The Green Prison and the Iron Tower: The Roles of Susanna Moodie and Archibald Lampman in Constructing Canadian Society and Literature

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At first glance, the poem “The City of the End of Things” by Archibald Lampman and the emigration narrative Roughing It in the Bush by Susanna Moodie appear to have little in common other than their mutual identities as canon of Canadian literature. However, under further inspection, these two texts seem to operate under common thematic threads: both are preoccupied with the progress of modernization, nature’s role in antagonizing humanity’s physical survival and promoting its spiritual survival, and the significance of human memory. Further analyses connect these two threads together under the realization that both authors, despite contrasts in gender, time period, national identity, political and ideological beliefs, preference of genre, and complexity of literary technique, write to express their dissatisfaction in the physical and socio-political environment in which they lived and thus seek comfort in memorializing an idealized past. In doing so, both Roughing It in the Bush and “City of the End of Things” become cautionary tales which raise awareness of the societal issues of their respective time periods and therefore contribute to constructing a more sophisticated Canadian literary and sociopolitical identity during salient times of national change: the emigration period and Industrial Revolution, respectively.

To understand these disparate authors’ similarities regarding their writing purpose, their stylistic differences must first be identified. The first impression of these two authors and their texts is that they are wholly opposites. In 1852, Moodie, a female British subject fixed on her birthright Victorian ideals, directly advocates for civilization and laments the isolated Upper Canadian wilderness in a slightly fictionalized emigration narrative (Hill). As a casual travel writer for the British masses, she gives relatively little thought to serious literary technique (Hill). Forty-three years later, Canadian-born Lampman employs classical, traditional and modernist techniques in his epic poem to
symbolically eulogize the loss of nature to mindless, mechanized civilization and expound his progressive socialist views (Hill).

Yet their thematic similarities can be seen as a clear progression, in which Lampman’s dystopic city peeks into a future world where Moodie’s longing for “proper” civilization goes too far in dominating the Canadian landscape. Moodie’s sketches, which describe the “great tide of emigration” (Moodie 110) populating what she calls a “prison…in the backwoods” (139), set alongside Lampman’s contrasting image of only three sentient beings remaining in an “iron tower” (Lampman 244) left over from the “multitudes of men/that built that city in their pride” (244), creates a paradoxical human timeline. In this timeline, the swarms of immigrants enter the country under the promises of capitalism, urbanize what they perceive as the oppressive darkness of nature, only to end with a dystopic Canadian society where few remain with the senses to enjoy their progress. This bleak future insinuates that Canada must strike a balance between nature and civilization while developing its sociopolitical identity, or else face death by house fires in the isolated wilderness or through the mindless drudgery of capitalist urbanization.

This preoccupation with survival echoes in Margaret Atwood’s Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature, where Atwood postulates that Canadian writers often write to “[carve] out a place and way of keeping alive” (Atwood 32), physically against the tough conditions of the wild, or for “spiritual survival…life as anything more than a minimally human being” (33). According to both Moodie and Lampman, this includes retaining memory. In Roughing It, Moodie, iterates mostly of the immigrant’s physical struggle for survival. In the introductory pages, she details one of the misfortunes met by unsuspecting emigrants, where “rust and smut, engendered by the vicinity of damp, overhanging woods, would blast the fruits of the poor emigrant’s labour, and almost deprive him of bread” (Moodie 111). In doing so, she simultaneously depicts the reality of the often-idealized New World by imbuing nature with a willful, malignant agency to harm humankind and any civilizing force. Moodie consciously chooses the verb “blasts” to describe the detrimental consequences of trees existing among human efforts at civilization. This unconventional diction deliberately draws associations to mechanized weaponry such as cannons
and old-fashioned guns, which are instruments of physical survival not found in nature. The phrasing personifies nature and provides it with the purposeful malice that justifies humankind’s struggle against the wild and Moodie’s intent to scare readers away from immigrating to Canada.

Moodie employs this fear, which influential Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye defines as “garrison mentality” (Frye 227), when cautioning her readers against Canadian nature, yet she finds great solace in the presence of nature that contributes to her spiritual survival. Frye claims that Canadian literature, particularly its poetry, is wracked with a “deep terror” due to Canada’s "vast unconscious of nature" that irreconcilably unsettles the “human and moral values” of civilization (227). This may be the case for texts focused primarily on physical survival, as certain parts of Roughing It often iterate due to Moodie’s colonial mindset (Bentley).

Yet this concept of garrison mentality does not extend throughout her entire emigration narrative. At several points, Moodie forgets her material woes and solely focuses on aesthetically appreciating nature. When she visits Grosse Island, the opening sentence remarks how “[a]s the sun rose above the horizon, all these matter-of-fact circumstances were gradually forgotten and merged in the surpassing grandeur of the scene that rose majestically before me... Nature had lavished all her noblest features” (Moodie 112-3). In short, Moodie basks in the sublimity of nature and allows it to temporarily eradicate her anxiety over “the dealers in wild lands” (Moodie 111), who sow sociopolitical corruption by falsely advertising their land for sale. In this instance, nature provides her with a sense of peace contributive to her spiritual survival, which is crucial to endure in “remote bush settlements” where socializing is difficult (Moodie 139). Moodie’s two-pronged approach to nature reveals her ambivalent and ever-shifting attitude towards living in Canada, but also affirms her role as a concerned writer who intends to contribute to creating a stable country, populated by informed citizens mindful of swindling land-sellers.

