development to another” (Cart, 2010, p.32). It is a challenging and critical transitional period in the teenager’s growth, marking the beginning of independence and maturity. Peter K. Smith (2016) asserts:

socially, adolescence can be marked by an increasing independence from parents, an increasing importance of the peer group, and often aspects such as mood swings, conflicts with parents, and risky or reckless behaviors – what has been called the “storm and stress” of the adolescent period. (p.1)

Adolescence can be a disturbing period if the teenager suffers from the loss of parents, friends, divorce, or other traumatic events such as war, displacement, environmental and natural disasters. Young adult literature thus emerges as an important genre in which serious investigation and exploration of the period of adolescence is offered. According to Achilles (2015), young adult literature often deals with “processes of transitions and threshold situations” (p.35). As a genre that targets a specific audience/reader, young adult literature acts as a mirror that reflects the needs, worries, anxieties, and troubles of teens, and assists them in steering towards adulthood. Young adult literature includes many genres, but young adult drama/theatre has been the subject of very few critical studies. Like young adult fiction, theater for the young adults is meant to explore problems that young adults face in real life and can be linked to liminality since, as Achilles and Bergmann (2015) argue, “certain forms of poetry and drama may also open up liminal perspectives” (p.4). The aim of the study is to explore water as a liminal symbol that is connected to and reflective of the young protagonists and their process of change in two plays for young adults: *Feeding the Moonfish* (2011) by Barbara Wiechmann and *Our Place* (2015) by Terry Gabbard.

Barbara Wiechmann is an American writer whose plays were performed in several festivals, such as the Edinburgh, and Toronto and Philadelphia Fringe Festivals. *Feeding the Moonfish* was first performed in 1988 “at the Nat Horne Theater, New York City, as part of the About Face Theater Company’s Julyfest” (p.4). The play revolves around Martin, who suffers from the traumatic experience of the loss of his father. As Mike Wells (2020) explicates, the play is about “scars that never heal, and the fragile nature of a tortured mind. From the opening scene to the last, the show teeters on the edge of reason, as the main protagonist struggles to cope with an inner turmoil that’s consuming him” (par.1). Martin is shown, throughout the play, seeking to relive his blessed childhood memories of his father; thus he walks to the dock of the lake every night hoping to reunite with his father, who killed himself in this place

years ago. Gazing at the water and speaking to the moonfish, Martin seeks solace in his solitude. He meets Eden, the young, troubled teenager, who has lived through similarly traumatic experiences (her mother killed her father). The play thus shows how two lonely, melancholic young characters come together and manage to find companionship and love by the water.

Our Place is written by Terry Gabbard, a director and playwright who received the Excellence in Directing Award from the North Carolina Theatre Conference. His play *Our Place* was first performed “by students of Ardrey Kell High School in Charlotte, N.C., at the 2014 North Carolina Theatre Conference” (p.4). It is based on five stories and an epilogue in which all characters meet and reach a closure by the dock on the lake. The first story, “Our Place,” is about the two young couples, Jack and Holly, and Anna and Lyle, who come to the lakeside dock hoping it will be the place that witnesses the beginning of their love relationships. The couples soon discover that Jake has already been deceiving both girls (Holly and Anne) and has taken them to the same place, reciting the same phony love lines. Soon, love turns to hate, but then the audience sees the love between Lyle and Holly, while Jake follows the hurt Anne trying to reconcile with her. The second story, “Flick of the Wrist,” is about Beth and her father Jonathan, who is dying of Alzheimer’s. She recounts her memories of coming to the dock to fish with her father. The third story, “Famtime,” concerns Al, who takes his wife Brenda and his two children, Sherry and Nicky, to the dock, hoping to unite his family and have quality family time, but is troubled and agonized by their arguments and lack of understanding. The fourth story, “Tuna Fish,” tells of teenager Liberty and her boyfriend Corey, who come to the water to sit together and enjoy their tuna fish sandwiches. Liberty feels lost as she struggles to discover her true self. The story ends with the couple breaking up. The last story, “Stay with You,” revolves around the rebellious teenager Stanley, who runs away from home to the dock but is soon followed by his six-year-old sister Sidney. She tries to persuade him to go back home but fails. She accidentally falls off the dock into the lake and dies. Collectively, the five stories deal with loneliness, friendship, love, hate, loss, illness, death, rebirth, and acceptance.

