

## “The snow is a moving shroud”: Still Stands the House and Murder on the Canadian Stage

Shelley Scott

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Résumé de l'article

Dans son exploration de la pièce *Still Stands the House* de Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Shelley Scott examine comment une expérience genrée du paysage canadien a pu s'exprimer par un meurtre commis par une femme. Au théâtre, un tel acte peut être un instrument puissant pour traduire sur scène une réaction canadienne au fait d'être enfermé dans un environnement hostile. La pièce de Ringwood s'avère un outil fascinant pour observer la convergence des rôles sexo-spécifiques, de la violence, de la géographie et du climat; elle puise ses origines dans les points de vue et les préoccupations de familles d'agriculteurs ayant participé à la colonisation de l'Alberta au début du vingtième siècle. Les théories de Northrop Frye et de Margaret Atwood ont été remises en question par des critiques subséquents et par les réalités changeantes de la société et de la littérature canadiennes, et bien des supposés sur lesquels reposent ces théories ont été problématisés par des chercheurs en études coloniales et autochtones. Sans perdre de vue ces objections cruciales, Scott fait valoir que certains concepts clé mis de l'avant par Frye et Atwood s'appliquent toujours au monde imaginaire de Ringwood et peuvent donc s'avérer utiles lorsqu'il s'agit de comprendre l'impact de la pièce et l'importance qu'elle continue d'avoir au sein du canon théâtral canadien. En représentant de manière réaliste la misère et l'isolement du mode de vie des colons agriculteurs, Ringwood fait de l'environnement hostile un personnage actif de la pièce; en établissant un lien entre la violence de l'environnement et l'acte violent du personnage de Hester, elle laisse entendre qu'une brutalité intrinsèque se cache derrière l'esprit pionnier et l'expérience coloniale au Canada.

# “The snow is a moving shroud”: *Still Stands the House* and Murder on the Canadian Stage

SHELLEY SCOTT

In exploring *Still Stands the House* by Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Scott considers how a particularly gendered experience of the Canadian landscape finds expression in a murderous act by a woman. The act of murder can be a powerful theatrical device for reflecting, on stage, a Canadian reaction to the experience of being embedded in a hostile environment. The play provides a fascinating case study for the convergence of gender roles, violence, geography, and climate, and springs from the perspectives and concerns of Alberta settler-colonial farm families in the early twentieth century. The theories of Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood have been challenged by subsequent critics and by the changing realities of Canadian society and literature, and many of their assumptions thoroughly problematized by colonial and Indigenous studies. But, keeping these crucial criticisms in mind, Scott argues that some of Frye's and Atwood's key concepts can still prove applicable to the imaginative world of Ringwood's play, and are therefore useful for understanding its impact and continuing status in the Canadian dramatic canon. By realistically evoking the hardship of the time and the isolation of the settler farmer lifestyle, Ringwood makes the harsh environment an active character in the drama and, by linking the violence of the environment with the violent act of her character, Hester, Ringwood suggests something intrinsically brutal behind the rhetoric of the pioneer spirit and the settler experience in Canada.

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*actif de la pièce; en établissant un lien entre la violence de l'environnement et l'acte violent du personnage de Hester, elle laisse entendre qu'une brutalité intrinsèque se cache derrière l'esprit pionnier et l'expérience coloniale au Canada.*



In *Survival*, her groundbreaking study of Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood reminds us that authors are “transmitters of their culture.” Famously, Atwood’s intention was to identify “key patterns” which “constitute the shape of Canadian literature insofar as it is *Canadian* literature” and to explain how “that shape is also a reflection of a national habit of mind” (19). In this article, my project will be to employ concepts from Atwood and from Northrop Frye, as proponents of a notion of Canadian identity deeply involved with the environment, and to apply them to a Canadian play that both illustrates and complicates their ideas. In exploring *Still Stands the House* by Gwen Pharis Ringwood, I will consider how a particularly gendered experience of the Canadian landscape finds expression in a murderous act by a woman. The act of murder can be a powerful theatrical device for reflecting, on stage, a Canadian reaction to the experience of being embedded in a hostile environment. The play provides a fascinating case study for the convergence of gender roles, violence, geography, and climate, and springs from the perspectives and concerns of Alberta settler-colonial farm families in the early twentieth century. Frye and Atwood have been challenged by subsequent critics and by the changing realities of Canadian society and literature,<sup>1</sup> and many of their assumptions thoroughly problematized by colonial and Indigenous studies. But, keeping these crucial criticisms in mind, I will argue that some of Frye’s and Atwood’s key concepts can still prove applicable to the imaginative world of Ringwood’s play, and are therefore useful for understanding its impact and continuing status in the Canadian dramatic canon. By employing realism to evoke the hardship of the time and the isolation of the settler farmer lifestyle, Ringwood makes the harsh environment an active character in the drama and, by linking the violence of the environment with the violent act of her character, Hester, Ringwood suggests something intrinsically brutal behind the rhetoric of the pioneer spirit and the settler experience in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

