

Southern Ontario Gothic in Atwood's "Death by Landscape"

The gothic literary genre came to popularity in the late 18th and early 19th century, later branching into sub-genres such as English Gothic and American Southern Gothic. Canada developed its own approach to gothic literature, inspiring what is recognized today as Southern Ontario Gothic literature. The Southern Ontario Gothic tradition shares many of the same themes as traditional gothic literature, such as madness and supernaturality, but with a special emphasis on colonialism and racial dynamics, female protagonists in nature, and the threat of the wilderness (Hepburn and Hurley). Margaret Atwood proves throughout many of her works her fine command over the Southern Ontario Gothic tradition. In this essay I will highlight Atwood's use of Southern Ontario Gothic traditions as they appear in her short fiction, "Death by Landscape."

"Death by Landscape" follows the experiences of adolescent Lois as she attends camp Manitou every summer, roughly between the ages of nine and thirteen. One summer, she befriends Lucy, a confident American girl whose character was undoubtedly inspired by the story of Tom Thomson and William Wordsworth's "Lucy Poems." In their final year, Lois and Lucy participate in the camp's traditional canoe trip, the culminating event of their camp years. After climbing to a lookout together, Lois turns her back to Lucy and hears a yelp of surprise. When she turns around Lucy has completely vanished without a trace. The camp counselor later accuses Lois of pushing Lucy over the edge, although her body was never found. Lois lives the

rest of her life considering what could have happened to Lucy and collecting paintings of the Canadian landscape where Lucy disappeared.

Camp Manitou employs many themes and stereotypes from Indigenous North American cultures in their camp activities. For example, when Cappie, the camp counselor, hosts a meeting around the campfire the night before their canoe journey, she refers to her campers as “braves” and speaks in the stereotypical ‘Indian’ fashion. As Lois looks back on these memories, she acknowledges that “even at thirteen, she was a part of a white society which was seriously damaging native culture as well as misunderstanding it” (Hammill, 57) Atwood’s use of these stereotypes is intended to evoke some discomfort in the reader, reflecting back to colonial mistreatment and displacement of Indigenous people. As Hammill elaborates, “the fetishization of native culture and the wilderness by white male explorers in the early twentieth century was transferred wholesale to the Canadian summer camp, where the same clichéd ideals about adventure, freedom and the noble savage persist” (56). Camps with stereotypical native themes are not at all uncommon in Canada and the United States, where Indigenous people have historically had their cultures simultaneously repressed and appropriated to suit white appetites. In keeping with Southern Ontario Gothic tradition, Atwood exposes racial hypocrisies related to the colonization and subsequent seizure of North America by European settlers.

Southern Ontario Gothic literature, like most gothic literature, also concerns itself with gender dynamics and women’s suppression. In addition to influencing ideas about race and the wilderness, white settlers and explorers established the wilderness as a very gendered experience. Throughout the history of North America, most if not all explorers have been male. The narrative of the wilderness adventure is a masculine one, bearing little room for women to have a place in

exploring the landscape. At the same time that women and non-whites were excluded from North America's exploration narrative, they were frequently associated with nature. To elaborate, "whites and males and the upper classes were often seen as more developed and civilized, and therefore more distant from nature. Women, the colonized, the racialized, and the working classes were placed in the opposing position, and therefore seen as closer to nature, less developed, and therefore inferior" (Mackey, 126). Women's place in nature, as written by white male explorers, was often one of subservience, where women were best suited to a life of domesticity and required protection on the part of men. If they were not described as damsels in distress, women in nature were invariably designed to bring ruin to men, "envisioned as temptress, monster, abyss--or, in the Canadian version, as 'ice-goddess'" (Raschke) In placing two young girls at the center of "Death by Landscape," Atwood places them in a context where women have never designed their own experience. Much of what the girls do at camp is considered "masculine" activity. When Cappie refers to her campers as "braves," Lois acknowledges that the canoe initiation game wouldn't work the same way if she were to refer to them as "squaws" (Atwood, 49). Lois confirms that "this is another of [Cappie's] pretenses: that they are boys, and bloodthirsty" (Atwood, 49). The girls at Camp Manitou conform to and perpetuate the idea that they must be masculine in order to play the wilderness game. "That is what is conveyed at the camp, Raschke writes, "an attitude that privileges the masculine." Atwood grapples with this idea throughout "Death by Landscape," bringing the reader to question just what the "feminine" type of engagement with nature might look like. If women had been able to stake their own ground in the wilderness narrative, how might our ideas and aesthetics of outdoor recreation be different?

As previously mentioned, women, if portrayed at all in the wilderness, are most often portrayed as the male protagonist's muse, temptation, or else an end-of-journey prize. As Raschke acknowledges, it is most often only pure and/or dead women who are idolized by the male protagonist, and the songs at Camp Manitou, including "My Darling Clementine," "My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean," and "Alouette," center around themes of dead women. To have a living, feeling, and motivated female as a protagonist in wilderness literature is historically unheard of. When Atwood writes Lucy and Lois as protagonists, she creates a place where women are at the center of their own wilderness narratives, defining their experience in their own terms. Female protagonists in the wilderness are a distinct and defining characteristic of Southern Ontario Gothic literature (Hepburn and Hurley). Women have no less to fear about nature itself than men, however women do have to fear men. The threat of rape is especially concerning and uniquely persistent for women. If it were not for men, the wilderness could be considered a relatively safe place for women.