The reasons behind the selection of both plays, besides their not receiving enough critical attention despite their success, is, firstly, the fact that, in comparison to young adult fiction and films, young adult plays are indeed scarce. In fact, there are notable studies conducted on young adult literature and on water, but such works do not fully explore the connection between water as a liminal symbol and adolescence in young adult theatre. Thus, this makes liminality in young adult theater an area to be further explored. Secondly, both plays have a striking resemblance in using water to address serious problems faced by adolescents/young adults. Moreover, neither work romanticizes adolescence; instead the works offer a dismal portrayal of young characters who have gone through serious, if not traumatic incidents, or are in the phase of self-discovery, showing how they manage to cope with growing up and eventually end up healing. The characters in both plays experience liminality, which as Turner (1967) argues, is not only a transformation between states but is “a state in itself” (p.xiii). In both plays, all the young characters go through the three stages of liminality of rites defined by Arnold van Gennep (1960) and which eventually lead to change: the pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal:

I propose to call preliminary rites [rites préliminaires] the rites of separation from the previous world, liminal rites [rites liminaires] the rites performed during the stage of the marge, and postliminal rites [rites postliminaires] the rites of incorporation into the new world. (p.27)

Gennep describes these stages in relation to coming of age rituals such as marriage or social status transitions. In the two plays, the three stages emerge as psychological and emotional stages that characters go through to recover. They are stages experienced by characters who are shown to be in a state of liminality or having liminal identities throughout the plays: they separate themselves from everyone to come to the water, they interact and bond/break, then eventually reconcile and return to their communities. The tripartite process of the liminal experience is presented in relation to water, an ambivalent symbol which is prevalent throughout the three stages, reflecting several significant themes that each young adult can recognize and identify with, such as companionship, loss, absence of family, sadness, revival, life, and death. Water emerges as a liminal symbol with various psychological, emotional, and social meanings. Such meanings will be examined through the lens of liminality and adolescent psychology, specifically the works of Erik Erikson, Helen Bee, and Abraham Maslow to explore the symbolism of water and its impact on the lives of the protagonists, showing how it finally emerges as a place of healing.

Isolation, Separation, and Negativity

Water is introduced in both plays as a place that is “projected outside of society and symbolize[s] a borderline through which the protagonist or the community of liminal beings, ‘the communitas,’ passes to reenter structure” (Joseph, 2011, p.139). Its liminality is emphasized as it is a place with clear borders, boundaries, and limits, yet it also has the potentiality of openness, freedom, and even threat (Tuan, 1977, p.6). The events of the two plays take place on lake docks which are paradoxically places and spaces: they are places of security and comfort as the characters keep recounting their blissful memories of the place, but they are also spaces of freedom and danger, as seen in Al’s injury and Sidney’s drowning. Combining the symbolism of space and place, water is identified by all the characters in both plays as intriguing, isolated, and menacing. In *Feeding the Moonfish*, Eden tells Martin that “this is practically wilderness to me,” and that “it’s goddamn creepy here” (10). In *Our Place*, Al’s daughter Sherry even describes the dock as follows: “It looks like one of those places where a murderer is waiting to attack you and rip out your throat” (p.15). Jake, in the first story of *Our Place*, asserts that he has “never seen anyone else out here” (p.7). Al and his wife Brenda also comment on the fact that “no one owns this place” (p.9).

