

Canadianism in Howard O'Hagan's Fiction: 'Straight line' vs. 'Curve'

教養教育 Chikako NAGAO

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore into the fictional world of Howard O'Hagan (1902-82), one of the best prose writers in Western Canada, to show how Canadian issues of a specific time and space were represented in his works: *Tay John* (1939); *The School-Marm Tree* (1977); *The Wilderness Men* (1958). In examining the significance of pioneering Western Canada, I will adopt a contrastive pair of motifs introduced by Margaret Atwood in her *Survival* (1972) as 'straight line' vs. 'curve' and illustrate how the binary opposition was merged into 'double vision' in the fictional structures and characters created by O'Hagan, which would inevitably anticipate some aspects of postmodernism.

Keywords: Western Canadian Literature, Howard O'Hagan, the wilderness, civilization, postmodernism

1. Introduction

It was not until the 1970's when Michael Ondaatje first unearthed *Tay John* that Howard O'Hagan came to be in the spotlight as one of the best prose writers in Western Canada. *Tay John*, first published in 1939, appeared too ahead of time and remained forgotten for 35 years. When Ondaatje reevaluated the novel in his article "O'Hagan's Rough-Edged Chronicle," the novel became a good sample of underground classic anticipating 'postmodernism.' It is true, however, O'Hagan's popularity is limited to writers, critics, and students majoring in Canadian literature. That is to say, even his one and only canonical work, has

failed to appeal to the general reader in Canada, let alone, to the reading public worldwide. Marjery Fee ascribed his unpopularity to the fact that *Tay John* was obviously, even aggressively, Canadian (Fee 97-108). In her view, O'Hagan did not care whether he tied his novel to the world tradition as Malcolm Lowry did. His *Under the Volcano* (1947) is another underground classic that is filled with things European. She says that once Lowry was discovered, a wide audience was opened up for him. Such was not the case with O'Hagan, who had been invariably concerned in Canadian issues and passed away only ten years after his reevaluation.

The focus of my attention is on this Canadianism itself found in O'Hagan's fiction.

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His fictional world is a good illustration of how, quoting from David Stains, “Canadian literature reflects the struggle of a young country to assert itself against the pressures of a mother country and a neighboring giant to the south” (Stains 8). Indeed O’Hagan persisted in his efforts to represent a particular region in the Canadian Rockies at the time the second transcontinental railway was constructed. In dealing with Canadian issues at the specific time and space in his fictional world, I will adopt a contrastive pair of motifs introduced by Margaret Atwood in her *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972).

2. *Tay John* and Canadian issues

Firstly, I would like to quote the opening passages of Part II in *Tay John* to show how the writer was concerned in railway building as an important issue at the turn of the 20th century in Western Canada.

In the year 1904, and in the years that followed, a new name blew up against the mountains, and an idea stirred like a wind through the valleys.

The name was the name of the new railway, the Grand Trunk Pacific, and the idea was that of a new route to the Pacific—a northern route, bringing the eastern cities, where money bred, closer to the Orient than they had ever been. The smell of Asia was in the air, and men thirsted still for the salt water beyond the mountains.

It would be an imperial route, and in time of war Britain could rush troops across

Canada well back from the American border. “It will show these damned Yankees,” a Member of Parliament shouted in Ottawa, “that what independence we have we mean to keep.”

Out on the prairies the white man’s breath had blasted the Indian and the buffalo from the grasslands, now his plough turned the grass under. (*Tay John* 73)

The passages would indicate, “The building of a single railway line was”, what Northrop Frye calls, “a matter of life and death to the infant nation” (Frye 22). Moreover, the last passage would show what Canadian attitudes should be like toward the native people. In the O’Hagan’s world, the second transcontinental railway works most importantly as the historical and geographical background.

