Reinterpretations of Susanna Moodie by Margaret Atwood as an example of creative recycling of the past

Thanks to Margaret Atwood, Susanna Moodie – the recorder and interpreter of pioneering in the 19th century Canada – became much more familiar to the contemporary reader. Atwood based a couple of her works on the writings of Susanna Moodie. These were: a collection of poems entitled *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), an unpublished play *Grace*, based on an episode from *Life in the Clearings* (which in 1974 evolved into a television play *A Servant Girl*), social history book *Days of the Rebels: 1815–1840*, which appeared in 1977, and finally a 1996 novel, *Alias Grace*. In *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* Atwood tried to fill in the missing lines left by Moodie in her narratives, to tell the untold. Atwood was fascinated with “the hints, the gaps between what was said and what hovered, just unsaid, between the lines” (Atwood 1986, VIII) and she felt legitimate to provide her own very subjective interpretation. Moodie’s writings also served as a source of historical knowledge used in Atwood’s history book for teenagers. Finally, in *Alias Grace*, Atwood changed her attitude towards Moodie, decided to treat her more critically and expose her tendency to “embroidery” so that the mythical Moodie figure lost a great deal of her allure.

According to Conny Steenman-Marcusse “one way for a Canadian woman to know herself is to read about her predecessors” (Steenman-Marcusse, 79). Margaret Atwood decided to trace her Canadian identity by analyzing and reinterpreting the works of Susanna Moodie. The aim of my paper would be to discover to what extent Atwood remained faithful to Moodie’s writings, how she treated the past, how much she decided to alter and why, and how successful she was in her venture to reinterpret the 19th century Susanna into a 20th century figure.

In one of her public lectures Margaret Atwood said: “The past no longer belongs only to those who lived in it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive
today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it” (Atwood 1997, 39).

For Atwood the past is important from two points of view: of a literary critic and of a writer. As a critic, she uses it more objectively; she tries to discover certain patterns and interdependence among different writers, their backgrounds, their times and certain conditions they had to deal with. Her task is to draw some conclusions, to find hidden meanings, to make assumptions and explain them on the basis of her findings. As a writer, she has an unlimited number of possibilities of dealing with the past. She is free to invent and to imagine things. She can create other worlds and other dimensions. If she chooses to write about the factual past about her predecessors, most often there is no one who can verify the truth. It is dangerous to challenge common knowledge and to speculate about the accepted facts but where there is no evidence, a writer has a right to invent.

Where to look for the past, how to find out about it? Margaret Atwood comes up with an answer, according to her:

> The past is made of paper; sometimes, now it’s made of microfilm and CD-ROMs, but ultimately they too are made of paper. What is on the paper? The same things that are on paper now. Records, documents, newspaper stories, eyewitness reports, gossip and rumour and opinion and contradiction (Atwood 1997, 31-32).

The above mentioned ‘contradiction’ is of greatest importance to an artist. In the places which lack unity and singlemindedness a writer can speculate and it is here that their stories originate. Susanna Moodie was describing her times, the surrounding reality, everyday experience. Margaret Atwood in turn, endeavoured to write not about her own but about Moodie’s times. She had to rely on the written accounts from which “the past is made”. She decided to treat Moodie’s narratives as a launch pad for further investigation.

Atwood believed that she was able to tell what Moodie was afraid, or unwilling to reveal. As Atwood’s involvement with the Moodie theme was growing, she was becoming better acquainted with the world of the early pioneer. She started to understand her better, and contrary to one’s expectations, started treating her less seriously. The Journals of Susanna Moodie were about tensions between "what (Susanna) ought to think and
feel and what she actually did think and feel” (Atwood 1986, IX). Days of the Rebels 1815/1840 was a history book with a social bent where Moodie’s writings served as historical facts, and finally, in Alias Grace, Atwood contradicted Moodie’s words, claiming that: “Susanna Moodie said at the outset of her account that she was writing the Grace Marks’s story from memory, and as it turns out, her memory was no better than most” (Atwood 1986, 33). Along with the process of ‘learning Moodie’ Atwood discovered similarities between the pioneer writer and herself. Not only are they both immigrant (for Atwood claims “we are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here”, Atwood 1997, x) women writers but also both share the experience of being lost in the grand territory of Canada. Canada is treated by Atwood as “a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head” (Atwood 1972, 18). The only possibility to find way in this territory is to get hold of a map, which is, again, close to Atwood-Moodie experience, as: “Literature is […] a map, a geography of the mind. [...] For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive” (Atwood 1972, 19).

As a child, Atwood used to live in the bush, so she found the ways of a city surprising. With Moodie it was the reverse. That is why Atwood goes as far as to state that: “In some ways, we were each other’s obverse” (Atwood 1986, IX).

