Learning from the Franco-Provençals
An Investigation of the Writing Techniques of Marcel Pagnol

David James Henderson
May, 7 1998
Ball State University
Muncie, IN

Mathew David Fisher, Advisor

5/8/98
Abstract

Marcel Pagnol is one of the most outstanding Franco-Provençal storytellers of the twenty-first century. His strength as an author lies in his ability to teach universal lessons through fiction. *Souvenirs d’Enfance*, a collection of three novels, is a prime example of works containing these lessons. In the novels, Pagnol employs a child character as the teacher and symbol of the lessons he is revealing. In this essay I discuss Pagnol’s life and work, the Franco-Provençal influence on his writing, and Pagnol’s use of the child character in *Souvenirs d’Enfance*. In conclusion, I ask the reader to consider whom Pagnol found the most wise and fair, the child or the adult.
Introduction

Sitting in “Le Scot-Thé”, sipping a cup of tea, I opened one of Marcel Pagnol’s novels for the first time. Initially inspired to continue reading by his simple, easy to comprehend style, I soon discovered that Pagnol’s writing was a fantastic representation of the Franco-Provençal life that reminded me of situations and events that I, myself, had encountered. I was mesmerized by the way in which an author could write a book about the life of someone so seemingly different than I was and yet make the work relevant to my own experiences. In fact, this was an idea that I was familiar with only from lectures that my teachers had given, claiming that an author could create a universal montage of lessons and theories through a narrative of fictional occurrences. For the first time, I truly felt that I had understood this phenomenon through my own reading. Because of this feeling, that day in “Le Scot-Thé,” I made a commitment to myself to learn more about Marcel Pagnol and his ability to reach such a large audience with his depiction of the French-Provençal way of life.

Through an investigation of the literature, I realized that it was its “storytelling” nature that allowed Pagnol’s work to be so obviously full of lessons applicable on a universal level. Storytelling is an important facet of French literature and extends far beyond its beginning as the only means of keeping a tale alive; it is a method of expressing life-morals and lessons to an audience through a fictional creation. Nancy Mellon (1992) embellishes this definition with the following statement: “Although setbacks of all kinds may discourage us, the grand, old process of storytelling puts us in touch with strengths we have forgotten, with wisdom that has faded or disappeared, and with hopes that have fallen into darkness” (p.1). Modern French writers, such as Pagnol, have maintained this tradition with their novels and short stories.
While it can be argued that all literature has the ability to transmit a universal message, it is storytelling that accomplishes this result in the most effective manner. Because there is usually only one lesson to be learned in each story, it is not difficult for the reader to remain concentrated on this idea. In much literature, vast descriptions of events not necessarily consequential to the overall theme can detract the reader’s interests and attention from the central concept. Also, it is not the purpose of all literature to teach anything to the reader, rather, the work could be written simply to entertain. This ambition to entertain is not vital to storytellers, as it is not their principle motivation in writing.

In this paper, I will show how a storyteller such as Pagnol achieves the extension of his ideas to a universal audience. First, I will discuss his life and events that may have influenced his literature. Second, a connection between Pagnol and French-Provençal writing will be established. Finally, I will spend the majority of this paper referring to Pagnol’s trilogy, *Souvenirs d’Enfance*, in order to illustrate his use of a child narrator in expressing valuable lessons to the reader. Also, examples of situations found in the novels will be given that convey these lessons.

**The Life and Work of Marcel Pagnol**

Of all the French authors of the twenty-first century, Marcel Pagnol shines as one who is able to master the dramatical aspect of the written word. Born February 28, 1895 into a humble family, Pagnol grows to become a scholar, writer, director, and storyteller. His childhood was one like many of his time; he attended classes in the fall and amused himself with his family and friends throughout the summer. Excelling as both a son and a student, his interests were varied and extensive. In fact, learning about himself and the
world around him was his life-long passion. Through introspection and investigation, Marcel came to a great understanding of human nature and phenomenon.

Although a talented and skilled prose writer, Pagnol is most known for his work in the French theater and cinema. Early in his career as an English professor, Pagnol embarked upon Paris to accept a teaching position at the Lycée Condorcet, one of the city’s most famous high schools. Soon into his new career, Pagnol met an influential theater critic of the time, Paul Nivoix, and through a combined effort on both of their parts, wrote his first play, *Tonton*. To his dismay, the finished work was unimpressive to the extent that he considered it to be an embarrassment and never had it published (Caldicott, 1977).

While Pagnol never considered *Tonton* to be one of his successes, it did have a short run in Marseilles and marked his entrance into the dramatic world. Earning 700 Francs, about 140 U.S. dollars, from the production, he returned to Paris to write more theatrical works. Publishing plays such as *Les Marchands de Gloire, Un Direct au Coeur*, and *Jazz*, the young playwright began to make an impression on the Parisian theater scene. In 1928 Pagnol’s most well known play, *Topaz*, first ran in Paris. While this play solidified his worth as a French dramatist, it did not receive the recognition that it deserved.

In the late twenties France was exposed to a new phenomenon, sound movies, or “talkies” as they would be later known. Always willing to tackle a new challenge, Marcel Pagnol decided to engage in this new venture, rewriting his theatrical works into movie-scripts and eventually directing his own films. In 1932, a film version of *Topaz* was released into the French cinemas. Directed by Gasnier for Paramount, the film enjoyed enough success that Pagnol signed an agreement with French writer Giono,
allowing Pagnol to make film adaptations of his works.

A key component of Pagnol's success in his early days of French cinema was the freedom and liberty that he enjoyed in his work. After having established his own production company, including his own studios, a team of technicians and actors, and private subcontracts with for sound reproduction, Pagnol was able to guide his career in his own manner. This freedom and liberty was an essential aspect of his happiness and fame, and became a central theme in his upcoming novels.

