

Nature the Monster and the Bush Myth

- Think of an incident in which you had a terrifying or dangerous encounter with Nature.
- How do you feel?
How did you react?
Were you calm, or did you panic?
- How did you escape?



Bush Myth and Literature

- In groups of 5, discuss the following questions:
- How does Nature affect your everyday life?
- How does Nature affect the formation of society?
- What is the importance of **home**, be it the dwelling, the town, the society, in relation to our proximity to Nature?

Bush Myth and Literary Regionalism

- In the preface to *The Bush Garden* (1966), Northrop Frye stressed the importance of regions to the creative imagination, arguing that an imagination conditioned by prairie stretching to the horizon would develop differently from one shaped by the huge mountains and trees of British Columbia or by the sea around Newfoundland.
- According to such literary critics, the experience of living in a vast country of strikingly different landscapes has inevitably led Canadian writers to assert a primary imaginative allegiance to specific regions rather than to the whole country.

- Small and isolated communities surrounded with a physical or psychological “frontier,” separated from one another and from their American and British cultural sources: communities that provide all that their members have in the way of distinctly human values, and that are compelled to feel a great respect for the law and order that holds them together, yet confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting—such communities are bound to develop what we may provisionally call a garrison mentality...The real terror comes when the individual feels himself becoming an individual, pulling away from the group, losing that sense of driving power that the group gives him...It is much easier to multiply garrisons...
- Northrop Frye, from *The Bush Garden* (1966)

- As the centre of Canadian life moves from the fortress to the metropolis, the garrison mentality changes...It begins as an expression of the moral values generally accepted in the group as a whole, then, as society gets more complicated and more in control of its environment, it becomes more of a revolutionary garrison...But though it changes from a defence of to an attack on what society accepts as conventional standards, the literature it produces tends to be rhetorical, an illustration or allegory of certain social attitudes...
- Northrop Frye, from *The Bush Garden*