This sense of physical isolation is linked to the psychological and social isolation that the characters experience, which coincides with stage one of liminality, the pre-liminal (separation), identified by van Gennep. In this stage, “the initiate undergoes a symbolic death, the death of whatever social role or identity is being left behind, and is separated from the community” (Otto, 2016, p.139). Mathieu Deflam (1991) explains how in the “separation or the pre-liminal (after limen, Latin for threshold), a person

or group becomes detached from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or from an earlier set of social conditions” (p.8). In both plays, the characters exemplify this stage verbally and visually. They confess that they are in a state of separation from their communities: families, work colleagues, friends, ...etc. In *Feeding the Moonfish*, Martin separates himself from everyone to come to the dock, sit by the water, and talk to the moonfish. His social isolation is confirmed by Eden, who tells him that nobody even talks to him at the restaurant where he works: “they never basically even look at you” (p.9). As a young adult, Martin has reached the stage characterized in Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development by either intimacy or distantiation, the latter being “the readiness to isolate and, if necessary, to destroy those forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to one’s own, and whose ‘territory’ seems to encroach on the extent of one’s intimate relations” (Jenks, 2005, p.237). Martin separates himself from everyone, especially women, because he still believes that it is his mother’s desertion that caused his father’s suicide. Therefore, Martin’s distance from his community is caused by his own traumatic experiences and inhibitions. His insistence on being by the water, which is a liminal space between the traumatic experiences of the suicide of the father and the happy memories with him, confirms how he exhibits what is called “liminal consciousness ... which, like liminal space, is intended to represent a condition of interiority” (Joseph, 2011, p.139). Being by the water allows him to separate himself from the world and engage in a stage of introspection and reflection upon his life and memories.

On the other hand, Eden’s separation from her community to follow Martin stems from her desire for intimacy and companionship, as she has suffered from loneliness all her life. Together, Martin and Eden clearly show a desire and need for love. According to Maslow (1981), who in 1943 first introduced the concept of the Hierarchy of Needs, there are five types of human needs that are arranged in a hierarchical order, and which eventually result in self-fulfillment: physiological needs, safety and security needs, love and belonging needs, followed by esteem needs, and ending with self-actualization. All Martin and Eden’s needs except for the physiological are unfulfilled. In stage one (separation), Eden constantly expresses her fear of being alone and her wish to be with Martin, thus reflecting safety and security needs which include, as Maslow affirms, “security, stability, dependency, protection, freedom from fear, from anxiety and chaos, need for structure, order” (Maslow, 1981, p.39). The moment she begins to feel secure with Martin, she begins to express her need for love and belonging, which is also hinted at by Martin. Because at this stage these needs are not fulfilled, Martin and Eden also exhibit feelings of confusion and insecurity as they attempt to search for their own identity (the final stage of the hierarchy of needs).

Isolation and seclusion are also emphasized in *Our Place*. The two couples in the first story separate themselves from the rest of the world to come to the isolated dock to express their love. Al also separates himself and his family from the city to come, hoping that it would be “our place for famtime, hanging out, for summertime adventures” (p.20). Symbolically, they separate from the city life they are used to in order to create strong family bonds. In other words, it symbolizes the entrance into another structure: close family relationship. Beth also brings her father to the dock in an attempt to spend quality time and engage in a process of remembrance. Even though

Beth is not an adolescent, she goes through a liminal experience that every young adult losing a parent can easily relate to. In “Tuna Fish,” Liberty wishes to separate herself from her old world. Once by the water, she begins to express how she is going through a period of a struggle with self-understanding and with becoming independent, a typical phase experienced by adolescents (Smith, 2016, p.2). Liberty’s crisis is characteristic of the stage of psychosocial development that Erikson called “Identity vs. Role Confusion” in which adolescents are in a search for the self and for a sense of identity: “The growing and developing youths, faced with this physiological revolution within them, and with tangible adult tasks ahead of them are now primarily concerned with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are” (Erikson, 1963, p.235). The stage starts with feelings of confusion about the role of the adolescent in the society or community. Adolescents explore the possibilities and opportunities they find in their way and feel uncertain about them. Wolfe and Mash (2006) assert that adolescents’ “increased ability to think about possibilities may also lead to becoming lost in thoughts and worries” (p.4). Such feelings are exhibited by Liberty who admits that she is confused about what she loves or hates now and that she “loses sleep thinking about missing an opportunity to find out that [she] might like something” (p.24).