In the years that followed, Pagnol created many of his own films and eventually worked with Paramount Studios. He made a name for himself in the industry, and it was finally through film that Pagnol received the recognition that he deserved (Caldicott, 1977). In fact, Pagnol was one of the only French filmmakers who were able to create films prior to the second world war. During which time, the European film industry was almost entirely controlled by the German U.F.A. and the American movie giants. Against this competition, it was quite rare for an independent filmmaker to prove successful.

While Pagnol is most known for his work in film and theater, he has also left with us outstanding pieces of literary magic. It can be said that Pagnol began his writing career in 1910, while still in high school in the town of La Treille\(^1\), publishing his first attempts at poetry in a local magazine, *Massilia* (Beylie, 1974). This event was important for two distinct reasons. First, it was his original attempt and success at publishing one of his works. Second, it showed how Pagnol, at a very young age, was driven to share his talent and ideas with his native France.

After having spent a forty year recess from poetry and prose writing, Pagnol

---

\(^1\) La Treille is located in the south of France.
Learning from the Franco-Provençals

returned to the south of France in the 1950's to rekindle these interests. C.E.J. Caldicott (1977), critic of Pagnol, calls this transition “the return of the native” (p.133) for not only does it mark Pagnol’s return to his native “Midi,” it also symbolizes his return to the literary world of prose. What many do not know about Pagnol is that he had always dreamed of making a career in prose writing, even though others had classified the theater as his true vocation, (Beylie, 1974).

Another aspect of Pagnol’s life not commonly publicized or discussed is the extreme value that he had always placed on education and his work in academia. Throughout his childhood, Pagnol was incredibly interested and diligent in his studies. This dedication proved beneficial when, in 1904, he won a competitive scholarship to do his high school studies at a private institution. During this time in France, there was a great separation among the educational levels of the students attending the private and public schools. While the public schools were open to all French citizens, private schools were open only to those who could afford their high prices. The difference in the levels of education comes in the fact that students attending the private schools were groomed for entrance into a university upon completion of their studies, while it was not possible to attend a university upon completion of a public education (Caldicott, 1977). Because Pagnol’s father earned a humble income, he could not afford to send Pagnol to a private school. Luckily for Marcel there were two scholarships open to the youth of his region, and in 1904 he placed second in the examination competition, winning one, (Beylie, 1974).

Because Pagnol valued the benefits of an education, he desired to continue his studies upon high school graduation. At this time, he entered the University of

---

2 The Midi is a region in the south of France that would be bordered on the north if one were to draw a horizontal line from Bordeaux to the country’s eastern border.
Montpellier, Montpellier, France. By February 16, 1916, he had completed a *license d'anglais*³ and prepared to begin a teaching career in English at the *Collège de Palmiers*,⁴ Palmiers, France.

After much effort, Pagnol eventually reveled in a public acclaim of his creative and academic work. Probably the biggest of the honors bestowed upon him came on April 4, 1946. It was on this date that the talented Pagnol was made a member of the Académie Française⁵. The Academy is a group of the most influential and popular French authors and dramatists who assemble to make decisions on the progression of the French language. It is easy to understand why it was so natural that Pagnol be asked to serve in The Academy, as he had conquered three of the most important mediums in creating art from the written word: drama, the novel, and the screen-play. Indeed, this was the greatest acclaim and recognition that Pagnol’s country would bestow upon him during his lifetime.

Although it may seem that Pagnol *ajoui d’un succès imméce*⁶ throughout his life, early on he suffered two tragedies that would inspire him in his literary ambitions. Almost at the same time that *Topaz*, his first play to become a film, finished production, death came to his younger brother Paul, who had been quite unhealthy since the early part of his life. This, in fact, was the second death that had struck the Pagnol family, as Marcel’s mother had died unexpectedly in 1910. The death of his mother and brother must have affected Pagnol greatly, as he held his family quite dear to him. In his literary works, he makes frequent allusions to his family and events that had taken place in his life. It is suggested that the death of his brother, Paul, and the unresolved feelings that

³ Bachelors degree in French
⁴ Palmiers Middle School
⁵ The French Academy
⁶ reveled in success
thus were left with him were major influences in his book, *Jean de Florette* (Caldicott, 1977).

**The Occitan Influence on Pagnol**

Because there is such reference to Pagnol's life to be found in his creative works, it is necessary to understand the environmental influences that shaped the person he was. As with anyone, he was much a product of his surroundings. While it can be simply stated that he was French, and thus the culmination of French society, this is a very general assessment. In essence, he came from a unique region of the country known for a distinct culture, heritage and literary ambition. An investigation of these differences provides the reader with a better familiarity with Pagnol and his professional work.

In France, art, music, film, and literature are grouped into two major categories. The first is known as "Parisian," meaning the work was done in Paris, and somehow holds the Parisian spirit within it. This usually means that the setting of the piece is in Paris, and the characters, or subjects, are Parisian citizens. The second category is most commonly known as "Franco-Provençal," or simply, "Provençal." Provençal means work done outside of Paris, including within it events and situations that occur in that location.

To classify all works that are done outside of Paris as simply Franco-Provençal is misleading. In fact, there are many different artistic styles that fall under this category. For each of the six major geographical regions in France⁷, there is an artistic style and language all of its own. If one continued to divide the country, he or she would find that within those six regions, there is even further regional differentiation. It is necessary to

---

⁷ The north, south, east, west, center, and Parisian regions
Learning from the Franco-Provençals

consider this when discussing Franco-Provençal culture, as it is a very broad term.

