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The Role of Nature in Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It In The Bush*

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Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susanna_Moodie

Abstract

The word *nature* has the ability to cover numerous concepts like landscape, geography, climate, flora and fauna which are thoroughly tangible in Canadian literary works especially in Susanna Moodie's 'Roughing it in the Bush'. Susanna, with the experience of emigration from England into new land (Canada) by the great expectations in mind of the new life, has

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obtained the required ability to write about the deep effect of nature in the people; however, she concluded all those colourful dreams and the new land are all in fake and counterfeit.

In *Roughing It in the Bush*, Moodie refutes the common Romantic assumption that living in a wilderness area, far from the corruption of cities, makes a person both spiritually and morally stronger. Although upon her arrival she delights in Canada's natural beauty, her enthusiasm later wanes as she becomes increasingly disillusioned with nature as a source of moral and spiritual rejuvenation. She depicts nature, instead, as “red in tooth and claw,” offering little security to the middle-class female immigrant like herself, who is constantly fearful of the known and unknown dangers of the woods.

Moodie refers to the bush as a “green prison,” a description that surely expressed the thoughts of many other women immigrants. Living closer to nature fails to offer the immigrant a heightened experience of the sublime, as described by such Romantic poets as Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley; instead, the middle-class woman is confronted with the sordid actuality of daily life in the backwoods, a reality that seems impossible to change.

Key Words: Nature, Ecocriticism, Canada scenery, Bush

Introduction



Courtesy: <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/roughing-it-in-the-bush>

Roughing It in the Bush

The original title page (courtesy Bruce Peel Special Collections/University of Alberta).

The word *nature* in the title of my article has the ability to cover numerous concepts like landscape, geography, climate, flora and fauna which are thoroughly tangible in Canadian literary works especially in Susanna Moodie's ‘Roughing it in the Bush’. She, with the experience of emigration from England into new land (Canada) with great expectations in mind of the new life, has obtained the required ability to write about the deep effect of nature

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in the people. However, she concluded that all those colourful dreams and the new land were all in fake and counterfeit.

Literature of Canada – Role of Nature

With this opinion and point of view, in the following there is going to be a brief introduction to nature in the history of Literature of Canada, significantly in the nineteenth century contemporary to this manuscript done by Susanna Moodie. Many scholars and researchers have attempted to concentrate on a special aspect of nature seen through human eyes. The term ‘nature’ covers the overall environment, physical reality of the land which the early explorers encountered a few centuries before and which still keeps on haunting the Canadian imagination.

Based on Konrad Holleis’s idea, a scholar from the University of Wien, when we have a surface glimpse at the background of nature in Canadian literature in recent years, a bizarre triangle of mutual influence will be observed. It is out of the question to speak of the Canadian nature without reference to literary representations of settlers and explorers, simply because they were the only witnesses to the land that was not developed by Western civilization and was unexplored at that time. It is also impossible to write about Canadian literature without paying attention to the emergence of the search for a national identity that commenced in the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, it does not make any sense to speak about national identity regardless of the impact of nature on the Canadian imagination and self-perception. Therefore, without an identity in a discussion of the nature, literature in Canada is just as senseless as excluding the nature or literature from the other two following elements.

Nature was in existence first. It was there when Jacques Cartier and Samuel de Champlain cruised up the St. Lawrence River. It existed there when the fur trade commenced. It was there when the leading European settlers strained to found a colony. All these people gathered in a country still largely unexplored with a harsh climate and incredible scenery. They faced a huge presence of nature, and had to encounter it in different ways. They endured to survive in a hostile environment; they were impressed by the strangeness of landscape, and finally they utilized the land’s resources to build an economy that worked for them and guaranteed their survival. They cultivated the land, and soon started to exploit and destroy it. The people, who had not been in the true north, even they had to have their living outside the community alongside the enormous presence of nature.

A simple glimpse at the map, the vastness of the country reveals that the people were fully engaged with nature, and the oral news of the adventurers in the border or in the north, or any other part of unexplored country, had a strong influence. The country was settled only sparsely as numerous early accounts propose. Large tracts of uninhabited land, where researchers were exposed to a natural environment were easily seen. Even now Canada is the second largest country in the globe with only thirty three million inhabitants, making it one of

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the least populated countries in the world. The land was there from the start, and was a massive area. Settlers had to face many challenges. So, the nature of Canada had a profound influence on its occupants from the early beginning.

