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ENG 2400 – Canadian Literature

PAINTING THE PORTRAIT THAT DEFINES A NATION: A.J.M. SMITH & TOM THOMSON

What is Canada, and who are Canadians? Is Canada only a rugged wasteland, covered in snow twelve months of the year? Are Canadians nothing more than a population of slow, snow-loving people, who drink Molson Canadian, and eat Tim Horton’s donuts, while patriotically watching the CBC? A.J.M. Smith, in his poetry, and Tom Thomson, in his painting, create a different portrait of this nation and its people. Both artists focus on Canada’s natural beauty as it relates to understanding the country, and identify the characteristics that allow Canadians to succeed in this land.

An investigation of the qualities of Canada and Canadians as they can be interpreted from Smith’s *The Lonely Land* and Thomson’s *The West Wind* defines a different image of Canada. These works of art were created for an early twentieth century European and North American audience that were quite ignorant of what made Canada and Canadians. Canada is much more than barren ice, snow and rock – that is obvious. What, then, defines this nation?

Peter Stevens notes that there was a “strange Canadian nationalism circling around the notion of discovering the true dimensions of the Canadian voice in poetry” (Stevens, Online). The McMichael Canadian Art Collection identifies the purpose of the Group of Seven as attempting “to capture the spirit of Canada in their paintings and, in this way, [trying] to express a Canadian identity” (McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Online). It is important to note that other critics do not agree with the notion that these arts attempt to provide nationalistic depictions of Canada. Critics like D.G. Jones argue that Smith did not believe in creating an image of Canada, as “his conception of the poem [was] being symbolist and metaphysical, [and is] poles away from the Canadian ‘documentary poem’ (Jones 273). Criticism against the Group of Seven has also arisen, regarding their primary concentration on Quebec, Ontario and, to a lesser degree, the far north. However, the works of the Group of Seven does in fact span much of the country. The reality is that the paintings of northern Ontario have just gained the most popularity. Therefore, the artists do in fact represent the nation as a whole.

So what of Canada’s identity, then? One of the main features of Canada is the tranquility of the wilderness. It may be easy to quickly disagree with this idea, as countless amounts of Canadian literature, such as *Roughing It in the Bush,* have focused on the “gloomy woods” of Canada (Moodie 111). But both Smith and Thomson abandon this seeming tradition of describing Canada’s rougher edges and instead, embrace all of its natural goodness. *The West Wind* (Appendix I) is an image illustrating such tranquility; a pillow-clouded sky standing guard over the land, a breeze that gently causes the water to wave, and a lone figure – a pine tree – quietly observes the natural world brushing against its roots. It is as if that tree were a person, standing on the shore, taking in both a breath of the fresh air, and the quiet serenity of the scene. Tranquility is also represented in the poetry of Smith, where gentle sounds, such as “the lapping of water/on smooth, flat stones” (LL 21-22) aid in conveying the peacefulness of the Canadian wild. In the context of the poem, Smith presents the idea that all tension in the “blown spume”(LL 6) and “bitter spray”(LL 7) is absolved by the peaceful, softness of the natural surroundings. The opinion that Canada is a land of invigorating tranquility flows commonly between pen and paintbrush, and definitely creates a beautiful image of Canada. Thomson and Smith introduce other qualities that also develop the concept of Canada’s image and identity.

Most Canadians can appreciate the power of nature around them. This is true whether it be towering mountains and forests, the impact of the weather, or the changes of season, part of the Canadian psyche is realizing the dominance of nature. Obviously, one’s awareness of Canada’s natural power extends mostly from an experience with it, but this consciousness can be partly attributed to nationalist artists such as the modernists, who are responsible for providing some answers in the Canadian identity debate. The fact that the forces of nature are such a predominant part of Canada’s identity is partial proof of Smith’s and Thomson’s success; perhaps we would have a different notion in mind if they had chosen to focus on something different. *The Lonely Land* refers to one such element of natural power:

this smoky cry

curled over a black pine

like a broken

and wind-battered branch

when the wind

bends the tops of the pines

and curdles the sky

from the north

(LL 27-34)

It is apparent that Smith is demonstrating that Canada is shaped by the elements. The imagery of the wind shaping the land and the sky can be viewed as negatively powerful – the wind is damaging and thus not a good thing. Instead, the power of nature is something Smith attempts to celebrate. After all, Canada’s natural history is something that defines the nation and should be revered: For example, the Canadian Shield is a land mass created by volcanism, and shaped by glaciers. Wind also shapes the land, over time, so it is appropriate to use it to refer to the power of nature and its influence over Canada and how we should define it.

Canada can also be described as a land that evokes a great deal of emotion. Perhaps it is because of its great size, and the many different landscapes that exist from coast to coast. The prairies convey a sense of emptiness and continuity, the remote wilderness of Northern Ontario expresses feelings of isolation, and waves lapping along Canada’s expansive coastline provide a soothing and relaxing effect. Both Smith and Thomson identify Canada as a place where emotions emanate from the environment. An emotional response triggered by the land is very ubiquitous in Thomson’s *The West Wind*. Strength is drawn from seeing a frail tree surviving in what seems like such a harsh environment, and perhaps the painting can be understood as a metaphor – that regardless of how harsh Canada can be, one *can* survive. Of course, experiencing emotional responses is the point of visual arts, but using a painting to define Canada emphasizes the importance of focusing on emotions. The same can be said for Smith’s poetry. *The Lonely Land* is a beautiful piece, because it eloquently expresses the “ragged/and passionate tones”(LL 14-15) of emotion brought on by the surrounding environment. Many have been cheered up by the soothing splendour of the Canadian outdoors, and think it is quite fitting to use emotional connectivity as a method of describing Canada.

