Is there a uniform Canadian fictional climate from the point of view of the application of weather images? Or, is it a more valid approach to treat weather images as regionally dependent, and if so, are these regions congruent with the Canadian climatic regions? The artists of the Group of Seven considered the Canadian Shield to be the prototype of Canadian landscape. Is there a climatic region that bears similar significance to the above in terms of weather images? To what extent does temporal distribution as a factor shape the weather image experience? The present paper aims at focusing on memories that have been distilled from mid-to-late twentieth-century experiences featuring a cornucopia of places throughout (and occasionally outside of) Canada as presented in Margaret Atwood’s and Robert Weaver’s short story collection titled The New Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English. In my examinations, I will juxtapose the use of sun – a global weather image – to that of a local weather phenomenon: snow, the two main axes of comparison being place and memory. As suggested above, place will be associated with regions whereas the feature of memory to be exploited is a degree of remoteness in time. Both the spatial and the temporal investigations will contain quantitative and qualitative observations.

**Place**

“It is inevitable that a country with such marked physical characteristics as Canada possesses should impress itself forcefully upon our artists.”

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1 In fact, the examined volume is the second edition of the book with the title mentioned in the text.
2 Naturally, I do not wish to imply that snow can only be found in Canada. Weather phenomena do not respect the political boundaries of countries.
3 George Woodcock’s observation referring to the highly visual nature of Canadian
These words of Charles W. Jeffrey’s prove conveniently applicable for the justification of Canadian short story writers’ fascination with weather images. In the above quotation, Canada is referred to as a single entity unlike in the essay excerpt below by Lawren Harris, which documents how the artist and his fellow artists came to the recognition of thinking in regional rather than pan-Canadian terms concerning their imagery:

We found that there were cloud formations and rhythms peculiar to different parts of the country and to different seasons of the year […] And we found that all these differences in character, mood, and spirit were vital to a creative expression […] which went beyond mere decoration and respectability in art (Murray 29-30).

Canadian literary regionalism has become an acknowledged fact by now, which combines both geographical and historical factors, where the historical factor is interpreted as a “continuing pattern of interrelation between man and the landscape (Woodcock 1981, 182). Weather – also a geographical component – forms an organic part of the landscape, which interacts with the human psyche. On the human side, this interaction is responsible for a heightened awareness of climatic effects. Another human consequence is the landscape-induced evocation and intensification of emotive sensations in the observer, which, in turn, may be cast into images. These images, then, are the products of “a peculiar quality of feeling induced by a particular writing (Woodcock 1976, 116) confirms the link between visual and literary arts, which gives us the right to set off with an example taken from painting.

Consider the Woodcockesque premise “Canada can only be understood in regional terms” (Woodcock 1981, 203),

Others, such as Arthur Adamson enumerate culture as a third, separate component of regionalism. In his interpretation regionalism is “a nexus of place, time and culture” (Adamson, 2). However, I do believe that history, interpreted in a broader sense, entails culture.

Weather, in fact, is an ideal example to show that “geographical implications cannot be isolated from historical and cultural realities” (Adamson, 2).

The Climate Severity Index is to measure the environmental stress laid on individuals by the Canadian climate. It encompasses four major factors: the comfort of individuals (clothing, physical effects of weather, etc.), their psychological state, safety (the threats and hazards posed by the given climatic environment) and mobility (conditions of moving about). The first factor is worth 500 weighed points, the second and the third 200, and the last one a hundred.
landscape” (Woodcock 1981, 181), which seems to point toward the preference of the regional approach in our examinations.

In his account “The Story of the Group of Seven”, Harris speaks of the existence of particular areas and objects within a region where “form and character and spirit reach their summation” (Murray, 30). Do weather phenomena belong to this essential set of region depictions? Do the characteristic places carry weather images as an essential part of the spirit of the place in question? The answer proves to be affirmative in both cases. Woodcock refers to the literary region of the Prairies as fostering “a literary culture shaped alike by the extremities of the climate and of passion”. (Woodcock 1981, 186) The marriage of climate and passion is conducive to the formation of a most powerful weather symbology. Similarly, “affirmations of life and vigour against the hard, grey weather and the dangerous ocean” (Dobbs, 169) with disasters induced by the sudden storms of sea dressed up in ballad style recitation are the trademark of the Maritime fictional climate (Woodcock 1981, 193). Parching Prairie drought, sudden and severe storms on the eastern coastline, the windy, snow-packed winters of Quebec, the muggy heat of Ontario summers, the lack of sunshine and the thick coat of fog in British Columbia – directly or indirectly, these all get translated into the regional weather idiom.