Beginnings of Canadian Literature

Inspired by its natural environment, people began to write about their own experiences in the new land. The pioneers of English literature in Canada were the researchers who came from Europe and attempted to deal with the unknown country and wrote long travel reports often in the form of diaries or notes. It is worth mentioning Samuel Hearne and Alexander Mackenzie in this issue. In a few decades later, Catherine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie came to write about their experiences as incomers in the Upper Canada. Traill appears to be a curious and flexible woman, who acclaimed the pioneer life in 'The Backwoods of Canada'. Moodie, on the other hand, represented the nature of Canada as a deception and warned the women in her class of a trip to Canada in her memoir *Roughing It in the Bush* published in 1852.

Canadian novel came into being by the late nineteenth century; therefore, the only few which were written at that time were mostly adventure stories dealing with garrison life. Of course, all these stories were a sort of response to the nature of Canada in some way.

Search for National Identity

Finally the search for national identity with the British North America Act of 1867 commenced. Starting this year, it was quite obvious that a country that was threatened by the invasion of the United States of America and that was still very deeply dependent on Britain did its best to strengthen its national identity. From the outset there was great deal of tension between French and English Canada, and this continued until the 20th Century.

The ambition of a national identity originated primarily from the English side, and the shaping factors for the cultural identity were rather ethnic and religious than political. The fact that Canada as a country, directed its troops to Europe, gave a great increase to the confidence of Canada. In the years of the post-World War II Canada was more politically independent of Great Britain, which gave legislative independence to Canada and gave it its own decision making in foreign policy. What has mostly shaped Canada's national identity which is fairly significant in recent years is the policy of multiculturalism. The celebration of various identities in the country has become a determinant for Canadian identity.

Moodie's Works

Mrs. Moodie's masterpiece, *Roughing It in the Bush*, appeared in the year 1852, and a slightly less prosperous follow-up of this work, *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush*, a year later. Susanna Strickland, born in Bungay, Suffolk, England, married J. W. D. Moodie, an English officer in the army. They both together immigrated in 1832 to Upper Canada (now Ontario) and settled for the first time on a farmland next to Coburg. In 1834 they moved to an area of

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backwoods in the municipality of Duero and cleared a farm from the wilderness. Captain Moodie was involved in the suppression of the rebellion failed in 1837, led by William Lyon Mackenzie, and soon became the Sheriff of the County of Hastings. Thereafter, they lived in Belleville, where Moodie made the most of her literary works. She passed away in Toronto.

Author's Own Experience

The Canadian classic 'Roughing It in the Bush' has been written as a narrative in which the author is the raconteur of her own experiences as an emigrant from Britain, in her expedition to the New World, and her challenges to settle and her sense of life in the "Bush" of Canada. We encounter every character with her and learn the details in their secret thoughts, as we get to discern every one of them. We start, naturally, with the first impression of physical detail. We understand the peculiarities, habits or idiosyncrasies peculiar to that specific character and the description of the character makes him or her more memorable. The different information given about each character puts him or her into a sort of role that might be a stereotypical mirror image of Victorian sensibilities and prejudice of Susanna Moodie. After filling her character, Mrs Moodie makes several comments that lead the reader to know what impressions she has had to date by that specific individual, what conclusions she has obtained. This is significant for the story, and predicting how the story will react and interact with the character.

Based on Eco-Criticism

This paper analyses the novel based on eco-criticism which can be applied to most of Canadian literary works as well as Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*. This paper is based on the aspect of eco-criticism theory that deals with nature and/versus human being. Here in this paper the main character is the author herself as a woman immigrant.

