

# The portrayal of nature in the selected poems of Irving Layton's *A Red Carpet For the Sun*.

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on a seminal study of the portrayal of nature in the selected poems of *Irving Layton's A Red Carpet For the Sun: The Cold Green Element, The longest Journey and One View of Dead fish*. Irving Layton was the most influential poet whose poems convey the thoughts of survival in the hinterland. In Canadian literature, the role of nature plays an eminent position, which reflects the lives of humans and their bewildering thoughts. This paper discusses the depiction of nature in Canada, which helps to propagate the mindset of the Canadians.

Key Words: Canadian Literature, Nature, Wilderness, Emptiness, Despair, Death and scary.

The Portrayal of Nature in the selected Poems of *Irving Layton's A Red Carpet For the Sun*.

Canadian literature is the body of written works produced by Canadians reflecting the country's dual origin and its official bilingualism that is English and French. As a critic Northrop Fyre observed Canadian literature is haunted by the overriding question "where is here?" Thus metaphoric mappings of people and places became central to the evolution of the Canadian Literary imagination. Bruce King states that ideology of

Canadian literature which goes from local humour through an early internationalism, historical romances and settled life.

Irving Layton was a Roman-born Canadian poet. His family moved to Montreal when he was one year old. During his schooling, he got inspired by Lord Tennyson's poem, "The Revenge" later he earned a degree in agriculture at Macdonald College, where he joined the young People's socialist League. His involvement with the league led to his being banned from entering the United States for fifteen years. Layton enlisted in the Canadian army in 1942 and was honourably discharged a year later. Then he served as an editor for first statement press, "Here and Now" (1945) as well as for contact Press. Layton's student and best friend was Leonard Cohen who was a Canadian poet and singer. His honour included two Nobel Prize Nominations, Italy's Petrarch Prize for Poetry and the Governor General Award of Canada.

His contemporary writers are Margeret Atwood; her stories show her relationship with wilderness of nature. Her writing reveal the feminist perspective. Yann Martel is a fiction writer with a paradoxical style of writing and approach to his craft is methodical and planned, not spontaneous. Robin Mistry is an Indian-born Canadian author whose fiction has a precise writing style. He writes about the difficulties that Indian Immigrants face when coming to Canada.

Irving Layton's famous works are *The Black Huntsmen* (1951). This poem conveys the time when Jewish skin was made into Lampshades. We can consider the work as the song of Innocence becoming the Song of Experience. *A Red Carpet for the Sun* (1959). This collocation of poem shows his themes centered on nature, death and hope. Other prominent

poems are *The Pole-Vaulter* (1979), *The Selected Poems of Irving Layton* (1977), *Final Reckoning poems* (1987) and a wild *Peculiar Joy: Selected poems* (1945-82). His prose includes *Engagements: The Prose of Irving Layton* (1972), *Taking Sides: The Collected Social and Political Writings* (1977) and the Memoir *Waiting for the Messiah* (1985).

*A Red Carpet for the Sun* is the collection of poems, published in 1958, it is the only book that won the Governor General Award. It includes poems reprinted from twelve previous collections and contains much of the best work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Cold Green Element* and *Berry Picking*. It includes the thoughts of Layton where he proclaims his own “impeccable ear for rhythm”. As capable of genius as he is of utter triviality, Layton remains among the most rewarding and infuriating of Canadian Poets.

This paper annotates the portrayal of Nature in the three following poems: *The Cold Green Element*, *the Longest Journey* and *One View of Dead Fish*. The first poem *The Cold Green Element* speculates the wilderness of nature. Layton contemplates the typical mindset of Canadians in the first few lines of the poem as the following,”

At the end of the Garden walk, / the wind and its satellite wait for me: their meaning I will not know/ until I go there,” Layton (1-4). Canadians know there is always an end to their happy life. Because of the dangers waited for them like wind and satellite. Here Layton puts his random imagination finding the wind as common and everyone knows about it. On the other hand, Layton probes the idea of satellite which cannot be sought by everyone. So Canadians undergo the mindset to know of the calmer and cheaper side of nature and also know that the complicated side of nature

can change their forms to threaten the lives of people. This ideology also reflects Margaret Atwood in her work *Survival*, where she emphasizes nature as “distrust “and she stated that Canadian writers as a whole do not trust nature, there are always suspecting some dirty trick. Henceforth she portrays nature as betrayed expectation.