3. Motifs of ‘straight line’ vs. ‘curve’ in *Tay John*

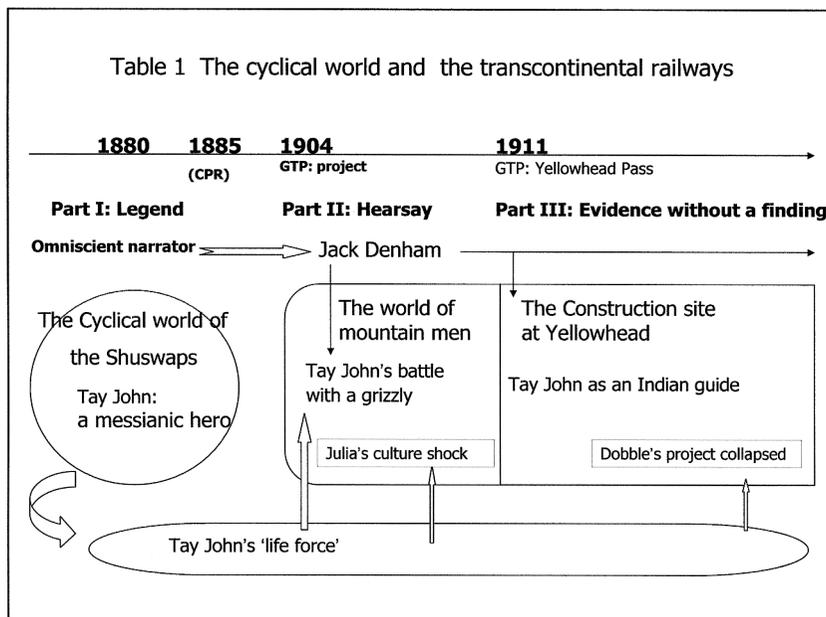
Margaret Atwood classifies the settler theme in Canadian Literature into two contrastive motifs in her *Survival*. The first motif is that “straight line battles curve and wins, but destroys human ‘life force’ in the process.” The other is that “straight line deteriorates and curve takes over again, that is, settlement fails” (Atwood 122). “Straight line” would signify linear order of white civilization, “curve” both fertile and chaotic nature of the wilderness and “life force” primitive vitality within human life. Taking examples from Frederick Grove’s novels, Atwood explains that the settlers succeed in their plan, build their straight-line constructions, but kill something vital in

the process. As for the second motif, she introduces a typical ending found in many Canadian poems in which “the wilderness has been settled and then largely abandoned, and the landscape is strewn with deserted farms” (Atwood 123).

Unlike Grove’s realism novels, O’Hagan’s *Tay John* metaphorically presents significance of pioneering the wilderness by way of an image of the transcontinental railway penetrating the cyclical world of the native people. It works as a symbol of male linear principle forcing alteration on their nature-oriented world. In the narrative of *Tay John*, three specific years are mentioned in relation to railway building. The year 1885 is one of the most memorable years in the history of Canada when the Canadian Pacific, the first continental railway was completed. The year 1911 is the time when the Grand Trunk Pacific, the second continental railway passed through the mountains at Yellowhead, present-day Jasper.

The year 1904 is, as I quoted earlier, the year when the project of Grand Trunk Pacific started. In Part I, the omniscient narrator lays a special emphasis on the fact that the story begins in the summer of 1880 before the years 1885 and 1911, in which “the country around Yellowhead was...little changed from what it had always been” (*TJ* 11-12) as is graphically indicated in Table 1.

Tay John, a half-breed protagonist of the novel shows phases of transformation depending on nearness to the railway line or degree of involvement with the white engaging in the railway-related projects. In the Shuswap world living communally in the wilderness, Tay John appears as a messianic hero in Part I. Then at the beginning of Part II, when a mountain man, Jack Denham, takes over the narration, he calls Tay John an epic hero in the battle with a grizzly bear. When he reappears in Part III at the construction site of a mountain resort, he is an eccentric Indian



guide hired by a railway official.

