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## Mapping a hostile land : the severe and monstrous Canadian nature of Susanna Moodie's "Roughing It in the Bush"

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**MAPPING A HOSTILE LAND: THE SEVERE  
AND MONSTROUS CANADIAN NATURE  
OF SUSANNA MOODIE'S *ROUGHING IT IN THE BUSH***

*Roughing It in the Bush*, a vivid account of the British settlers' experience in the nineteenth-century Canadian backwoods, was published in 1852 to cater for the needs and interests of the British genteel poor, who also might be considering economic emigration. It relates the hardships, privations and disappointments of the first seven years the Moodies spent in Upper Canada, first on a partly cleared farm near Cobourg, then removed further into the real wilderness, where they struggled to survive on a hardly arable plot of land. Admitting from the outset that emigration is "a matter of necessity, not of choice" and "an act of severe duty, performed at the expense of personal enjoyment" (Moodie 11), the author seeks to discourage prospective exiles from hastily succumbing to what she refers to as "the infection" and "Canada mania" (14). Apart from the (hardly ennobling) poverty and the predominantly contemptible neighbours, it is the forbidding, incomprehensibly cruel and frustrating aspect of Nature that brutally betrays the expectations, inflicts gratuitous harm and directly leads to the Moodies' ultimate failure as settlers.

An outstanding example of settler literature, *Roughing It...* calls for an interpretation from a broad cultural studies perspective, which will uncover the colonialist underpinnings of Susanna Moodie's story and in this way help account for her double consciousness and her sense of cultural displacement. Herself part of the invading culture, Susanna Moodie feels at the same time a victim and a dislocated, resented other. Through the lens of the Postcolonial Theory, I will investigate the juxtaposition of the author's imperialist zeal to impose her purportedly universal readings on a new land and her own experience of alienation and unhomeliness. I will seek to prove that Mrs. Moodie portrays nature as monstrous mainly because, as a European and an inveterate Romantic, she "judges" it in strictly moral categories, applying English norms and English imperial stereotypes. The inability to shed her

inflexible expectations and her obsolete Old-World gentlewoman's identity makes her culpable in the ensuing misery. The austere landscape and excessive severity of Canadian climate are undeniable facts, but the perceived indifference and hostility are of Mrs. Moodie's own making and derive from her reluctance to try to understand and adjust to (and not simply claim and „civilise“) the Canadian geography.

The primary cause for Mrs. Moodie's cultural shock and sense of betrayal is the discovery of an unbridgeable chasm between her cultured sensibilities pertaining to nature and the dire physical reality of the backwoods. Her writing, imitative of the sentimental and highly dramatic literature popular at the time in the metropole, belongs to colonialist literature, i.e. "literature written by and for colonizing Europeans" (Boehmer 3), produced in the outposts of the empire by settlers-invaders, and "designed to send impressions from the edge of civilisation to an authority who stayed back home" (New 24). As such, it inevitably incorporates an imperialist stereotyped vision that seeks to contain and claim new lands, or "translate" them into "copies" of the privileged centre, "far-away reproductions" (Young 139), a "multiplicity of English meadows" (Boehmer 51).

By means of "discovering" and "naming" the sites she penetrates with her colonial gaze, Mrs. Moodie enacts an imperial conquest on a smaller scale, appropriating the land. In her imperial discourse, she describes the wilderness as potentially transformable, possible to be rendered productive and valuable when civilised and cultivated. Using the inculcated colonial apparatus and the English culture as the only standard (a practice now known as Eurocentrism), Moodie superimposes British tastes and conventional readings on the periphery. Consequently, she attempts to interpret the encountered landscape in terms of an idyllic garden, ascribing it with values of nobility and majesty, applying familiar literary conventions and Victorian diction. Driven by nostalgia for her lost England and the desire to recreate it, she deludes herself with a vision of nature which "arrayed in her green loveliness, had ever smiled upon me like an indulgent mother, holding out her loving arms to enfold to her bosom her erring but devoted child" (Moodie 73).

