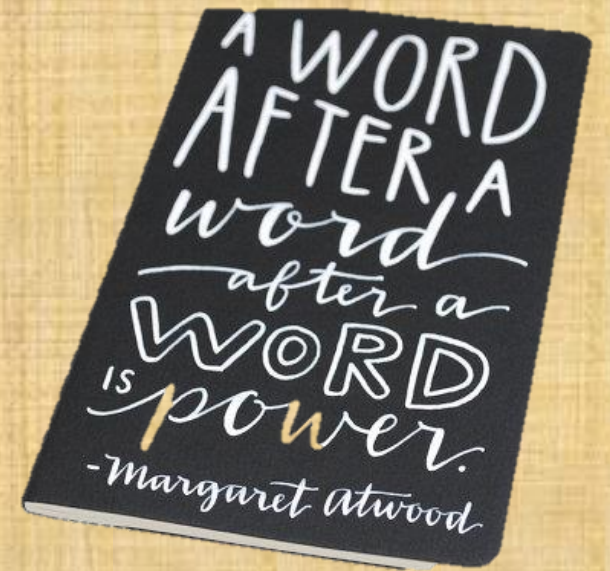




ENG 4200:
MARGARET ATWOOD
POETRY & FICTION
DR. HOPE JENNINGS



UNIT ONE: NATIONAL IDENTITY, SURVIVAL, AND
THE "WILDERNESS" IN POSTCOLONIAL WRITING

NATIONAL IDENTITY

- **THE AUTHOR OF OVER SIXTY BOOKS, ATWOOD HOLDS A UNIQUE POSITION IN CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN LITERATURE.**
 - John Bemrose: "[She] is arguably the most recognizable writer in the country."
 - Ann Marie Lipinski: "one of the leading literary luminaries, a national heroine of the arts, the *rara avis* of Canadian letters."
- **ATWOOD IS NOT SIMPLY A "CANADIAN" AUTHOR, THOUGH, SINCE HER BOOKS HAVE RECEIVED CRITICAL ACCLAIM IN THE UNITED STATES AND EUROPE AS WELL IN AS HER NATIVE CANADA, AND SHE HAS WON NUMEROUS LITERARY AWARDS.**
- **"IT'S AN ACCIDENT THAT I'M A SUCCESSFUL WRITER," SHE TOLD ROY MACGREGOR IN *MACLEAN'S*. "I THINK I'M KIND OF AN ODD PHENOMENON IN THAT I'M A SERIOUS WRITER AND I NEVER EXPECTED TO BECOME A POPULAR ONE, AND I NEVER DID ANYTHING IN ORDER TO BECOME A POPULAR ONE."**



ATWOOD VIEWS HERSELF FIRST AND FOREMOST AS A CANADIAN WRITER



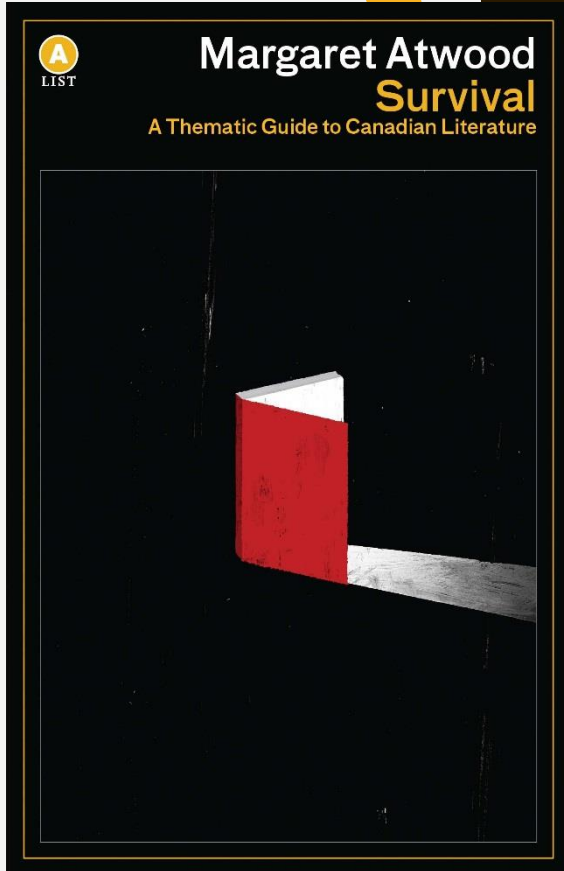
- As Marge Piercy explained in *American Poetry Review*, Atwood believes writers must consciously work within their nation's literary tradition.
- Atwood's prominent stature in Canadian letters rests as much on her published works as on her efforts to define and give value to her nation's literature.
- According to Susan Wood, Atwood "has emerged as a champion of Canadian literature and of the peculiarly Canadian experience of isolation and survival."
- Linda Hutcheon notes Atwood's "important impact on Canadian culture" and that her diverse body of work, "internationally known through translations, stand as testimony to [her] significant position in a contemporary literature which must deal with defining its own identity and defending its value."