The regional culture that influenced the life and work of Marcel Pagnol the greatest was that of the Occitan, as that is the area in which he spent all of his childhood and adolescent years. “Occitan” is a term used to define the native language and culture of the southern part of France, extending into Italy. This would encompass La Treille, where Marcel spent the early part of his life.

Occitan, like all of the regional cultures in France, is one stemming from an old and rich tradition. The culture began in the Middle Ages and melted into the French Society after the French Revolution. In the Middle Ages, the langue d’oc\(^8\) was the sole language spoken in these regions. In fact, the Occitan language flourished until the 1850’s, when it began to deteriorate. Although there were attempts to retain the language as the national language of the Midi region, shortly after the turn of the century it became obsolete and was replaced by the version of French that is spoken today (France, 1995).

As previously stated, Occitan is not only a language, but also a thriving culture. In the Middle Ages, the Occitan region was greatly known for its lyrical poets and the pieces they composed. This can be attributed, in part, to the beauty of the Occitan language itself. The Medieval Occitan language possessed certain features that made it perfect for lyric composition. For example, the words of the Medieval Òccitan language display a wide range of static, stressed and unstressed suffixes, which made it a light task for a composer to find words to fit his metric rhyme scheme. To understand this principle, one need only consider the nouns of the Occitan language. The nouns were separated into cases, each with its own specific ending.\(^9\) This made it quite easy for an author to find words that would easy rhyme together to maintain a static pattern within

\(^8\) Occitan language
\(^9\) The nominative case nouns such as amaire (lover) and chantaire (singer) always end in -aire.
Occitan literature flourished as a separate entity until after the French Revolution. It then became more fused with the mainstream French culture, most importantly, that of the Parisian region. It was at this same time that the Occitan territories became submersed into the French Nation. This had a great impact on the culture of the region, as more and more it was influenced by the literature coming from the cultural epicenter, Paris (France, 1995). Another reason for the dissipation of Occitan literature was the technological advances that came around the time of revolution. Because technology now made it easier to print books and share ideas throughout the nation at a much more rapid rate than had previously been possible, more information was able to permeate the Occitan “border.” This new information, style, and culture naturally found its way into the Occitan way of life and provoked change in their once “isolated” region.

While Occitan language and culture ultimately gave way to the “National” influence, it was never lost. It has only been in the past century that the Occitan language is no longer spoken at schools or in the home. In fact, there are still many elderly French citizens who claim the Occitan language as their native tongue and French as their second language. Also, there are still Occitan festivals that take place every year France, where in the participants dress in the traditional Occitan clothing, play Occitan music and perform regional theatrical pieces.

The art of creating Occitan, or Provençal, literature has not been altogether lost. In this century, there have been a great number of authors who have been inspired by the Provençal theme. As previously stated, the Provençal theme is one in which the events in the story take place outside of Paris. Some, though, would say that this is only a simple

---

10 This information was discovered in meetings I had with natives of the Occitan region in a recent visit to France.
Provençal literature is an art that pulls the reader inside with vast descriptions of the French countryside and the people that inhabit it. These people enjoy a life much simpler than those living in Paris do, and the plots of Provençal stories reflect this simplicity.

One of the most noted Provençal writers of this century is Marcel Pagnol. His books capture the beauty and simplicity of the French countryside in a way that is almost mystical. In fact, as Maurice Rat once wrote, “Not for a hundred years has a French writer expressed all the essence of his native province as well as Marcel Pagnol” (Rat in Popkin & Popkin, p.167). This ability is drawn from his ties with his Occitan home, and the influences that Occitan literature must have played on his education.

When looking at the literature of Pagnol, it is necessary to remember that his work is not only a description of the artistic fantasies that surrounded him at the time the piece was written; it is also a representation of the region that marked his childhood. He includes in all of his books expressive descriptions of the rural backdrops where the stories are set. Never are his characters locked inside of Paris, nor would they want to be. Instead, they blossom out of a great liberty that is found in the county and the simple lives that can be lead there. This is an amazing tool used to concentrate completely on the internal emotional responses and activities of the characters, not only their interactions with the complex world around them.

Souvenirs d’Enfance

As a writer, Marcel Pagnol had great success with many of his works, but his collection, Souvenirs d’Enfance represents some of his most impressive writing. The collection consists of three separate books, La Gloire de mon Père, Le Château de ma
"Mere, and Le Temps de Secrets.\textsuperscript{11} These three books showcase a newfound motivation in Pagnol’s writing. Not only does he build a fiction depiction of life in the French countryside, he also shares with the reader many experiences from his own life. The pieces were written in a storyteller’s manner, describing situations in the character’s lives, followed by a concluding summation by the narrator. The beauty of these stories is that they are so applicable to all of our lives. Because the characters and events are real and believable, all can learn from the lessons they are taught. Most especially, the reader easily relates to the main character and can share in the conclusions he derives about the different aspects of life.

As previously stated, one of the interesting aspects of Souvenirs d’Enfance is the relationship that the collection has with Pagnol’s own life to the extent that the main character is named Marcel. In this century, there has been a new wave of French writers using their own lives as the plots for their literature. According to Christopher Robinson (1980), author of French Literature in the Twentieth Century, “In the novel and poetry, …concentration upon oneself, identity, and self exploration have become an important feature of literary creation… the artist must look into the mirror of his ‘self’ in order to reproduce not merely his own reality, but also a meaningful vision of the world around him” (p.98). In other words, twentieth century French writers, like Pagnol, are using their creative abilities to dive back into their past to reach an explanation of the people they have become, and the environment that influenced this growth and change.