What follows, Mrs. Moodie focuses only on such aspects of Canadian nature that seem to confirm her assumptions and allow her to feel more adequate and secure, chiefly, more at home, in the novel environment. However, her vision, based on a purely literary construct is misleading and far from applicable. The image of a caring Mother Nature, as well as the lofty concepts of the Sublime descended from Edmund Burke, provide a precious cultural link to the abandoned homeland, but, hopelessly incompatible with the raw reality of Upper Canada, they limit the author's perception and impede her understanding and appreciation of the harsh actuality of the land. According to Margaret Atwood, this could be the reason why the pioneer "remains a stranger: he's looking for the wrong thing in the wrong place" (*Survival* 65).

Describing her sentimental encounters with the landscape, the author conventionally broods on the effects it has on her emotions. She uses the refined but somehow outlandish vocabulary of Romantic poets to describe nature as exceedingly dramatic, overwhelming and imposing. Its solemn grandeur and majesty are reported to produce “a melancholy awe [...] painful in its intensity” (Moodie 27) and terror, both inspiring and delightful.

[...] the surpassing grandeur of the scene that rose majestically before me. [...] mighty giants – Titans of the earth, in all their rugged and awful beauty – a thrill of wonder and delight pervaded my mind [...] my eyes were blinded with tears – blinded with the excess of beauty. [...] never had I beheld so many striking objects blended into one mighty whole! Nature had lavished all her noblest features in producing that enchanting scene. (25–26)

The stupendous views off Grosse Isle are comparable only to those on the St. Lawrence, whose vastness imprints itself on Mrs. Moodie’s emotions, giving rise to a religious fervour:

What wonderful combinations of beauty, and grandeur, and power, at every winding of that noble river! How the mind expands with the sublimity of the spectacle, and soars upward in gratitude and adoration to the Author of all being, to thank Him for having made this lower world so wondrously fair – a living temple, heaven-arched [...]. (36)

The “astonishing panorama” of Quebec evokes tears of “pure and unalloyed delight”; the narrator records, “I never before felt so overpoweringly my own insignificance, and the boundless might and majesty of the Eternal.” (37). Susanna readily dubs her new country “a perfect paradise” (28) and even the sober remark of the captain (“Don’t be too sanguine, Mrs. Moodie; many things look well at a distance which are bad enough when near.”) can hardly restrain her imagination and enthusiasm.

Nature is perceived as a faithful reflection of a benevolent God, while its apparently limitless abundance, in line with the prevailing literary aesthetic, provides both succour and inspiration for the writer. Susanna Moodie confesses: “The aspect of Nature ever did, and I hope ever will continue – “To shoot marvelous strength into my heart.” Romantic to her marrow, she crowns her eulogy with a heart-felt profession of faith: “As long as we remain true to the Divine Mother, so long will she remain faithful to her suffering children.” (135)

The landscape, alluring in its natural beauty yet unconquerable in its sublimity, becomes to her voyeuristic gaze an exotic other. Alien and grand, it cannot be fully understood or contained. Furthermore, it eludes Moodie’s moralising attempts and resists being disciplined. Canadian nature, which the author seeks to render in didactic tones, imposing on it her clear-cut

definitions of the Victorian regime, proves amoral, amorphous and intrinsically disorderly. Moodie's attempts to apply appropriate boundaries and render her experience in discrete units of words and stock expressions all prove futile, just like her drive to transplant onto the new terrain the familiar class system and definitive ethnic distinctions.

Nature stays impervious to the ideals of temperance and civility; it could be admired but not classified or subsumed in any organising scheme, especially not in explicitly moral Romantic landscape conventions. In other words, as the surly captain already hinted and as Margaret Atwood poignantly notes, what seems to Mrs. Moodie "a second Eden" from afar, at close quarters might turn out disturbingly incongruous with her naive shipshape expectations:

Again and again we find her gazing at the sublime natural goings-on in the misty distance [...] only to be brought up short by disagreeable things in her immediate foreground, such as bugs, swamps, tree roots and other immigrants. Nature the Sublime can be approached but never reached, and Nature the Divine Mother hardly functions at all [...] Unfortunately it's the swamps, bugs, tree roots and other immigrants that form the texture of daily life (*Survival* 62).

