

Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970)

Biographical Info of Susanna Moodie (6 Dec 1803 – 8 April 1885, lived 53 years in Canada)

Source: [Dictionary of Canadian Biography](#)

- Susanna Strickland was the youngest daughter from an English, upper middle-class, literary family; she met John W. D. Moodie in 1830 and married him in April 1831; emigrated to Canada in July 1832 (younger brother Samuel had been there since 1825 and her sister Catharine Parr Traill also left for Canada in July 1832 on a separate ship).
- The Moodies emigrated in hopes of economic success and higher social status, but Susanna was reluctant to go, considering their departure a “fearful abyss” yet a “stern necessity,” and upon arrival felt both excitement and a sense of being a “stranger in a strange land.”
- Susanna and her family spent seven years in the bush but abandoned farming in late 1839 and moved to Belleville in January 1840; their lack of success as farmers was probably due to personality, temperament and attitude.
- Susanna viewed the backwoods as a “prison-house” and in her writing primarily dwells on sickness, death, danger, and near-disaster; she seems to have had a romanticized view of what pioneer life would be like, which was deflated by realities of hardships; she also consistently presents in much of her work a dark view of the world.
- Upon moving to Belleville, Susanna pursued a more active literary career, and was successful through the early 1850s; she and her husband experienced further financial scarcity in the 1860s and after John’s death in 1869, Susanna lived mainly in Toronto with her son Robert until her death in 1885.
- Her writing and literary sketches clearly indicate a talent for human observation, warmth and humor. *Roughing it in the bush* (1852) depicts colonial characters, backwoods customs, domestic practices, and natural surroundings; also, her work expresses the romantic sensibility in 19th-century Canada; in *Life in the clearings* (1853), a series of sketches and essays on colonial society, she provides frequent patriotic and optimistic statements probably to stress that she was not anti-Canadian.
- It is important to note that “*Roughing it*, unlike her other books, was generated by traumatic experiences of emigration and backwoods life, and manifests, in its complexity, the tensions in the intellectual, emotional, and imaginative life of its author” (Carl P. A. Ballstadt).

In 1970, Margaret Atwood published *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, a now-famous poetic and artistic response to Moodie’s books, *Roughing it in the bush* and *Life in the clearings*. The first edition was accompanied by images by Atwood, and the second edition, published in 1997, includes a different set of images by Charles Pachter. The following questions are adapted from those provided by [CanLit Guides](#) in its section on Moodie’s *Roughing it in the bush*, and have been revised to shift focus to Atwood’s treatment of major themes found in Moodie’s work and to help you reflect critically on the intertextual relationship between Moodie’s and Atwood’s texts.

Emigration, Settlement, Settler Relations, and Colonial Bias

1. How does Moodie characterize her fellow settlers in the first four poems from Journal I? What kind of mood or tone does Atwood set up in this section, via Susanna’s perspective?
2. What is the tone of the following five poems in Journal I, as Susanna settles into her new home? Is she more comfortable with the setting, the work, and the challenges of the situation? What does she value and what does she despise about her situation?

3. Consider Moodie's descriptions of different groups of people throughout Journal I, such as the English, the Irish, and Indigenous peoples. How does she indicate her variable perceptions of different people? How does she specifically position herself as an English woman in relation to the other groups of people? How might her observations reflect her British heritage and colonial assumptions? How do her perceptions, assumptions, and values shift throughout the poems in Journal I and then further in Journals II and III?
4. Who are the "First Neighbors" in the poem of that title? What is Susanna's reaction to her new neighbors? How does she handle their requests or criticisms? What does this suggest about her position in the community as a new British emigrant? How does Atwood play on themes of ownership, bias, prejudice, and class conflict through Susanna's increasing sense of "unease" or "unsettlement" in this poem?

Gender and Perspective

1. How does Susanna's gender impact her engagement with people? How does her role as a home-maker in the domestic sphere limit her exposure to social interactions?
2. In the three consecutive poems from Journal I—"The Wereman," "Paths and Thingscape," and "The Two Fires," how does Susanna's gendered domestic role inform her perception of the "wilderness"? How does her experience of homesteading subtly alter her perspective?
3. Examine Susanna's description of "Brian, the Still-Hunter" in the dream poem of the same title in Journal II. Does her assessment of Brian change over the course of the poem? How might Brian be a parallel figure to Susanna—another figure whose mental state is under pressure from his engagement with society and the landscape?