Gina Starblanket and Dallas Hunt describe some of the visual sources for that familiar pioneer rhetoric: “Early immigration posters and handbooks described the [Prairie] region as a vast, unoccupied, fertile hinterland with little, if any, mention of indigenous peoples [...] [and] idealized a patriarchal nuclear family and an agrarian lifestyle.” Images were of a strong, prosperous farmer and his family, on a wide-open Prairie that was depicted and understood as his new home and rightful property. Starblanket and Hunt write, “These images help illustrate the intent behind the process of settler colonialism - not just its foundations, but the norms, values, expectations and aspirations that were held by individual settlers and inherited by many descendants.” Starblanket and Hunt point out that these images are highly masculine and work to institutionalize a white man’s “ability to build a home, provide for and protect one’s family, and [...] to exercise control over one’s private domain” (O9).<sup>3</sup>

Exploring the relationship between the settler-colonial experience and the environment in Canadian literature has long been associated with Northrop Frye’s theory of the garrison mentality. Frye describes

[small] and isolated communities surrounded with a physical or psychological “frontier,” separated from one another and from their American and British cultural sources: communities that provide all that their members have in the way of distinctively human values, and that are compelled to feel a great respect for the law and order that holds them together, yet confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting—such communities are bound to develop what we may provisionally call a garrison mentality. (*Bush* 225)

Essentially, the fear of nature draws people together in their metaphoric garrisons, enforcing a kind of conformity to community standards. Frye elaborates that, a “garrison is a closely knit and beleaguered society, and its moral and social values are unquestionable. In a perilous enterprise one does not discuss causes or motives: one is either a fighter or a deserter” (*Bush* 226). The fighter is fighting against the hostile natural environment, while the deserter is one who feels himself pulled away from the group, “aware of a conflict within himself” (*Bush* 226), and opposed to what he comes to feel are the “anti-creative forces” (*Bush* 231) of the community.

Frye explains how these settler Canadian origins have shaped the creative imagination: “Literature is conscious mythology: as society develops, its mythical stories become structural principles of storytelling, its mythical concepts [...] become habits of metaphorical thoughts” (*Bush* 232). Margaret Atwood expresses something similar when she suggests, “What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else [...] literature is a map, a geography of the mind” (26). For Atwood, the “central symbol” for Canada is survival, whether in the face of hostile elements or of a crisis (41). Frye agrees, summarizing that, “everything that is central in Canadian writing seems to be marked by the imminence of the natural world” (*Bush* 247). Both Frye and Atwood are describing the reality of settler Canadians in a period of colonial history that ignores, and in fact relies on the denial of, the very different origins and relationship to the natural world of Indigenous peoples. The garrison mentality, in particular, betrays the settlers’ terror not only of the harsh environment, but their fear of the Indigenous “others” who inhabit it. As Eva Mackey has pointed out, “the idea of being lost in the wilderness is itself a perspective of a colonizer” and is a settler point of view, one which, “not coincidentally, often erases the presence of Aboriginal people. Yet, paradoxically, white settler nationalists take up a subject position more appropriate to Native people, in order to construct Canadians as victims of colonialism [...] and to create Canadian identity” (131).

