

Survival in Perspective



What makes the literature of one nation different from that of another? Many analysts suggest that it is a group of key patterns--revealed in plot, characterization, imagery, etc.--which, together, disclose that national literature's shape and reflect a "national habit of mind". Margaret Atwood feels the confluence of these patterns can, for each nation, be summed up in a single unifying symbol: for the U.S., The Frontier; for England, The Island; for Canada, Survival. Her concern is the Canadian context. She interprets survival in its most negative sense, "Bare Survival"--encompassing failure and, at best, crippled success--and contends that Canadian literature shows "a marked preference for the negative", a "will to lose which is as strong and pervasive as the Americans' will to win". For Atwood, "Canada is a collective victim", and the construct of the victim forms the framework within which she discusses Canadian literature. Because her book *Survival* is being consulted by many school teachers, it is appropriate to examine her theories here.

The model Atwood applies is a set of four "Basic Victim Positions" into which every work and victim supposedly fits:

Position One: To deny that one's experience is that of a victim.

Position Two: To acknowledge that one is a victim, not due to one's own character, but due to some larger force such as Fate, Divine Will, Historical Necessity, etc. (Atwood sees most Canadian literature falling into this category).

Position Three: To acknowledge that one is a victim but to deny that the role is inevitable.

Position Four: To be a non-victim by engaging in creative activity. (This position, which Atwood defines as the situation of the artist at the moment of creation, is the one she prefers).

Applying her four-position model, Atwood attempts to interpret Canadian literature within such categories as Nature the Monster, Animal Victims, Unsuccessful Explorers, Defeated Settlers, Immigrant Failures, Futile Heroes, Unconvincing Martyrs, Paralyzed Artists, Ice

Women, the Family as a Trap, and Quebec the Prison. The result is a gloomy literary picture--and an inaccurate one.

Atwood's errors are many. Though the broad theme of survival in literature is at least as old as the *Odyssey*, though the problems of artists and women, for example, are common to all cultures, and though tragedy and defeated protagonists have been literary preoccupations for centuries, Atwood sees them as particularly Canadian. Would she then make authors since the Greek tragedians through Thomas Hardy and William Golding into honorary Canadians? Her solution is too simplistic.

Further, as Atwood admits, her exposure to Canadian literature has been limited and her examples are based not on study or research but derive mainly from the "course of my own reading". Perhaps this fact accounts for the total omission of such prominent Canadian writers as Robertson Davies, Charles Bruce, Thomas Raddall, Bliss Carman, Timothy Findley, Sarah Jeanette Duncan, Harold Horwood, Louis Dudek, Rudy Wiebe, and F.R. Scott. Perhaps it explains the almost total neglect of such others as Raymond Knister, Dorothy Livesay, A.J.M. Smith, Malcolm Lowry, Archibald Lampman, W.O. Mitchell, Major John Richardson, Charles G.D. Roberts,¹ Raymond Souster, Ethel Wilson, and Morley Callaghan.² The range of serious omissions shows the incomplete data upon which Atwood constructs her theories about Canadian literature. This defect is accentuated by the questionable interpretations she gives of such other authors as Fred Bodsworth, Gabrielle Roy, Margaret Laurence, F.P. Grove, and E.J. Pratt³ -- interpretations which are often due to taking characters out of the context of a book, or a book out of the context of an author's whole canon. Atwood stresses one facet of one theme and reduces others, equally important, to minor variations. Atwood, ironically, is trapped by her thesis in a victor/victim winner/loser situation. In many works, this dichotomy is not the central issue, not the author's theme or main concern. The reality of the whole work and the attitudes of the author are frequently very different from what Atwood suggests. In addition, her book focuses on surprisingly few novels and poems, most of them postwar, possibly attributable to her limited knowledge of previous Canadian writing.

- 1 Who is briefly mentioned five times but whose specific works are never really discussed.
- 2 Admittedly, one of Callaghan's short stories is given a paragraph's discussion--but his dozen novels receive only 1½ lines in total.
- 3 For alternative interpretations, see Don Gutteridge, "Surviving the Fittest: Margaret Atwood and the Sparow's Fall", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, VIII, 3 (August, 1973), 59-64, and P. Morley, "Survival, Affirmation, and Joy", *Lakehead University Review*, VII, 1 (1974), 21-30.

