

# Thematics and its Aftermath: A Meditation on Atwood's *Survival*

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*The claim that Margaret Atwood's Survival, A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature delineates nationally distinctive features of Canadian literature is considered historically and analytically. Canadian and European reactions to Atwood's universalist thematics are compared and a revised view of the text's tone and genre is advanced.*

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## **Thematics and its Aftermath: A Meditation on Atwood's *Survival***

When Margaret Atwood's *Survival, A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* was first published, few could have predicted its far-reaching impact on literary criticism in Canada (Cooke 25; VanSpanckeren 2–3; Nischik *History* 297). Atwood's text spoke to a range of readers about the Canadian books that were beginning to appear on university syllabi across Canada. Moreover, her book offered a taxonomy—a categorical schema promising a holistic reading of Canadian writing. The schema owed much to Northrop Frye, with his revolutionary “anatomy” of criticism, but unlike Frye's analysis, Atwood's turned to the limited selection of literature written in Canada and subjected it to a form of literary psycho-analysis.

*Survival* has had a significant influence on how Canadian literature is read and taught in the years since, especially in Europe. The taxonomy has resulted in a lasting thematic emphasis in the image of Canadian literary and cultural production. This paper will examine the “survival” phenomenon in literary criticism and posit that its reception in Europe as a universalist prescription for a national literature constitutes a form of creative misreading of tone and genre in the original text.

## **Universality: A Canadian-European Perspective**

In 1985 Reingard Nischik wrote that “The fact that Canadian literature, like the more established British and American, is a foreign literature in Europe

has kept the thematic approach from becoming as important as it has been in Canada itself? (Kroetsch and Reingard). While distancing European practice from Canadian, Nischik acknowledges the importance of the thematic emphasis in Canada. Here Nischik identifies one feature of the Canadian Literary criticism written in the shadow of Atwood's *Survival*. According to Nischik, this vein of distinctivism in Canadian literary criticism arises from the national drive towards identity creation: "[N]ative literature has frequently been regarded as a means of 'seeing ourselves' of revealing national character as well as creating literary tradition" (Nischik in Banting). Freed from this preoccupation, Nischik argues, the European approach has been more textual than thematic, more structural and technical than content-oriented.

Nevertheless, Nischik's claim for European work cannot entirely be substantiated, since scholars in the region continued to use Atwood's parameters to interpret Canadian literature for four decades. While Nischik and other German scholars have contributed much to the genre criticism of Canadian literature, there is evidence of the application of thematic universals in some of the criticism presented at Canadian studies conferences and printed in the journals. In order to understand the popularity of thematic criticism, it will be useful to recap what universal prescriptions Atwood's book laid down and how these concepts were first adopted and then sidelined by the literary establishment in Canada.

### **Atwood's Main Concepts**

*Survival*, subtitled "a thematic guide to Canadian literature," appeared in the same year as her groundbreaking novel *Surfacing* (1972). *Survival* was both a commercial success and a cultural sensation. Many read it, but just as many simply absorbed its main concepts by cultural osmosis, via reviews and radio interviews. A set of concepts entered the national consciousness, which prescribed the form of both a national literature and the national psyche. These concepts, vastly simplified, were as follows:

All national cultures can be reduced to a single symbol. According to Atwood, Canada's is the notion of survival. American and British cultures are similarly pigeonholed (the frontier and the island, respectively); the inadequacy of the reduction in the case of the monumental canon of English literature should be immediately apparent. However, this infelicity in the analogy did not frighten readers away from Atwood's pronouncement about Canadian culture. Canadian culture had been experiencing an identity crisis for decades, and any pundit brave enough to jump into the breach with a plausible suggestion was given due consideration.

