

# Antithesis of Racial and Ethnic Stereotypes in *Les Deux Nègres* by Gabrielle Roy

Velda Leona Dewi<sup>1</sup> and Joesana Tjahjani<sup>2</sup>

<sup>12</sup>French Department, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia

[velda.leona@ui.ac.id](mailto:velda.leona@ui.ac.id), [joesana.tjahjani@ui.ac.id](mailto:joesana.tjahjani@ui.ac.id)

## ABSTRACT

Quebec is a part of Canada that holds a different cultural identity to those of other provinces in the country. There are cultural elements such as language, arts, and literature that distinguish the Quebec society from other societies in Canada. Identity has become a primary issue in Quebec's society and literature was one of the main means of proliferating ideas about that identity, including racial and ethnic identities. This article discusses antithesis of racial and ethnic stereotypes in *Les Deux Nègres*, a short story by Gabrielle Roy (1955). The story narrates reactions of Rue Deschambault's white community after the arrival of two black tenants, who rent rooms from families short of funds. The usual stereotypes of blacks are surprisingly contradicted by these well-spoken, neat, hard-working men, and active discrimination against them does not occur. Following Barthes's theory of narrative structure, findings from this study include construction of contradictory and dynamic characters, forms of stereotypes, and their inversion to form antithesis.

**Keywords:** *Antithesis, Canadian literature, narrative structure, race and ethnic, stereotype.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Canada's demographic composition is ethnically heterogeneous, in the sense that its citizens have come from many countries of origin and cultural backgrounds [1]. At the time of publication of *Les Deux Nègres* (1955) [2], racial and ethnic stereotypes in Canada involved two groups, the black and the white communities. Walker stated that at least partly due to long-term African colonization, the white Canadian community considered itself superior. The position of black people as newcomers or immigrants also became a medium supporting racial and ethnic stereotypes [3]. In Canada, the stereotypes developed partially because of black people's initial professions as unskilled laborers (agricultural workers and servants). During Canada's confederation era, skin color determined people's civil rights and created boundaries for the black community in every economic and social aspect of life. These circumstances affected not only the first generation of immigrants but also lingered to beleaguer their descendants. Viscous discrimination eventually roused the black community to demand equal rights as Canadian citizens. During that period, racial and ethnic issues became a major theme in Canadian politics and literature.

Canadian francophone literature also became a medium for opinions and criticism that merged into Canadian literature's important themes: family, cultural diversity, and racial and ethnic issues, identity, including stereotypes. Dwyarie and Tjahjani state that identity themes,

cultural pluralism, and intercultural condition became a recurring issue in Canadian francophone literature [4]. One Canadian francophone author who often addressed this theme is Gabrielle Roy (1909-1983). The works of Gabrielle Roy that involve themes of racial and ethnic issues include *L'Espagnole et la Pékinoise* (The Tortoiseshell and The Pekinese) and two short stories, *l'Italienne* (The Italian) and *Les Deux Nègres* (The Two Black Men). In *Les Deux Nègres*, stereotypes and their contradiction are the theme. The story was published in 1955, coinciding with the peak of racial and ethnic stereotyping in Canada. The characteristics of her literary work in this short story convey serious social criticism concerning race.

*Les Deux Nègres* recounts a story about two white families, the family of the narrator and the family Guilbert who live in Rue Deschambault. Economic difficulties experienced by the narrator's family force them to rent out a room in their home. Unexpectedly, the tenant is a black man. They are surprised to discover that their tenant is a black person, but mixed-blood or *mulâtre*. Differing from Mother (*ma mère*) who finally starts to accept the black roomer, Madame Guilbert cannot accept the *mulâtre*'s presence. In contrast, Odette and Giselle, daughters of each family, are open and curious about the two tenants. Racial difference and ethnic stereotypes cause conflicts throughout the story, but the story ends with Mother's somewhat resigned acceptance of the family's roomer cause discrimination.

According to Radaini[5], the story's racial theme includes one reversal of stereotype. Following Radaini, this paper's author found further indications of antitheses of racial and ethnic stereotypes, which are discussed here. So how does antithesis manifest in Roy's short story *Les Deux Nègres*?