There is an episode in Part II of how 'life force' embodied in Tay John could affect the white taking part in linear order of civilization against the wilderness. In the episode, Tay John was accused with assault on Julia Alderson, wife of an engineer coming from England. The couple hired Tay John to guide them into the sheep hunting country. On the day of an expedition, the husband was forced back to camp because of his sprained ankle, leaving Julia to continue with Tay John. After a night spent with the guide, she came back alone on horseback with her eyes wide "as if they had just looked upon a revelation" (142). The reader cannot know what really happened between Julia and Tay John away from their camp and whether her accusation of being assaulted was true or not. In the end of the episode, Julia abruptly withdrew her previous accusation at the investigation by the Royal North-West Mounted Police and ran out of the place. Ronald Granofsky argues that the episode is "paradigmatic of the novel's indeterminacy" (109). The episode surely has attracted postmodernist attention, but in my view, the focus of the narrative is to present an indescribable culture shock of a white woman facing 'life force' inherent in Tay John. Julia should be torn between her unconscious attraction toward his 'life force' and her fear of throwing herself into contact with it. 'Indeterminacy' of meaning in the episode comes from her dilemma, which deprived her sense and self-control. Julia's culture shock will also tell what the whites left behind in the process of being civilized.

Part III of the novel is mostly set at the

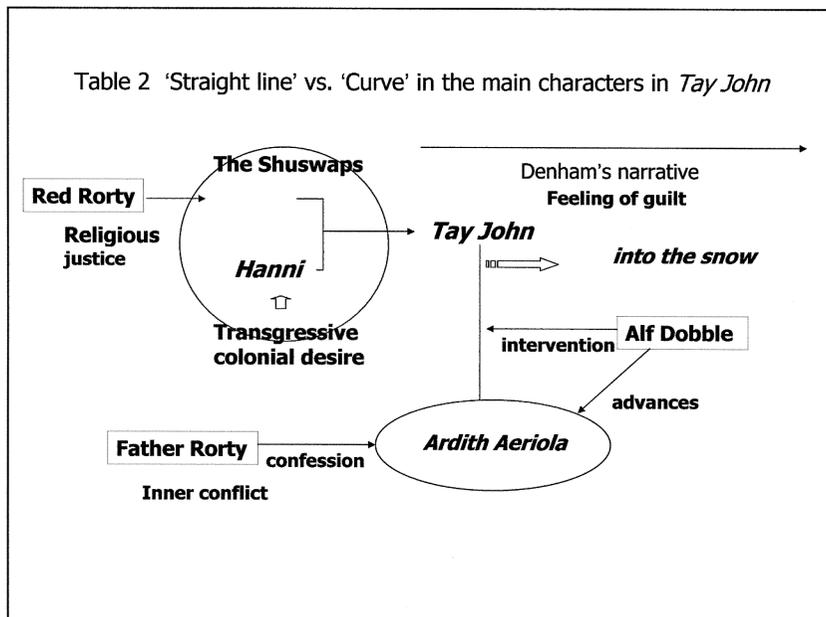
construction site of a mountain resort in command of Alf Dobbie, a capitalist entrepreneur coming from Colorado. The final image of his project illustrates the second motif by Atwood that "straight line deteriorates and curve takes over again; that is, settlement fails." Dobbie failed in transforming Yellowhead Lake region into "the Switzerland of America." He wished to hire Tay John as an Indian guide meeting tourists on the railway platform at the completion of his project. It is true that Tay John diminished in size and grandeur almost down to the level of realism as the setting became more civilized, but his 'life force' still worked as to make Dobbie fatally hurt and retreat from his project after a fight against Tay John. We should note here that the railway itself remained unhurt and kept stretching while Dobbie's cabins disappeared one by one "as though slowly sinking into the ground" (253). Only the Swiss name "Lucerne" held on since the railway was looking for names. The narrative seems to suggest that an individual American dream was out of place in Western Canada. Atwood's contrasting motifs of 'straight line' vs. 'curve' are intertwined in O'Hagan's fiction as 'double vision'. The motif of railway building across the continent indeed signifies a historical, geographical, and political victory for the nation. Nevertheless, the victory is blurred by the overwhelming presence of wilderness, which appears to resist human efforts and to plunge everything into the seasonal cycle of nature.

The motifs of 'straight line' vs. 'curve' are also reflected in the main characters in *Tay John* as shown in Table 2. If Dobbie exercised men's justice in transforming the wilderness,

Red Rorty exercised religious justice of enlightening the uncivilized. In Part I, Rorty is described as a typical white man with blue eyes and blond hair. His self-righteous mission to the Shuswap came to a climax when he was accused of raping Hanni, the wife of an absent hunter, and was tied naked to a tree and burnt to death. His conduct might symbolize 'transgressive colonial desire.' On the other hand, Hanni's passive or almost willing attitude toward being assaulted may reflect an ambivalent response of the native people when confronted with Western civilization. Tay John, born from the Hanni's tomb, inevitably embraces conflicting values of both the white and the native people. While he was showing his primitive 'life force' to the civilized, he was equally attracted to their materialistic world of possession.