In the next lines, Layton connotes the person who is wearing “the black-hatted undertaker/ who, passing, saw my heart beating in the grass” Layton (5-6). Here the black hatted refers to death, which passing beside of him and knows about his fear towards the death. Layton pictures how death knows about his fear like his heart beating in the grass. This metaphorical image of grass denotes naked and humble. Here the poet is symbolic of the grass, as to being helpless and simple creature of the world. On the land of grass everything was clearly visible. One questions how the poet’s fear visible to the eyes of death. Otherwise one can take the black hatted person as fellow people who also undergo the same crisis in nature and make them be “strangers”, who live under the same wilderness roof. Atwood also projects the strangeness, through the poem of Douglas Lapan’s “A Country without a Mythology”, she claims that the stranger is travelling towards no discernible goal through a land without “monuments or landmarks,” among “a savage people”, who are silent and moody. Layton often ponders the awful condition of Canadians, in being treated as strangers in their own Land. Their belonged land; they were treated.

The following lines refer to the central idea which is”, a great squall in the pacific blew a dead poet / out of the water.”Layton (8-9) Layton attacks the sense of the ideal life of the canadian people pointing to how the dead poet had been blown from the Pacific Ocean. Canadian literature portrays their victims as drowning and freezing. Atwood also refers to the drowning people as poets and freezing people were prose writers. Here one can’t

blame the nature. The entire environment is water and snow. Atwood emphasizes that there is a lot of water and snow in Canada and both are good murder weapons.

Layton describes the heart of the people who saw the drowning bodies,” Crowds depart daily to see it, and return /with grimaces and Incomprehension: if its limbs twitched in the air they would sit at its feet peeling their oranges”. Layton (11-15). Layton regards how Canadians were helpless in the hands of nature. These lines depict that they were under the control of nature. Layton portrays how silenced nature undergoes the transition to threaten the people and it's not the fault of nature. Layton never blames the ways of nature. He accepts the behavior of nature in the hinterland of Canada. Atwood confronts that the nature is an isolated or alienated man: the result of an actively hostile nature is usually a dead man and certainly a threatened one. so we can see nature as an element of wilderness and scary.

Layton's expression of personal relationship with nature to a poetic perspective, focusing his perspective towards nature, “I embrace like a lover/ the trunk of a tree, one of those/ whom the lightning was too much/ and grew a brilliant/ hunchback with a crown of leaves.” Layton (16-20) these lines explore the quality of nature in Canada, how the people embrace the awful nature as a beauty. This shows their mind sets towards the collapsed natural conditions. Layton depicts the higher order ideology of the people who denied being victims. According to Atwood, this basic victim position, stated as “they are afraid to recognize they are victims for fear of losing the privileges they possess and they are forced to account somehow for the disadvantages suffered by the rest of the people in the



group by disparaging them”. Layton describes the icon of nature as their own identity.

The next following lines deal with how the nature had not been helpful to the people. Duty of nature is to sustain the lives of creatures. But here in Canada, nature reciprocates to human actions showing anger and resentment. Layton refers that “The aliments escaped from the labels /of the medicine bottles are all fled to the wind “Layton (21-22). medicine were essential to life but when there is not aliments in the bottles and remained empty, there is no use of the medicine and it couldn’t save the lives of the people. Contrastingly Layton applied this idea to nature. Which remains empty and forgets the duty towards the people? We can notice that the wind took way the aliments of medicine. This shows how weather condition destroys the lives of Canadians. On the whole, Atwood considered the nature’s personality underwent a change: she remained a female deity, but she became redder in tooth and claw as Darwinism infiltrated literature. So we can observe the double minded attitude of Canadians mindset. Their blind faiths were in divine mother of nature and have a feeling of hopeless imprisonment.

Now Layton views through the eyes of old woman, which can also be interpreted as perspectives through the nature. Here Layton refers to the woman as old. Nature is considered here as old because she was helpless in her last days she does not intend to kill the people. While she fells down humans who were crossing her lines and end their lives in danger. we can refer “old pupils” as the typical view of old woman finding her fellow nature as endangered, Layton states that’s the sun became / a blood smear on broad catalpa leaves and hanging from ancient twigs, /my murdered selves/ sparked the air like the muted collisions/ of fruit.”Layton (26-31).

Layton describes his encounter as his last breath among the twigs of trees. So, we wonder how he would be murdered. Thus, he depicts a weary sense of death by stating how his views changed as bloody. Here sun refers to the eyes of the poet; or it may refer to the light of the world, which changed to bloody colour showing in saw angry face on human race. Layton concludes the poem by the following lines” but the furies clear a path for me to the worm/who sang for an hour in the throat of a robin/ and misled by the cries of young boys/ I am again / a breathless swimmer in that cold green element “Layton (36-40). Layton batters that the nature at least helped him to enter the gateway of death. Layton connects the last line “a breathless swimmer in that cold green element” to the lines” a great squall in the pacific blew a dead poet out of the water”. Atwood on Douglas LePan’s poem stated that the way, the nature doesn’t grant him the accurate vision to attain his destiny,’ and not a sign, no emblem in the sky”. Similarly, Layton considers nature as cold, element which doesn’t have any feeling towards the fellow creatures. Layton conclude how the Canadians encounter the dangers in nature and make it as a usual thing happening in everyday lives