The Victorian imagination and habitual modes of writing, including traditional descriptions and terminology, prove insufficient to relate the new experience. Consequently, Moodie becomes both "constrained by the literary form she admires" and "estranged by language from the place she made her home" (New 56). Relying on her learned diction is of no avail – not only is Moodie unable to "find a common language with nature" (Polic 167), but she is equally unsuccessful in describing and explaining the surrounding realities. Although, like her predecessors in landscape poetry traditions, she attempts to "read order where no order was and to control by diction what seemed chaotic to the empirical eye" (New 69), Moodie feels increasingly powerless against the Canadian wild. Its immoderately vast geography alienates the settler whose language turns out completely inadequate:

Such alienation is shared by those whose possession of English is indisputably "native" [...] yet who begin to feel alienated within its practice once its vocabulary, categories, and codes are felt to be inadequate or inappropriate to describe the fauna, the physical and geographical conditions, or the cultural practices they have developed in a new land. (Ashcroft 10)

Even though "writing strove to contain the disturbing effects of a new environment by attaching to that environment recognizable narrative and metaphoric patterns" (Boehmer 87), the descriptive capacity of the imperial discourse still was not enough to "tame" the lawless wilderness. The known hermeneutic strategies and imported figures of speech would not fit the actualities, rendering the colonial vision unreliable and incomplete, while the

landscape remained incomprehensibly immense and, therefore, shapeless (cf Boehmer 87–89).

An excessive land whose vastness cannot be curtailed or properly explained becomes suspicious. Lacking more specific words, Moodie the narrator repeatedly (over a hundred times throughout all her sketches) uses the adjective “wild.” Employed to describe the land itself, its animal inhabitants, the varied features of its topography and climate (rivers, forests, winds) and, last but definitely not least, the emotional states the contact with nature entails (“wild horrors,” “wild confusion”), it carries the double meaning of something that attracts, inspiring wonder and awe (the exotic other), and repels, raising well-founded uneasiness and fear (the demonic other). The shift from detached admiration for inaccessible beauty to a mute horror at something with which the settler cannot identify, let alone forge any meaningful bonds, marks a stage in the continuous interplay between the pioneer and the land.

The bouts of enthusiasm with which British settlers launch out into the conquest of the wilderness subside when faced with the disappointing unresponsiveness of nature. Moodie herself notices that her Mother Nature is in fact quite indifferent to her “children’s” suffering and perfectly undisturbed by their misery. Its austere beauty and aloofness constitute but a silent backdrop to their exasperating struggle for survival. Similarly, in “Disembarking at Quebec,” the modernised Susanna observes that “the moving water will not show me / my reflection. / The rocks ignore” (Atwood, *The Journals...* 11). The pitiless nature appears senseless and lacking in any intelligent purpose. In fact, it looks empty and dead. In his essays on Canadian culture, Northrop Frye focuses on the pathos of death and a “lurking sense not only of the indifference of nature to man, but almost of its exasperation with this parasite of humanity that has settled on it” (*Divisions* 53) as a prevalent theme in a literature of a country whose history features “the unbroken violation of nature [...], the economy founded on the trapping and mutilating of animals, the destroying of trees, the drying up of rivers and the polluting of lakes” (53). It may seem that the settlers’ uneasiness is not entirely groundless.