Ringwood’s play *Still Stands the House* is a clear illustration of the ideas of Frye and Atwood because Ringwood was consciously writing from the perspective of settler Canadians, but her particular use of realism, and her gendered understanding of the environment, add depth to the way her play works towards a murderous climax. In 1939, *Still Stands the House* won “the [Dominion Drama Festival] executive prize of one hundred dollars for the best Canadian play at a regional festival” (Bessai 178).<sup>4</sup> In *The History of Prairie Theatre*, Ross Stuart identifies Ringwood as “the most important folk dramatist to emerge in this period,” and acknowledges that she is “usually classified as a regional writer” because of her deep investment in the culture of Alberta (132). In the 1930s, G. L. Brodersen wrote of Ringwood’s work that she

is able to “express her inner Canadianism through a loving and penetrating handling of one district and its people,” calling her “the great hope of Canadian theatre” (qtd. in Wagner 15).

In her Foreword to the published collection of Ringwood’s plays, Margaret Laurence reminds us that when Gwen Pharis Ringwood began writing and was encouraged to write regional plays, her Canadian models were still “largely British and our writing was still colonialist in outlook” (xi). Laurence points out that *Still Stands the House* was “one of the first to explore the Canadian Prairie farm experience of those years. The obsessive love-hate that Bruce feels towards his unfruitful land, his half-mad sister’s equally obsessive determination that their dead father’s house shall not be sold, and his wife Ruth’s terrible loneliness and feeling of isolation, all these still exert tremendous force and strength” (xi-xii). Of Ringwood Laurence adds: “She saw, early on, the need to write out of our own people, our own land, and she has remained true to that vision” (xiv). Laurence is, of course, speaking specifically from a white and colonial sense of “us” as Canadian settlers laying claim to the land as “our own”; fellow playwright George Ryga writes from a similar bias when he insists that Ringwood

reflects as no other theatre personality I know that sense of what it means to be of this country. Raised in an Alberta rural community, she realized from childhood both the bonds and the divisions which characterized newly settled communities. That heritage was evasive and not readily recognized. And the challenge of locating roots and building a tradition on them was indeed complex and exasperating. (xvi)

Ryga is displaying a tactic common to the settler-colonial mentality, the appropriation of an identity as “native” Canadian from the absented Indigenous inhabitants of the country; Seema Ahluwalia describes this as an “assertion of ‘non-Indigenous indigeneity’ [...] that is, the re-constitution of Canadian settlers as the Native sons and daughters on this ‘our home and native land’” (46) and suggests that “Our attempts to steal the very identities of Native Peoples may explain why we continue to struggle to assert our own identity as Canadians” (49).

In their 2012 collection, *New Canadian Realisms*, Kim Solga and Roberta Barker include *Still Stands the House* as the sole “historical” example of plays they describe as adapting the conventions of realism to “entirely Canadian moments” (vi). In this article I explore how Ringwood’s uniquely Canadian moment comes to be expressed through murder, but it is important to acknowledge it as a moment that defines “Canadian” in a way that excludes many other subjectivities and elides Indigenous presence and alternative ways of knowing the land. As Starblanket and Hunt remind us, “Colonial settlement narratives either absented Indigenous peoples entirely from their portrayals of Prairie life, or when they did appear they were described as occupying a role that would not interfere with the agrarian settler lifestyle” (O9).

We must not only consider Ringwood’s context as a writer of settler narratives,<sup>5</sup> but also her experience as a *woman* writing for the theatre. As Laurence advises: “Remember that for Gwen Pharis Ringwood, it must have been initially difficult—as it was for all women writers at that time—to portray women as she *knew* they were, not as they had been presented by generations of male writers” (xii). Ringwood herself commented on the risk taken by a

woman writer: “Exposure on the stage of intimate details of family life, even acknowledgement that conflict, blood, money, love and hate exist in explosive forms in the bosom of the family, pose a risk to a woman responsible for making a serene home” (qtd. in Wagner 4). The home in *Still Stands the House* is anything but serene, and by writing about a woman driven to murder, Ringwood found a powerful way to talk about settler women and their *unsettled* environment.