Another related issue to consider at this point is whether climatic regions are congruent with their literary counterparts. Five great climatic regions lie in the examined area in Canada: East Coast, Great Lakes, Prairies, Cordilleran and West Coast. Only minor changes have to be made to obtain the five examined literary regions from these: the Cordilleran climatic region can be eliminated since rarely have short story writers chosen the Rocky Mountains either as their headquarters or as setting. In fact, about 50% of the population of British Columbia reside in the Greater Vancouver area (Sauvé et al., 103), which also accommodates the literary centres of the region. The great Lakes region is to be divided into Québec and Ontario, a division, which is justified by dissimilar historical-socio-cultural indices of these two literary regions, vital from the point of image formation. Each of the regions mentioned above will reveal slightly different quantitative and qualitative patterns, to be illustrated with the use of sun and snow.

8 Also, consider Kreisel’s remark, “All discussions of the literature produced in the Canadian west must of necessity begin with the impact of the landscape upon the mind” (Kreisel, 206).
The *New Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories*, a colourful selection of works representing all regions, contains all regions with the exception of the North\(^9\). However, the regional distribution of the stories is slightly uneven; a certain Ontario-centeredness prevails in the selection. In one interpretation the high number of Ontario-conceived stories forms part of a proportionate, regionally valid literary map, where each region represents itself with proper weight and emphasis\(^{10}\). In the other – supported by George Woodcock’s cultural centralism (Woodcock 1981, 185) – the editors, both being from Ontario, may have selected readily from home grounds fuelled by better familiarity with a considerably large number of Ontario-based authors. In any case, we must not forget that major publishing houses are located in Ontario. Therefore, out of publicational and financial necessity, writers may choose Ontario for their authorial headquarters\(^{11}\). Whatever the actual reasons may be, the problem of uneven regional distribution is to be overridden and this will be done by the application of relative frequency in our quantitative calculations.

The quantitative markers\(^{12}\) reveal that two thirds of the total number of stories in the collection contain an image of the *sun*, whereas only one third

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\(^{9}\) A highly distinct region, the North is not likely to mingle with anything else in other anthologies, either.

\(^{10}\) This is, each region is represented in accordance with the number of its short story publications.

\(^{11}\) Which, however, does not necessarily mean that they are going to make this region the setting of their œuvre.

\(^{12}\) If we have a look at the relative frequency of all weather images contained by the short story collection region by region, the following order may be set up. The Prairie provinces have the highest values, followed by Quebec and the Maritimes. Ontario is in fourth position, while British Columbia is the file-closer. This seems quite congruent with Woodcock’s observations, who refers to the literary region of the Prairies as fostering “a literary culture shaped alike by the extremities of the climate and of passion”. (Woodcock 1981, 186) The marriage of climate and passion is conducive to the formation of a most powerful weather symbology. Similarly, “affirmations of life and vigour against the hard, grey weather and the dangerous ocean” (Dobbs, 169) with disasters induced by the sudden storms of sea dressed up in ballad style recitation are the trademark of the Maritime fictional climate (Woodcock 1987, 193). If we compare this ranking with that of the Climate Severity Index average for a given region, we will find a close correlation. The Climate Severity Index ranks the climatic regions in the following order: Quebec (50.1), Maritimes (49.1), Prairies (48.1), Ontario (44.6) and British Columbia (21.6) out of a maximum of 100 points.
contains a snow image. The sun being a universal symbol may account for the discrepancy in relative frequency. Here common sense says, “If something occurs more frequently or is more widely known, it is more widely used”. The situation is slightly more complex than that, though. As far as the last three decades of the twentieth century are concerned, it is an observable tendency to prefer truths that remain valid over the borders of the given region rather than writing about local truths. This tendency is emblematized by the principle of the local and universal, that is, “the ability to view Canada […] in local terms that relate to larger patterns within the western world”. (An Anthology, 97), or the generalization of a local experience as epitomised by Sinclair Ross’s “universalized struggle of sensitive people against a stultifying environment” (Woodcock 1981, 199). The heat of the Prairie sun scorching the vegetation, for example, is a suitable tool to depict either suffering or impotence on a more universal scale. To express both local and universal features, universal weather images are preferred but in their local role. This, translated into the above example means that a regional quality of the sun (i.e. scorching) has been chosen to signify a universal theme (i.e. suffering and impotence), which theme may also appear at a local level (i.e. the suffering and impotence of the inhabitants of the affected area).