Margaret Atwood weaves stories from her own life in the bush and cities of Canada. Intensely conscious of her political and social context, Atwood dispels the notion that caribou-clad Canadians remain perpetually locked in blizzards while simultaneously seeming to be a polite mass of gray faces, often indistinguishable from their American neighbors. Atwood has continually pondered the lack of an identifiable Canadian culture. For over thirty years her work has aided in fashioning a distinct Canadian literary identity. ... In an attempt to focus on *Canadian experiences*, Atwood has populated her stories with Canadian cities, conflicts, and contemporary people, conscious of a landscape whose borders have been permeated by the frost of Nature, her colonizers and her neighbors. Her examination of how an individual interacts, succeeds, or stagnates within her world speaks to an emerging sense of self and often parallels the battles fought to establish self-determination.

- **Patricia F. Goldblatt** "Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists." *World Literature Today* 73, no. 2 (spring 1999): 275-82.



SURVIVAL VS. VICTIMHOOD



- IN *SURVIVAL: A THEMATIC GUIDE TO CANADIAN LITERATURE* (1972), ATWOOD EXPRESSES HER STRONG BELIEF IN CANADIAN NATIONALISM AND DISCERNS A UNIQUELY CANADIAN LITERATURE, DISTINCT FROM ITS AMERICAN AND BRITISH COUNTERPARTS, AND DISCUSSES THE DOMINANT THEMES TO BE FOUND IN IT.
- FOR ATWOOD, "EVERY COUNTRY OR CULTURE HAS A SINGLE UNIFYING AND INFORMING SYMBOL AT ITS CORE: FOR AMERICA, THE FRONTIER; FOR ENGLAND, THE ISLAND; FOR CANADA, SURVIVAL."
- PERHAPS THE MOST CONTENTIOUS PART OF HER ARGUMENT IS THAT CANADIAN LITERATURE IS PRIMARILY CONCERNED WITH VICTIMS AND WITH THE VICTIM'S ABILITY TO SURVIVE.

- Several critics find Atwood's own work exemplifying this primary theme of Canadian literature. Her examination of destructive sex roles and her nationalistic concern over the subordinate position Canada plays with relation to the United States are variations on the victor/victim theme.
- Hutcheon observes that because Atwood's own work closely parallels the themes she sees as common to the Canadian literary tradition, *Survival* "has served as the context in which critics have subsequently discussed [Atwood's] works.

If the national mental illness of the United States is megalomania, that of Canada is paranoid schizophrenia.



The central symbol for Canada-and this based on numerous instances of its occurrence in both English and French Canadian literature-is undoubtedly *Survival*, *la Survivance*.