Robinson goes on to call this concentration upon oneself in his or her writing narcissistic because the emphasis of the work is placed completely on the authors. I would suggest, however, that when authors, such as Pagnol, use real life events as the

\textsuperscript{11} My Father’s Glory, My Mother’s Castle and The Time of Secrets.
motivation for their writing, the end result is a believable depiction of human behavior. Because authors draw on feelings they have experienced, they are able to write in a more realistic fashion. This realism has been a major force in twentieth century French writing, making the work universal in that many readers can relate to the believable pains and triumphs of the characters.

Thus, while Pagnol embellishes *Souvenirs d'Enfance* with fictional characters and events, his inclusion of personal experiences make the books believable and relevant to a large audience. In fact, the three books trace Pagnol's life from his earliest recollections until the end of his first year at the Lycée. They combine to tell a story about a boy's coming of age and the lessons that he must learn throughout this process. The lessons that he learns are not, though, only applicable to a child. Instead, they are ideas and morals that any audience treasure, and apply to many aspects of their lives.

Pagnol's use of a child as his main character is not surprising at all. In French literature of the past few centuries, it has been a trend to use a child as the central character. We find an early example this use of a child character in *Emile*, written by Jean Jacques Rousseau in 1762. In this work, Rousseau depicts childhood as a time of purity which should be left untainted by society, as possible (Robinson, 1980). Even at this time in history, the child was seen as an innocent creature, open to the influences of his environment. Rousseau was using the child to exemplify the purity of the human soul in its most un tarnished state.

The value that French authors placed in the innocence of the child is exemplified in more modern literature as well. Henry de Montherland (1856-1972), in his novels, portrayed childhood as a paradise, or, a period in life where one has the freedom of

---

12 High school
complete self-expression, unconfined by the limits of reason. Alain Fournier, author of
*Le Grand Meaulnes* (1913) also shared in this ideology. In a letter he once wrote to
friend, Jacques Rivière (1906), he states:

> My credo in art and literature is: childhood. To succeed in rendering
it...in all its profundity, touching on sacred mysteries. My book will
perhaps constitute a perpetual, imperceptible to-and-fro between
dream and reality, dream being understood as the vast, other world
and continually ringing with echoes of it (in Robinson, p. 94).

We see how his view of childhood denotes more than an independence from reason, but
rather, an exclusion from reality.

Because authors view the child as an entity untouched by the “real” world, it is
natural that they are used to transmit important messages to the reader. The use of a child
in this way is effective because they are seen as true and honest. They show the reader
what life is, as seen through the eyes of someone who has not been effected by its jading
influences. Marcel Pagnol was correct in using a child character to send universal
messages through his writing because it is easy for the reader to trust the child’s feelings
as being true and natural. The reader does not have to question the motivation for the
character’s decisions, because a child is not stimulated by a need to conform to reason or
reality, he or she reacts merely on instinct alone.

It is also interesting to note that the books are written in a stream-of-conscious
format. The narrator moves from event to event in a very casual way. In many cases, we
find no transitions between events. Because there is no plot, there is also no official
climax or resolution; rather, there are many small ones. Each “tale” that Pagnol writes
has its own introduction, building of tension, climax, and resolution.

This format is effective in *Souvenir’s d’Enfance* for two reasons. First, as H.
Lefebvre points out in a critique of the works, it enriches the “storytelling” aspect of the
books. In storytelling, the author shares brief anecdotes with the reader that contain their own climax and resolution. In the case of *Souvenir’s d’Enfance*, Pagnol’s purpose is to share varied life-lessons with the reader. Writing in a stream-of-conscious allows Pagnol to tell many different stories, each with its own separate lesson.

Second, stream-of-conscious writing matches Pagnol’s decision to use a child as the narrator. Children converse in a unique manner, sharing a myriad of recollections with the receiver that do not necessarily follow a distinct lineage. They relay to their audience what they find essential and pertinent to their message or simply the recollections that come to them at the moment they are speaking. Pagnol has managed to capture this technique and implemented it justifiably in his writing.

*La Gloire de mon Père*

The first book in *Souvenirs d’Enfance*, *La Gloire de mon Père*, covers Marcel’s life from 1895-1903. The work includes random recollections from his birth until the age of six. The most important aspect to this piece is that it sets the stage for the events in the following two books. In providing the reader with a summarized history of the Pagnol family, the author gives insight into the motivation and personalities of the characters. This familiarity enriches one’s understanding of certain events depicted in the books.

Early in the story, we are introduced to Jules, the fiancée of Marcel’s aunt. Jules is not a central character in any of the stories (as is Marcel, his father, his mother, or his brother, Paul) but he indirectly influences Marcel’s entire childhood. The most significant example of this is when he decides to rent a summer villa with Marcel’s father, Joseph, who could have never afforded to rent it on his own. This is an influential event in the Marcel’s life, as he is now taken from the city to spend his summers in the
French countryside.

Ironically, the family nicknames the villa, “La Bastille Neuve.”13 This is an interesting name for the summer home because it becomes an intense force in the Marcel’s life, just as the true Bastille became a force in the history of the French nation. Prior to the French revolution, the Bastille was a prison, housing many criminals that the monarchy deemed to be offenders of the state. On July 14, 1778, the Bastille was stormed and the prisoners set free. Thus, it was with this event that the Bastille became a symbol of the liberation that revolutionaries were fighting for.

Marcel’s own Bastille marked his liberation from the city and a newfound freedom in the countryside. At the summer villa, Marcel spends his days wandering through the forests and discovering a true love for nature. This freedom to explore stirs a great deal of creativity in the young boy. Caldicott (1977) states that the countryside gave Pagnol the freedom to imagine and grow, and was a necessary prelude to the adventures he experienced later in life.