Eco-criticism

Academically disciplined Eco-criticism started seriously in about 1990s, even though its origins are traced back to the late 1970s. Since it is a kind of new and fresh field of study, researchers were involved in giving definition to the scope and purposes of the field. Cheryll Glotfelty, as a pioneer in this area of study, has described ecocriticism as "The study of the relationships between literature and the physical environment" and Laurence Buell says that this study must be "Conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis." David Mazel declares "it is the analysis of literature as though nature mattered." Through this field, we get a deep understanding of the nature's crises of recent times and a grasp of personal and political activities. In its origin the theory assumed a form of activism. Numerous scholars put their focus on the interdisciplinary environment of the enquiry that is learnt by ecological science, politics, ethics, women and American studies and history among other research fields.

The term “ecocriticism” was invented by William Rueckert in 1978 in his paper “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism.” A great deal of enthusiasm in covering nature writing and studying literature with an emphasis on “green” issues cultivated through the 1980s, and shortly after that decade ecocriticism arose as a special discipline within literature departments of American universities.

Although scholars in the field of ecocriticism look at literature obtained throughout history and take out its connection to nature, a lot of studies was actually concentrated on American and British works from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The nineteenth century basically made some advance in literature which ecocritics see as important; Victorian realists described industrialization that was shifting the landscape; explorers and natural historians commenced to speak about places that were affected by industrialization, and wildlife and pioneers and other immigrants spoke about their own experiences with a stress on setting.

American authors of the era whose writings have been observed as significant by critics include William Cullen Bryant, James Kirke Paulding, James Fenimore, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman and some lesser known authors who spoke about Wild West. Several scholars have reported that most of the attention of ecocriticism has been on nature writing by white men. They understood that the reply to the environment is quite varied in works of African Americans (such as Fredrick Douglass), Native Americans, and women. A relevant but distinct area of literature study, ecofeminist literary criticism, inspects the views on environment by women and shows how the usually overturn dominant male images and points of views towards nature.

American Naturalists and adventurers of the nineteenth century are usually valued by ecocritics as having begun the conversation movement. These authors vary from literary writers since their works concentrate mainly on scientific depiction and speculations about environment. However, as numerous critics have illustrated, their works are saturated with poetry which gets their ideas available to lay readers.

The two awesome nineteenth century American naturalists, most of the critics approve, are John Burroughs and John Muir. After studying Charles Darwin and John Fiske, Burroughs resorted to scientific speculation about environment and then in life took a more spiritual aspect. Muir, a Scotland aborigine, journeyed broadly around the United States of America and reported his notes in several essays and papers and ten significant books. He had a major activity in thwarting the destruction of nature, and he has been valued as being chiefly in charge for preserving the Yosemite Valley in California, that turned out to be the second national park in the United States of America.

In Great Britain, in the nineteenth century, the romantic poets coined novel methods of uttering their ideas and feelings. William Wordsworth, nominated as the spokesperson of the

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movement by numerous scholars, celebrates the gorgeousness and secret of nature in some of his most celebrated lyrics including “Michael” (1800) that describes a naïve shepherd who is intensely linked to the natural world around him. The poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Lord Byron, and Percy Shelley also comprise emotive portrayals of the natural world and characterize several of the famed nature poetry in English. The romantic enthusiasm in environment is especially important to ecocritics since these poets were innovative in their politics and the conservancy of the natural world.

Even though ecocriticism launched its formal start as a discipline in the 1990s, significant critical papers which engulfed the ecocritical mold came to surface even by the 1800s, most of them influenced by works of authors like Thoreau and Emerson. Two significant works of criticism from the mid-twentieth century comprises Henry Nash Smith's “Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth” (1950) and Leo Marx's “The Machine in the Garden” (1964). These works suggest that ecological criticism is not a novel occurrence and that literature through its analysis offers answers to the crucial issues of the day. As scholars have uttered, one of the reasons for the continuous growth and extension of eco-criticism as a discipline is the existence of universal environmental problems. The crucial goal of ecocritics is to indicate how the works of authors on the environment could play a part in resolving true and tenacious ecological anxieties.