This is not to say, however, that Atwood paints the woods around Camp Manitou as a particularly welcoming or safe place. The "boogeyman," the imagined and the real dangers of the wilderness are additional prominent themes of Southern Ontario Gothic literature. The wilderness itself presents dangers to Lucy and Lois, as it has for generations of explorers before them. Mackey states, "Nature and wilderness are certainly not inviting or comfortable to humans. This wilderness - the quintessential Canadian landscape - is overpowering; it is a place in which one can become lost, even die" (129). In addition to threats from the wilderness itself, the concept of monsters, spirits, or other supernatural threats is riddled throughout much of the Canadian landscape narrative. Lucy's sudden disappearance imparts to the reader strong

suspicions of some supernatural interference. She vanishes without a trace. Lois recounts, “there had been no sound of falling rock; there had been no splash. There was no clue, nothing at all” (Atwood, 53). “‘Death by Landscape’ takes the idea of nature as monstrous to its logical limit,” writes Hammill, “Lucy does not drown or freeze but is simply polished off by the forest” (59). While no obvious monster, boogeyman, or kidnapper is ever outright blamed, Atwood leaves this up to the reader’s interpretation. Lucy is sometimes conflated with the Indigenous peoples of the Algonquin area, who disappeared culturally following European colonization, but whose haunting presence still remains in the form of white settlers’ guilt. The mystery of Lucy’s disappearance torments both Lois and the reader to no end. Eloquently put, “Atwood’s engagement with the horrors of colonialism, in terms of the conflict between white and native Canadians, leads eventually to the question of what it is which haunts the forest” (Hammill, 58). Atwood’s command over the mystery of Lucy’s disappearance demonstrates a thorough example of Southern Ontario Gothic themes.

The burning mystery of Lucy’s fate continues to follow Lois home, and persists in her mind throughout all of her adult life, shrouding out even some of her most monumental life moments. Insanity and spectrality are two of the most iconic themes in any form of Gothic literature, and “Death by Landscape” presents no exception to this commonality. As Lois grows older and learns more about appropriated Indigenous cultures, she becomes “conscious of the ominous implications of giving to that summer camp the name of Manitou, a term for a Supernatural Power or supernatural power in the abstract, according to Algonquian religious beliefs” (Gibert, 91). It is apparent that Lois indulges herself in the idea that some supernatural forces contributed to Lucy’s disappearance. Lois considers some truly unconventional

possibilities. For example, she wonders if Lucy might have transformed into a tree, asking, “who knows how many trees there were on the cliff...? Who counted? Maybe there was one more, afterwards” (Atwood, 56). She collects the paintings on her walls in hopes that one day she will see Lucy, or she will finally understand behind which hill or which tree she was hiding all along. Perhaps, “more important than the question of whether or not Lucy is actually dead, is Lois’s insistence that Lucy is alive and inside her personal space” (Beran). Lois dedicates an obsessive amount of time and energy to searching for Lucy in the apartment. In the final paragraphs of “Death by Landscape,” the reader becomes acutely aware of the extent of Lois’s obsession. It becomes clear that “Lucy’s persistence in the mind of Lois is of a different order from that of most individuals bereaved by the death of a friend. We are led to suspect that the strong bond by which Lois remains linked to Lucy is an indicator of a pathological condition” (Gibert, 96). As she searches for Lucy in every painting, Lois becomes further entrenched in her efforts, perhaps suggesting that the title, “Death by Landscape,” does not merely refer to Lucy’s disappearance, but also to Lois’s loss of self. Although the narrative of “Death by Landscape” does not explicitly center itself around the slipping mental faculties of Lois, the theme of insanity, especially where women are concerned, is a classic trademark of Gothic literature, extending into Southern Ontario Gothic traditions.

Atwood certainly does not shy away from exploring colonialism, feminism, and the concept of wilderness in “Death by Landscape.” Her multi-tiered yet concise and critical writing style reveals her firm command over every aspect in this short story. In addressing the concerns of death, human relationships with the environment, and the symbolism behind geographical spaces, “Death by Landscape” presents itself as “an outstanding example of the Canadian

Gothic” (Gibert, 83). Atwood canonizes herself as an icon of Canadian Gothic literature. Her layered use of memory, mystery, and supernaturalism in “Death by Landscape” demonstrates a mastery of the genre and an acute awareness of Canadian history and culture. “Death by Landscape” serves to remind the North American reader that our history is not yet so far in the past. Everything must be somewhere, people from the past do not disappear, and the ghosts of our colonial history remain in the very blood and landscape of our modern society.

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