In the O'Hagan's world, female characters work as agents of the wild nature. The male principles embodied in Alf Dobbie and Red

Rorty turn out to be ineffectual when they try to possess women. In other words, contact with women inspires them to manifest their inner nature or 'life force.' They look as if they forgot their justice or mission. Father Rorty, presumably, a younger brother of Red Rorty, is another victim by contact with Ardith Aeriola, mistress of a railway official. According to Denham's speculation, he died accidentally on a Y shaped-tree while imitating Christ. Tay John alone finally won Ardith who had rejected Dobbie's approach and laughed away Father Rorty's confession. Nevertheless, Tay John could never be successful. The ending of the novel shows Tay John, thin and worn out, pulling a toboggan in a blizzard and almost delirious asking for a doctor and a church. Blackie, the last witness, saw in passing a dead woman sitting up on the toboggan with one eye open and her mouth full of snow. The scene indicates that Tay John's 'life force' was totally deteriorated in the process



of exercising a male principle of possession. Finally, the motif of 'straight line' vs. 'curve' appears again as 'double vision.' Jackie Denham retells Blackie's tale of Tay John at the very ending as follows.

Blackie stared at the tracks in front of him, very faint now, a slight trough in the snow, no more. Always deeper and deeper into the snow. He turned back then. There was nothing more he could do. He had the feeling, he said, looking down at the tracks, that Tay John hadn't gone over the pass at all. He had just walked down, the toboggan behind him, under the snow and into the ground. (263-64)

Tay John being a man of mixed race and embodiment of both 'curve' and 'straight line', he metaphorically wins and fails at the same time. The image of his returning to his mythical origins lingers at the conclusion of the novel and tempts the reader to find an archetypal cycle of death-rebirth in Tay John's life. As Tay John himself came from the tomb of his dead mother, his baby could be born from the dead pregnant woman. The mythical image, however, is blurred by the fact that Tay John was in search of a doctor and a church for his woman instead of a wise woman or a medicine man, and that he was heading in the wrong direction for it. The supreme dilemma within Tay John should reflect feeling of guilt in the colonial mentality of Canadians. In other words, Jackie Denham could not but provide the listener of his tale with the mythical image converging Indian, Woman and Nature into one.

4. *Wilderness Men* and O'Hagan's Canadian imagination

Now I would like to pick up some episodes out of *Wilderness Men* first published in 1958 to explore further into the O'Hagan's world. This collection of 10 non-fictional stories mostly deals with historical characters that lived in the wilderness, such as Almighty Voice, Albert Johnson, and Gray Owl. This also treats unknown but real mountain men O'Hagan himself had met in his youth. They were solitary white men who rejected what the railways signified. The most typical is an old trapper, MacNamara, the main character in the very first chapter. Being pursued by locomotives all his life, MacNamara tried to retreat from them and sought his God in the mountains. The chapter is based on real episodes young O'Hagan had when he was a McGill University student during the summer of 1920. I find it worthwhile to notice that those episodes as a young man could possibly form original mental images that appealed the imagination of the future writer. He got acquainted with MacNamara, who short of funds, had sawed and split the winter's wood for his father, the town doctor in Yellowhead.