If the relative frequency of sun images is considered in the examined regions, the Prairies can boast of the highest values, Ontario ranks second, followed by Québec, the Maritimes and British Columbia. It is noteworthy that the Prairie provinces are the sunniest in Canada, and the annual number of sunny hours decreases in the very order the provinces are ranked above (Lightbody et al., 20). The coastal area of British Columbia has a reputation for being all gloom and rain (Dobbs, 171) and, accordingly, no story set in the region contains a single reference to the sun. It is equally remarkable that stories of foreign setting can boast of more sunshine than those set in any province of Canada. Could this latter finding be another projection of the literary pessimism signified by Atwood’s critical volume titled Survival? (Atwood, 39).

For snow, again, the results are completely in line with the actual climate, snow being significant “from east of Toronto on”, increasingly towards the Atlantic coast (Lightbody et al., 21). Nova Scotia and Newfoundland are famous for the “nor’easter” (The New, 18), a fierce, sudden snowstorm. Thus, the frequency in the fictional climate for snow images is led by the Maritimes. Québec ranks second, Ontario third and the Prairies fourth.
Remarkably, no one wrote about snow either in British Columbia or in a foreign setting. Vancouver has typically low snowfall rates. But why did nobody depict snow in a foreign setting? Also, why did no first generation immigrant writer pay more attention to this typically Canadian weather phenomenon?

What do qualitative markers, such as central versus marginal role, polarity, and degree of abstraction suggest? A weather image has a central role in the story if it plays an organic part in forming the short story plot or bears undeniable consequences with regard to the protagonist’s life. Half of both sun and snow images perform a central role in the examined volume. Do they generally possess positive or negative qualities? If one wants to see them positively, snow can be associated with the peacefulness and bliss of the Christmas season, just as the sun may be regarded as a vital source of light and life. Yet, in the examined short story collection, images of both the sun and snow are very often negative when they play a central role in the story. This seems to support Atwood’s theory referring to the abundance of negative roles in Canadian literature (Atwood, 29). As for the spatial distribution, the most negative area for the sun and snow are the Prairies and the Ontario region, respectively. Ontario being the most unpleasant region snow-wise is intriguing for two reasons. Firstly, a high percentage of the population lives in urban settlements, where winter should be less unpleasant. Secondly, Ontario is not the snowiest area of Canada. Equally surprisingly, even the sun as a central image proves to be largely negative. This is especially thought-provoking as the universal symbol of the sun can boast of numerous positive roles ascribed to it, it is associated with warmth, energy, power and the benevolence of Nature in many cultures. Sunshine does have unpleasant components and induces consequences such as ravaging heat prevalent in the Prairies, or muggy weather and high humidex values characterizing Ontario summers. Most of the central sun images come from the two regions mentioned above, which may furnish an explanation for their negative sign. Still, it remains a question why those moments have to be exposed, whether literally or symbolically, when the negative qualities of the sun dominate. Concerning the degree of abstraction, the findings seem

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13 See the article in Canadian Geographic titled “Shadow of A Drought” (Goss).
14 I have used two indices to measure the degree of abstraction: one moves along the axis of overtness, the other measures directness. In the sentence “I always thought that snow was white” the word ‘white’ describes a quality that would also normally
to suggest that covert references, as well as indirect ones – that is, certain types of symbolic abstraction – presuppose a hands-on experience of the given weather phenomenon, whether it be the sun or snow. In Ricoeur’s terminology, the phenomenon must “climb the Platonic ladder” (*Ikonológia*, 192).