Like Liberty, Stanley in the last story is another troubled teenager who separates himself from everyone. He runs away from his home to sit by the water trying to reach a moment of self-understanding. According to Patricia Noller and Sharon Atkin (2014), “adolescents who run away from home do so because of common parent-adolescent conflicts, such as rules or school, and ... most run to a friend’s or relative’s house” (p.153). They add that the act of leaving home is also seen as an attempt to “strive for independence and autonomy” which is “central to this stage of life” (146). Through Stanley’s conversation with his young sister Sidney, the audience understands that he has conflicts with his parents; Sidney even describes him as “messed up” (p.2). Stanley’s escape to the water to reflect upon himself and his life coincides with Turner’s view of the concept of liminality as a “stage of reflection” (Turner, 1969, p.105). In fact, being by the water to reflect upon his current state confirms how, as William Stewart (1998) asserts, “the surface of a lake has similar symbolism to the mirror, presenting an image of self-contemplation, consciousness and revelation” (p.381). Thus, the lakes in both plays are liminal places/spaces; they allow the characters to reflect upon their inner desires, fears, and themselves.

Symbolically, the separation of the characters from their communities and their escape to the water confirms their state of dysfunctionality, as they are incapable of interacting with others or integrating in their societies/communities. Instead, they tend to exhibit a myriad of different negative feelings.

According to Kevin J. Todeschi (1995), there is a strong relation between water types and emotions: “The type of water could be symbolic of particular feelings, moods, and desires; for example: clean water may indicate clarity of insight or vision; dirty or muddy water might represent an unclear situation, clouded emotions” (p.282). Similarly, Stewart (1998) confirms that “water ... has many symbolic meanings: clear water, running water, stagnant water, dead water, fresh and salt water, reflecting water, purifying water, deep water, stormy water, river water, and stream water” (p.149). In *Feeding the Moonfish*, water is unclear; a symbol of Martin’s lack

of clarity. Even more, it is described as “black” symbolizing death and danger symbolic of Martin’s struggles with his resentment and anger towards women as well as his pain because of his father’s death. Therefore, his initial reaction towards Eden is anger, hatred, and aggression:

Martin: I’m just getting up off my stomach.

Eden: Don’t go. Don’t leave me here.

Martin: What?

Eden: Talk to me.

Martin: I been talking to you. Don’t you have somewhere to go? (p.11)

Such hostility continues as Martin does not accept Eden’s presence on the dock believing that she has invaded his own private world. In *Our Place*, the dark water is symbolic of Stanley who exhibits negative emotions: aggression and hostility. Brenda, Al’s wife, in the third story of *Our Place* comments that on the water saying: “the water is kinda murky” (p.16), which is reflective of the state of dissent among the family, with endless arguments and disputes. According to J. E. Cirlot (1971), “there is also a very important spatial symbolism connected with the ‘level’ of the waters, denoting a correlation between actual and physical level and absolute moral level” (p.366). He adds that water “can also be considered at different levels; surface or deep. There is a difference between paddling in a stream and diving to explore the depths of the ocean, there to find sand, shells, wreckage, fish and fearsome creatures” (p.149). In both works, the lakes are deep, emphasizing the immensity of the troubles, fears, and worries that the protagonists harbor: Martin’s inclination to give in to his unconscious desires, Al’s discontent with his life, Anne and Holly’s discovery of Jake’s deception, Sidney’s accidental fall into the water, and Beth’s sadness because of the deterioration of her father. The depths of the water also confirm that all the characters have deeply hidden desires that are unraveled in their close encounters with/in/around water: Jake, Holly, Anne, Lyle, and Corey yearn for love, Liberty and Stanley desire freedom and self-understanding, Sidney and Al want to unite their families, Beth experiences pain because of her dying father, while Eden and Martin seek companionship and reconciliation with their traumatic pasts.