_La Gloire de mon Père_ also describes the relationship that Pagnol has with his father. The book exposes a closeness that develops between the two, in the midst of barriers that Joseph builds between them. This is not to say that there was any conflict between the characters; rather, there exists an underlying distance between the two. For example, Joseph and his brother-in-law, Jules, spend much of the summer hunting in the woods. While Marcel asks frequently if he can join them, he is systematically denied this privilege. The young boy does not understand the reason for this, and it might be said that this causes some apprehension on Marcel’s part towards his father.

---

13 The New Bastille
Le Château de ma Mère

The second book in the Souvenirs d’Enfance collection is Le Château de ma Mère, concentrating on Pagnol’s life from 1903-1905. In this book we see Pagnol move from an infant into a young adolescent. The reader is pulled into Pagnol’s stories through emotional descriptions of nature and human feelings. As in all of the three books, the central character is Marcel and the narrator is his older self. In Le Château de ma Mère, Marcel learns the benefits of friendship and persistence. Also, he realizes that the child’s world is dominated by adults, and discovers that sacrifice is necessary to live within that constraint.

A central idea of the book is Marcel’s realization of what friendship constitutes. Up until this time in Pagnol’s life, he was not old enough to understand the “dynamics” of a relationship with another. Through Marcel’s association with another boy, Lili, he learns the value of intimacy, a phenomenon that was lacking in his family relationships. He also discovers the significance that humility plays in relations with others.

After meeting Lili in the woods near his parent’s summer villa, Marcel soon develops a strong admiration for him. Their friendship is one built on opposites; Lili is the poor country boy and Marcel is the middle class city boy. Never the less, Marcel develops a profound admiration for Lili, centering on his vast knowledge of the countryside. This admiration is evident in a short description that Marcel gives of his friend:

Lili knew everything; the weather, hidden water holes, the valleys where one would find mushrooms, wild vegetation, almond trees, prune trees…(Pagnol, p. 37).

In effect, Lili knows and teaches Marcel what he had been looking to his father to learn. In an apprentice like manner, Lili shows Marcel how to hunt and survive in the
Learning from the Franco-Provençals

countryside. This is something that Marcel had been looking to his father to teach him since the first book in the collection, *La Gloire de mon Père*. Marcel’s father was not interested in sharing these experiences with his son. Rather, he kept a distance from Marcel, showing an interest only in his studies at primary school. Finally, though, once his father notices the enjoyment that Marcel receives from his experiences with his friend, he invites the two boys to hunt with him and Jules. By this point it is too late. Marcel is dedicated to his adventures with Lili and no longer shows an interest in spending much time with his father.

In return for showing him the secrets of the forest, Marcel teaches Lili about the city and school. Due to the absence of Lili’s father, for which an explanation is never given, he is forced to stay at home throughout most of the school year and assist his mother, never leaving the countryside and barely attending school. Thus, Marcel takes on a double role in Lili’s life. First, he is Lili’s eyes beyond the forest, sharing with him adventures of the city. Lili is mystified by what he hears, primarily because he has never left the boundaries of his native surroundings. Pagnol depicts this aspect of their relationship in much depth, as expressed in the following passage:

> In exchange for so many secrets, I (Marcel) told him about the city: the stores where one finds everything, the toy displays at Christmas time, ... and the “Magic-City” ferry... (Pagnol, p. 39).

Second, Marcel becomes Lili’s tutor, sharing with him his limited academic knowledge.

> Finally, one day I gave him a piece of paper, on which was written “anticonstitutionally” When he succeeded in reading it, I showered him with compliments, all the time realizing that he probably would not use the word very often... (Pagnol, p. 40).

These situations reflect the value that the two placed on “sharing” in their relationship. In fact, sharing ideas and experiences is what can draw any two friends together. All too often, we find ourselves in relationships that are one-sided, meaning
that they are based on the giving nature of one and the taking nature of the other. This sort of relationship is not beneficial to both parties, and usually, when the “giver” curtails his generosity, he is left without the companionship of the other. Pagnol, through his description of the friendship between Marcel and Lili, shows us that there is an alternative to this one-sided relationship, namely, one built upon mutual sharing.

A second lesson that can be learned through the boys’ friendship is that the value of a person is not to be judged on a superficial level, but instead should be determined through an investigation of his or her inner qualities. Marcel is constantly bombarded by his father’s overwhelming opinion that the value of a person is found in his or her academic capabilities. This stance is understandable because his father is an academic instructor, but it is still unjustified. Marcel never scrutinizes Lili for his academic deficiencies, just as Lili does not ridicule Marcel for his inexperience in the countryside. Because both academics and the ability to survive outside of the comforts of the city are learned traits, anybody can develop an understanding of either. Thus, it would be unfair to use either of these “skills” as a measure for a person’s value.

Pagnol uses the innocence of the two children to show the reader where the true value of a person is found. As children, the determining factor in our choosing to associate with someone is not their social class, level of education, or any other construct which society has created to separate its members. Children place value on a person on the basis of inner qualities such as trustworthiness, caring, sincerity, or loyalty.

As exemplified in a conversation that Marcel has with his father, children do not even understand the stigmatization factors that adults use to label the “worth” of a person. When Marcel returns to the city, after having passed his summer in the villa, he receives a letter from Lili that is barely decipherable due to the vast number of spelling and
grammatical errors. Marcel’s father, upon reading the letter states that he is “happy that he (Lili) still has three years left to prepare for his school examinations,” (Pagnol, p.154), and goes on to say that Marcel will understand the significance of the errors later on in life. Innocently, Marcel responds, “I took it (the letter), I folded it, I put it in my pocket, and I didn’t say anything back: I had understood well before him” (Pagnol, p. 154), believing that his father was implying that Marcel would understand the surface meaning of the letter when he had acquired a knowledge of the language well enough to decipher so many mistakes.