The play is constructed as a confrontation between Hester, who has lived in and cared for a remote Prairie farmhouse all her life, and her sister-in-law, Ruth, who wants to convince her husband, Bruce, to sell the farm and move closer to town. At first, Ringwood creates a naturalistic vignette of a common experience for Canadian Prairie farmers during the Depression: a recognizable struggle with the unforgiving land and brutal weather conditions. The conflict between the two women is melodramatic and complex. Hester boasts that she could have married but sacrificed herself to care for her widowed father and her younger brother; she resents Ruth’s sexuality and her pregnancy and views her as an intolerable threat. Hester’s behaviour grows increasingly deranged. When Bruce goes out in a blizzard to care for a horse, Ruth realizes his lantern was not filled with oil and that he will not be able to find his way back to the house in the dark and the storm. As Ruth readies herself to follow Bruce, Hester promises to fill another lantern: but she does not, thus effectively murdering them both and keeping the house for herself.

In his study of the use of violent nature imagery in literature, Robert Brown suggests phenomena such as storms “can be linked to a fear of contemporary social change.” Brown writes of characters much like the ones in *Still Stands the House*, the early settlers that tried to wrestle a livelihood from a difficult land, and who confront

the isolation and endangerment of the individual on the periphery of traditional society [...] isolation is expressed as an apposition between society and nature, which is projected in each work as an “other” terrain of both hope and fear. Each work features the problem of identity and the experience of self in nature, and each presents a vision of what it could mean to live unbound by traditional fetters. (9)

Brown goes on to ask, “Is this vision of social change promising or horrifying? Does nature ultimately turn on those it seduces in a paroxysm of violence that destroys them?” (9) He concludes that nature imagery can be understood as a metaphor, “Where idyllic nature imagery reinforces static values, violent nature destroys their fixed settings, signifying ferment and change” (130). Interestingly, Frye writes something similar when he argues that, the “unbroken violation of nature in Canada, the economy founded on the trapping and mutilating of animals, the destroying of trees, the drying up of rivers and the polluting of lakes, began inspiring guilt and uneasiness [...] there is a lurking sense not only of the indifference of nature to man, but almost of its exasperation with this parasite of humanity that has settled on it” (“National” 53). The characters in *Still Stands the House* are living on a farm that has failed, land that has not produced a decent crop for years, and they are contemplating giving up their hopeless struggle for an easier living closer to town. The significance of this defeat, and the upheaval it will cause, is part of the larger social reality of life on the Prairies in the 1930s—a turmoil symbolized onstage by the terrible blizzard. In

terms of Frye's garrison, they have been deserters, and they must now contemplate a return to being fighters.

As Ringwood's realistic one-act drama begins, much attention is paid to the battle between the house and the threatening storm outside its walls. The house, and more specifically the room in which the play takes place, is undoubtedly Hester's domain. Not only does she believe the house belongs to her, there are many indications in the script that she and the house are symbolically and metaphorically linked. In the opening description, Ringwood writes that the "*house was built to withstand the menace of the Canadian winter and scornfully suffers the storm to shriek about the chimney corner, to knock at the door and rattle the windows in a wild attempt to force an entrance*" (27). Both the house and the winter are personified: nature is "*wild*" and wants in, but the house (and Hester) are "*scornful*" of its attempts. The stage directions go on to describe the room in terms that could as easily be applied to Hester, describing its "*faded austerity*" and "*decayed elegance*," as "*remote and cheerless as a hearth in which no fire is ever laid. The room has made a stern and solemn pact with the past. Once it held the warm surge of life; but as the years have gone by, it has settled into a rigid pattern of neat, uncompromising severity*" (27). When Hester enters the scene, she is described as "*tall, dark, and unsmiling. The stern rigidity of her body, the bitter austerity of her mouth, and the almost arrogant dignity of her carriage seem to make her a part of the room she enters*" (29). Ringwood is making explicit, for the reader and for those who stage the play, that Hester and the house are one and the same.