The Transition

As a liminal symbol, water emerges as an interstate between the past and the present. Therefore, the characters engage in a process of oscillation between remembrance of the past and living in the present. In this respect, the characters seem to go through a transitional stage: the liminal (stage two of liminality). During this stage, the position of the person is rather unclear, undecided, and unfixed as he is between two stages/states. During the “margin or the liminal, . . . the state of the ritual subject is ambiguous; he is no longer in the old state and has not yet reached the new one” (Deflem, 1991, p.7). In this transitional stage, the characters constantly oscillate between contradictory feelings and states: acceptance and rejection, love and hatred, past memories and present situations. Such contradictory feelings and situations are evident in

the characters' references to water and its connection to their relationships. Therefore, as a spatial-temporal symbol, the symbolism of water keeps changing because, as Doreen Massey (1994) asserts, "the identities of places are inevitably unfixed. They are unfixed in part precisely because the social relations out of which they are constructed are themselves by their very nature dynamic and changing" (p.169).

In *Feeding the Moonfish*, water is a symbol of a once happy past, but it is also associated with the sad memory of a long dead father. The references to the past foreground liminality. As anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen (2009) confirms, liminality helps to "identify the importance of in-between periods, but also to understand the human reactions to liminal experiences: the way in which personality was shaped by liminality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience" (p.14). The constant references to the water in the past memories of Martin and the shift to the present references to it help the audience understand how this symbol represents an interstate, a connection between Martin's past and present, his trauma and desire for closure. This is emphasized when Martin recounts to Eden how coming to the dock is an attempt to reconnect with his beloved father:

Martin: My dad would take me here.... He'd show me the fish, all the different kinds. The rays. The squirrel fish and the parrot fish. ... At night, we'd walk out here. We'd look for the moonfish. They'd come. I couldn't take my eyes off them ... I am waiting for my father. I sleep alone here. Each night I dream and in my dream I see him. Warmer and more than in life. He watches me sleep and picks me up in his arms like I was a tiny boy and carries me out to the end of the dock. (p.404–405)

In this respect, water, to Martin, is a paradoxical symbol of the past and present, life and death, sadness and happiness. Eden, the lonely and troubled teenage girl, finds that sitting by the water allows her to discuss her traumatic experiences with Martin. She confides her desire to be free from her dismal past. Therefore, when Martin insists on taking her home, she simply replies: "I want to stay here with you" (p.12). Still, because Martin is in a transitional stage, he oscillates between feelings of love and hatred. This oscillation is verbally and visually presented. His conflict between being attracted to Eden and giving in to his unconscious desires (symbolized in the moonfish) is evident. At one point in the play, Eden leaves angrily. Even though Martin desires to follow her at first, he is stopped by the moonfish:

Martin: Something can happen to her.
Voices: Nothing can happen.

Still, Martin's refusal to leave Eden despite being commanded by the moonfish (his unconscious) to do so, in this transitional stage, paves the way for his healing in stage three. Significantly, every time Martin talks to Eden, the voices of the Moonfish recede and disappear, emphasizing how Martin's hope for recovery lies in finding a companion. Both Martin and Eden engage in storytelling, which allows them to give vent to a myriad of feelings. Richard Stone (2004) confirms that storytelling results

in “strength, distance, understanding, compassion, and, most of all, healing” (p.166). Martin’s later apology to Eden for his aggressive behavior marks the beginning of change in his character after sharing his dark secrets with her: “Look, I’m sorry I ain’t been nice to you. I guess I’m just not very nice, you know? You know, I can be an asshole” (p.401). Despite the ugliness of their stories, they do not repel each other, but rather learn to accept one another with all their failings. As Martin puts it: “You listen to me tell you this. You listen to me, and you just sit there like it was nothing” (p.407). Storytelling allows Martin to gradually achieve self-esteem, which according to Maslow (1981), “leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability, and adequacy, of being useful and necessary in the world” (p.45). The realization of this need will eventually allow Martin to step out of stage two of liminality and reach stage three and heal from his scars.