Aside from omitting or misinterpreting the above authors, Atwood excludes whole categories of Canadian writing, most notably humour (Thomas Haliburton, Stephen Leacock, Robertson Davies, Donald Jack) and the literature of protest and dissent (Livesay, Lampman, and Scott again; Peter McArthur, Joe Wallace, Irene Baird, Douglas Durkin, Ted Allan, David Lewis Stein, James De Mille, A.E. Van Vogt). Since, almost by definition, these categories call into question Atwood's thesis, it is not surprising that she ignores them.

Even in those works where survival is an important theme, it is often not survival in Atwood's sense of the word. In effect, she equates survival with failure, seemingly unaware that--both in life and literature--survival is a very positive achievement. In the intrinsically Canadian animal story, for example, survival (including propagation, i.e. survival of the species) is the supreme accomplishment of the animal, its whole purpose in life.

Indeed, for most Canadian literature, a better identifying symbol than survival might well be heroic struggle.⁴ This concept is true not only for animal stories but also for stories with human protagonists. It is especially evident in the many Canadian works which show a conflict of ethical or spiritual values versus material ones, with the characters (usually) and the authors (always) ending up on the side of ethics--or at least indicating the spiritual cost of material wealth. In fact, whereas in British literature, wealth often comes through inheritance, and in American, through Horatio Alger-like hard work, luck, and marriage, in Canadian literature hardly any character gets rich. Instead, he usually earns only moderate worldly success but significant personal and ethical insight. In exceptions to this rule, such as Richler's *Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, there is a spiritual price for the greedy drive towards wealth; this price is Duddy's error and Richler's point. Correspondingly, the hero in Canadian literature is generally neither an outstanding individual, nor always even a collective hero, but rather the ordinary person making his ethical choices in his own life situation.

Further, the concept of heroic struggle with its ethical ramifications even encompasses, without distortion, such diverse books as De Mille's *Strange Manuscript* (which Atwood ignores), Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* (which she discounts as a "'child' point of view"), and the works of the Confederation poets (which she tends to avoid). Heroic struggle also connects with the traditions of popular Darwinism (especially ethical evolution) and social dissent in Canadian literature. Though Canada has been and remains, in some ways, a colony, the response in our literature has not generally been a yielding to a victim mentality but rather the call and commitment to struggle. Not "bare survival", but heroic struggle--a very positive act.

⁴ No exclusivity to Canadian literature is claimed for this concept--just appropriateness.

Atwood's theory of survival, then, provides not a true mirror of Canadian literature but instead a distorted view, at best only partially accurate and therefore even more dangerous than total falsity. Her book does, however, supply a useful framework for the study of her own fiction. In an unguarded moment, she admits that "several though by no means all of the patterns I've found myself dealing with here were first brought to my attention by my own work"--*Surfacing* is an excellent example. Atwood has projected her own thematic concerns onto Canadian literature as a whole, and *Survival* is more valuable as a guide to Margaret Atwood than to anything else.

This issue of *Canadian Children's Literature*, appropriately enough, focuses primarily on the Canadian animal story. Roderick Haig-Brown, featured in our cover notes and in an interview with Glenys Stow, is a noted Canadian naturalist and writer of animal stories. His comments on his own work (ignored by Atwood) provide an excellent starting-point for understanding how a creative writer sees the genre. A critic, Timothy Murray, supplies a complementary analysis of a writer's fiction; he focuses intensively on the animal stories of Charles G.D. Roberts. In the process Murray shows some inadequacies in Atwood's theories: American animal stories, he points out, are not all "success" stories, nor are most Canadian animal stories patterns of failure. In another article, Muriel Whitaker gives an overview of the genre: its sub-genres, its different treatments, its peculiar appeal. Finally, in part of the second installment of Geoffrey Chapman's survey of Canadian reference and information books for children, such life science authors as the Milnes, Jacqueline Berrill, and R.D. Lawrence are discussed. Together, these articles provide a commentary on a genre that, more than any other, is particularly Canadian.

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