Tranquility, the power of nature, and emotional significance are aspects that Smith and Thomson use to define Canada. There are also qualities that can be taken from the poem and the painting which describe some of the characteristics that Canadians possess.

The title of Smith’s poem*, The Lonely Land*, communicates the idea that Canada is perhaps a less-than-idyllic place to live. He makes it sound like the land is very empty, solitary and sullen. It is logical then, to conclude that it would take a certain personality to live comfortably in such a climate. As mentioned above, the purpose of the Group of Seven’s paintings was to sell an image of Canada. There are elements in Smith’s poem and in Thomson’s painting that identify what it takes to be a Canadian. It is as if these artists are contrasting the false testimonials of nineteenth century hopeful immigrants, who believed that they did not have to adapt to the country, because “all who went there became rich … The settlers, they said, were so comfortable…” (Urquhart 114-115). Instead, a more realistic description of what it takes to succeed in Canada is presented between the lines of modernist art.

One of these qualities is determination – a strong will to continue, even in the face of adversity. In *Roughing It in the Bush*, Susanna Moodie describes several adversarial occasions – deceitful neighbours, loneliness, and devastating fires – but she somehow manages to maintain her strength and continue to face the world. This sentiment exists in Thomson’s *The West Wind,* as the tree, which takes root in thin soil, and stands up against the wind that tries to topple it over. The tree stands up to face nature. Smith, influenced by the feeling of determination evident in the painting, exemplifies the strong will of Canadians in *The Lonely Land,* by creating a voice, staggering and falling against the relentless noise of nature, but somehow, it is able to recover, to continue trying to be heard (LL 16-17). Regardless of how hard the wind blows, how deep the snow is, or how strange the neighbours may be, it is imperative that Canadians are able to grit their teeth and stand their ground if they want to succeed.

To survive is one thing, but to fall in love with, and enjoy the nation, is something else. Perhaps Canada is not the most aesthetically pleasing nation – there are large swamps, desolate arctic deserts, endless grasslands and deep, dark forests, and the daunting feeling of isolation. To avoid ‘cabin fever’, inhabitants of Canada must romanticize what they do have. Smith, in *The Lonely Land* refers to this as the paradox of “a beauty/of dissonance” (LL 23-24). It is a very evident part of the Canadian culture. They may not be the most beautiful locations on Earth, but places like Flin-Flon, Manitoba, and Sudbury, Ontario, take pride in their rocky appearances. Prairie residents joke about being able to see nothing for miles and miles. Stephen Leacock’s *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* is popular for making fun of small towns, and everyone (with the exception of the people of Orillia), love it – they too find the phenomenal beauty in something that to others is anything but. The same can be said for *The West Wind*. The painting features a scraggly pine tree, perched on a rock, overlooking a body of water. Simple, scraggly trees are not beautiful, are they? The isolated woodlands of early-twentieth century Canada were cold, lonely places, yet the Group of Seven was able to make it beautiful. The ability to manipulate the despicable into the striking is a characteristic that, according to these artists, is an important part of being a Canadian.

Contemporary readers may find it easy to overlook the truths in the identities created when the modernist poems and paintings first began to appear. Canada, at present, is not unlike other western nations, and the isolation, one’s frailty against the elements, and a necessity to make beautiful what necessarily is not are not as important as they once were. But to those trying to understand what Canada is, and whom Canadians are, *The Lonely Land* and *The West Wind* more than adequately serve their purposes.

It is also evident that Smith, who wrote his poem after the release of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven’s paintings, was heavily influenced by their work. It has been argued (Trehearne 237) that *The Lonely Land* is a lyrical description of the painting – an attempt to put it into motion – but I disagree. I think that although it is very much connected, and engages in the same issue of identifying Canada, it is a separate entity and aims to express different ideas, as described by example in the preceding argument.

Thomson and Smith hit the nail on the head and help to define this nation. Canada is a tranquil land, full of natural power, and the power to evoke strong emotions. And Canadians are strong-willed people, able to find strength in even the roughest parts of the bush. Smith emphasises the magnificence of Canada in the closing stanza of his poem:

This is the beauty

of strength

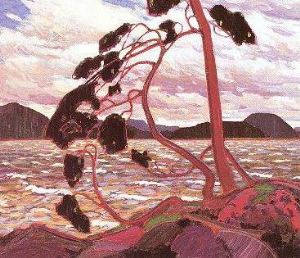
broken by strength

and still strong

(LL 35-38)

Tom Thomson and A.J.M. Smith’s identification of the greatness of Canada and Canadians kind of makes you want to drink a bottle of Molson Canadian, eat some donuts, and watch *The Red-Green Show* on the CBC, doesn’t it?

# APPENDIX I

Tom Thomson

## The West Wind

1917

Oil on Canvas

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