In *Our Place*, the references to water as an interstate symbol that connects the past and present also reflect the social relationships of the characters who go through stage two of liminality (the transition). These characters move between contradictory feelings around the water. The couples Jack and Holly, and Anna and Lyle exhibit feelings of love and hate in this transitional stage: Holly shows love to Jake, but at the same time, she seems to have loved Lyle; thus, she is angry at his infidelity. Similarly, Anna is in love with Lyle, but, after the exposure, she reveals feelings of hatred for his betrayal. Liberty also goes through feelings of love and hate for her boyfriend. Her conflicting feelings, which result in feelings of lack of self-understanding, become evident in her dialogue with Corey: “I don’t know who I am, Corey, and I guess I won’t know who I am for at least six or seven years” (p.23). Liberty’s opposing emotions and her struggle to find a new life, new opportunities eventually lead her to break with the past as she heads towards a new phase in her life. According to Wolfe and Mash (2006):

Thinking about people, relationships, human behavior ... is also an important part of adolescent growth. Adolescents are starting to make their own decisions about important issues affecting their lives. Self-reliance, self-control, and independent decision making all increase during the teen years with a shift away from the family and onto the peer group. (p.4)

Applying this view to Liberty, her sense of independence is evident in this stage (the transition) which ends with her decision to start a new phase (studying at the university) during which she will try the new possibilities life offers her. She tells Corey that in this stage, she would like to try new things and not just be content with the tuna fish sandwiches that they always have on their dates and that are symbolic of their relationship.

Like Martin and Eden, Beth goes through stage two (the liminal). She recounts to the audience how her father used to take her fishing as young girl:

Do you remember the first time we came out here? It was a disaster. I went to cast and hooked my leg. You had to bribe me with a Barbie just to get me to come back here. ... After that second trip, coming here with you to our place

became the bribe. We'd get here early, fish all morning and swim all afternoon.
(p.13)

As with Martin, for Beth coming to the dock is both a duality of happy memories and the dismal present of her father's imminent death. Water then reflects an interstate between the happy past and the depressing present in which Beth is preparing for the loss of her father. This liminality is visually and verbally confirmed when the audience sees Jonathan barely responding to Beth, who implores him to instruct her again in fishing: "*(She casts again. The lure again doesn't go far. She tries again and fails.)* What am I doing wrong? Well? Don't just sit there. Show me? I know you can get up" (p.13). Beth's words contrast with how she told the audience earlier that Jonathan used to teach her as a child. Her stories constantly oscillate between her memories of the past and the current condition of the father.

To Al, the family arguments act as a hindrance to his attempts to keep the family together. Almost all his family members complain and protest against his canoeing trip: his wife tells him "We are more stay-at-home ... kind of people" (p.19), his daughter calls her brother "deranged," and his son keeps complaining about his expensive phone getting wet. The constant arguments and discontent of the family end with an accident when Al hits his head and is knocked unconscious. The canoeing trip is cancelled because of the injury, but Al's insistence that he will come again shows his determination to reunite the family despite the hardships and challenges.

To Stanley, water is also liminal space between his past life with his family and a new phase. In his transitional stage, Stanley argues with his sister Sidney, who relentlessly attempts to bring him back home, but is met with Stanley's decisive reply: "I'm not going home" (p.26). Sidney accidentally falls into the water and drowns. Stanley's submergence by the water while trying to save Sidney is a symbolic act that stands for the dissolving of feelings of hatred, negativity, and anger towards his family, and it hints at his rebirth.