Canada’s harsh climate alone is able to harm, break or kill the settler and do it in a most aimless, barbarous manner. The weather conditions are described by Mrs. Moodie as completely unpredictable at best and lethally wicked at worst. Due to the excesses of the climate, life in the bush is but a succession of bitterly cold winters, threatening frostbites and killer blizzards, scorching dry summers, alternate droughts and floodings, forest fires, sudden downpours, violent gales, terrifying tornadoes, all resulting in regular crop failures, ever-raging pandemic and a state of constant scarcity, starvation and depression. Unanswering yet extravagant in its variety, Canadian nature hardly resembles an animate, let alone rational, agent. Instead, it presents to the viewer an uncoordinated, entirely haphazard mixture of possible climatic eccentricities. Such a blend of uncontrollable extremes recalls an image of

total desolation and abandonment. It is, in the words of Margaret Atwood, “the absence / of order” or, better still, “an ordered absence” (“Progressive Insanities...” 61–62).

The settlers are fully exposed to the severity of the climate while the inanimate bleak landscape imprints itself on their mind, wreaking havoc with their self-possession and dignity. A particular example of how downgrading a life in the dead land could be is Moodie’s description of the “iron winter of 1833,” when “the rigour of the climate subdued my proud, independent English spirit, and I actually shamed my womanhood and cried with the cold” (144). The vast and empty land comes here to reflect the psychological tensions of settlement.

The need for tremendous adjustments on the part of the newcomers becomes more urgent when they start to notice the deceptive appearances of the landscape. Even when embarking on a sentimental description of a serene winter day, Susanna remains alert to the “suspended operations” that the “sleeping/dead nature” might any time awaken to resume:

[...] the deep silence that brooded over their vast solitudes, inspiring the mind with a strange awe. Not a breath of wind stirred the leafless branches, whose huge shadows [...] lay so perfectly still, that it seemed as if Nature had suspended her operations, that life and motion had ceased, and that she was sleeping in her winding-sheet, upon the bier of death. (259–260)

Nature seen merely as picturesque lulls you into a false sense of security and leaves you unprepared and vulnerable. Its temporary “sleep” is an appreciable respite from its excesses, but not from its unpredictability. For example, a dark interminable maze of forests could easily become a silent unfeeling witness to the drama of lost children. As Gray explains,

The spectre of children lost in the forest was common among Canada’s early settlers. It was a real threat, when paths were few, forests dense, and children as young as five were sent off to find lost cattle or take a lunch-pail to men working in the bush. Contemporary newspapers were filled with such heartbreaking tales. [...] The nightmare of missing youngsters [...] also symbolized the deeper anguish of leaving familiar scenes and losing oneself in new and unknown territory.

The pristine wilderness, permeated with “sepulchral silence” (Moodie 267), is unaffected by what traumatises a settler. Dismal ancient woods, illegible to a European coloniser, are, as Coral Ann Howells notes, “a space outside civilised social order and Christian moral laws, the place of mysterious and threatening otherness” (qtd in Hammill, *Canadian Literature* 63). The story of a lost girl related in *Roughing It...* foreshadows Susanna’s bitter resentment and indignation at the bush, which later in a similarly offhanded manner claimed the life of her five-year-old son Johnnie.

In cosmic terms, the howling wilderness, as opposed to bucolic visions of nature, is unconcerned about the vulnerable individual. In fact, one is soon convinced that even the total annihilation of the whole human species may be without consequence for its workings. No wonder the gloomy, overpowering landscape instils the feeling of insignificance and total isolation. It is the sheer vastness of the land that proves oppressive and imprisoning.

Over a hundred years after Susanna Moodie, in her poem quite tellingly entitled “Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer,” Atwood captures an immigrant’s utter despair at the silent landscape and emphasises the sense of claustrophobic confinement this situation is bound to create:

He stood, a point  
 on a sheet of green paper  
 proclaiming himself the centre,  
 with no walls, no borders  
 anywhere; the sky no height  
 above him, totally unenclosed  
 and shouted  
 Let me out! (60)

The settler is overwhelmed by the land’s excessive expanse. Slightly distrustful of it at the beginning, with time he grows to detest it. He abhors the omnipresent vermin, labyrinthine swamps, unpassable thickets, treacherous ground and all other features of this spiritual and moral wasteland.