Then Atwood reduced Canadian literature to a set of scenarios that she designated “Victim Positions”—there were four to choose from, and all characters in Canadian literature were posited as being in one of these positions: 1, denial of being a victim; 2, acknowledgement, but acceptance of fate and destiny—resignation; 3, acknowledgement, but acceptance of responsibility for one’s own destiny, and 4, creative non-victimhood. Only the last position left room for agency or creative growth. By Atwood’s definition, then, any creative artist was in position 4, but some were still creating characters that remained in less invigorated positions.

This victim taxonomy was accompanied by several thematic motifs for Canadian literature, of which I will mention just a selection: death by nature, earth mothers, wilderness, monster nature—these were the ones the readership remembered. Atwood’s cleverness at finding apt illustrations from the literature added to the plausibility of these motifs. These pronouncements amounted to a set of pigeon holes for Canadian literature, which was a small field at the time. However, critical reflection soon gave the informed reader some reservations; as Barbara Nickel points out, the book’s approach could be seen as “non-evaluative and reductive” (Nickel). Moreover, the further claim that these symbols and positions were universally applicable within the national literature and not outside was startling. Atwood’s survival theory made a claim for universality of one cultural fact, in the service of distinguishing that culture from all others, but especially from those related by contiguity (the United States) and heritage (Britain). *Survival* was thus an act of literary universalism aimed at nationalist distinctivism.

According to the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (1983), *Survival* became the “most influential work on Canadian criticism in the [70s]” (Bennett 161). In fact, the book received its own entry in the *Oxford Companion* (Toye 777–778). Atwood’s book was embraced partly because of timing: the explosion of Canadian cultural production after 1967, the centennial, had just occurred. There were cultural demands pulling in two directions: on the one hand, the need for national self-identification, on the other hand, immense cultural and geographical diversity. Atwood solved the problem by appropriating the canon and providing a lens comprising a set of motifs from her own work and those of a coterie of writers from Anansi Press. Atwood’s own novel *Surfacing* echoed the theme of refusal to be a victim. In the novel’s context, this reads as a feminist manifesto, one uttered within a specific, personal and national situation. However, once re-contextualized in *Survival*, this act of refusal and the implicit assumption of ubiquitous victimhood become generalized onto national culture. Moreover, the novel’s speaker claims the highest category

in the taxonomy of victim positions: creative non-victimhood. Atwood's novel and her critical book pose the question of identity, while appropriating the privilege of having the first chance to answer—and the last word.

The publication of *Survival* marked a watershed moment in Canadian culture. Following the book's clamorous reception, its title began to be recycled into other titles, as a way of marking transition, progress and the future of Canadian literature. One could claim that the word "survival" became a meme, since it began to appear in titles, sometimes with variations. Such echoes testify to the persuasiveness of Atwood's thematic claim for Canadian Literature. As an act of nationalist thematics, then, *Survival* transformed a varied, post-colonial literature into an identifiable unity.

### Backgrounds to Thematics

It is not being claimed that Atwood invented thematic criticism. It would be more accurate to trace the concept to the work of Northrop Frye, as does Donna Bennett in her entry for the *Oxford Companion* (161) as well as a Slovene critic (Jurak 29). A distinguished scholar, Frye taught at the University of Toronto in the years when Atwood studied there. Though not exclusively a Canadianist, Frye brought the rigor of his Blake and Shakespeare scholarship to Canadian literary production. His criticism dealt with archetypes, and in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye boldly dictated the form of all literature, both synchronically and diachronically. His writing had an oratorical certainty backed by encyclopedic knowledge and ethical humanism; these features facilitated acceptance of universals. It was one piece by Frye (the "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada*) that indelibly marked the future of Canadian criticism. As an aid to understanding 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial culture, he gave us the concepts of the "garrison mentality" and the "bush garden", each of which elucidates an aspect of Canada's conflicted colonial position. Frye posited that the imaginary order created by words—even colonial words—occupied a position just as valid as the order of nature in which human beings lived—even the monstrous wilderness of the early settlers, and that the first order offered clues to the national psyche in its struggle with the second. While human experience of the natural order was local and specific, the world of words was universal and articulated in archetypes. Frye's was a claim of true literary universality.