Integration, Rebirth, and Healing

Towards the ending of both plays, the significance of water as a symbol of healing and rebirth is fully revealed as characters go through stage three, which according to van Gennep (1960), is the post-liminal (incorporation). During this stage, the individual is integrated or incorporated into the community (p.30). Turner (1964) writes: "in the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more" (p.47). Stage three marks the reconciliation of the characters with their inner fears and their emergence in a new state/position in their communities. In *Feeding the Moonfish*, after Martin and Eden share their painful stories, they emerge in the final scene as if beginning a new love relationship:

(She takes his hand and places it on her throat-gently but in a choking hold – he holds it there for a moment, then finally begins to stroke her throat).

Martin: You're beautiful. You're so beautiful.

(He continues to stroke her throat as the lights fade.) (p.407).

Instead of “choking” Eden, as a clear symbol of his anger towards all women, he strokes her neck. Such a verbal and physical change confirms his reconciliation and healing, and the dissipation of his hatred, anger, and hostility towards women. It is a clear visual sign of his change and rebirth. Thus, the ending of the play suggests the beginning of a love story which will result in the integration of the couple into the community. The new relationship marks a change in Martin and Eden as well as in their social position as a couple. Their relationship asserts how liminality “may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (Turner, 1969, p.97). The ending shows the realization of the final tier in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs: self-actualization. Martin has rediscovered himself and has found, at last, a kindred spirit that accepts him with all his moral failings and drawbacks. In the final scene, there is no reference to the Moonfish at all, showing how Martin has healed and managed to recover from his obsession with the past and from the grip of his unconscious desires and feelings.

In *Our Place*, Stanley emerges in the epilogue standing by the water and grieving his loss, but the play hints at his rebirth as he seems much calmer than before. He appears with Beth, who has also lost her father and who stands on stage “with a fishing rod” (p.30), signifying the continuation of her cherished memory with her father. The appearance of both Stanley and Beth together on stage is a visual sign that marks their parallelism as both seem to have reconciled with their losses and the new side of their evolved personalities is now visible. Together, they speak in unison and utter a significant verbal sign that marks their change:

ALL. This our place.

HOLLY. Where our hearts are.

COREY. Where we learn to live

SHERRY & NICKY. Learn to laugh

ALL. And sometimes, our place

STANLEY & BETH. Is where we learn to say goodbye. (p.31)

These words of Beth and Stanley coincide with van Gennep’s view: “In order to understand rites pertaining to the threshold, one should always remember that the threshold is only a part of the door and that most of these rites should be understood as direct and physical rites of entrance, of waiting, and of departure—that is, as rites of passage” (1960, p.25). He adds that “to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world. It is thus an important act in marriage, adoption, ordination and funeral ceremonies” (1960, p.20). Beth and Stanley’s appearance on the dock in the epilogue as if they “have crossed the threshold” signifies their act of incorporation and healing; they have entered a new phase. Symbolically, both Jonathan and Sidney appear on stage before the audience, showing the connection of water with life, death, and rebirth. The liminality of water is thus visually emphasized in the appearance of the two dead characters together.

Al's family also appears in the epilogue showing how, as family members, they are now able to connect to the water. After his accidental injury and the abortion of the canoeing plan, the family now seems to be in unity. The line uttered by his children Sherry and Nicky about the effect of the place, their place, "Where you try a little bit harder to connect" (p.31) confirms the importance of water as a symbol of connection and unity. Their emergence in the final scene is a strong visual and verbal sign confirming the reconciliation of the family members who seemed disparate and separate in their first appearance. The visual grouping of the family on stage marks a new phase in their lives in which water will play a great role emotionally, psychologically, and socially.

For the two couples, Holly and Jake, and Lyle and Anne, their changed social relations have been hinted at by the end of their scenes; they go through tests of fidelity which result in breaking up and reuniting. They express their need for the water to be their place/space, their tie, their connection, the weaver of love relations, and bringer of strong ties. To them, it is a spatial symbol whose importance stems from the strong emotional need to belong to a certain place which will be associated with their love. Wolfe and Mash (2006) emphasize how "relationships are of central importance in adolescence... the development of romantic relationships ... encourages independence, assists with identity formation, and fosters skills for intimacy" (p.4). This view applies to the two couples, and their appearance on stage suggests that they have found their love and reconciliation has taken place. Stage three marks their integration in their communities as couples.