## 2. METHOD

The method used is a qualitative research method with a structural approach. Barthes states that a text's narrative structure is not limited to the sentence, but goes beyond it to diction, grammatical variation, perspective, and characterization [6]. This can depict the stereotypical of race and ethnicity in the text. Antithesis is the opposite of a thesis which is an idea or a theory believed by society. The idea conveyed in the thesis contains incompleteness that can cause rejection of that idea. In this short story, racial and ethnic stereotypes are the thesis. Liliweri (2005) stated that stereotype is the belief to generalize certain characteristics, which are negative, about other people, influenced by common knowledge and experience. Racial and ethnic stereotypes view a group based on physical appearance, racial classification, and historical background. According to Bó (2019)[7], negative stereotypes, in particular, are extremely troublesome, as they have a tendency to lead to internalization and discrimination. This can happen in any context containing the possibility for marginalization based on social identity. If racial and ethnic stereotypes are not under reality and do not cause discrimination, we can categorize it as an antithesis. Meanwhile, to show the story's development, this research uses the Canonical Narrative Schema Greimas which show changes when the story moves from one stage (beginning) to another (end) [8].

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Narrative structure of *Les Deux Nègres*

The narrative structure of *Les Deux Nègres* reveals the text's tendency in depicting racial and ethnic stereotypes.

**Table 1. Characterization as narrative structure in *Les Deux Nègres***

#	Character	Ethnicity	Characterization
1	Mother	White	Main character, curious yet highly dignified, prejudiced
2	Madame Guilbert	White	Highly dignified, feels white racial superiority, prejudiced
3	Odette	White	Mother's oldest daughter, highly tolerant, curious, rebellious
4	Giselle	White	The Guilbert's daughter, highly tolerant, curious, rebellious
5	I	White	Mother's younger daughter, highly tolerant, curious, neutral
6	Father	White	Tolerant, neutral
7	Robert	White	Mother's older son, tolerant, neutral
8	Gervais	White	Mother's son, tolerant, neutral
9	Agnes	White	Mother's youngest daughter, tolerant, neutral
10	Monsieur Guilbert	White	Tolerant, neutral
11	Lucien	White	The Guilbert's son, tolerant, neutral
12	Jackson	Black	Mother's tenant, rich, nice, has a good job, notable, pious, classy, English speaker
13	The <i>mulâtre</i>	Black-mix	The Guilbert's tenant, excellent income, has a good job, classy, English speaker

First, of the story's 13 characters, 11 are white members of Mother's family and the Guilbert family. The two black characters are Jackson and the *mulâtre*, whose name remains unknown. Obviously, white domination exists in Rue Deschambault. White people have more concrete power than black people. Based on characterizations in Table 1, the story's white characters are more detailed and varied than the black characters. This indicates that the deconstruction to take place is from the white characters' perspective, and their varied characterizations create social and self-dynamics in the story, especially in chapters 2–5. Despite demonstrating antitheses of stereotypes, black characterizations remain flat in order to provoke and highlight white characters' reactions.

*Les Deux Nègres* has an unnamed first-person narrator, Mother's middle daughter, who, unlike her siblings, is old enough to understand the conflict, but young enough not to have been contaminated by stereotyping. As the main character's child, she occupies a nearly omniscient place in the family: she observes her mother's social dynamics and her tendency to discriminate against black people because of her insecurities.

Second, the story takes place in two related settings. Rue Deschambault itself and the narrator's home. Rue Deschambault is a suburban Canadian street of houses known for their large size and many rooms. Roy depicts it as a peaceful, beautiful, secure place. The only neighborhood problem is that Mother and Madame Guilbert compete for perfection. The black tenant in Mother's house creates inner conflict for her because she fears what the neighbors will think, thus revealing the "white" street's long-held prejudice against black people. As a leading character in the street and in the story, Madame Guilbert reveals the street's prejudice in every dialogue. Within Mother's home, however, there is acceptance. Partly due to curiosity and economics, Mother and her family perceive many differences between prejudices and reality. Still, since Mother's house is part of Rue Deschambault, conflict might have been expected, but none materializes, indicating that Mother's house can be viewed as a medium for changing prejudices and stereotypes. Obviously, black people's presence is something new in the neighborhood, and it creates social agitation, anxiety, and curiosity. This dynamic is concentrated especially in the two families in direct contact with their black tenants. One might expect the two tenants, as newcomers, to be intimidated by the neighborhood, but just the presence of two dark-skinned, single, self-possessed men stirs the entire white community.