Frye was succeeded by the critics that Bennett calls "the major 'thematicists'" (160), who included D. G. Jones with *Butterfly on Rock* and John Moss, *Patterns of Isolation*. Thematic criticism became de rigueur; everyone

sought their own sub-symbol—there was CanLit as archaeology, as borderland (W. H. New, Clark Blaise, Russell Brown), or as haunted wilderness, with the Canadian subject as Adam, or as sleeping giant. The symbol had to be catchy and recognizable, but also malleable—a mold into which many works could be forced. Soon, graduate students in the relatively new field of Canadian Literature were cramming literature into these formats. Thematic criticism was temporarily dictating both the content and the critique of Canadian literature.

## **Reception and Critique of *Survival***

Some readers soon noticed the deficiencies of *Survival* as a universal theory of Canadian culture and began to publish critiques. Even Atwood herself acknowledged the anti-*Survival* movement, saying “*Survival* was fun to attack” (Atwood, quoted in Nicholson 3). Since it was not a scholarly work, the book was vulnerable on several fronts. By the mid-1990s, Atwood even thought that “most self-respecting professors of CanLit” would begin their courses by “a ritual sneer” at her work (Nicholson 3). More seriously, Frank Davey made a trenchant critique in his article “Surviving the Paraphrase” (Davey 5–8). His well-known arguments covered the following points: the overuse of catchwords and their substitution for analysis; reductionism and restricted sample size (Atwood had drawn her examples heavily from works published by Anansi, the press that had commissioned *Survival*); ahistorical bias, and inattention to literary historical tradition. Other critics noted that *Survival* applied in only a limited way to a finite set of cultural products and with a limited capacity to illuminate the vast cultural production of the booming post-centenary Canada. In a pointed critique, Barry Cameron and Michael Dixon affirmed that Canadian criticism had too readily accepted the official status of thematic versions of Canadian literature based almost exclusively on “survival in a garrison.” Cameron and Dixon asked their reader how the “thematic variety, formal abundance, and technical inventiveness” of Canadian literature could be reconciled with the simple schema presented by thematics (Cameron 137). Their projection onto other literatures of representative themes captures the absurdity of the claim of distinctiveness within literary universals: “Thus a novel written in the Sahara may exhibit themes of survival and isolation and contain much sand imagery, and a novel written in the Arctic may exhibit themes of survival and isolation and contain much snow imagery; but they are both novels and, as such, are autonomous, transcending national and geographical boundaries. The

themes are commonplaces of fiction; the snow and sand are commonplaces of environmental experience” (Cameron and Dixon).

Their “subversive polemic” threw down the gauntlet in favour of a critical practice that was less nationally focused and less geographically deterministic. Gradually, readers within academia and beyond moved on. Canadian scholars turned to new tools associated with post-structuralism and post-modernism. The scholarly trend in the late 1980s veered in the direction of the canon wars.

In 1995, an American critic returned to the question of whether there were universals within national literatures that were stronger than overall literary universals—in particular between the two contiguous nations of Canada and the United States. In her article “Nations and Novels,” Sarah Corse critiques the assumption that “individual-level cross-national psychological differences, i.e., differences in national character or the “spirit of the people,” are “reflected” in unique national literatures (Corse 1279). Her research tested whether Canadian/American national differences could be identified in a properly randomized sample of texts. She chose, first, two sets of works of high culture (award-winning works and novels being regularly taught in university courses); these were marked for canonical status and assumed to constitute the symbolic capital of each nation (1282). Second, Corse selected a group of works from the best-seller lists. She hypothesized that themes deemed nationally distinctive (e.g., American rebelliousness and individualism) would be much more marked in the works of high culture. Surprisingly, she could not substantiate this thesis (1286–88). In fact, she found that in many cases it was the *American* works that exhibited themes more commonly associated with Canada. The one quality where she did find a national distinction was the Canadian preference for the collective over the individual (1288). Corse concluded that there was no support for the idea that “distinct national literatures are due to the reflection of widespread, psychologically based, national character differences” (1292). Thematics as a nationalist universal had thus failed a blind test. Moreover, the works from Corse’s best-seller lists—the books endorsed by consumers—exhibited almost no national differences (1292–23). Her conclusion was that what national differences did emerge among the high-culture works had been consciously crafted in the process of engineering and/or reinforcing national distinctiveness—by writers, publishers, grant agencies and literary awards. As a corollary to Corse’s findings, it appears that the common themes identified in *Survival* and embraced by a generation of readers probably constitute part of the “self-preserving” canon (Corse 1281). The small Canadian canon of the early 1970s could have been both descriptively and prescriptively redefined by the survival phenomenon.