When the young man spent a night together camping, he awoke around midnight to find that he was alone. Then he heard MacNamara's voice a short distance off in the woods. What he witnessed was the old trapper talking to the trees. In this shocking episode, the reader can detect how the Canadian wilderness could deprive a white man isolated from the civilized society of his reason, or rational

thinking and throw him into insanity. O'Hagan often describes men on the edge of losing sanity as men talking to the trees or shaking hands with the willows. While MacNamara tried to be away from the human society and the railways, he showed his eagerness for the release of speech. Once he got an actual listener, MacNamara showed himself, unexpectedly for young O'Hagan, to be an artist in words and brought the scene alive. He talked about his experience of meeting an uncanny being with a beastlike smell. He got so frightened with its sudden coming that he said he killed "the thing that walked like a man" (*WM* 19). The reader cannot tell what it actually was and whether or not the shot creature was dead falling from the cliff. The point is that the sensitivity of the loner has something in common with that of the native people who have a legend of the Wendigo. According to *A Dictionary of Canadianism on Historical Principles*, Wendigo is a man turned cannibal and believed possessed by an evil spirit. For MacNamara the wilderness is not so much the place to be explored and possessed but the fearful sphere with primeval ghosts as well as his God, some sacred presence. What kept MacNamara sane and connected to the rational world of the white was nothing but the act of verbalization. The narrative goes on like this.

There in the forest night, with the wind sighing and the river murmuring, his tale had not seemed incredible and the old man with long white hair, staring into the campfire as he spoke, was only a sorcerer reading the story in the coals. MacNamara was

making his own contribution to the lore of the "man-beast" that walks the mountains, in North America as in Asia. (*WM* 20)

When the writer looked back to the days spent with the wilderness man, he might have realized anew the precariousness of man's reason and what's more, the obsessive desire of telling stories. It is no exaggeration to say that *Tay John* mostly consists of stories told by solitary backwoodsmen living in the wilderness. The first person narrator, Jack Denham is the one to collect those stories. What prompted him to be a potential writer was his experience of witnessing an epic battle of a Yellowhead Indian. The rest of the narrative is his oral report of how and what Denham heard from various sources or happened to be on the scenes. *Tay John* indeed illustrates the postmodernist assumption that all reality is fictive. In any case, O'Hagan's imagination originally comes from his real experiences in the Canadian Rockies as a mountain man.

O'Hagan worked in the mountains as an ax man for a survey party or a guide together with a well-know guide Fred Brewster. Before establishing himself as a short-story writer, he also had various job experiences such as an editor in chief of the McGill Daily, sports reporter for the Montreal Star, assistant US representative for the Canadian National Railway, public agent for the CPR and so on. In short, O'Hagan had two faces, one with perception of the wilderness, and the other with intelligence to observe and explore the significance of Western civilization invading the wilderness.

5. *The School-Marm Tree* and “The Rapunzel Syndrome”

We can find another dimension of the O'Hagan's world in *The School-Marm Tree*. It is his only other novel written in 1950's but published much later in 1977. While the masculine world of *Tay John* was preoccupied with pioneering the wilderness by way of naming and possession, *The School-Marm Tree* explores the wilderness from a female perspective, setting the viewpoint within the heroine's consciousness. The novel is set around Yellowhead and the High Valley in 1920's, the era of the steam locomotive crossing the continent. Here the railway symbolizes the go-between for East and West both geographically and psychologically.

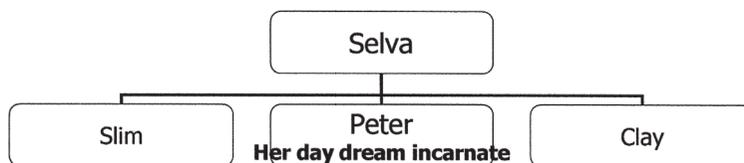
In an interview given in 1979, O'Hagan told the interviewer that *The School-Marm Tree* had the same theme as Louis Hemon's *Maria Chapdelaine* (1914) and Martha Ostenso's *Wild*

Geese (1925). The heroines are all “tying to get away from where they are and to go somewhere where life is” (Maillard 26), though Selva's yearning eyes are set upon Montreal, not the United States the other heroines longed for.

Read as a realistic romance, *The School-Marm Tree* is a story of a young servant girl with three men courting her and of her failure of escaping from her plain humble life. Peter, her daydream incarnate, came from Montreal by rail and eventually died from falling off the mountain ridge before he could take her to his sophisticated world of the city. Like Louis Hemon's Maria, Selva was to get married with Clay, a man of a kind. We can apply what Atwood calls “the Rapunzel Syndrome” to Selva's case as you see in Table 3.