In *Roughing It...*, the disillusioned Tom Wilson is an example of such a settler broken by the resistant and invincible bush, which repeatedly took its toll on the hopeful man, “until that horrid word ‘bush’ became synonymous with all that was hateful and revolting in [his] mind” (81). It is by no mistake that the disheartening experience of tens of thousands of ill prepared British settlers gave rise to the concept of “being bushed,” in other words, being degraded and driven into insanity by the prolonged residence in the backwoods. A bushed person is continually persecuted by the acute dismembering fear of the unknown. The silent but inescapable threat of the wilderness is so intense that Atwood lists “Death by Bushing” as one of the many ways in which nature disposes of inconvenient settler characters in Canadian literature. It is briefly defined as a condition in which “the character sees too much of the wilderness, and in a sense becomes it, leaving his humanity behind” (*Survival* 67).

Such a failed pioneer becomes desperate in his struggles for bare physical survival, victimising others, whom he perceives as even more destitute and downgraded, before he is defeated by the unbearable anxiety and grows completely indifferent to his surrounding, focused only on anticipating death that would finally liberate him. Moodie also repeatedly summons the image of death. Pining for her idealised England, she prays: “Oh, that I might be



permitted to return and die upon your wave-encircled shores" (73). Elsewhere, she exclaims: "Home! Oh, that I could return, if only to die at home!" (89). Once her hopes for a return are shattered, Canada becomes for her synonymous with confinement and death: "At that period my love for Canada was a feeling very nearly allied to that which a condemned criminal entertains for his cell – his only hope of escape being through the portals of the grave" (135). Faced with the barren and empty outside world, the tormented narrator starts building psychological walls designed to protect her against the imposing wilderness. The terror of the intemperate nature and unbounded space gives thus rise to garrison mentality, the condition of a beleaguered settler "confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting" (Frye, "Conclusion..." 351), a powerful metaphor central to Canadian imagination.

If the Canadian landscape is capable of inflicting so much physical and mental harm through its excessive severity alone, what chances does an invader stand when it assumes a more aggressive, consciously hostile attitude? Atwood's answer is more than straightforward: "The result of a dead or indifferent Nature is an isolated or 'alienated' man; the result of an actively hostile Nature is usually a dead man, and certainly a threatened one" (*Survival* 66).

Considerably more alive and often attributed with human traits of character, emotions, and ulterior motives, nature in *Roughing It...* is increasingly depicted as an active agent, a devious monster, purposefully following its murderous propensities. It intelligently chooses to destroy the inept settler who in his intolerable insolence dares to position himself as a heroic conqueror of the savage land. Such nature seems intent on persecuting him as if in a determined effort to punish him for his attempts to colonise and tame it. Animate and wilful, nature harnesses all its strength and violence to torment him. Its unrelenting fury is visible, for instance, in the fire that consumes the fallow and threatens to claim Mrs. Moodie and her two infants in the process. Curiously, it is an unexpected downpour, (in other circumstances likely to be seen as yet another manifestation of nature's cruelty) that extinguishes the fire.

Even though it is winter with its blizzards, freezing cold and unexpected thaws that seems to constitute the essential Canadian season, summers typically involve comparable displays of nature's fierce wrath. A summer storm is a particular feat; describing its unstoppable progress in detail, Mrs. Moodie asserts that "a vivid recollection of its terrors was permanently fixed upon [her] memory" (430). She recalls how "The roaring of the thunder, the rushing of the blast, the impetuous down-pouring of the rain, and the crash of falling trees were perfectly deafening" (432). Moodie's brother, Mr. Strickland, recorded the progress of a similar but fiercer "whirlwind": „fearful velocity – bright lightnings issuing from the vortex; the roar of the thunder – the rushing of the blast – the crash of timber – the limbs of trees, leaves and rubbish, mingled with clouds of dust, whirling through the air" (Moodie 434).