**Memory**

All the stories in the selection date back to the second half of the twentieth century. However, it must be noted that the first two decades do not provide a sample large enough to allow for any kind of conclusions, or to suggest a consistent pattern. In addition, it must be kept in mind that the date of publication leaves the last decade of the twentieth century incomplete. The quantitative markers imply that for the last three decades of the twentieth century two thirds of the stories contained a sun image and this ratio seems constant. The peak for snow images falls indubitably in the seventies.

Centralization can serve as another index for the measurement of temporal interest in the given weather images. The central role for both snow and sun images reaches its peak in the seventies and early eighties, then it gradually decreases. In each decade, the central sun image roles outnumber their snow counterparts. Excitingly, *The Canadian Encyclopaedia* notes that “in the 1970s and 1980s severe winters and uncertainty of foreign supplies focused attention on Canada’s vulnerability to climate variation” (Climate..., 438). Realism being the prevailing mode of literary expression in contemporary belong to snow. Therefore, this instance signifies an overt reference. However, this relationship does not hold in the case of a covert reference. Consider “Her voice has gone white”, for example. Here ‘white’ is a reference to the whiteness of the snow surrounding the female protagonist of Timothy Findley’s “The Duel in Cluny Park” whereas it is human voice that this whiteness is attributed to. From the collected data it appears that overt references outnumber covert ones approximately in a ratio of six to one. The sentence “The fields were dead with snow” contains a direct weather image because the image ‘snow’ is marked in the text by its actual presence. In Clark Blaise’s story “A Class of New Canadians” we view ‘slithering taxis’ and ‘slushy curbs’ roaming the streets of Montreal. Even though the snow itself is not mentioned in either case, the words ‘slithering’ and ‘slushy’ imply that there is snow on the road on which taxis are sliding, and this snow is partly melted to form slush. Examining the directness of snow images, we find that there is a fivefold abundance of direct images as compared to indirect ones.
Canadian short fiction, the above background information may explain the popularity of snow images in the given period of time as well as their negative polarity. Perhaps it is not accidental either, that the first comprehensive Canadian study of climatology appeared at the beginning of the 1980s, publicizing compiled and analysed data from the period between 1950 and 1980 (Climate..., 438). As for the temporal distribution of the polarity of images, the negative role dominates both in the case of the sun and snow for all decades starting with 1960, except for the 70s for the sun, in which case the role is neutral (but in no way positive!). Concerning the degree of abstraction, the image of the sun slowly moves towards more emphasis on the abstract, whereas the image of snow moves from concrete to abstract (1970s) and then back towards concrete. The results also show that it takes a higher level of abstraction to project the qualities of weather onto humans than to attach human qualities to the weather. Moreover, the results imply, which seems to be congruent with Atwood’s “Whenever it is cold Canadians say so” (Atwood, 35) and Woodcock’s “highly visual and concrete nature” of Canadian writing (Woodcock 1976, 119).

Why would anyone painstakingly analyse the use of weather images? The above seems to imply that our mind responds to what is emphatically present in our life. In the twenty-first century, climatic change seems imminent, which may also trigger a certain revival of weather images in fiction once weather becomes an emphatic component of our lives again. Certain signs of such a change are already visible. As a recent example I would like to mention a personal favourite, “Weather” by Carol Shields15, where the lack of weather forecast is capable of creating an existential vacuum by inducing the Heideggerian nothingness feeling in humans:

> [...] without weather, we struggled against frustration and boredom. I had never before thought about deprivation on this scale, but I soon discovered that one day is exactly like the next, hour after hour of featureless, tensionless air. We were suddenly without seasonal zest, without hourly variation, without surprise and complaint, dislocated in time and space (Shields, 29-30).

15 In fact, many of the stories in the volume Dressing up for the Carnival contain a number of weather images.
Works Cited


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