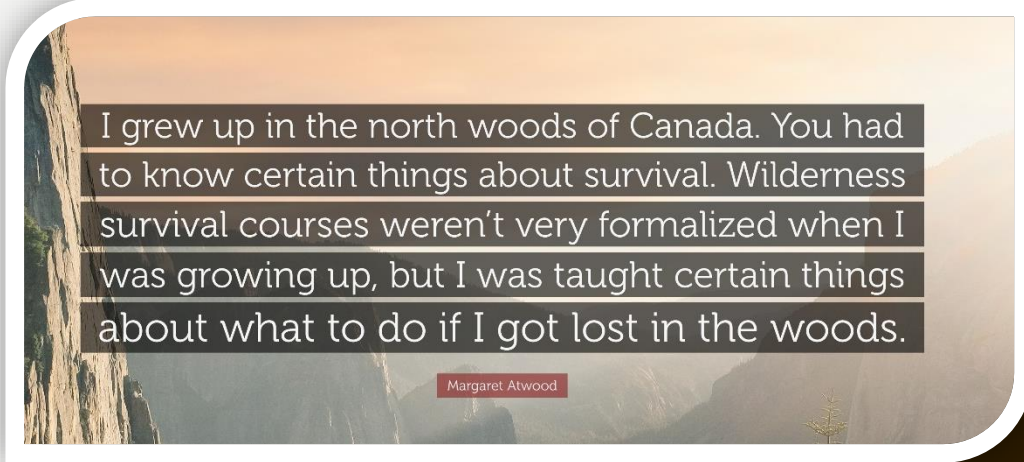
— Margaret Atwood —

AZ QUOTES

Americans don't usually have to think about Canadian-American relations, or, as they would put it, American-Canadian relations. Why think about something which you believe affects you so little? We, on the other hand, have to think about you whether we like it or not.

In her novels, Margaret Atwood creates situations in which women, burdened by the rules and inequalities of their societies, discover that they must reconstruct braver, self-reliant personae in order to survive. Not too far from the Canadian blueprint of the *voyageur* faced with an inclement, hostile environment, these women struggle to overcome and to change systems that block and inhibit their security. ... Yet the author herself was neither encumbered nor restricted by the definition of *contemporary female* in her life as a child. Having grown up in the Canadian North, outside of societal propaganda, she could critically observe the behaviors that were indoctrinated into her urban peers who lacked diverse role models. As Atwood has noted, "Not even the artistic community offered you a viable choice as a woman" (Sullivan, 103). Her stories deal with the transformation of female characters from ingenues to insightful women. By examining her heroes, their predators, and how they cope in society, we will discover where Atwood believes the ability to reconstruct our lives lies.

- Patricia F. Goldblatt "Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists." *World Literature Today* 73, no. 2 (spring 1999): 275-82.



I grew up in the north woods of Canada. You had to know certain things about survival. Wilderness survival courses weren't very formalized when I was growing up, but I was taught certain things about what to do if I got lost in the woods.

Margaret Atwood

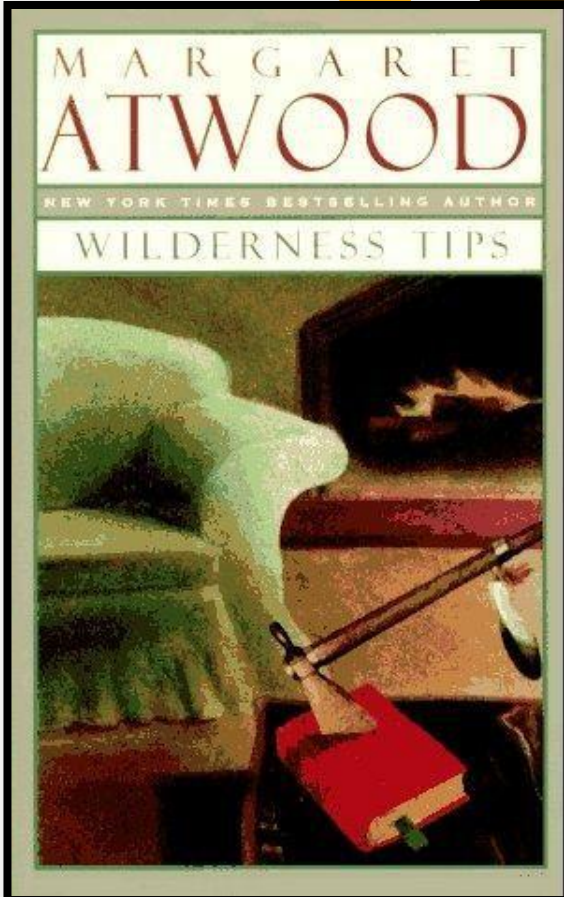
KEY QUESTIONS:

WHO ARE THE VICTIMS?

WHO IS PREY AND WHY?

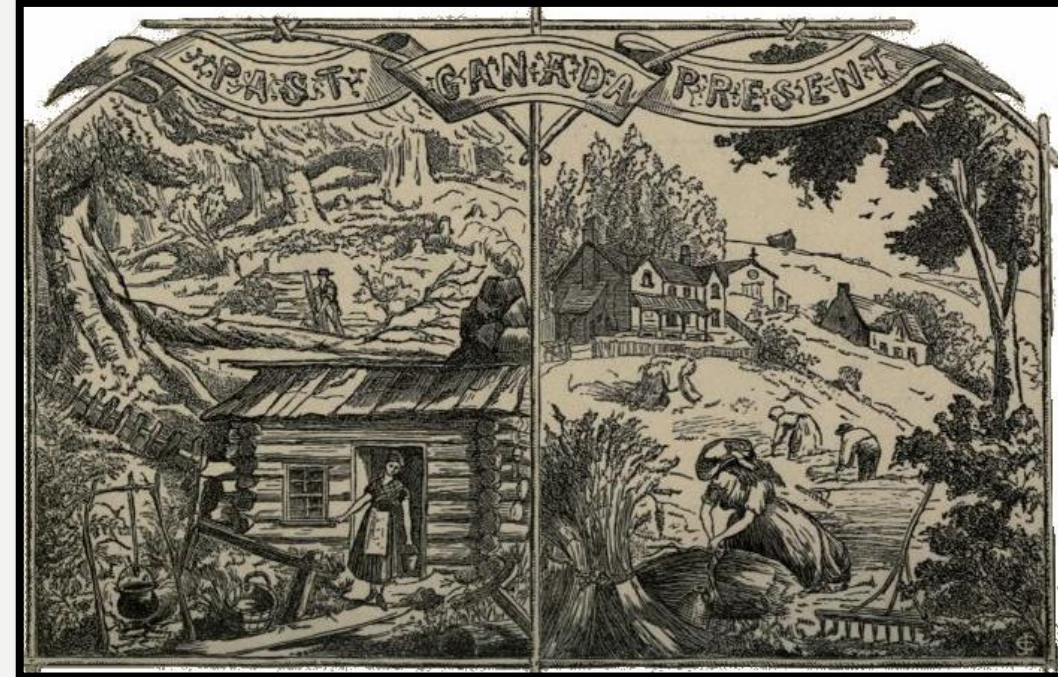
HOW DO CHARACTERS
ESCAPE THE ARCHETYPE OF
VICTIM OR PREDATOR/PREY
RELATIONS?

CIVILIZATION VS. WILDERNESS



- ATWOOD'S WORK, ESPECIALLY THE EARLY POETRY AND FICTION, EXPLORES HOW HUMANS (NAMELY, WHITE SETTLERS) OFTEN ATTEMPT TO CONSTRUCT THE BORDERS OF "CIVILIZATION" AGAINST THE "WILDERNESS" SURROUNDING OR ENCROACHING UPON IT
- SHE CONSIDERS THESE OPPOSITIONS TO BE THE DEFINING PRINCIPLES OF CANADIAN LITERATURE; THEY ALSO PROVIDE A METAPHOR FOR DIVISIONS WITHIN HUMANS IN THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THE WORLD AROUND THEM:
 - Civilization = society, culture, the rational, contained side of humanity
 - Wilderness = irrational, primeval, carnal, nonhuman spaces and "others"
- ATWOOD IS ULTIMATELY INTERESTED IN HOW THE "WILDERNESS" IS BOTH A REAL AND IMAGINED PLACE WITHIN THE CANADIAN POST/COLONIAL IMAGINATION.