Nonetheless, the stubborn settler, instead of accommodating the fact that apparently nature functions in accordance with its own laws, devises grand plans to temper and “improve” it. Scarcely has the storm subsided when Mrs. Moodie records a conceited opinion that “[i]t is very evident [...] that storms of this description have not been unfrequent in the wooded districts of Canada; and it becomes a matter of interesting consideration whether the clearing of our immense forests will not, in a great measure, remove the cause of these phenomena” (435). Settlers are determined to turn natural anarchy into man-made order.

Depicted as a mortal foe, unprincipled and determined to thwart European civilising plans, Canadian nature is finally recognised to be governed by some logic, stern and wicked to the civilised eye, but intolerably clear and just to its subscribers. The brutality of natural laws is central to the story told to Mrs. Moodie by Brian the Still-Hunter, an experienced woodsman, well-versed in the harsh laws of survival. The spectacle he recounts features a merciless killing of a majestic and proud (“noble”) deer by a pack of fierce wolves (“black devils [...] with fiery eyes and bristling hair, and paws that seemed hardly to touch the ground in their eager haste”). Throughout its struggles, the deer emerges as an admirable creature senselessly destroyed by ferocious predators:

His [...] eyes seemed to send forth long streams of light. It was wonderful to witness the courage of the beast. How bravely he repelled the attacks of his deadly enemies, how gallantly he tossed them to the right and left, and spurned them from beneath his hoofs; yet all his struggles were useless, and he was quickly overcome and torn to pieces by his ravenous foes. (180–181)

Although himself an experienced hunter, Brian expresses his indignation at what he perceives as an outrageous crime. He laments the demise of the animal, unable to “see in what manner he had deserved his fate. All his speed and energy, his courage and fortitude, had been exerted in vain” (181). He stubbornly refuses to perceive the underlying order of nature, which applies indiscriminately to every living creature. Under natural laws, endurance is rewarded with priceless (even if temporary) survival, while failure is swiftly punished by death. No one is exempt from this inexorably just paradigm; assuming otherwise is sentimental and potentially destructive. One is tempted to presume that the reason for the settlers’ unwillingness to accept this simple fact lies primarily in their unpreparedness to adjust to it.

Unable to notice the order inherent in nature and constantly intimidated by the perceived chaos, man sets off on a quest to impose his own order. The discrepancy between his expectations and the reality, and the resulting alienation, are most briefly and poignantly expounded by Margaret Atwood, who observes that

the order of Nature is labyrinthine, complex, curved; the order of Western European Man tends to squares, straight lines, oblongs and similar shapes. [...] So the Canadian pioneer is a square man in a round hole; he faces the problem of trying to fit a straight line into a curved space. Of course, the necessity for the straight lines is not in Nature but in his own head; he might have had a happier time if he'd tried to fit himself into Nature, not the other way round. (*Survival* 144–145)

Consequently, to the mind of a British emigrant, nature's "chaotic energy," which is "beyond the realm of logic, reason, and civilized order," needs to be forcefully humanised (Bilan):

[...] the colonist [...] treads in tracks but little known; he has to struggle with difficulties on all sides. Nature looks sternly on him, and in order to preserve his own existence, he must conquer Nature, as it were, by his perseverance and ingenuity. Each fresh conquest tends to increase his vigour and intelligence, until he becomes a new man [...]. (Moodie 495)

Such an endeavour requires concerted effort, but, as Mrs. Moodie asserts, it could be rewarding, rendering the bush habitable and turning its dwellers into a community since "Common labours and common difficulties, as among comrades during a campaign, produce a social unity of feeling among backwoods-men. [...] Every tree that falls beneath the axe opens a wider prospect, and encourages the settler to persevere in his efforts [...]" (252–253). Most crucially, the colonist conquers his surrounding to avoid being killed by it.