Discussion and Analysis

In *Roughing It in the Bush*, Moodie refutes the common Romantic assumption that living in a wilderness area, far from the corruption of cities, makes a person both spiritually and morally stronger. Although upon her arrival she delights in Canada's natural beauty, her enthusiasm later wanes as she becomes increasingly disillusioned with nature as a source of moral and spiritual rejuvenation. She depicts nature, instead, as “red in tooth and claw,” offering little security to the middle-class female immigrant like herself, who is constantly fearful of the known and unknown dangers of the woods. Moodie refers to the bush as a “green prison,” a description that surely expressed the thoughts of many other women immigrants. Living closer to nature fails to offer the immigrant a heightened experience of the sublime, as described by such Romantic poets as Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley; instead, the middle-class woman is confronted with the sordid actuality of daily life in the backwoods, a reality that seems impossible to change. Longtime Canadian settlers tell Tom Wilson, the Moodies' friend and fellow immigrant, that it is “impossible to be nice about food and dress in the bush; that people must learn to eat what they could get, and be content to be shabby and dirty, like their neighbors in the bush” (72).

Susanna was not exempt from dutiful care of the creatures about their childhood home in Reydon, but her writing reveals that her relationship with nature was a romantic one, articulated in poetic language. In “Tom Wilson's Emigration” Susanna recalls her unwillingness to leave the landscape around Reydon Hall, saying, “It was while reposing

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beneath those noble trees that I had first indulged in those delicious dreams which are a foretaste of the enjoyments of the spirit-land. In them the soul breathes forth its aspirations in a language unknown to common minds; and that language is Poetry (35).”

Susanna may sometimes fear the land's brutality, but accepts it without embroidery. “We beheld the landscape, savage and grand in its primeval beauty” (373) says Susanna from her canoe in Stony Lake. She loves the “strange but sadly plaintive” cry of the whip-poor-will (517). Her own quick-changing temperament responded to the flash and flow of fast water: “By night and day, in sunshine or in storm”, says Susanna, “water is always the most sublime feature in a landscape, and no view can be truly grand in which it is wanting. Sometimes Susanna can make the sublime her own, moving beyond convention, fitting it to her own psyche.

Astonishing Panorama Giving Way to Loneliness

In Susanna's case, the exultation that she experienced on first seeing the "astonishing panorama" of Québec City and the St. Lawrence River soon gave way to loneliness and homesickness, and she sometimes viewed the landscape as a prison. Such feelings did not prevail for long, however. *Roughing It in the Bush* more often reveals Susanna's romantic enthusiasm for the "sublimity" and "grandeur" of the Canadian landscape. She also begins to take note of the particular features of her surroundings, recalling in "Phoebe H____, And Our Second Moving" that with the arrival of spring "gorgeous butterflies floated about like winged flowers, and feelings allied to poetry and gladness once more pervaded my heart." *Roughing It in the Bush* records such feelings in prose and in poetry. Many of the chapters in the book begin and end with poems celebrating the powerful forces of Canadian nature and the human activity that goes on in its midst.

The Poem Quebec

While closely connected in mood and focus to the immediately preceding prose, however, “The strains ...” seems to reverse the warm sentiments of the chapter's opening poem “Quebec” (35) where Moodie speaks of Quebec in glowing terms and looks to the future greatness of its inhabitants. Yet the sense of opposition created by the bracketing poems emphasizes the sketch's prose structure—a general movement from praise to dejection, as the tears of joy elicited by the sublime beauty of Quebec, “a second Eden” (36), become tears of regret occasioned by memories of the lost Eden. Moreover, upon closer examination, it seems that even in “Quebec” the voice of the emigrant predominates.

Quebec, or Paradise Regained, is evoked as a standard, unsurprising sublime scene featuring height (mountains), power (storms), speed (rushing water), and strength (rocks). The awe-inspiring situation is far from unique, and could call forth any European mountain setting. Thus, while positive in tone, this is not a ringing endorsement of Canada. The praise of

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Canada is further made tentative by future conditional verbs in the final two stanzas where the poet has moved from a depiction of the sublime setting to a contemplation of the city's inhabitants: if Quebec flies the British flag, it "should be, / The mountain home of heaven-born liberty!"; its "children may defy" the malice of others; the residents "may rest securely in their mountain hold." In this manner Moodie injects a note of caution, not to say warning, and withholds absolute approbation. Not overtly looking back at England, she nevertheless covertly holds to preconceived ideas in this picture of Canada. The beauty of the Canadian setting is acknowledged, and the future greatness of Canadian people is hypothesized—but only as these connect with standards set in the English Eden.