Atwood the critic and Atwood the writer very often concentrates on dualities in Moodie’s books. Susanna contradicted her own words all the time and it is clear that she could not find her place and define her role in Canada. It is visible in Moodie’s approach to nature, which she had learnt to admire, to trust in and depend on her native country. On struggling in the Canadian bush, she began to feel a sense of betrayal on nature’s part, and that is why “two emotions – faith in the Divine Mother and a feeling of hopeless imprisonment – follow each other on the page without a break or explanation” (Atwood 1997, 51). Landscape seen from a distance is breathtaking, thus Moodie the painter is charmed by it. However, the everyday struggle for survival changes nature into a ubiquitous enemy.

Susanna is interested in other pioneers. She watches them carefully, sometimes admires and uses as tools of transmitting her inner thoughts. Moodie as a gentlewoman is more than often ready to impose social frames brought from the Old World on other people. Thus she finds some manners
of fellow-pioneers unacceptable and outraging. She believed she was surrounded by enemies. Just as Susanna Moodie used the protagonists of her books to hide her own real feelings behind them, Atwood used the Moodie protagonist to transmit her own beliefs. *The Journals* begin with a short poem, where the poetic persona speaks:

> I take this picture of myself  
> and with my sewing scissors  
> cut out the face.  
> 
> Now it is more accurate;  
> Where my eyes were  
> everything appears (Atwood 1997, n.p.).

The reader does not know if the real protagonist of the poem is Susanna Moodie or Margaret Atwood. They both look past others. They do not speak plainly for themselves, but disguise their feelings and ascribe them to their heroines. They manipulate the reader’s perception. Eyes, being the reflection of the soul are cut out, they are empty, one can see through them, and this is supposed to be a “more accurate” perception. There are no personal and biased distortions of the truth. Atwood, in her poem, talks about a picture.

Atwood claims Susanna to be a perfect representative of a Canadian: she was an immigrant, had to fight for survival, she had to live with “a violent duality” and was showing traces of Canada’s mental illness – paranoid schizophrenia. All the above mentioned arguments are enumerated and clarified in Atwood’s Afterword to the first edition of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*:

> If the national mental illness of the United States is megalomania, that of Canada is paranoid schizophrenia. Mrs Moodie is divided down the middle: she praises the Canadian landscape but accuses it of destroying her; she dislikes the people already in Canada but finds in people the only refuge from the land itself; She preaches progress and the march of civilisation while brooding elegiacally upon the destruction of the wilderness; she delivers optimistic sermons while showing herself to be fascinated with deaths, murders, the criminals in Kingston Penitentiary and the incurably insane in the Toronto lunatic asylum (Atwood 1997, 62).
Moodie observes everything from a distance, detaches herself from the crowd and its problems. Pioneers are referred to as “they”, “the others”, never “we”. When Moodie is off guard, she loses the distance: “in time the animals / arrived to inhabit (her)” (Atwood 1997, n.p.). She is on the verge of losing her sanity entirely. When she left the bush she “was / (instantaneous) / unlived in: they had gone” (Atwood 1997, n.p.). She is on her way to mental stability but fears within her remained; she is afraid to come back to civilisation, she is unfit for this kind of life any more. In Belleville she was supposed to be much happier than in the bush. Nevertheless, Atwood makes sure that the reader from the very beginning understands that Moodie could not overcome madness entirely.

As Faye Hammill points out in a 1997 film, *The Enduring Enigma of Susanna Moodie*, Atwood “emphasises the way each generation creates a new Moodie, almost denying the value of searching for the historical reality. She argues that Moodie’s significance lies primarily in “what has become of her in our hands” (Hammill, 69). As Atwood oftentimes stresses, her works on Moodie are based on what was left unsaid, which clearly suggests that the poems are founded on her own invention and speculation. The same applies to the novel *Alias Grace*, where Atwood based her story on only a few facts and felt free to invent all the rest.

Atwood divided her poems into three journals. The whole makes a picture of a psychological journey from madness to sanity. In *Journal One*, Moodie, as a person coming from the Old World where everything is shaped by reason and culture, finds herself isolated from the new land of nature and freedom. In *Journal Two* she gradually comes to terms with the hostile reality; comprehends everything better (it is probably due to the fact that she can watch it from the perspective of a comfortable life in Belleville). And finally, in *Journal Three* Susanna is a fully conscious person who has come to terms with the rest of the society. At the cost of losing her personal identity, which was the cause of her mental disorder, she gained a national identity, she became “spirit of the land she once hated” (Atwood 1970, 63).