Up to this point, it has only been mentioned how Pagnol shares lessons with the reader through character dialog and interaction. As any talented writer, Pagnol does not limit himself to the symbolic meanings of human relations. He also uses symbolism found in nature to open the reader’s mind to new and old ideas that apply universally. In fact, this is an outstanding technique because nature is a strong, eternal entity that bears the “sagesse”

14 of the ages. Who better to use in sharing lessons with a wide audience than a creation shared and trusted by us all.

Using nature as a vehicle for the transmission of ideas is nothing new to Franco-Provençal writing. Baudelaire, one of the most outstanding of all French poets used elements of nature as tools to exemplify his message to the reader in many of his works. In his poem, “L’Etranger,”

15 Baudelaire creates a discourse between two men in which the first is asked what he loves the most in life: his family, his friends, gold, etc. Finally, the man responds that he “loves the clouds, the clouds that are passing, over there, over there, the marvelous clouds!” (p. 12). The character proclaims his love for nature above all else, especially man-made ideas and principles. Pagnol also embraces this technique.

14 wisdom
15 The Foreigner
Through romantic depictions of the French countryside, he, as Baudelaire and many Franco-Provençal writers, relays to the reader a profound value to be placed on nature. Once this value is understood, the reader can then begin to interpret the symbolic meanings from the description.

In *Le Château de ma Mère*, Pagnol describes to the audience the beauty of Provincial France, at the same time formulating a pictorial representation of the mood of the characters.

In the central and northern regions of France, on the first days of September, a small, all too fresh breeze moves along its path. It grasps an adorable, shining yellow leaf that turns, slides, and flies here and there, as gracious as a bird... The leaf gives a light foreshadowing of the resignation of the forest that turns red and then sparse and black. The leaves, at the same moment as the swallows, took flight when autumn rang in with its golden trumpet (Pagnol, p. 50).

This passage enters the story at the time when Marcel is to leave the summer villa and return to school. This romantic description of the forest becomes a symbolic representation of two events occurring simultaneously in the life of the child.

First, and most obvious, the change from summer to fall marks a uncontrollable transitional period in the course of nature and Marcel’s life. As the brilliant colors of summer give way to the serious, quite austere flavors of autumn, Marcel must himself must leave the “gold” of his summer adventure to return to the strict and banal life of a student. Marcel has no choice but to follow this path, just as summer is powerless over the onset of autumn. Try as he may have, by pleading to his mother and father to allow him to stay and going so far as to attempt running away from home, Marcel ultimately realizes that he must leave the villa.

This event signifies an important lesson to be learned, as explained through the use of this symbolic scene. In this situation, Marcel learns that as the summer is free to
Learning from the Franco-Provençals

reign only to a certain time when it must inevitably relinquish its hold, he must also allow himself to be over powered by events and people from whom he cannot escape. Furthermore, the leaf, swept up by the breeze and carried on its wings, exemplifies Marcel’s inability to control the situation in which he is found. He would rather stay at the villa throughout the year, but cannot because his parents have decided he will return to the city. His parents (the breeze, the natural change in seasons) hold the definitive power over his life, just as we all must submit to the domination of outside influences.

What Pagnol is saying through the brief story of autumn and the leaf is that what we cannot control, we should submit ourselves to as willingly as possible, because as the forest, there are certain aspects of life that we have no hold over. In the fall, the trees seem to perish, only to be reborn in the spring; such is the way of nature. We, as the tree, should not fear what we perceive to be an end to our glory, our colors. Instead, we should look ahead to a future renaissance. While we may perceive the situation to be the loss of our freedom to continue our endeavors, it is an uncontrollable pause that we cannot escape.

The second symbolic meaning in the passage can be defined as the following: the transition from summer to fall marks a change from frivolity to austerity, with much still to be gained. When Marcel moves from the country to the city, he also takes upon this change. From spending his days hunting with Lili to working diligently in hopes of winning a scholarship to private school, Marcel accepts that a period of relax from the blazing energy of his adventures is necessary and beneficial. The trees shed their leaves, dropping them to the ground to feed their richness into the soil to fertilize the growth of a new season. Marcel acts in the same way, translating his summer “energy” into a desire to study and grow into a new person. Marcel comes to enjoy this process, and derives a
pleasure from his studies, even though he longs for the excitement of the summer.

It is here interesting to note a linguistic aside relating to the depiction of nature in the work. Throughout *Le Château de ma Mère*, Pagnol enticed the reader into the text with the use of regional vocabulary. Interweaving standard French with Provençal vocabulary stresses the Provençal aspect of the book. Also, it assists in defining the characters as Provençal native, enriching the notion of who they are and from where they come. Pagnol limits the character’s use of Provençal vocabulary to situations in which they are discussing elements of nature. The names of plants, birds and insects are the most common words to be translated into the regional dialect. Because these creations are most abundantly found in the French countryside, as opposed to its capital of Paris, it is appropriate of Pagnol to guard their names in the language of those regions. Some examples of these words are:

- l’angeras: a type of thorny grass
- la cade: juniper
- la coucourde: pumpkin
- la farigoule: a type of thyme
- les messugues: a wild cistus
- les mussugues: terebinth tree
- le pétélin: fir cone
- la pigne: magpie
- une agasse: a type of wild ant
- une alude: a large partridge
- une bartavelle: a crested lark
- une bedoulde: a wheater
- une cabbridan: a large wasp
- un cul-blanc: lizards typically found in S. France
- une larmeuse: a praying mantis
- une limbert: a type of bat
- une ratepénade: a type of thrush
Les Temps de Secrets

Literally translated, the title of this final book in the *Souvenirs d’Enfance* collection is *The Time of Secrets*. Written in 1960, the work traces Pagnol’s life from 1905-1906: the summer before his entrance into the Lycée and his first year there. This is the time in Marcel’s life when he crosses the bridge from child to young man, and learns, in part, what being a man entails. To Marcel, the discovery of manhood is a private process, and it is here that the title of the book is derived. Through observance and experience, Marcel ascertains an understanding of the seemingly esoteric codes by which the life of a man is guided.