The settlers will continue their attempts to curb the disruptive vastness of nature, exploit it and harness its power to serve their needs, but for the time being, the bush stubbornly resists civilisation. The atrocities it commits range from unmeasurable natural calamities to tiny nuisances and numerous "dirty tricks" played on unsuspecting humans. To illustrate the latter, one may recall the accident Mr. Moodie has when working in his field: a malicious stump blocks his way and causes a heavy, iron-toothed plough to break the man's leg, crippling the only breadwinner of a hungry, rapidly growing family. Thus nature takes perverse pleasure in daunting the settlers with its ill will and crushing the sorry remnants of their courage and heroism. Its malevolence is particularly perfidious when it catches you unawares, as when the narrator sets to cross a seemingly calm river in her small canoe only to discover, when already halfway across, that

The water was rough, and the wind high, and the strong current, which runs through that part of the lake to the Smith rapids, was dead against me. In vain I laboured to cross the current; it resisted all my efforts, and at each repulse I was carried farther down towards the rapids, which were full of sunken rocks, and hard for the strong arm of a man to stem – to the weak hand of a woman their safe passage was impossible. (471)

It is only by a stroke of luck that the narrator manages to escape her atrocious persecutor.

As evident from the examples above, nature portrayed as a sworn enemy assumes many conspicuously human qualities. Not only is it spiteful and perfidious, but it is also intelligent and inexhaustible in devising schemes to destroy humans. As Mrs. Moodie drily remarks, "Fortune seemed never tired of playing us some ugly trick" (409). When resigned, in her poetic endeavours, she switches from an infatuated and laudatory tone to a more plaintive and disheartened one. Towards the end of her sojourn in the bush, she finally acknowledges her bitter experience of being the target of nature's malice and fury.

Although herself a survivor, Susanna Moodie remains forever deeply affected by her sojourn in the backwoods. At the close of her residence there, she is able to trace the impact of nature upon the identity and psyche of the settler in the changes in her own appearance and in the shift in her thoughts. Able at last to escape from the hated woods, she explores the sudden reluctance to return to the society to which she once thought she belonged:

For seven years I had lived out of the world entirely; my person had been rendered coarse by hard work and exposure to the weather. I looked double the age I really was, and my hair was already thickly sprinkled with grey. I clung to my solitude. I did not like to be dragged from it to mingle in gay scenes, in a busy town, and with gaily-dressed people. I was no longer fit for the world; I had lost all relish for the pursuits and pleasures which are so essential to its votaries; I was contented to live and die in obscurity. (476)

Eventually, the adamant landscape prevails. In 1865, when the Moodies visited the property that had been their home in the years recounted in *Roughing It...*, Susanna observed that the wilderness had reclaimed the land and that their presence had been almost totally erased:

In Lakefield, nature might have been tamed and shaped to suit colonists' tastes, but out there, it was back in control. Their lakeside log cabin had disappeared, and most of the acres had reverted to cedar swamp. The only evidence of the Moodies' sojourn were the stones of their well – mute testimony to the blood, sweat and tears they had expended on survival. (Gray)

Susanna Moodie departs from the Canadian bush as a failed settler, which leaves the reader wondering whether her toil and torment were not entirely futile. Actually, although she never prospered, Mrs. Moodie does appear to have gained a lot. Her journey from myths to realities of pioneer life enables a change in perspective and, more importantly, a self-discovery that would not be possible in England. She was rooted in the hostile land by the traumas that devastated her there. In particular, the children she lost and buried in the

adopted country “made Susanna begin to think of herself as the mother of Canadian children rather than the daughter of English gentry” (Gray). The modernised Susanna from the 1970 volume *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* views the loss of her Johnnie in similar terms – in “Death of a Young Son by Drowning” Margaret Atwood has her say “I planted him in this country / like a flag” (*The Journals...* 31). Thus the unhappy pioneer recognises that sacrifice and torment are integral to the process of accommodation in a new land.