Nevertheless, some Canadian critics continued to find the survival hypothesis plausible and useful; T. D. Maclulich, for example, saw thematic criticism as a vital prop in Canada's nation-constructing agenda, a tool that was better suited to the Canadian situation than the "intricacies of European literary theory" (18). Like the European Nischik, Maclulich accepted as valid the gulf between Canadian and European approaches. For Maclulich, a national literature was an assumed good and a national criticism succeeded insofar as it projected such a boundary around a nation's cultural production. Other critics, while avoiding a reductive position of "anti-thematics", often erected their own universal prescriptions, as for instance Heather Murray in "Reading for Contradiction". While critiquing the readers' race for coherent themes, Murray turns to Frye's notion of contradictory positions in Canada's colonial space and elevates contradiction itself into a comprehensive goal (Murray 75–76). After the century's turn, I. S. MacLaren, reviewing a book of Atwood's essays, made the unchallenged assertion that *Survival* offered "second rate criticism" (MacLaren). Nischik identified the perception among some Canadian critics that *Survival* was being read "prescriptively" (Nischik *History* 297). Nischik reads this as part of a Canadian trend of "Atwood-bashing" (Nischik *Margaret* 51–52) that took hold in the early 1990s, and as one strand in the Canadian love of unmasking heroes or "debunking" them, as W. H. New avers (New 43–44). In an interview from 2009, Nischik draws on her "privileged" European perspective to observe that "Canadians, really going back to Atwood's *Survival* to some extent still ... use their literature also as a way of selling yourselves" (Nischik in Banting).

Despite Nischik's thesis that Europe was relatively immune to thematic criticism, it appeared to me on my arrival in Europe that thematics was flourishing. *Survival* and its hypotheses are still evoked regularly in European interpretations of English Canadian literature. One well-expressed example comes from a Romanian analysis of Timothy Findley's work: "As a conclusion, one may argue that the theme of survival and the motifs of death and failure are one of the characteristic features of Canadian Literature, giving it a certain tone of unity" (Rogojan 145). In contrast, Slovene criticism on Atwood has avoided the emphasis on thematics, even though Atwood's novels, short stories and poetry have proven popular with scholars and students. The first undergraduate thesis on Atwood's work appeared in 1988, and there has been an explosion of theses in the years since 2005. However, the critical approaches employed eschew thematics in favor of genre studies, feminist studies and formalist studies. An early example is an essay by Metka Zupančič that places Atwood's work in the dual context of feminist writing and utopian myth (Zupančič 1–15). Stepping back from national literature to a comparative



perspective, Marcello Potocco discusses Canadian “thematology” as just one stage in the ongoing development of literary consciousness (Potocco 27–29). Judging solely by these Slovene examples, then, Nischik’s thesis of European immunity to thematics receives considerable support.