The purpose of this work is to describe the journey by which Marcel comes of age. In a synopsis of the book written by Pagnol (1960), he explains that “day after day, young boys grow up. They are very proud. I do not know if they should be, but, in the end, that is how it is and one can do nothing to change it.”. The truth is that all boys must come to one day become a man, and becoming a man means meeting the social expectations of masculinity. In the book, Pagnol follows the events that propel Marcel to realize two important aspects of meeting societal expectations of masculinity: the acquisition of honor and a “correct” relation with a woman. One of the most important lessons of this work is that these measures of masculinity are not natural to a child and learned only through societal and family pressure. In this book, Pagnol asks the reader to examine the steps that Marcel must follow in order to consider himself a man and question their validity, asking ourselves if we should be proud of achieving the title “man,” if it must come through our assimilation to certain prescribed social influences.

A vast amount of *Les Temps de Secrets* is allocated to Marcel’s discernment of gender differences and what is expected of him to retain “male” status in society. This
Learning from the Franco-Provençals

process is quite important to one’s development of “gender” as standardized by the rules of our culture. Warren Steinberg (1993), explains:

Gender roles are an aspect of the persona; they are a social construction, creating powerful expectations designed to outline acceptable behavior for each sex.... What results are powerful stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, stereotypes that we accept at an early age and that influence our behavior and thoughts as men and women (p. 2).

This process is a difficult one, regardless of culture, as it means the relinquishment of principles thought to be understood by the individual to the strict rules of society and culture.

At the beginning of the book, Marcel’s aunt Fifi joins the family at the summer villa and recites a story that opens his eyes to the idea that there exists differences between men and women that should be noted. The story begins with Marcel’s grandmother proclaiming to her husband what would occur if he were to ever have a relationship with another woman. “If you were to ever cheat on me, by fraternizing with a trollop, of course it would offend me. But, you need only tell it to me, and I would forgive you” (Pagnol, p. 70). Later, though, when André, her husband, does indeed admit to her his liaison with another woman, she becomes so enraged that she sinks her teeth into his shoulder, screaming that she will kill him and never forgive him. After listening to this story, Marcel comes to his first conclusion about the nature of men and women. Looking back on the situation, through the voice of the narrator, he remembers, “I finished by concluding that love that rendered one crazy was an adult affair, and most of all a woman affair” (Pagnol, p. 74).

Later in the story, Marcel, himself, experiences love for the first time. While on an expedition in the forest, Marcel spots a young girl seated on a rock in the mist of tall grasses and vines. The girl, Cléméntine reveals that she is lost and is waiting for
someone to pass by and accompany her home. Hearing this, Marcel announces that he will lead her home safely. Upon their arrival, Cléméntine proclaims to her mother the severity of the situation she had found herself in and that Marcel had saved her from it. The two quickly develop a fondness for each other and Marcel’s first bout with love begins.

It is important to consider the way in which Marcel “rescued” Cléméntine in the forest. First, this situation feeds the idea that women need to be cared for and led throughout life, as they are not capable of caring for themselves. In fact, further in the book Marcel dreams that he saves the girl once again, this time from a burning building. These events are symbolic of the first component of the male gender role that Marcel learns: women are weak and men are strong. In the act and fantasizing of rescuing a girl from stark situations, Marcel proves to himself that he is the stronger of the two. Furthermore, it follows that the girl is weak because she does not have the capacity of delivering herself from danger.

It is crucial for Marcel to place himself in the role of the hero if he is to truly be seen as a man in his French society. At this time in France, male and female roles were strictly defined. A woman was perceived as a fragile creature that required the presence of a man to protect her throughout all of her life (M.L. Roberts, 1994). If the man did safeguard the women around him, it was an affirmation of his masculinity. Thus, as a young man, Marcel needs to feel as though he is meeting this expectation in order to feel secure in his masculinity.

As society has placed an expectation on the man, requiring that he ensure the safety of the women around him, the French have also stipulated an expectation for their women in that they are obligated to care for the domestic needs of their families. This
aspect of a women’s life is essential to her feminine security in the same manner that it is so with a man. Nowhere was this idea more embraced than in the French Provençe, Mecca to the Franco-traditional way of life. On this subject, Mary Louise Roberts writes that “The image of the domestic wife and mother became a privileged symbol of both cultural continuity and Traditional French ideas…” (p. 10).

In Les Temps de Secrets, Marcel’s mother is the exemplary figure of this principle in that she accepts her duty to maintain the domestic continuity of her home. Not only does this mean that she cares for her family by performing the manual functions expected of her, but also, she submits herself willingly to the dominance of her husband, never questioning his decisions or commands.

It is for this reason that she becomes so alarmed when the gender rules she subscribes to are broken in the relationship between Marcel and Cléméntine. While together, the children amuse themselves with games in which Cléméntine is in a governing position to Marcel. The game, which the children name “Chevalier de la Reine”\(^\text{16}\) entails Marcel playing servant to Cléméntine, subordinate to her whims. Lili and Paul witness the two playing this game and report to the entire family that Cléméntine has been pretending to force Marcel to eat grasshoppers. Upon hearing this, Marcel’s mother angrily responds, “If girls make you eat grasshoppers now, I wonder what they will make you eat later!” (Pagnol, p. 221), after which the two are forbidden to continue playing together.