Moodie’s life writing is a record of both the changing attitudes of her times and the substantial growth of her own identity. The reader might wonder why the narrator diminishes her character’s development (cf. Glickman 542) and deliberately constructs herself in an outdated manner, clinging to a familiar, even if obsolete, Old-World identity. In fact, her attempts to preserve a unified self against the encroaching ambivalence and the lack of any obvious frames of reference, are remarkable. Struggling to shape and make sense of the land she came to inhabit, she is shaped by it in return, inheriting a divided self, which is mirrored by the perceived contradictions in nature. As Whitlock observes, “Writing autobiographically about her younger self in the 1840s becomes a way of representing ongoing ambivalence, nostalgia and estrangement which remain a legacy of emigration” (46). Writing in retrospect, Moodie the mature and experienced pioneer creates an ironic effect, purposefully juxtaposing her initial enthusiasm and unreal expectations with the harsh reality. Incorporating discourses of those she once dismissed, she “establishes a zone of contact wherein their discourses subvert hers. Hence she participates in the subversion of her authoritative language [...] [and] even if unintentionally, creates a polyphony” (Thurston, 140–141).

The protagonist’s spiritual growth leads to two important discoveries. First, the austere landscape of Canada does have its tangible merits and may be enjoyed by a persistent and industrious worker (as opposed to an unfitted yet pretentious gentleman) to whom the land will yield its fruit in abundance. Ironically, the boundless and sinister woods are “the most certain proof of its fertility” (Moodie 493). The other discovery pertains to the dubious character of constant progress advocated by the coloniser. Mrs. Moodie has a vague premonition that conquest and colonisation may not be as morally unequivocal as she has been conditioned to presume. Musing elegiacally on the deterioration and demise of the Native inhabitants of Canada, she often “grieved that people with such generous impulses should be degraded and corrupted by civilised men; that a mysterious destiny involves and hangs over them, pressing them back into the wilderness, and slowly and surely sweeping them from the earth” (299), but she still does not blame the double dealings of the empire which she herself represents. Similarly, she fails to recognise how the colonial practice of portraying the landscape as hostile and potentially deadly serves to justify the violence and appropriation on the part of the coloniser.

In relation to Canadian nature, Mrs. Moodie's hard-won reconciliation with the new home derives to a considerable extent from the realisation that her misery was in fact largely self-inflicted. Uncritical adoption of European aesthetic and moral standards of sublimity and "reputable regularity" (New 74) results in her inability to understand and respond to a nature that is not either truly murderous but "exists as a living process which includes opposites: life and death, 'gentleness' and 'hostility'" (*Survival* 77). Self-exploration enables the settler to discover that the menacing irrational wilderness is also part of man's own psyche (Groening) and his unconscious attempts to defend and alienate himself from this more primeval side of humanity are useless, leading only to psychological torment and schizophrenia.

In "Departure from the Bush," the twentieth-century Susanna shows the reader the spiritual progress triggered by her residence in the wilderness. As a haunting spirit of the country, she recounts how "I, who had been erased / by fire, was crept in / upon by green." The obstinate bush advanced and invaded her: "In time the animals / arrived to inhabit me." Suffering from a violent psychological conflict, a cognitive dissonance as we would call it today, Susanna "was frightened / by their eyes [...] / glowing out from inside me." However, when the time came to return to civilisation, the speaker of the poem "was / (instantaneous) / un-lived in: they had gone." As she observes in the last two verses, "There was something they almost taught me / I came away not having learned." (*The Journals...* 26–27). Having briefly experienced the dark primeval side of her own psyche, the poetic persona chose to renounce it, thus losing her only chance to gain a deeper insight into her humanity.

Irrespective of the modern version of Susanna by Atwood and even Susanna the character in *Roughing It...*, Susanna the actual settler did undergo a significant transformation. To highlight her development, Susan Glickman emphasises a seemingly insignificant episode in which the heroine "learns how to avoid being wrecked in the rapids by paddling *with* the current instead of against it" (Glickman 535). Thus Mrs. Moodie acknowledges that she herself belongs to nature and experiences a fleeting glimpse of epiphany which she denied herself. Accepting her once-hated new home, she simultaneously acknowledges what Atwood calls "a violent duality" or an "inescapable doubleness of her own vision" (*The Journals...* 62–63), her condition of being neither here nor there, the state that came to denote Canadians, who „metaphorically [...] are still living in alien country" (Stouck 277).

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