Just as the house is described as once holding a "*warm surge of life*" that has faded over the years, we also learn that Hester was once a more appealing creature. She describes her relationship with her younger brother: "When he was little, after Mother died, he'd come tugging at my hand...He'd get hold of my little finger and say 'Come, Hettie...come and look.' Everything was 'Hettie' then" (34). Similarly, Hester describes a close bond with her father: "'We'll have to lean on one another now, Daughter.' Those were his words...And that's the way it was. I was beside him until—[his death]. I never left him" (32). Hester concedes that she could have married if she wanted to, and that "young men used to ride over here on Sunday" but insists that she "stopped that. I never saw a man I'd sleep beside, or let him touch me. And that's all they want" (34). While Hester clearly had maternal instincts, expressed towards her brother, and a need for a partnership she found with her father, she did not transfer those emotional needs to anyone else. Now that her brother is grown up and married, and her father is dead, Hester has buried her emotional needs and denies that she cares for anything more than to preserve the house exactly as it has always been, as a kind of tomb and a monument to a time when she was emotionally alive.

Frye writes that, a "feature of Canadian life that has been noted by writers from Susanna Moodie onward is the paradox of vast empty spaces and lack of privacy, with no defenses against the prying or avaricious eye" (*Bush* 221). In Frye's garrison mentality formulation, Hester's house should be a symbol of civilization, a private fortress against the vast, empty Prairie landscape outside. In his critique of Frye, D.M.R. Bentley characterizes this inward-turning as patriarchal, as a retreat to a "refuge from messy nature and busy femininity in masculine abstraction and mastery" (Trotter qtd. in Bentley), a retreat that would accord with the father-identified Hester. As we have seen, Starblanket and Hunt similarly identify the settler myth as one of masculine control. Indeed, Ringwood's detailed description of the good quality furniture, the portrait of the father on the wall, and the presence of the Bible,

would all lead to an expectation of the house as a bastion of old world patriarchal tradition and stability, a refuge from the terrors of uncontrollable nature in a hostile land. But Hester is a female figure with greater complexity, symbolically linked to both the house and to the land outside. Traditionally, the work of moving stones, forging roads and buildings, taming the dry prairie and forcing it to yield crops, would all be male activities. While her brother Bruce drives himself to conquer the natural landscape, Hester can only devote herself to the land vicariously by ruling inside the house. In fact, Hester believes that Bruce is not tied closely enough with the land; she says, “You have to love a place to make things grow. The land knows when you don’t care about it, and Bruce doesn’t care about it anymore. Not like Father did” (32). Nonetheless, because he is the male, Bruce owns the house and the land. He can make the decision to sell and force Hester to leave. Hester insists (“This house belongs to me”) and Bruce refutes her (“Hester, don’t start that again! I wish to God the land had been divided differently, but it wasn’t”). Hester repeats that, “Father meant for us to stay here and keep things the way they were when he was with us,” and concludes: “He meant for me to have the house” (39). Bruce tells his wife, “I feel about the land like Hester does about the house, I guess. I don’t want to leave it. I don’t want to give it up” (38). For Bruce, the land is a place of memory and a challenge; his father was able to farm and Bruce wants to live up to that masculine legacy. Perhaps, having a strictly gendered view of the world, it cannot occur to Bruce that Hester would have been as involved with the land as with the house, had she been allowed. He does not understand that Hester loves the land even more than he does, and that she relishes even the storm for its associations with their beloved father. Hester remarks: “He always liked the snow. He called it a moving shroud, a winding-sheet that the wind lifts and raises and lets fall again” (32).

Given that Hester and her sister-in-law, Ruth, are set up as opposing forces in the play, and that Hester is so clearly identified with the house, we might assume that Ruth will be symbolically aligned with nature, that she will have a contrasting “domain of association” (Murray 77). In *Divisions on a Ground*, Frye writes that nineteenth-century Canadian writers exhibited “the rhetoric of a divided voice. Up above was vigor and optimism and buoyancy and all the other qualities of life in a new land with lots of natural resources to exploit; underneath were lonely, bitter, brooding visions of cruelty without and despair within” (“Across” 37). Frye mentions that this “division in tone” can be “traced in later writers,” and I would argue that it is an apt description of what Ringwood illustrates with *Still Stands the House*. The optimistic voice is given to Ruth Warren, described as “*small, fair-haired and pretty, twenty-five or twenty-six years of age.*” In the stage directions, we are told that there is “*more strength in her than her rather delicate appearance would indicate*” (28). Ruth is closely identified with a pot of lavender hyacinths “*blooming bravely on the table, in contrast to its surroundings*” (28). Ruth describes the hyacinth to her sister-in-law Hester in a “*young and vibrant voice*”: “They’re birth! They’re spring!” (31). Hester, in contrast, says “Hyacinths always seem like death to me” and criticizes Ruth for going to “as much trouble for that plant as if it were a child.” Later in the play, Hester deliberately breaks one of the stalks “*with a quick, angry gesture*” (35). The act foreshadows Hester’s violence to come, and her comparison of the hyacinth to a child is particularly meaningful when we learn that Ruth is pregnant.