The dynamics that occur produce Mother's transformation in the plot. The plot comprises things that influence changes in the Mother's attitude. The following is a table that contains the variables that cause the transformation:

**Table 2. Functional Chart of Mother's Transformation**

Initial Situation	Transformation			Final Situation
	Rising Action	Climax	Falling Action	
Mother looks for room tenant due to economic condition.	Acceptance of Jackson as tenant by Mother because Mother needs the money	Competition between Madame Guilbert and Mother regarding the black community	Odette and Jackson walk together, caused Mother's anger	Mother hums to the music played by the girls and the black people.

Mother's initial situation is seeking a tenant due to the family's economic condition, which forces her to accept anyone, even though the tenant may not match her criteria (Table 2). Fortunately, Jackson immediately makes a full week's payment, gaining Mother's approval, even though Madame Guilbert confronts Mother very intensely at his arrival. But the greater the confrontation, the more Mother realizes black stereotypes' falsity. Falling action occurs in the storyline when Mother discovers that Odette and Jackson have been walking out together in public. This begins with a debate between Mother and Odette, but ends with Mother's indirect acceptance.

From the text's narrative structure above, readers know that Rue Deschambault is dominated by the (formerly) all-white community. Racial and ethnic stereotypes have resided in the neighborhood and influenced Mother's attitudes. The presence of black characters, white characters' variation, and environmental conditions in Rue Deschambault triggers changes in social and self-dynamics in the white neighborhood. Rue Deschambault creates dynamics through anxiety, whereas the narrator's family home does so through curiosity, with its acceptance becoming a medium for eliminating stereotypes. Mother's gradual transformation exemplifies the changing of stereotypical ideas. Besides that, Madame Guilbert serves as an obstacle, but also as a catalyst, for Mother's acceptance of her tenant.

### 3.2. Racial and ethnic stereotypes in *Les Deux Nègres*

A stereotype is a generalized view or preconception about attributes or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by members of a particular social group or the roles that are or should be performed by, members of a particular social group [9]. Stereotypes can develop into discrimination if negative acts or behaviors occur toward a group or group members who are stereotyped [10]. As long as a stereotype remains only in the minds of certain groups, it is still a stereotype, or prejudice [11]. Simply put, a stereotype is an idea, while its implementation constitutes discrimination. In *Les Deux Nègres*, stereotypes emerge through dialogue:

*«Ma mère se mettait à craindre le personnage louche ou le pauvre manœuvre que l'on verrait chaque soir entrer chez nous noir et crotté.»* ("My mother began to fear the shady character or the poor laborer that we would see every night come to our house black and dirty.")

Mother is worried about the possibility of a black (*noir*) and dirty (*crotté*) laborer (*pauvre manœuvre*) living in her house. Here the word "black" has two meanings, black with dirt from

labor or dark-skinned. In a white neighborhood, the joining of “black” and “dirty” suggests that dark-skinned people must be themselves dirty or laborers who get dirty, and laborers are always poor, so black people must be poor. Those ideas carry, three stereotypes about the black race: poor, dirty, and unskilled laborer.

The stereotype of a black person as a laborer reemerges in a chapter 3 dialogue between Madame Guilbert and Mother when Madame Guilbert begins to look for a tenant. When Mother says that she is happy with Jackson, especially because he cleans his own room, Madame Guilbert responds:

«Ça se comprend, commenta Mme Guilbert, un peu pincée. Un porter! Un homme qui fait le lit des autres!» (“It is understandable, says Mme Guilbert, a bit cynically. A porter! A man who cleans up other people’s beds!”).