Furthermore, when describing the stream by her new home, Moodie goes even beyond characterizing the wilderness as a convenient distraction from her reality of physical survival when she helplessly
savour the very “unconsciousness” Frye postulates as a source of fear for Canadian writers writing about Canada (227). Moodie lovingly depicts how her “new habitation…stood on a gentle slope; and a narrow but lovely stream, ran murmuring under the little window” where “the sound of that tinkling brook, for ever rolling by, filled my heart with a strange melancholy… I fancied myself lamenting for the land I had left for ever” (Moodie 124). Tied to the indefinable allure of this stream is its simple “tinkling,” which unpredictably stimulates her memory of faraway Britain. As Eric Ball mentions in regards to Lampman’s poetry, the “theme of memory… [is] an attitude toward experience” (Ball 16) that aesthetically and psychologically supports spiritual survival through remembering the past. While the river emotionally upsets Moodie with homesickness, she also describes the river as a charming and peacefully euphoric phenomenon and therefore nuances existence in Upper Canadian wilderness to be simultaneously isolating yet comfortingly memorial. While Moodie often uses nature as a simplistic cautionary device in her writing, she also depicts honest moments in which the aesthetically delightful appearance of nature and the indefinable purity of memory supports her spiritual survival, and therefore depicts the realistic possibility of immigrants successfully living among Upper Canadian nature.

In Lampman’s case, however, it is arguable that humankind is not just compatible with nature, but it absolutely requires nature in order to spiritually survive. “The City of the End of Things” directly contrasts the garrison mentality due to its anxiety over the lack of nature. The poem opens with the observation that the land upon which the city is built is “leafless [emphasis mine]” (Lampman 243), and ends with the disturbing tirade, “Nor every living thing shall grow/nor trunk of tree, nor blade of grass;/ No drop shall fall, no wind shall blow [emphasis mine]” (Lampman 245) within the doomed City, for eternity. Lampman does not have to continue past the first line, “Nor every living thing shall grow,” to explain the current deficiency of nature in the city, yet he still executes this detailed redundancy. He does this to reiterate his fear, not of nature and its unknowable presence, but of the complete absence of nature. Since the “ceaseless round” and “hideous routine” (Lampman 243) of the city is destined to “be abandoned utterly” (244) someday, Lampman insinuates that a lack of nature stagnates, and ultimately ends, society’s
progress and growth. He therefore endorses nature, as Moodie occasionally does, as the absolute spiritual balm to the increasing complexity of everyday human life and the increasing physical and social problems appearing as chronic issues in an urbanized environment.

Similar to the fear of losing nature, Lampman also laments the loss of human memory, as it effectively ends the “geography of the mind” (Atwood 18-19). Atwood argues that the geography of the mind is a socio-imaginary mapping of “who and where we have been” (19) that is crucial for the survival of social and individual identity, especially in a vast and isolating country such as Canada. Lampman alludes to the lack of memory throughout his bleak description of the City and, in doing so, confirms the essentiality of having memory in survival. In the opening stanza, the poem narrator admits to having “heard it called in dreams/The City of the End of Things” (Lampman 243), which dislocates the City from reality in the assertion that it has no knowable geographical identity. This is particularly important since, in the poem, Death would orchestrate “each thread of memory snapt and cut” (244) in any approaching mortal, symbolizing that spatiotemporal disconnection and isolation ensure the deterioration of growth and progress. This warning about disconnection from memory and the past is further iterated in the loss of the City’s history, since only “[i]n days that no mans thinks upon…light leaped and shone” (244). There is no one left to remember and appreciate the city’s past, when it had a collective memory to enjoy “its light,” history, society and culture. It is also memory that allows Moodie to socialize and empathize with the few locals she meets, like the old woman and Brian the still-hunter, when they tell stories from their past. So while the “theme of memory” in Roughing It in the Bush points towards “…an attitude toward experience” (Ball 16) encouraging nostalgia and empathy, “The City of the End of Things” focuses more on the lack of memory and its subsequent devastation to society’s progress. While Ball rightly states, “Canada as a nation depends for its survival on continent, with a connection to the past,” (Ball 22) and while memory does act as positive modes of thought in both texts, Moodie and Lampman go beyond simply idealizing the past. In remembering the past and the locative powers memory possesses, both authors forge ahead to outline their dissatisfaction with their current situations and create change. Moodie
does this through raising direct awareness of corrupt land-sellers, for example, and Lampman accomplishes the same through symbolizing the City as a negative consequence of capitalism to reflect his progressive outlooks for Canada as a developing nation.

In analyzing the seemingly contrasting Roughing It in the Bush and “The City of the End of Things,” identical and complementary concepts about survival, the natural world, memory, and improving society have been identified and linked to overall literary thought of Canadian literature. While Margaret Atwood’s motif of physical and spiritual survival consists in both texts, other concepts such as Northrop Frye’s garrison mentality cannot entirely capture the essence of these two works due to the socially shifting times in which they were written that required nature as a spiritual remedy. Remembering the idyllic, static past and improving the current bustling society seem to motivate both Susanna Moodie and Archibald Lampman to write and create more sophisticated thought about Canadian life in their respective formative eras. In creating canonical texts that address such timeless concepts that later literary critics also expand on, their cautionary tales continue to survive and challenge the Canadian writer’s exploration of their identity in the geography of the Canadian mind.
Works Cited