In fact, the pregnancy is evidence of sexual activity taking place in the house, and that—even before Bruce decides to sell—is another trigger for Hester’s descent into madness.



Towards the end of the play, the stage directions tell us that: “*Hester comes towards Ruth with a strange, blazing anger in her face.*” Her next lines are a quite shocking departure from the rest of the play’s naturalistic dialogue: “I know your kind. In the night you tempted him with your bright hair...Your body anointed with jasmine for his pleasure...Oh, I know what you are! You and women like you. You put a dream around him with your arms, a sinful dream... You lift your white face to every stranger like you offered him a cup to drink from. That’s sin! That’s lust after the forbidden fruit” (40). Hester’s feverish condemnation of Ruth is the moment when she becomes mad. She begins to slide into the past, finally imagining that her father is still alive, and remorselessly rids the house of Ruth and Bruce. Her last words of the play are a Bible quotation about nature and the house: “And the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock” (43).<sup>6</sup>

Ruth’s association with nature in the play is of a tame and conventionally feminine kind. Ruth’s “optimism and buoyancy” are not for the land, but for the life in town that she longs for. Her sexuality is expressed only in the most socially acceptable way, through pregnancy within marriage. Her love of nature is confined to a pretty hyacinth in a pot. When confronted with nature in its more uncontrollable aspects, Ruth is terrified. She states, “It’s so cold it almost frightens me,” and a little later the stage directions tell us that “*A touch of hysteria creeps into her voice*” when she says: “The wind swirls and shrieks and raises such queer echoes in this old house! It seems to laugh at us in here, thinking we’re safe, hugging the stove! As if it knew it could blow out the light and the fire and...” (31). Ruth has something of a premonition of her own death, since eventually the light of her lantern will blow out, and she and Bruce will be lost in the storm. Echoing the words she used to describe the cold, Ruth tells Bruce how she feels about Hester—“I’m almost afraid of her lately” (36)—and how she really feels about the house and the land: “You didn’t tell me you worshipped a house. That you made a god of a house and a section of land” (37). Ruth reveals how lonely and unhappy she has been, and Bruce finally understands: “I didn’t know you hated it so much” (39). Rather than nature or the land, Ruth is the one that truly stands for civilization and the garrison, arguing that her child would die on the farm and that she must move into town. For Frye, settlements like the one Ruth longs for are the very opposite of Canadian nature—“There is little adaptation to nature: in both architecture and arrangement, Canadian cities and villages express rather an arrogant abstraction, the conquest of nature by an intelligence that does not love it” (*Bush* 224)—and, indeed, Ruth does not.

Finally, the connection between Hester and the house and the land becomes so intense that she is driven to madness. Jenn Stephenson argues that “each person may be defined entirely by his or her material situation—a central tenet of nineteenth-century realism,” and that for the “nineteenth-century realist, environment and identity became almost synonymous” (75). As we have seen, Hester’s identification is complex. On the one hand, she claims she is the only one among the three characters that really loves the land. She is unafraid of the storm and actually likes the snow. But on the other hand, nature also represents the present rather than the past, uncontrollable forces rather than the strict control Hester maintains over her home and her own body. In the opening stage directions, Ringwood writes, “*As if in defiance of the room, the frost has covered the window in the rear wall with a wild and exotic design*” (27). This is the “*wild and exotic*” face of nature that Hester despises and associates with Ruth’s flagrant sexuality.<sup>7</sup> Hester uses “exotic” terms and phrases, such as