Nevertheless, not only has thematics persisted in the European version of Canadian studies, but it has flourished. A colleague from another European university concurs, observing that Atwood’s simplifications were being taken not as attempts but as “dogma” (personal communication). “This is surely,” continues Dr. Jason Blake, “because Canada (as a non-nation-state) is so complicated for many Central Europeans - aside from Atwood’s views, there was simply no other manageable and *teachable* inroad to Canada.” Another European critic, Franz Stanzel, partly agrees; in a cogent essay, Stanzel acknowledges the decline of thematics in North American criticism, while concluding that “From the European point of view it would ... be regrettable if thematic criticism of Canadian literature were to be altogether ostracized” (Stanzel 199). Defending *Survival* and other thematic keystones as “heterostereotypes,” Stanzel affirms their usefulness for European students seeking a “common denominator” (199). Beyond utility, Stanzel implies necessity: “[I]n any discourse on a topic like Canadianness ... generalization cannot be altogether avoided” (200–201). Mirko Jurak plausibly explained the appeal of thematic criticism by its contribution to the building of a national identity, and posited that this had special resonance for Central European readers of the 1990s (Jurak 33). By 2009, Nischik herself outlined for an interviewer the pedagogical utility of the survival schema: “When you try to introduce a new national literature to your students you also ask the question, well, what is idiosyncratic about this literature, what is Canadian about Canadian literature” (Banting). Nischik also invokes cultural schemata as a form of national branding, a way of “selling a country.” That being so, the sales job was remarkably successful on the Canadian Studies circuit in Europe. The critical debunking of *Survival* filtered through to Europe slowly, and Atwood’s schema was embraced both pedagogically and interpretively, at face value.

### **Un-Reading *Survival***

Atwood’s successful monograph may contain a flawed universalist theory of a national literature, but there is another possible approach to the text, one which re-interprets its tone to claim that the survival hypothesis has been taken too seriously. *Survival* may have been at least partly a very Canadian joke.



It has been noted that Atwood's *Survival* has affinities with her satirical comic strip art. Cynthia Kuhn, for example, cites a connection with the "Kanadian Kultchur Komix" in subject, tone and genre. The Komix, written between 1975 and 1978, even include a character called Survivalwoman (Kuhn 23). Certainly, Atwood has a wicked sense of humour that emerges in the deep irony and black humour of her novels and short stories. Within *Survival*, too, there is textual evidence indicating humour at work. It is unnecessary to rely on any one reader's subjective reaction to the "funny bits". One can detect in Atwood's very syntax her tongue in cheek attitude to the material.

Three examples of Atwood's techniques of playfulness, taken from the early sections of *Survival*, will serve to challenge the assumption that the text's tone is one of earnest affirmation.

First, there are her figures of speech: analogies in *Survival* are often bizarrely sourced from completely non-literary domains: "It outlines a number of key patterns which I hope will function like *the field markings in bird-books*; they will help you distinguish this species from all others. Canadian literature from the other literatures with which it is often compared or confused" (Atwood *Survival* 19; my emphasis). Here Atwood brings together two domains: literary criticism and bird-watching. The incongruity of the conceit, in combination with the dead-pan delivery, the tone of rational helpfulness ("which I hope will function," "will help you distinguish"), serves to mark the observation as extreme exaggeration. The notion that literature will have distinguishing marks akin to the colour bars on birds' wings and just as simple to identify is necessarily received with a degree of incredulosity. Such neo-metaphysical conceits keep the prose lively, while simultaneously alerting one community of readers to the potential for layered communication.

Second, there are indications within Atwood's syntax that serve to further open a gap between content and tone. The text makes frequent use of the kind of syntax usually characterized as Johnsonian: "But the main idea is the first one: hanging on, staying alive. Canadians are forever taking the national pulse like doctors at a sickbed: the aim is not to see whether the patient will live well but simply whether he will live at all" (42). The final sentence exhibits the kind of balance and dialectic that is associated with the Johnsonian age of high seriousness. However, in combination with the previous incongruous medical analogy, the quip implies the reverse of seriousness. Atwood is warming up the reader, as a stand-up comic might her audience.