- For example, Atwood dramatizes the “civilized” urge to ignore the wildness lurking just over the horizon; in “Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer” she captures this theme with particular vividness: **“In the darkness the fields / defend themselves with fences / in vain: / everything / is getting in.”**
- Atwood elaborates on the uselessness of defending oneself against the wilderness in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, an account of a European immigrant’s struggles to navigate the wildernesses of Canada, her adopted home.



- **Almost every poem in *The Journals* deals with this tension in some form: human “improvements” to the natural world do little to mask the “savagery” that preceded human intervention.**
- **Landscapes in Atwood’s early poems and fictions are often harsh and brutal, wild and unconquerable, and confront Canadian settlers and their descendants with a legacy of colonized spaces and ways of viewing the world.**



FURTHER ARRIVALS

After we had crossed the long illness
that was the ocean, we sailed up-river

On the first island
the immigrants threw off their clothes
and danced like sandflies

We left behind one by one
the cities rotting with cholera,
one by one our civilized
distinctions

and entered a large darkness.

It was our own
ignorance we entered.

I have not come out yet

My brain gropes nervous
tentacles in the night, sends out
fears hairy as bears,
demands lamps; or waiting

for my shadowy husband, hears
malice in the trees' whispers.

I need wolf's eyes to see
the truth.

I refuse to look in a mirror.

Whether the wilderness is
real or not
depends on who lives there.

POSTCOLONIAL & FEMINIST WRITER

- ALTHOUGH SHE HAS BEEN LABELED A CANADIAN NATIONALIST, A FEMINIST, AND EVEN A GOTHIC WRITER, ATWOOD INCORPORATES AND TRANSCENDS THESE CATEGORIES. IN MANY REVIEWS, ARTICLES, AND SPEECHES, SHE MAKES THE MORE GLOBAL FOCUS OF HER WORK DELIBERATE AND CONSCIOUS:

- "I have always seen Canadian nationalism and the concern for women's rights as part of a larger, non-exclusive picture."

- SHE WRITES FROM HER OWN PERSPECTIVE AS A WOMAN, A CANADIAN, AND AN AUTHOR, BUT SHE ALSO INSISTS ON EXERCISING ALL HER ARTISTIC OPTIONS.
- THE POTENTIAL STERILITY OF CONTEMPORARY ART AND CONSUMER CULTURE IS CHALLENGED BY ATWOOD'S VIEW OF ARTISTIC CREATION AS AN ACT OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY, BOTH PRIVATE AND PUBLIC; IN ALL HER WORKS, SHE SEES THE PROCESSES OF WRITING AND READING AS LIFE-GIVING.

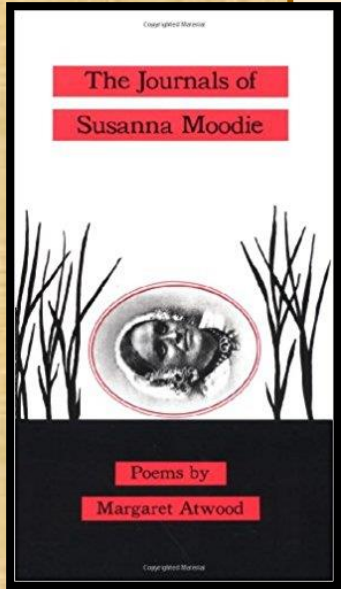


Linda Sandler concludes that "Atwood is all things to all people ... a nationalist ... a feminist or a psychologist or a comedian ... a maker and breaker of myths ... a gothic writer. She's all these things, but finally she's unaccountably Other. Her writing has the discipline of a social purpose, but it remains elusive, complex, passionate. It has all the intensity of an act of exorcism."