The Lament of a Canadian Emigrant

One of the longest laments in *Roughing It*, "The Lament of a Canadian Emigrant" (85) has an interesting textual placement. Chapter Four starts with a two-line commentary on oddity, pointing to the comic sketch of Tom Wilson which follows. The sketches, and others like it, display the strength of Moodie's prose; her comic/ironic/critical observer's eye is at work as she delineates the people around her. Yet in the centre of the chapter, the focus shifts as Moodie muses on her enforced departure from England, typically mixing together Nature, England, the Creator, and May flowers (72-3). The ending of the prose sketch reverts to laughter with the return of Tom Wilson to the foreground. Then, coming as it does at the end of "Tom Wilson's Emigration," "The Lament ..." echoes back to the chapter's melancholy centre.

At first glance, the poem summons up a limited amount of, if not praise, then at least grim, teeth-clenched acceptance of pioneer life. The unhappy female speaker fondly remembers "distant" England and then mounts a weak defense for emigration, chiefly the over-riding needs of the family—the husband and the child. She may have obeyed the "stern voice of duty," but the "deep pang of sorrow" is only "repress'd," and the tears and "useless repining" are merely "check'd." Stanza three drops all pretext of defense, as the poet juxtaposes a Canadian hell⁹ to an English Eden. Exiled from the "Bless'd Isle of the Free" the emigrant is "cast," Crusoe-like on a "far distant shore." The emigrant poet (the English songbird) complains: "In the depths of dark forests my soul droops her wings." The final stanza turns from the present hell of Canada to a dream of "lovely England," the lost paradise, and of "dearest Nature."¹⁰ In a somewhat confusing conclusion, the poet asserts that her love for Mother England will last as long as her love for Mother Nature,¹¹ and she abandons the poem's closed couplets to demonstrate through expansion the strength of her devotion. The poetic gaze is once again turned back to the lost Eden. Without the poem, the chapter ends as comedy and as prose of settlement; with the poem, the chapter finishes on a despairing note as elegy of emigration.

There is, of course, some backsliding in the poem, as is consistent with Moodie's life-long preoccupation with her decline in social standing: "Our hut is small and rude our cheer." In

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addition, five out of ten lines in the last stanza feature Moodie's fears of the wilderness: she mentions wolves, a "felon owl," the wintry "blast"; she contrasts the frightening noises of the woods with the merry sound of her husband's sleigh bells. Even so, some unspecified danger seems to be averted by her husband's arrival, and the poem ends joyously. The emigrant's complaints are subdued, over-ridden in this case by the settler's joy. There is no backward glance at England, nor is there an extended look at the emigrant's fears.

The Otonabee

"The Otonabee" (271-2) ends "A Journey to the Woods" and is the first in a series of chapter-ending poems of settlement. "I love thee, lonely river!" says the poet of the Otonabee River. Ever the minor poet, Moodie cannot rid her work of the poetic commonplace, addressing the river as "thee" and employing such lines as the following: "No longer shall rejoice / The woods where erst it rung!" But Moodie chooses a Canadian subject and includes one native Canadian word, the river's Indian name "Katchawanook."¹⁴ As in "Quebec" the poet appreciates present beauty and anticipates future greatness. The Otonabee's "furious headlong" motion will be tamed into a "glide" when certain "improvements" are made to the Trent River system (see Moodie's footnote to the poem). At some point the Otonabee will be part of a direct water route to England:

And many a bark shall ride
Securely on thy breast,
To waft across the main
Rich stores of golden grain
From the valleys of the West.

The envisioned link reverses the emigrant's desire to return to England; here something of value will be sent by the settler to England. Also of interest in the above passage is the imagery connecting Mother Nature to Canadian nature.