Laura Groening argues that “Atwood’s mapping of Moodie’s state of mind bears little or no resemblance to the actual terrain in *Roughing It in the Bush*” (Groening, 175). It is true only because Atwood constantly uses modern psychological terms to describe Moodie’s worries which often resulted from social differences and a view on life that Moodie brought from the Old Continent. There are numerous examples of these
“misunderstandings”. When Moodie speaks of nature Atwood claims that, on the one hand Susanna is fascinated by the landscape, on the other she accuses it of destroying her. Groening points out the different understanding of the word “nature”. For Moodie it means scenery, for Atwood everything that is “other” from the rational understanding. Later, Atwood points out that Moodie is fascinated by civilisation but accuses it of destroying the natural environment. Again Atwood speaks from the perspective of a person witnessing today’s massive destruction of the environment. Moodie, on the other hand, was fascinated by the way in which technology alleviated the physical hardships. At one point she observed that a Canadian “cuts down but rarely plants trees” (Moodie 1959, 246), but it was just a statement, no comments or reproach attached.

However, Groening decided to agree with Atwood in one point. Moodie “claims to be an ardent Canadian patriot while all the time she is standing back from the country and criticizing it as though she were a detached observer, a stranger” (Atwood 1970, 62). Indeed, Moodie very often spoke of her great love and admiration for her native land. Canada is most often referred to in terms of a “prison-house” and a grave. She called her life in Canada “joyless existence”. Moodie knew she could not go back to England that is why she valued the memory of it even more. But later, Canada became her adopted mother where, after all, she came to seek better future for her family. She admitted that: “Now, when not only reconciled to Canada, but loving it, and feeling a deep interest in its present welfare, and the fair prospect of its future greatness, I often look back and laugh at the feelings with which I then regarded this noble country (Moodie 1989, 85).

Moodie’s patriotic attitude is much more visible in Life in the Clearings, where she exposes her fascination with Canadian cities. She is genuinely attracted by all the new developments and solutions. She does not have to struggle for survival any more; she is a city person once again and she is able to enjoy life which she was born to. She could say placidly:

Now every day  
I sit on a stuffed sofa  
in my own fringed parlour, have  
uncracked plates (from which I eat  
At intervals)  
And a china teaset (Atwood 1997, n.p.).
Atwood believes that Moodie became a national symbol of Canada, “a spirit of the land”. In the last poem of the cycle, Moodie is sitting on a Toronto bus and reflects:

It would take more than that to banish
Me: this is my kingdom still (Atwood 1997, n.p.).

Atwood believes that through her victorious struggle with the New Land, Moodie becomes inseparable from it. She devotes all her life to Canada; she becomes its citizen, her children are true Canadians; her descendants will always be present here. Her writings are mainly concerned with Canada; she devoted her talent to this place. That is why she will never vanish; she reappears all the time in works of artists and critics. Atwood is conscious of her own share in making a Canadian icon of Moodie. A contemporary vivid interest in her writings began in the 1970’s after the publication of The Journals. Faye Hammill stressed a very important aspect of that “resurrection”. She claimed: “by invoking Susanna Moodie, Atwood is raising the possibility of Canadian literary ancestry even as she activates the process of misreading that questions the status of the earlier poet” (Hammill, 70).

Some critics suggest that Atwood’s poems should be read without her Afterword, which influences the interpretation too much. Diana Relke wrote: “if the Afterword has not actually destroyed the work, it has done some violence by diverting attention from it” (Relke, 47). She tries to convince readers that it is the Afterword, not the poems themselves that make us consider Moodie’s schizophrenia and problem of doubleness. The division is often of Atwood’s own making, “as poetic persona Moodie suffers a further doubleness by sharing her identity with the poet” (Relke, 47).

Atwood’s interpretations and reinterpretations of Susanna undoubtedly influenced many later efforts to research Moodie’s works. Some critics went as far as to say that Atwood’s work so seriously controls our contemporary view “that the question has been put, of whether we can any longer read Moodie herself, or only Atwood’s Moodie” (Murray, 78) and “when we are discussing Moodie, we are largely discussing Atwood” (qtd in Hammill, 83) and that “so powerful is Atwood’s reconstruction that [...] many independent discussions of Roughing It in the Bush [...] has succumbed to its lure” (Johnston, 28). The Journals “envisage Moodie very much like Atwood”
(Davey 1983, 35)* and they were called “A self-portrait of Margaret Atwood” (Stephen) or even “Atwood’s own voice” (Purdy). Margaret Atwood created Moodie we know, recycled the past and put it into a modern frame. She brought Susanna back to life, saved her from oblivion but also used her to achieve her own artistic success. And that is the role of artists, they evoke the past and manipulate it; the task of inquisitive and creative audience is to separate the facts from artistic vision and judge the final outcome.

Works cited


* Quote from Relke (47).