The second poem *The Longest Journey* connotes the different faces of nature. Layton conveys the idea” of wanted of an author’s omniscience”. Layton clearly tells that in order to view all sides of nature the author must be omniscient. On the first line itself Layton tells that he cannot offer all sides of nature. But he could discover a few pages of nature. Layton refers to the shadows. These shadows represents the lives of Canadians who undergo lives under the shadow. One could also interpret it as malterable dark life.. But the shadow eem to suvive without showing courtesy at others feet. “They strove with shadows in the fast-dying

light:/but the shadows were themselves, things of time, which they cast without courtesy at each other's feet". Layton (2-4) Layton brings out the imagery of the lives of people like "rusted cans" which he saw in the rain. These ideas provoke how the people's lives had been rusted by the nature. Layton scrutinizes the different faces of nature like "the weather and angry flayed them" weather had an angry look on people but even though children were spies to be out-smarted. This line reflects on upcoming generation resisting the abhorrence of nature in Canada. Layton dwells that" or in the trees, where the scrupulous robins/kept signaling to them that they were there." even the robins were warning them about nature's activity. Those robins never behave like typical birds in other countries which forgot to sing are use its throats to warn the people. Layton refers to "the leaves twitched to the words like wolves' ears/ and gulped them down in heavy swallows."Layton (11-14) Even the leaves sounds like wolves and its shape looks like wolves ears always focused and alert towards danger. Likewise every people have these features in them

The wholesome concept intertwines the voices of Atwood. she states, "I will lose-I must lose-because that's the way things are and ought to be" man wills his role as victim because this completes for him a universe as hostile pattern and at this point the pattern becomes self-perpetuating. Layton points out to the real dual face of nature in the following lines "then they were quiet: quarrelling dogs". In some case landscape of Canada remains quiet and seemed to be beautiful for some times but it often changed to the form like quarrelling dogs. Layton concludes the poem with reference to the emotions of people towards nature" they solved the monstrous riddle of time and self/ and forgave the hour and the changed weather" Layton (23-25). These lines denotes how the people accept their fate with the hands of nature. They forgive the changed



weather. They find their own way to survive in the hinterland of Canada. Layton ends with heart of hopes by these lines “yet the good life holds’/like great art, is unsensational: and there time/ does not rush upon us but unfolds “Layton (26-28)

The Third poem is *One View of Dead Fish*. Layton confesses that “had it been a drowned child/ it should have owned some proof of birth, and sagacious forbears for this neutral water:” Layton (1-4) These lines refer to the poet’s thought that it may be a drowned child. Through those scary words, Layton confounds the serious scene as one that is causal. Even the fish depicts a child. This first line brings out the poet’s strong confession that nature is scary. Then Layton argues that a child must have a proof for its birth. This shows the death of the child had happened because of being born in the scary land of Canada. Layton continuously termed the water as neutral. It quit and the people couldn’t be alert of any danger. Layton states the following lines,” someone to mourn, a name. / but being a rotting fish “Layton (5). Here poet refers not only humans but even all the living beings undergo the same dangers. Layton carefully compared a child to a fish. The fish had been drowned in the water. Its habitat is water and if the fish finds its home a danger where would it find a safe heaven. Layton tells how a safe shelter turns dangerous. Likewise when a child finds nature itself troublesome, the land becomes a scary one. At the end of the poem, Layton expresses the beauty of being decomposed. The poetic lines show the levels of the Canadians mindset . They even begin to admire the beauty of death and scary things. Layton brings out, “its fins, a red streak in the crumpled/ water, mattered to no one/ not the white/ of its decomposing beauty” Layton (7-10). These lines convey the mindset of

the people about the nature and how they accepting the dangers as a part of their life.

on the whole, Irving Layton brings out his views on Atwood's third stand in *Survival*, where people are seen trying to frantically to dissociate from the grey sterile position. Even through the hardships of their lifestyle they find themselves in land. They believe that they belonged to hinterland of Canada. Thus Layton expresses his deep emotional view in "The Birth of Tragedy" that says;

In me, nature's divided things-  
 tree, mould on tree-  
 have their fruition:  
 I am their core. let them swap,  
 bandy, like a flame swerve  
 I am their mouth: as a mouth I serve.

Since, Atwood confronts that Layton accepts the victor/victim game, but makes the un-Canadian choice of identifying with the victors rather than the victims.

Irving Layton gives a vivid image of the landscape of Canada and the people with strong mind. These ideas provokes the thoughts that one should fight even if we fail and foglet till the last chance. Layton speculates on the views of the people and their way of living on the scary land. These poems ponder on hearts which accept all faces of nature. Layton remains an influential poet by sowing seeds of positive thought by negative caricature.

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