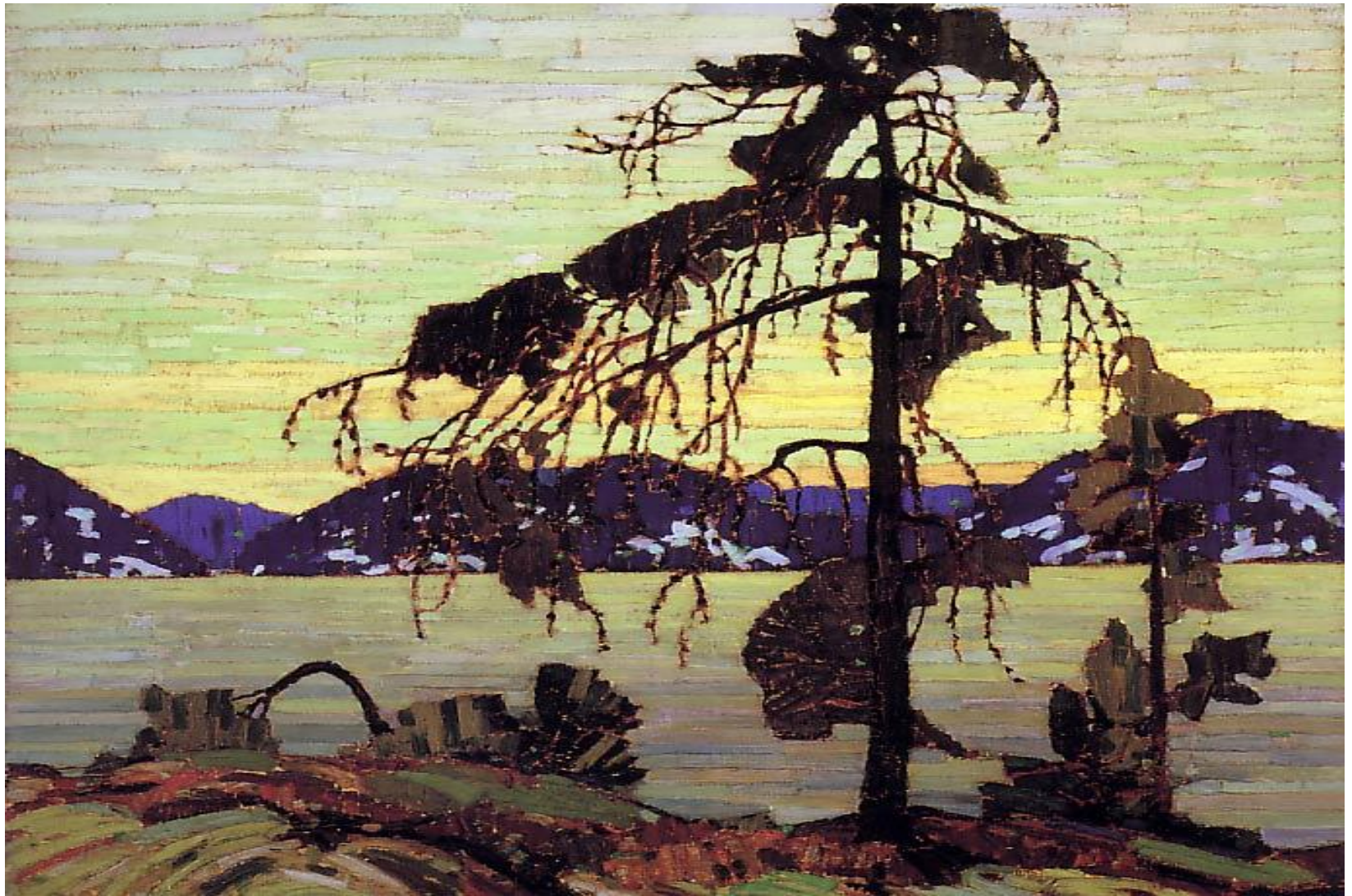
Literary Regionalism

- Similarly, the question of Canadian identity, so far as it affects the creative imagination, is not a "Canadian" question at all, but a regional question. An environment turned outward to the sea, like so much of Newfoundland, and one turned towards inland seas, like so much of the Maritimes, are an imaginative contrast: anyone who has been conditioned by one in his earliest years can hardly become conditioned by the other in the same way.
- Anyone brought up on the urban plain of southern Ontario or the gentle farmland along the south shore of the St. Lawrence may become fascinated by the great sprawling wilderness of Northern Ontario or Ungava, may move there and live with its people and become accepted as one of them, but if he paints or writes about it he will paint or write as an imaginative foreigner.
- And what can there be in common between an imagination nurtured on the prairies, where it is a centre of consciousness diffusing itself over a vast flat expanse stretching to the remote horizon, and one nurtured in British Columbia, where it is in the midst of gigantic trees and mountains leaping into the sky all around it, and obliterating the horizon everywhere?

Frye's Garrison Mentality

- We are so frightened by the oppressive vastness and threatening dangerousness of our natural landscape that we build walls against it, and hide behind the walls, in fortified garrisons of the mind.
- We see the natural world as something that's out to get us. Americans look at a big empty space and say, "Hey, great, let's get busy and conquer it and turn it into a city."
- Canadians look at a big empty space and say, "I'm frightened, so let's get together and build a wall and hide ourselves from the big ugly natural world before it gets us and does us in."

The Jack Pine, Tom Thomson (1920)



Garrisons and Bush Myths

- Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) carries on this theme, only she calls it the **bush myth**.
- The first, most important question in her book was “ ‘What's Canadian about Canadian literature?’ This was followed by “Why should we be bothered?” The latter question, Atwood argues, “shouldn't have to be answered at all because, in any self-respecting nation, it would never even be asked. But that's one of the problems: Canada *isn't* a self-respecting nation and the question does get asked.”

Garrisons and Bush Myths

- Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* carries on this theme, only she calls it the **bush myth**. We define ourselves in relation to the wilderness that is Canada.
- “Nature is a monster, perhaps, only if you come to it with unreal expectations or fight its conditions rather than accepting them and learning to live with them. Snow isn't something you necessarily die in or hate. You can also make houses in it.”
- Margaret Atwood

Garrisons and Bush Myths

- What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else. Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. [Canadian] literature is one such map if we can learn to read it as *our* literature...
- Margaret Atwood, from *Survival*
- The monster is now the United States (various authors)

Victims and Bush Myths

- As a variation on the bush myth, Atwood developed a theory of Canadians as, basically and eternally, victims.
- The world is cold and big and bleak and out to get us, and we are little and weak. We internalize this, Atwood suggests, and believe that everyone and everything is out to get us.
- We see ourselves as victims, little people in the control of vast forces. We tend to be depressed about it all, and unconvinced of our general ability to control anything or anyone.
- We never get to the last of the victim stages Atwood outlines: to refuse to become victims, and become creative non-victims.

Victims and Bush Myths

- She saw our victimization in 3 stages:
- To deny that you are a victim.
- To acknowledge that you are a victim.
- To acknowledge your victimhood but to refuse to accept this role as inevitable
- To be a creative non-victim
- We never get to the last of the victim stages
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Victims and Bush Myths

- Leonard uses the phrase **'beautiful losers'**
- Mordecai Richler simply uses the phrase **'losers'**

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- Are these positions evident in Moodie?

Catherine Parr Traill and her sister Susanna Moodie



Settler/Pioneer Fiction

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- There isn’t a requirement for accuracy, as memories are permitted to be flawed or colored by perspective. In short, memoirs can be a history, an art form, a meditation, or an amusement. They are often classified as “creative non-fiction.”
- This will come up again in *Running in the Family*.



Main Street circa 1900. Laura and Clara Reesor are in the foreground with the Town Hall, the Franklin House Hotel and Winkler's Tailor Shop in the background.

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- At the same time, such genteel pioneers were much more engaged in the imaginative mapping of the “mind of Canada.”
- Their memories are full of the clash of Old World, European manners and refinement—and continue such a life in Canada—and the tortuous and frightening struggle and monotony of a Canadian winter.

Some Other Important Settler Writers

- William T. Baird's *Seventy Years of New Brunswick Life* (1890). He claims that being raised in a log cabin leads to early maturity.
- Aeneas McCharles' *Bemocked of Destiny; the Actual Struggles and Experiences of a Canadian Pioneer, and the Recollection of a Lifetime* (1908).

Moodie: Introduction

- In her Introduction, Moodie explains why people immigrate to Canada. What are their reasons?
- What difficulties do they encounter?
- What are the lies they are told about Canada?
- Where does Moodie fall in this? What is her background? Is she an experienced pioneer?

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- Aeneas McCharles' *Bemocked of Destiny; the Actual Struggles and Experiences of a Canadian Pioneer, and the Recollection of a Lifetime* (1908).
- Thomas Need's *Six Years in the Bush* (1838).

The Bush Myth

- All of these writers helped contribute to what Canadian academics—particularly Northrop Frye in *The Bush Garden* (1966) and Margaret Atwood in *Survival* (1972)—described as the *garrison mentality* and the *bush myth*.