Atwood goes on to say, “in Canada Rapunzel and the tower are the same.” That is, “these heroines have internalized the values of their culture to such an extent that they

Table 3 The School-Marm Tree and “the Rapunzel Syndrome”



- “...the Rescuer, a handsome prince of little substantiality who provides momentary escape. In the original Rapunzel story the Rescuer is a solution and the wicked witch is vanquished; in the Rapunzel Syndrome the Rescuer is not much help. (Atwood 209)



have become their own prisons” (Atwood 209). For Selva, the prison tower is womanliness itself that compels her to stay in her country of mountains, rocks and ice. I would like to enumerate some passages that would show her self-image in *The School-Marm Tree*.

1. She and Rosie, like the Chinese cook in his white apron, moved in a world of foreigners. [...] they were part of a minority, not because of their numbers but because of the womanliness which confined them in what they did. (124)
2. ...woman, forever a transgressor in man's domain. (124)
3. Now she was able to go East or West as she preferred. yet, deep within herself, she knew that she would make no decision. (174)
4. She, a woman, hungered to be what she was not, to have what she could not have. All her life she had sat looking out a window. (231)

O'Hagan presents womanliness by means of Selva's passive sensitivity. For Selva, a passing locomotive sounded "as if a metallic giant were being tortured" (18). As she was on her way to the High Valley, "she was absorbed, trying to grasp the valley, not as a series of names and units, but as a whole"(128). O'Hagan also puts social conditions on Selva's passivity in the novel. Her life was a series of sexual harassments by her father-in-law, her employer, and a president's son offering her a job. Rosie, her close friend, had an abominable experience of being raped by four men at a time. As the novel is narrated from Selva's

point of view, the reader can easily empathize with her sense of humiliation.

6. *The School-Marm Tree* as a moral allegory

If we read the novel as a moral allegory in terms of the wilderness vs. civilization, we should rearrange the romantic relationships of Selva with three men into two oppositions. The first is an opposition between Selva, whose name means forest in Spanish, and Peter representing the city. They project their yearning toward the other world on each other. O'Hagan deals with the same topic of yearning in a short story titled "The Promised Land" collected in *The Woman Who Got On at Jasper Station* published in 1963. A man from the forest and a man from the city met, exchanged their belongings, went to their promised land, had terrible experiences there, and learning the lesson, went back to their own territory. This is indeed a Canadian parable about the Blue Bird of happiness. As *The School-Marm-Tree* is a realistic romance all the same, Peter could not go back to the city because of his easy attitude toward the mountains and Selva, being a passive woman, never experienced the promised land of her yearning.

The second is an even more metaphorical opposition found between Peter, the civilization and the other three characters representing aspects of the wilderness. Slim, Selva's first boyfriend symbolizes violent nature of the wilderness as the episodes of his brutally killing a porcupine and his hitting Peter suggest. Clay could connote the Earth, or possibly, the

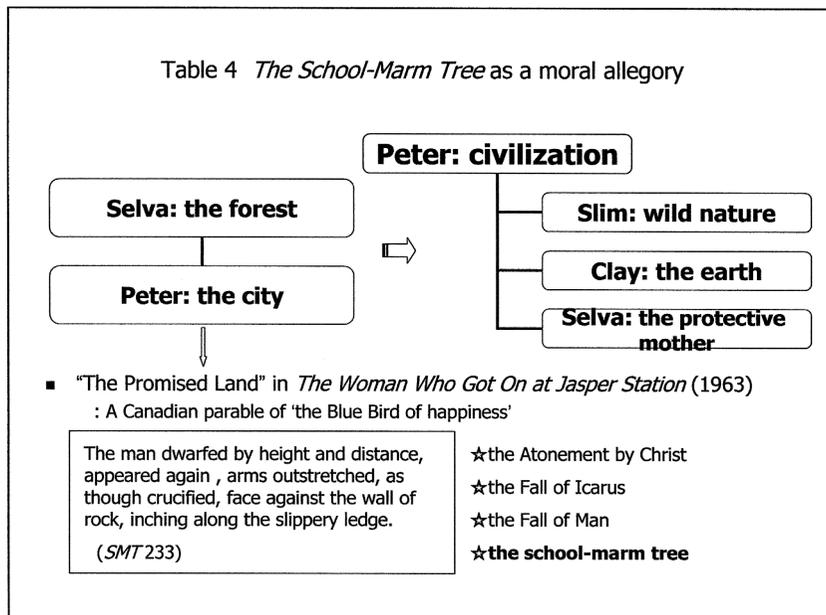
Canadian wilderness itself. Selva shows the nurturing aspect of Great Mother in her attitude toward delicate Peter, as her desire to nourish and protect him would indicate. We can assume Peter's death as the result of his contact with these aspects. Firstly, his challenge to defeat Slim, the wild nature, proves that Peter, the embodiment of civilization was too sophisticated to retain 'life force' for exploring the wilderness. Then, Peter should not have changed his target of yearning from Selva to Clay, the real mountain man and insisted to accompany Clay to his climb to Thunder Ridge. Peter found in the mountain man, "the prototype of the Canadian Rockies on the terms on which the characters in his boyhood stories had met it" (216). His refusal to listening to Selva, the protective mother, indicates that Peter was doomed to be a sacrificial creature as the following passage in Table 4 would illustrate.