“anointed with jasmine,” to convey her distaste at this particular, decadent, aspect of nature. At the end of the play, “*Hester is slowly unraveling her knitting but is unaware of it*” (41). Her voice changes, first described as “*a strange, calm voice that seems to come from a long distance*” and then as “*a high, childlike tone, like the sound of a violin string breaking*” (41). In one speech, she moves from reciting a story from the past to living in the past. She sends Ruth into the storm to find Bruce with a lantern that will burn out before they are able to return. Her last lines are excited and confirm her intentions: “They’ve gone! They won’t be back now” (42). Frye reminds us of the settler-colonial context of Hester’s dilemma when he suggests

the conquest of nature has its own perils for the imagination, in a country where the winters are so cold and where conditions of life have so often been bleak [...] I have long been impressed in Canadian poetry by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature [...] It is not a terror of the dangers or discomforts or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest. The human mind has nothing but human and moral values to cling to if it is to preserve its integrity or even its sanity, yet the vast unconsciousness of nature in front of it seems an unanswerable denial of those values. (*Bush* 225)

Roberta Barker writes of Hester: “Her intense investment in this project of mummification challenges the play’s audience to reconsider the realist setting as an uncanny one, haunted by the looming ghosts of the (un)departed and by the shadows of madness, violence, and death” (6). The blizzard becomes Hester’s “accomplice” and the play becomes “a starting point for later artists’ explorations of the troubled and resistant subjectivities that thrash around inside the apparently homely walls of the Canadian realist tradition” (7).

Atwood similarly argues, “Death by Nature [...] is an event of startling frequency in Canadian literature [...] There is lots of water and snow in Canada, and both are good murder weapons” (66). She might be thinking of Hester when she comments that “a character isolated in Nature goes crazy,” becoming Nature itself and leaving behind humanity (67). Atwood cites common incidents in settler-colonial Canadian literature where snow is a death image, “a metaphor for alienation, terror, manifestation of the inhuman void, and death” (79). Hester has come to view the destructive, rather than the creative, aspect of nature as her tool. Atwood declares, “Nature is a monster, perhaps, only if you come to it with unreal expectations or fight its conditions rather than accepting them and learning to live with them. Snow isn’t necessarily something you die in or hate. You can also build houses in it” (80). Ruth is the victim and Hester is the victor, simply because Hester has learned to love the snow.

Hester’s victory at the end has a quality of inexorable fate. Hester could be a figure from Greek tragedy, where we might compare her to Medea, threatened with being thrown out of her own home and driven to revenge. Like Medea, Hester has relied too much on the wrong men and lacks any kind of capital of her own, neither money nor authority. As royalty (Medea) and as the keeper of tradition (Hester), they might have some symbolic value relative to their homes, but if the homes are violated by the actions of men—through a real estate deal or an infidelity—their value is made worthless. Just as, I would argue, the ancient Greeks used non-citizen female characters to make their extreme moral dilemmas that much

more potent for the audience, so too does disenfranchised Hester stand as an unexpectedly powerful obstacle in the face of convenience. And just as Medea takes unthinkable revenge to prevent her husband Jason from having his way, Hester resorts to a double murder to prevent her world from changing. In both cases, the women use tools at their disposal in order to poison or to freeze their victims. Hester's blizzard is another face of malevolent nature, one associated with self-preservation. In Atwood's later writings, such as *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, for example, rather than humanity surviving nature, it is nature that must survive against humanity's relentless destruction of the environment.<sup>8</sup> In this recasting of her accomplice, Hester sides with nature to rid herself of other humans in an act of payback: justifiable revenge.