Landscapes and Colonial "Conquest"

1. Susanna often describes the landscape and nature as overwhelming (in both Moodie's original texts and Atwood's poems). Moodie's viewpoint was likely influenced by philosopher Edmund Burke's notion of the sublime, which is an expression of both awe and anxiety over the greatness or vastness of a "wilderness" scene. It reflects something that we, as humans (or, more specifically, white Anglo/European settlers) are attracted to yet cannot comprehend or envision in its totality, or that makes us sense our own mortality. Consider moments in which Susanna reflects this type of experience of the Canadian landscape throughout *The Journals*. How does she grapple with the overwhelming sense of the sublime? In what ways does her view of the "wilderness" indicate a split or schizophrenic perspective, as Atwood claims in her Afterword to *The Journals*?
2. How do Susanna's descriptions of wilderness spaces, the "backwoods" or the "bush," contrast with the "civilized" spaces of towns and cities, especially in the latter two sections of *The Journals*? How do these opposing landscapes or spaces inform Susanna's assessment of her fellow Anglo/European settlers? How does Atwood situate opposing spheres of "nature" and "culture" as definitive of colonial or imperialist attitudes? In what ways does Atwood undermine these attitudes or dualistic viewpoints? To what extent does she unsettle or disrupt the colonialist narrative of conquest and triumph over the land?
3. In her article [Cartographic Lessons: Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* and Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*](#), Florence Stratton argues that Moodie engages in a colonial project of erasure and re-naming. Stratton shows how maps are instruments of knowledge and power (83), and how expressions of colonial violence are evident through the erasure of Indigenous place names (84). Stratton argues that the colonial process of re-naming

normalized the death and suffering of First Nations people and promoted the myth of the vanishing Indian (86) and the empty continent (87). In what ways does Atwood's text illustrate Stratton's argument? In other words, how does she rewrite Moodie's colonialist narrative as a postcolonial critique of white settler politics? To what extent does Atwood reinforce or subvert the silencing and erasure of Indigenous peoples?

Recalibrations, Fictionalization, Image-Text, and Intertextuality

1. Although we have not read Moodie's primary texts, to what extent do you sense Atwood's rendition of Susanna's experiences attempts to shift various elements or viewpoints through a more contemporary postcolonial lens? What becomes emphasized or diminished, according to Atwood in her Afterword and your own reading of *The Journals*? What subtexts or overt statements does Atwood highlight in her version? What does this suggest about the relationship between the two writers? How does Atwood's re-writing suggest a historical engagement but also a historical recalibration? What is recalibrated, and why is this important?
2. Atwood introduces fictional facets to Moodie's narrative, most obviously in extending her metaphysically into twentieth-century Toronto, but also in subtle changes to Moodie's story and through the images. Consider how this fictionalization of Moodie's story opens up our notions of history and troubles the emphatic assertions of this specific, influential, historical figure. How does fictionalizing Moodie alter our perceptions of her historical text and her place in the narrative of Canadian experiences? Does Atwood's text seek to subvert the authority of historical documents, or does it more subtly open up questions about authorship and reporting? What might these subversions and questions accomplish or highlight?
3. Consider the importance of the interactions between image and poem in Atwood's text. What do the images add to your understandings of the poems, and what do they reflect of Moodie's accounts of her settler experiences? What might the imagistic qualities of the cut-up collage edges, or the soft and ambiguous watercolors highlight in the poetry? Consider how the images play with the notions of archival research and personal response to history.
4. Two different editions of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* were produced. The poetry remained the same, but the images changed dramatically, with the first edition containing a few images by Atwood but the more dramatic second edition pairing images and typographic alternations by Charles Pachter with each poem (some of the Pachter images are available in Pilot). Consider how these two different editions foster different interactions between the poetry and the images, and importantly, with Moodie's narrative as well.
5. Pick a specific poem by Atwood and connect it with its source content in Moodie's *Roughing it in the bush* (available [here](#)). For example, read Moodie's chapter 10 and Atwood's poem "Dream 2." Both engage with Brian, The Still-Hunter. Consider what facets of Moodie's descriptions and stories Atwood draws on for her dream, and what parts she ignores or changes. In comparing and contrasting these two sections of these books, consider how readerly perceptions of the story and the experiences of settler culture transform from prose into poetry, and from settler, non-fictional reporting in the mid-1800s to contemporary, metahistorical poetry in the 1970s. What is accomplished by this re-envisioning of Moodie? For instance, does it facilitate a socially critical engagement with Moodie's historical moment, or of Atwood's present?