Liberty and Corey's relationship, like that of the two couples, is also tested. In the Epilogue, Liberty appears much calmer and less confused than in her scene with Corey. Healing is thus hinted at, with Liberty embarking on a journey of self-understanding characteristic of all adolescents. According to Bee (1995), the period of confusion (Identity vs. Role Confusion) that adolescents experience should end with "a reintegrated sense of self, of what one wants to do or be" (p.279). Even though the audiences do not see the outcome of this period, they understand that stages two and three of Liberty's liminality have already commenced, since she is now beginning a new phase. Together, all the characters speak the following words in the epilogue:

LIBERTY. There are seven billion people in the world.

ANNE. If you were to ask each one of those seven billion people if they had a special place

AL & BRENDA. Most of them would say

ALL. Yes.

LIBERTY. The surface of our planet is 200 million square miles. ... it is no surprise that we share our special places

BETH. Where the water is calm.

...

JAKE. The isolated places.

ALL. That no one else knows about.

...

HOLLY. In those places ... you can feel it.

...

NICKY. Memories becoming part of this place. Part of . . .
 ALL. Our place. (p.30–31)

The epilogue marks a closure for all the characters who have gone through the three stages of liminality and who emerge as reconciled, healed, and incorporated in their old/new societies/communities. The ending stresses the liminality of water and how it symbolizes life and death, rebirth, healing and regeneration. It also stresses the importance of water as reflective of the emotional and psychological needs of the characters. The above lines, together with the whole epilogue, sum up how water mirrors the needs for security, safety, belonging, love, esteem, and finally self-fulfilment. It also confirms how water symbolizes healing and change.

Conclusion

Water in these plays for young adults is a dominant symbol that permeates the events. As a liminal symbol, water is used to explore different themes that directly relate to adolescents and young adults: life/death, isolation/integration, love/hate, separation/unity, and loss/healing. Its relation to the characters is shown as changing and evolving; this is because it is parallel to the psychological side of the young characters, which is also in a state of constant change. Relationships in *Feeding the Moonfish* evolve from hatred to love, from rejection to acceptance. Thus, the liminality of water as a psychological and social symbol is reflected in the changing emotional states and social relationships dynamics. Like the fluidity of water, relationships in *Our Place* undergo the process of forming, storming, bonding, and severing: Jake and Holly form a new love relationship, Liberty and Corey break up, Beth loses her father, and Stanley loses his sister, Sidney.

As a complex symbol, water acts as a stimulating force, a catalyst, for the characters in both plays to go through three stages of liminality; that is, a process of change and, finally, integration. The appearance of the characters by the water at the end of the two plays marks the development and change in their personalities. According to James A. Hall (1991), “the liminal identity is one that involves a shift from the usual sense of self toward an identity that is known to be different from the persona. . . and actually moves. . . toward a more comprehensive dominant self-image than the one transiently abandoned in the liminal state” (p.41). The endings suggest the presence of “liminal identities” as the characters have gone through the three stages and been healed by the water. In this respect, liminality, to borrow Elsbree Langdon’s words, “both initiates and becomes the process of change” (1991, p.20). The healing of the characters reflects how young adult plays, like young adult literature in general, “often unflinchingly engage with the problems of adolescents, [but] they are nonetheless tied to the broader tradition of Children’s Literature, which stresses hope” (Hintz et al., 2013, p.2). The two plays show young characters struggling with their present problems, but they also emphasize hope as the protagonists eventually heal. The final message sent through this powerful symbol in the endings of both plays is the importance of facing inner fears (fear of loss, death, separation, new beginning)

and reconciling with them to reach a state of recovery. In this respect, water, visually and verbally, signals a mode of healing and rebirth.

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