The Maple Tree

The last poem in *Roughing It*, "The Maple-Tree" (489-91), praises Canada and Canadian nature. While there has been a general movement in the poetry towards settlement and leading up to this final poem, the prose is less consistent. In fact, "The Maple-Tree" follows hard upon Moodie's stern prose warning:

If these sketches should prove the means of deterring one family from sinking their property, and shipwrecking all their hopes, by going to reside in the backwoods of Canada, I shall consider myself amply repaid for revealing the secrets of the prison-house, and feel that I have not toiled and suffered in the wilderness in vain.(489)

Adieu to the Woods

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The chapter “Adieu to the Woods” begins with “the bitter pangs of parting” expressed in the sorrowful verse “Adieu!—adieu!” (478) and the following prose gives vent to Moodie's conflicting emotions upon her departure from the bush (her escape from the prison-house), ending with her warning to emigrants. Juxtaposed to this and changing the direction of the text's ending¹⁶ is Moodie's celebration of the maple tree, the “pride of the forest.”

The forest here remains dark but is less foreboding than in many of the poems placed earlier in the text. For one thing, the setting sun is able to penetrate the “bosky forest shades” and can “brighten the gloom below.” Moreover, the forest lights up from within during maple sugar season with the “ruddy glow” of the sugaring-off fires. The winds have lost their power to terrify as well; now the “sad winds” merely utter “a tender plaint of woe.” While Moodie mentions loss, she looks to the future (rather than to the lost English home) to regret the imminent disappearance of native Canadians: “But soon not a trace / Of the red man's race / Shall be found in the landscape fair.” For the most part, the poem emphasizes the here and now of settlement: “The busy rout ... talk of the cheer / Of the coming year.” Although some “brave tales of old / Round the fire are told,” these appear to be Canadian in origin rather than stories of brave deeds from a heroic English past. Finally, in the last stanza the poet counts herself as Canadian; may the maple tree “grace our soil, / And reward our toil,” she says. (In “Quebec” Canadians are “them.”).

The Fate is Sealed

On June 1st, 1833, after Uncle Joe's grumbling departure from Melsetter, the Moodies move in. By now Susanna is beginning to resign herself to the fact that her “fate is seal'd! 'Tis now in vain to sigh, / For home, or friends, or country left behind / Come, dry those tears” (241). There will, in fact, be many more tears, but the Canadian Susanna is beginning to emerge, to enjoy her adopted country. She has survived “the iron winter” of 1833 with its extreme cold and deep snow, and as spring wildflowers fill the woods, Susanna walks abroad, and feels her spirits lift. She is soon forced, however, eight months later, to move again. Moodie can't make a go of the farm, even though it is already cleared and producing, and they decide to leave Cobourg for a backwoods lot near the Tralls, on Lake Katchawanook. Susanna is now sorry to be leaving: “It was a beautiful, picturesque spot; and, in spite of the evil neighbours, I had learned to love it. ... I had a great dislike to removing (269).”

Conclusion

The land is not only an accurate picture of Canada scenery, but Moodie's reflexion as response to it, as a sentimental heroine, expressing her own taste and sensibility in strongly reminiscent 18th century Gothic romance, such is the description of Quebec, the fishing in a canoe, night walking in terror of a visitor red in tooth and claws', emphasizing the fact that natural world is not benevolent and her sense of being

alone in a dangerous and foreign place as she mentioned a stranger is a strange land', suggesting, as it seems, the author's own alienation.

Life in the bush was a disgusting picture, in which Man had the main part; people made noise, riots, drunken meetings, violent quarrels ended in bloodshed whose mind was toughed in hunting and fishing as the sole aim and object of life. The new world enables the object to escape the old limits and the author is resentful at sizing such things throughout her writing. Moodie's sharp gaze focused over the lack of education of her neighbours she had to deal with and appreciated the friendly Indian and American families who had always been of much help to her and her family.

Mrs Moodie's descriptions are laden with sociological key terms containing a polysemous quality of her landscape aesthetics, including human material, view of nature and economic prospects. She advises the emigrants to wait a few years, because the sun of hope will rise and beautify the landscape, and they will proclaim the country one of the finest in the world! The introductory or interspersed poetry contains the author's intense message dealing with the sequel event without metaphors, as evidence of her naïve and romantic vision of the 18th century genteel woman; her style is simple and direct, mostly warning to build the new Canadian identity.

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