**What Makes Literature Canadian?**

Some common responses to this question reflect the typical Canadian perspective.

What stereotypically makes a Canadian novel Canadian are elements that concern:

1. Nature
2. Frontier Life
3. Canada’s position in the world
4. The New Canadian Experience

Some other prominent themes typically found in Canadian literature are as follows:

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| **Man versus Nature**Define: | **Analyze:** |
| **The search for self-identity**Define: | **Analyze:** |
| **Multiculturalism**Define: | **Analyze:** Canada is said to be a mosaic (stained glass window) while America is said to be a melting pot. Do we as Canadians truly value, respect and appreciate those who are “different”? Or, do we pretend to - all the while holding prejudices and stereotypes in our hearts. Perhaps we stake a claim to something that truly does not exist. Is this stained glass more of a cultural blemish than a sign of multicultural beauty?  |
| **Failure**Define: | **Analyze:** |
| **Self-deprecation**Define: belittling or undervaluing oneself; excessively modest.  | **Analyze:** Canadians tend to have a reputation for being very modest. Self-deprecation can manifest itself in being constantly apologetic to the point where one devalues themselves and makes it a habit. This can perhaps lead to failure, being overlooked and then having to search for an identity that has been lost or relinquished for the sake of modesty. |
| **Humour**Define: the quality of being funny, the ability to appreciate or express that which is humourous. | **Analyze:** |
| **Anti-Americanism**Define: | **Analyze:** |
| **Self-evaluation**Define: | **Analyze:** Are Canadians more introspective? Do we contemplate our place in the world more than other cultures? If so, are we haunted by it? Is this healthy or is it narcissistic? Do we ever come to a static conclusion? How do Canadians claim to actualize themselves as human beings? |
| **The underdog**Define: | **Analyze:** |
| **Urban versus Rural**Define: | **Analyze:** |
| **Satire**Define: The use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices | **Analyze:** |

University of Toronto professor of English, Nick Mount, was posed the same question on the topic of Canadian Literature by one of his students:

**What is Canadian literature? … [do] works in a national literature actually have some kind of bond in terms of themes particular to a country?**

Over the years there have been a lot of attempts to answer the question you’re asking.  What makes Canadian literature Canadian?  Probably the most well-known one is Margaret Atwood’s argument in Survival – that ours is a literature of victims, that America’s is a literature of heroes and ours is a literature of victims.  Other people have proposed the influence of the north, that you can feel the influence of the geography working on the literature.  More recently, people have wondered about why Canada appears to have so many famous female novelists, which is different from many countries.  Others say our literature is more multicultural, as a reflection of our society.  We like our literature to reflect who we want to be.

One of the most recent arguments is in a very good book by Noah Richler called This is My Country.  He does a slightly different take on Margaret Atwood’s victim argument.  He says our literature is populated by what he calls ‘myths of disappointment.’ He starts with Sir John Franklin and the failed expedition to the north and includes others like Louis Riel, the deportation of the Acadians, and a lot of examples from our literature.  We appear to be fascinated with people who have lost something.

All those arguments are true, to some degree.  There are a lot of books that fit all those arguments.  But the problem is that there are a lot of other Canadian books that don’t fit those arguments.  Unfortunately, people turn what was really just meant as descriptions into prescriptions.   So someone might say, “Well that book doesn’t have a loser in it, so it’s not Canadian” and that’s when the argument gets ridiculous.

The only real test is citizenship.  And even that doesn’t always work.  Because you could have a writer visiting here from another country who writes a book that becomes embraced by Canadian culture.  But that person wouldn’t officially be a Canadian citizen.  Or there are a lot more cases the other way — for example, Mordecai Richler wrote many of his books when he was living outside the country.  So, even that doesn’t work.

Ultimately, to me it’s like asking the question “What is a poem?”  And the answer is, “Well, if it says it’s a poem, then it’s a poem.”  And Can Lit is basically whatever its books say it is.

Death by Landscape: a short story by Canadian novelist, Margaret Atwood

Make note of areas that you feel are important to Canadian literature based on the criteria listed on the first page of this handout.

Answer the following questions:

1. What about the story is Canadian? List the themes that you feel are relevant. Explain.
2. What is death by landscape? Why would Atwood use this particular setting to tell the story?
3. Identify and explain the main conflict in the story.
4. Is there a lesson to take from this story? If so, what is it and how do you know?
5. As a Canadian, how do you identify with this story?
6. Margaret Atwood on Death by Landscape: “… there is this collective consciousness here in Canada of living at the edge of the world; after all, Canada is one of the only countries in the world where you can drive down some lonely highway until it ends, and there is nothing beyond it. Even in the United States, there are cities on either side of the desert. In Russia you can drive from Europe to the Pacific. But Canada is unique in that there is this massive, unending wilderness north of every inhabited place... whether it be Northern Ontario sitting atop Toronto or Nunavut sitting atop the prairies. And we all have this dark, lonely wilderness hanging over our heads waiting to swallow us up.” Comment on Atwood’s claim.