Madame Guilbert obviously maintains the stereotype of black people as laborers. «Ça se comprend» (“It is understandable”) expresses the certainty that a black person is naturally a servant. The second phrase «un porter» (“a porter”) means a person who serves train travelers, especially those who book compartments. In other dialogue, Madame Guilbert pinches her nose to show that, according to her, black people smell bad. The stereotype continues with Madame Guilbert’s question about Jackson’s “place”, meaning both Africa and his social status. Jackson seems to waste a lot of water when he bathes, so Madame Guilbert, who assumes that every black person has emigrated from Africa, also assumes that Jackson luxuriates in having more water than in Africa. The second meaning of “his place” assumes that Jackson’s position in the neighborhood, of course, is lower than that of white people. In chapter 5, this stereotype reemerges when Mother and Madame Guilbert scold their daughters for walking out with their black tenants in the *Rue Deschambault* neighborhood.

Dialogue between Madame Guilbert and Mother usually concerns the condition of their tenants and their prejudices or stereotypes about them. The women use phrases of possession: «mon nègres» (my negro), «notre nègres» (our negro), and «le mien» (mine) to mention their tenants. These competitive women are at once bragging about and denigrating the two men. The women’s use of possessive phrases suggests their own power, higher status, and even ownership. The text’s multiple incidences referring to the men as having lower social status demonstrates that this stereotype is the one most attached to black people.

### 3.3. Inversion of racial and ethnic stereotypes in «*Les Deux Nègres*»

Stuart Hall [12] categorizes cultural identity into two types, “identity as being” and “identity as becoming.” Identity as being is a given, whereas identity as becoming can change and continue to develop. In *Les Deux Nègres*, Gabrielle Roy criticizes stereotypes through her characters’ identity as being. Stereotypes convey black people’s identity as identity of being, a given projected onto the black community from the early colonial era. However, black people themselves see their identity as identity of becoming, like the construction of white characters in *Les Deux Nègres*. On the other hand, the development of the short story’s narrative structure demonstrates inversion of stereotypes.

Based on the stereotype, a black person is depicted as laborer, dirty, smelly, poor, criminal, uneducated, backward, not respected, an immigrant of low social status. On the other hand, normatively, white people assume that their own community is superior. However, Roy’s characterizations of Jackson, the *mulâtre*, and the white characters differ from those

stereotypes, especially in the narrator's words and in a dialogue between Madame Guilbert and Mother.

The narrator describes Jackson as smelling nice, neat, handsome, rich, and established, based on his clothes, his nice luggage, and his manner. These facts support Mother's shock regarding stereotypes and the reality of Jackson, who seems to be of the middle class. Despite being affected by stereotypes of blacks, Mother's family accepts Jackson. Their positive attitude, unaligned with normative stereotypes, is the antithesis of racial and ethnic stereotyping.

Another inversion of a stereotype is Jackson's occupational status. His activities and his earnings indicate that he works as a porter for the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). The narrator describes the *mulâtre* similarly to Jackson in occupation, clothing, and economic status. To obtain their positions in the CPR, the men must be fairly sophisticated, personable, relatively educated, and refined. This fact opposes the stereotype of the black community as uneducated, backward, not respected, and having low social status. Besides Rue Deschambault, conditions in Mother's household contradict stereotypes. Inside the house, Mother gradually comes to accept Jackson's presence, and her new attitude is then reflected outside the house as well. Inside the house, Mother also realizes that her concern about what the neighbors will think is faulty because she has enough personal space to consider and process new ways of thinking. In other words, the house becomes a medium for antithesis.

Yet another important instrument in Mother's change of racial attitude is her competition with Madame Guilbert. On the one hand, the confrontation with Madame Guilbert obstructs Mother's acceptance of Jackson, but on the other hand, Mother clearly sees her prejudice. The more Madame Guilbert points out stereotypes, the more Mother knows they are untrue. Thus, the competition also becomes a medium helping Mother realize antitheses of black stereotypes. The narrator's character is also contradictory. As the main character, Mother naturally influences her daughter, the narrator. Like Mother, the narrator, despite assuming herself neutral, uses possessive pronouns and the word «*nègre*» to talk about Jackson. «*Nègre*» is pejorative and the possessive pronouns should show bias, but the narrator feels happy with Jackson there. As mentioned, the narrator has not yet been contaminated by common stereotypes, so her use of possessive pronouns and «*nègre*» are antithetically positive. She simply does not know the expressions are normally perceived as prejudicial.