The scene provides the reader with multiple

images as shown in Table 4. Further more, the scene reminds us of Selva's favorite, the school-marm tree on the hill, resembling a human figure with two forked branches uplifting against the sky. This association suggests human aspiration and its unattainableness as Selva's life exemplifies. The whole picture conveys a moral lesson intended by the mountain man writer that ignorance in the civilized will cause failure in their exploring the wilderness, let alone in their survival in the wild nature. On the other hand, the narrative contains a successful case by Mr. Branchflower. The man from New Zealand made the first solitary ascent of Mount Erebus in the Canadian Rockies. Indeed, knowledge, experience, and 'life force' should count when the civilized dare to face the wilderness.

7. Conclusion

We have seen that the O'Hagan's world



shares some of typical motifs or patterns in Canadian literature before the 1970's: namely, motifs of 'straight line' vs. 'curve', and a marked preference for failure and frustration found in his main characters. In *Tay John*, overwhelming presence of the wilderness blurred the political and historical victories of railway building, with disappearing losers. In the *School-Marm Tree*, the railway line uniting East and West never played the primary role for self-confined Selva with locomotive whistle lingering in her ears.

The way O'Hagan deals with Canadian issues should reflect the Atwood's generalization that Canadian literature is undeniably somber and negative. Atwood says at the conclusion of her *Survival* that in Canadian literature, a character who does much more than survives stands out almost as an anomaly (245). Such are the cases with Jack Denham, in *Tay John* and Clay in *The School-Marm Tree*. They could avoid failure patterns and do something new in their own ways. Jack Denham took the lead in telling stories of Tay John in the middle of the narrative as a potential meta-fiction writer. Clay convinced Selva to follow him to a new ground in the mountains where he could raise horses. What they had in common is that they were real mountain men who knew the city and what it stood for just like O'Hagan himself.

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ハワード・オヘイガンの小説にみるカナディアニズム —「直線派」と「曲線派」の相克—

大阪樟蔭女子大学人間科学部教養教育
長尾知子

概 要

カナダの作家ハワード・オヘイガン（1902-82）の小説におけるカナダ性について考察する。第二の大陸横断鉄道敷設時代、カナディアンロッキーの未開地が抱えていたカナダ事情が、作品世界でいかに表象されているかを探る。先駆性ゆえに注目を浴びた代表作『テイジョン物語』（1939）をはじめ、もうひとつの長編小説で伝統的なロマンスでもある『女教師の木』（1977）、ノンフィクションの体裁を持つ物語集『未開地の男たち』（1958）を取り上げる。未開地への鉄道敷設により文明化されるとするカナダ西部開拓のコンセプトを検討するに当たり、マーガレット・アトウッドが『サバイバル』（1972）で範疇化している「直線派」と「曲線派」の相克というモチーフを援用する。この二項対立の概念は、オヘイガンの作品世界ではダブルヴィジョンと化し、作品構造においても人物創造においてもポストモダニズムの諸相を先取りしていることがうかがえる。

キーワード：カナダの小説、ハワード・オヘイガン、未開地、文明、ポストモダニズム