**YOU FIT INTO ME
LIKE A HOOK INTO AN EYE
A FISH HOOK
AN OPEN EYE**

~ POWER POLITICS

- Atwood frequently uses surprise in her poems. She establishes very specific expectations and then tramples them.
- Here, she overturns the expected definition of "hook and eye" and replaces it with an image of brutality and violence.
- The power of this setup/letdown formula often hinges, as in this poem, on the multiple meanings of words.
- "You fit into me" succinctly captures Atwood's interest in the mechanisms of language, the multiplicity of words, and the many layers of meanings.



UNIT READING:

THE JOURNALS OF SUSANNA MOODIE (1970)

SELECTED POEMS FROM:

THE CIRCLE GAME (1966)

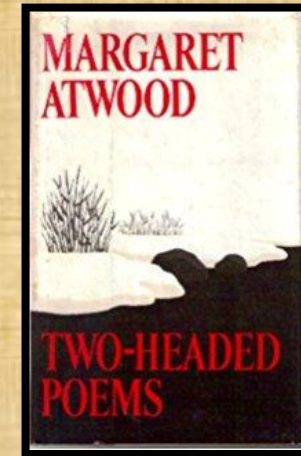
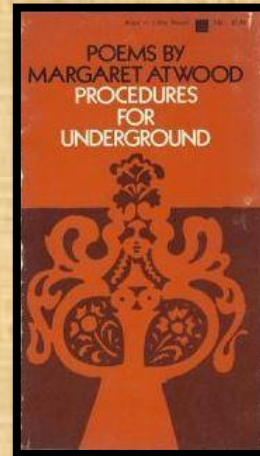
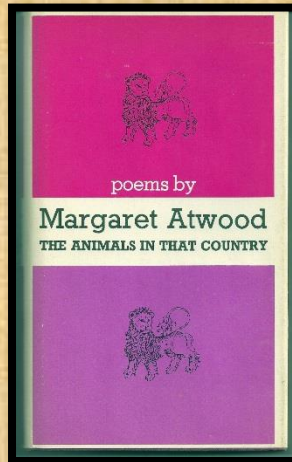
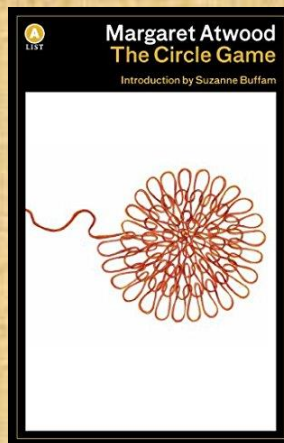
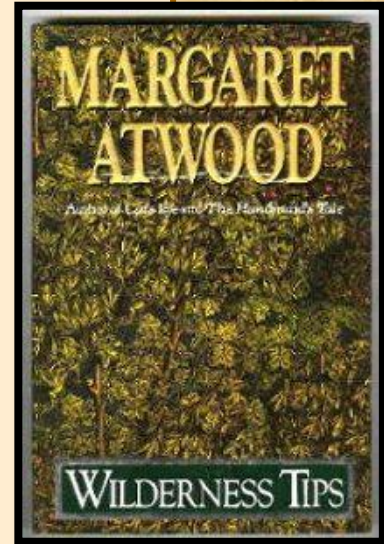
THE ANIMALS IN THAT COUNTRY (1968)

PROCEDURES FOR UNDERGROUND (1970)

TWO-HEADED POEMS (1978)

SHORT STORIES:

“WILDERNESS TIPS” & “DEATH BY LANDSCAPE” (1991)



ADDITIONAL READING: LITERARY BIOGRAPHY OF MARGARET ATWOOD (IN PILOT & THE SOURCE FOR MOST OF THIS PP)