Roy created identity as being for each character. Identity as being of the characters becomes a medium to show antitheses of racial and ethnic stereotypes. Inversion of these stereotypes demonstrates that any position can be instilled into any human being regardless of race and ethnicity. Antithesis rejects not only racial and ethnic stereotypes associated with the black race, but also the white supremacy stereotype. Moreover, antithesis also manifests through characters' objects and activities, for instance, Mother's house and the competition between Mother and Madame Guilbert. These become media for changing racial and ethnic stereotypes of both black and white. «*Nègre*» becomes antithetical when the narrator uses it in showing affection. In other words, Roy deconstructs not only stereotypes, but also the word still most sensitive and polemic in both black and white society.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In *Les Deux Nègres*, antitheses of racial and ethnic stereotypes cannot be separated from conditions in Rue Deschambault society. The first component for examination is the text's narrative structure depicting neighborhood society. Next are stereotypes presented in dialogue between characters, particularly between Mother and Madame Guilbert. Last is inversion of

racial and ethnic stereotypes that occurs through dialogue. Identified narrative structures play an important role in inverting racial and ethnic stereotypes, and inversion becomes key in forming antitheses of racial and ethnic stereotypes.

As part of the text's narrative structure, arrival of the two black tenants creates a new dynamic in Rue Deschambault, a completely white community affected by the usual stereotyping of black people and represented by Mother, a dynamic character who transforms when she perceives certain truths presented in antithetical form by Madame Guilbert. Variations in neighborhood reactions, represented by Madam Guilbert, and the dynamic curiosity inside Mother's house become media for eliminating stereotypes. In *Les Deux Nègres*, the black characters do not conform to stereotypes expressed in dialogue, for instance, dirty, smelly, poor, uneducated, and backward. Instead, the two tenants conform to the family's stereotypes of the English, seen as very superior. Here, Roy's story tells readers that a person's qualities can overcome stereotypes. In *Les Deux Nègres*, fortunately, inversion of stereotypes, through curiosity and manner, prevents active discrimination. Inversion of stereotypes works both ways, on black and white, through their identity as being (characterization), dialogues, and diction. Those become media to show antitheses of racial and ethnic stereotypes of the black race. As antithesis, the story's construction and events form a bridge to needed changes. As a white author with a multicultural background, Gabrielle Roy wrote *Les Deux Nègres* to criticize misperceptions of black people in her community.

## REFERENCES

- [1] P. S. Li, "CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN CANADA: The Social Construction of Racial Differences," 2000.
- [2] G. Roy, "Les Deux Nègres," in *Rue Deschambault*, Montréal (Québec): Les Éditions du Boréal, 2010, pp. 9–22.
- [3] J. W. S. G. Walker, *Racial Discrimination in Canada: The Black Experience*. Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association, 1985.
- [4] R. D. Dwyarie and J. Tjahjani, "Intercultural Concepts in Place Cliché by Jacques Godbout," *3L Southeast Asian J. English Lang. Stud.*, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 137–149, 2019.
- [5] R. B. Radaini, "Tema Rasisme dalam Cerpen *Les Deux Nègres* Karya Gabrielle Roy," *Univ. Indones.*, 2014.
- [6] R. Barthes, "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits," *Communications*, vol. 8, pp. 1–27, 1966.
- [7] B. B. Bó, "Structure versus agency: a cross-national examination of discrimination and the internalization of negative stereotypes," *Eur. Soc.*, pp. 1–29, 2019.
- [8] O. Zaimar, *Semiotics in the Analysis of Literary Works*, Depok: Komodo Books. 2014.
- [9] E. and N.-D. Women's Rights and Gender Section, OHCHR Research and Right to Development Division Rule of Law, "Gender stereotypes and Stereotyping and women's rights," Geneva, Switzerland, 2014.
- [10] A. Al Ramiah, M. Hewstone, J. F. Dovidio, and L. A. Penner, "The Social Psychology of Discrimination: Theory, Measurement and Consequences," in *Irish and International Approaches to Measuring Discrimination*, Dublin: Liffey Press, 2010,
- [11] S. Plous, *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 2003.
- [12] S. Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *IDENTITY: Community, Culture, Difference*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, pp. 222–237.