As a product of a traditional environment, Marcel’s mother is shocked when she learns he has placed himself in a subservient position to a woman. In her opinion, this is a shameful act, detracting from Marcel’s manly honor.

\(^{16}\) The Queen’s Knight
Around the rim of the Mediterranean, honor and shame have operated primarily to regulate relations between the sexes, families, and clans; to distribute prestige (and therefore status) among them; and finally, to promote cohesion in the whole society through the shaming of individuals who have forfeited their honor (Nye, p. 9).

Honor is an important principle to the traditional French and must be upheld to insure a measure of societal balance.

The balance of the society in which Marcel lives is achieved through the division of traits into masculine and feminine, and the conservation of this division by the individual in maintaining his or her masculinity or femininity. In the Franco-Provençal culture of 1905-1960, the man was deemed the aggressive dominator and the female the passive servant (Nye, 1993). Order was guarded by one’s allegiance to the predefined role that his or her culture had created. In the situation between Marcel and Cléméntine, the roles have been reversed, contradicting Marcel’s family’s notion of how a “man” should behave.

Because Marcel is still young, one must question his motivation for plying to the whims of his companion. At this point in time, Marcel has not yet understood that his masculinity (as defined by society) would require him to take upon the dominator role in his relations with a female. His motivation was merely an innocent desire to please someone he admired. He does not deserve the approbation of his family for having crossed the masculine/feminine boundaries they confine themselves to. Pagnol is revealing to the reader the way in which a child, whom I have already illustrated as acting and reacting in an innocent, natural manner, does not perceive basic interaction as an expression of gender. It is only the adults, who have learned and accepted a definition of male and female interaction that find this game inappropriate. Thus, Pagnol is showing how the categorization of actions in gender definitions is not a natural phenomenon, and
its validity must be questioned.

A second explanation, briefly discussed earlier, for the family’s reaction to the game is that in submitting to the dominance of a woman, Marcel loses his honor as a man. The concept of honor traces itself quite far back in the French tradition and can be synopsized as being as “a masculine concept. It has summed up the prevailing ideas of manliness and marked the boundaries of masculine component” (Nye, p. 8). Simply stated, honor is gained and retained by a man’s adherence to the specific terms of his masculine role in society. Because Marcel allowed himself to be in a subordinate position to a female, his family views this as a loss of honor. Honor is the reward for complete compliance with masculine expectations, and without it, as far as his traditional culture is concerned, he cannot call himself a “man.”

The concept of honor becomes an intricate aspect of Marcel’s motivation in other situations in the book. Another component of the French masculine theory of the early twentieth century is that men physically combated to retaliate against coarseness or contempt focused towards them or members of their family, class, clan, etc. Robert A. Nye (1993) explains that the group itself enhanced its fitness to survive by preserving individuals with a high degree of altruism and willingness to sacrifice their individual interests to those of a larger society. In Les Temps de Secrets, Marcel learns and accepts the responsibilities of honor when he defends belligerent accusations made on the merits of the scholarship receiving students at the Lycée. Through this process, Marcel defends his own honor as well as that of his fellow “boursiers”\(^\text{17}\).

The situation begins when Pégomas, a rich student, implicates that the boursiers are of a lesser quality than the other students are. He states that “…the scholarship

\(^{17}\text{scholarship recipients}\)
recipients are scrounges. The proof is that the government has them eat here (at school) because there is no food at their homes” (p. 420). Marcel, a boursier himself, confronts Pégomas and invites him to a duel. Even though Pégomas is by far the larger of the two, Marcel finishes as the victor.

It would be uncomfortable for me to state that the lesson for the reader to digest is that men must fight when their honor is in question. In the turn of the century France, this idea would have been largely accepted, as dueling was still an important aspect of masculine culture. Fortunately, modern society no longer calls for physical combat in situations when one’s honor is in jeopardy. There still exists, though, a sense of need to defend one self in some manner in these situations. Whether this defense is truly necessary or unnecessary is inconsequential; a defense of one’s honor is still a component of modern society. If one wishes to maintain a desired status, he or she is expected to refute accusations made against their person, family, or group. Honor is thus upheld through this public defense and challenge of the words or actions of another.

Conclusion

The use of literature to convey ethical critiques or life messages to the audience is nothing new. Authors such as Chaucer, Baudelaire, Dickens, and Swift have been using this idea as the motivation for their writing for centuries. Marcel Pagnol exemplifies the use of this premise in our modern era, most especially with his Souvenir’s d’Enfance collection. In his personal history retold in this work, he shares stories about the realizations that a child makes throughout his or her “coming of age” process. Because the child is acting in a natural, innocent manner, one can interpret his thoughts and reactions as exemplary behavior for us all.

The child becomes the moralist in the story, and universal lessons can be drawn
from his personal journeys. This is most interesting because as adults, we would like to believe that it is our experience that makes us experts on the guidelines by which we interact with our environment and each other. In this collection, though, Pagnol esoterically implies that this "experience" has jaded and removed us from a natural and innocent way of viewing life and each other. The question, then, to be asked is that are we any more correct about the societal rules we teach our child to abide by then they are. If this statement is true, then quite possibly, it is the greatest lesson of all to be learned from *Souvenirs d'Enfance*, one of the most outstanding literary endeavors of Marcel Pagnol.
Bibliography and Works Cited


* Quotations from these works have been translated from French to English by the author, David Henderson.