The third feature of the syntax is the use of anti-climax, sometimes descending into bathos, as here in Atwood's discussion of settlers arriving

in the New World: “But the tension between what you were supposed to feel and what you actually encountered when you got here—and *the resultant sense of being gypped*—is much in evidence” (61; my emphasis). This is just one example of a disjunction between style and content in *Survival*, ordinarily the hallmark of high burlesque. The formal style initially clashes with the pop-cultural content, but then the clash is signalled by the fall into contemporary informality—“being gypped”. However, many early readers must not have perceived a clash, because they took the pop-cultural analysis seriously. Hungry for a clear interpretive schema, readers accepted the inflated syntax as the subject’s due.

This reading of *Survival* as straight literary criticism persisted despite other signals of high burlesque, notably the capitalization of concepts, a feature which extends throughout *Survival*: “If Canada is a collective victim, it should pay some attention to the Basic Victim Positions. These are like the basic positions in ballet or the scales on the piano: they are primary, though all kinds of song-and-dance variations are possible” (45). Atwood capitalized concepts such as the “Basic Victim Positions” and the “Secret of Life”, in an ironic inflation of the mundane and contingent into the essential and eternal. Atwood seems to be invoking a Victorian convention of capitalizing significant nouns, the effect of which is both coy and oratorical.

Considering these stylistic indications that the text can be read as high burlesque, it seems that the issue with *Survival* is not that Atwood’s technique suffered from limited sample selection or her hypothesis from confirmation bias. The issue is that the Atwoodian tongue may have been firmly in her cheek.

In Europe, however, whenever I have dared to suggest that Atwood’s victim positions might have been meant less than seriously, the reaction has often been disbelief. “Canadians excel at irony” says the Canadian scholar, Jason Blake (Blake 71), but Atwood’s irony is not always detected or appreciated.

Atwoodian thematics have made a lasting impression on European Canadianists, whatever Nischik might have claimed. Despite Atwood’s own quiet distancing from the topic in the reissued edition of *Survival*, the patterns are being taken as both delineation and delimitation of the national literature (Gerson 892). Where cultural nationalism is an assumed good, ironic treatment can be invisible. And, since irony of the kind detected in the text of *Survival* is among the most difficult tropes to translate, both lexically and culturally, *Survival* may have enjoyed a creative mis-reading of tone and genre by critics who see no contradiction in universalist claims of national distinctiveness.

For the final word on thematics, let us turn to an award winning writer, J. M. Coetzee, who provides an alternative perspective on readers who embrace theme as a primary heuristic tool, maintaining that “the reasoning imagination thinks in themes because those are the only means it has; but the means are not the end” (Coetzee 289). Undoubtedly, both Frye and Atwood would concur.

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## Tematika in njene posledice: razmišljanje o knjigi *Survival* avtorice Margaret Atwood

Ključne besede: kanadska književnost / kanadska literarna veda / tematologija / Atwood, Margaret

Knjiga avtorice Margaret Atwood z naslovom *Survival, A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Preživetje, tematski vodnik po kanadski književnosti) je imela daljnosežen vpliv na prakso literarne vede v Kanadi. V knjigi je avtorica obravnavala kanadske knjige in ponudila jasen načrt za holistično branje vseh kanadskih književnih del. Njena uporaba tematskega pristopa je bila posledica vpliva Northropa Fryea. *Survival* še naprej vpliva na to, kako se kanadska književnost bere in poučuje, in sicer tudi v Evropi, kjer tematski pristop pogosto velja za zapovedanega. Taksonomija preživetja je prispevala k trajnemu tematskemu poudarku v podobi kanadske literarne in kulturne produkcije. V članku avtorica preučuje pojav »preživetja« v literarni vedi, njegovo posledično kritiko in razkrinkanje ter njegovo dolgo »posmrtno življenje« v evropski vedi. Podrobna slogovna analiza besedila razkrije ironije v njem in na podlagi te analize lahko zaključimo, da je sprejem dela v Evropi kot univerzalistične zapovedi nacionalne književnosti pravzaprav oblika kreativnega napačnega razumevanja tona in žanra izvirnika.

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