In addition to these archetypal characters and the conflict between civilization and nature, we have seen that Ringwood builds the impact of her play by adhering to the conventions of realism. In their Introduction to *New Canadian Realisms: New Essays on Canadian Theatre*, Kim Solga and Roberta Barker explain that realism embraces "the metonymic truth that seems to reside in detail," bringing together "material existence and psychic life" (9). The realism of *Still Stands the House* is located in its domestic details and accurate portrayal of the challenges of settler farming in a particular time and place. Solga and Barker aim to challenge the notion that realism is one-dimensional, insisting that it can accommodate "expectation alongside its failure, empathetic connection alongside uncertain allegiance, and degrees of spectatorial pleasure alongside visceral discomfort as audiences work to figure out exactly how they ought to feel, what they ought to think" (6). The naturalism of *Still Stands the House* is haunted by the unnatural—Hester's insanity and act of murder. She is the repressed emerging into the mundane. Just as audiences for Ibsen's *A Doll House* or *Hedda Gabler* were shocked by the dark underbelly of the domestic environments portrayed onstage, and just as much of that repression revolved around gender roles and expectations, so too does Ringwood use a recognizable setting to reveal social unrest. Bennett and Solga observe that, "Hester is resigned, trapped in the past, creating a sense that her father's death foreclosed the possibilities of her own life—a condition Ringwood realizes with Ibsenesque undertones of misplaced sexual longing" (187). The gendered roles laid out for all three characters are constructs for which they may not be suited. Bruce is harassed by his failure, the two women are driven to two different levels of mental instability by their constructed roles, and all three are confined by the expectations of their settler-colonial society as much as by geography and weather.

Barker and Solga notice that a "qualified realism is a recurrent feature of drama by Canada's leading women playwrights" (9) and cite another play about a woman committing murder, Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations*, as the example. In both *Still Stands the House* and *Blood Relations*, the "troubled and trespassing woman both exists within and defies the strictures of the realist vocabulary that serves as a tool for her carefully managed self-disclosure" (9). If the European realist tradition is founded on a "claim to the exposure of scientific truth," scientific naturalism in *Still Stands the House* is found in the pragmatic business details of the real estate agent's offer and the papers he leaves to be signed; the descriptions of farming, including an animal about to give birth; and even the accurate business of filling the lamps. More than anything else, the realism in *Still Stands the House* is aligned with "the realist traditions' core emphases on affect, empathy, identification, and the everyday concerns of

‘ordinary people’” (12). Here, specifically, are the fears of ordinary settler women. Bennett and Solga write: “As it reflected the starker features of western Canadian rural living, *Still Stands the House* provided a mimetic match for the experiences of the women who must have heard this play on the CBC in their own farmhouses, or seen it produced at local drama festivals” (188). Bennett and Solga point out that “Ringwood insists on speaking to other women (whether in the theatre or at home) and deployed realist methods for this distribution,” and conclude that “*Still Stands the House* offers an urgent proto-feminism for those unable to conceive a life outside of rural patriarchy” (188). Like Susan Glaspell’s 1916 play *Trifles*, with which Ringwood’s play can be usefully paired and compared,<sup>9</sup> the social message is subtly conveyed by the careful recording of daily life for an ordinary family. It is a kind of organic feminism, revealed almost incidentally through the conventions of realism, brought home to the spectator through the act of recognition. And if a recognition of the inequity of gender can be said to emerge quite naturally, simply through accurate portrayal, perhaps too the possibility of murder comes to seem—if not natural—somehow intrinsic to the brutality of the settler Canadian experience. Starblanket and Hunt remind us that patriarchal and capitalist ideologies are part and parcel of settler-colonial conquest, and, as I have argued, Ringwood has created a narrative that could be considered a sort of natural, inevitable consequence of that project.

As Linda Hutcheon reminds us, Frye’s “faith in humanist universals and his modernist internationalism sat side by side with his belief in the power and value of Canadian regionalism; his view of arts as autonomous rubbed shoulders with his commitment to the local roots of the imagination” (240). To apply the ideas of Frye and Atwood to *Still Stands the House* is not to ignore the subsequent complications and criticisms of their theories, but to offer an example of a play that makes sense in their terms, and to offer a way to understand the enduring power and meaning of that play for many Canadian audiences.

## Notes

- 1 See for example Weiler; McKenzie; Kim, McCall, and Singer; and Nolan and Knowles.
- 2 Also see my discussion of Hester as a violent woman in *The Violent Woman as a New Theatrical Character Type* (13).
- 3 Starblanket and Hunt draw a direct line from early settler rhetoric to the “defending his castle” mentality employed in the defence of Gerald Stanley, acquitted in 2018 of the murder of a young Cree man, Colten Boushie. The authors write: “missing from the coverage and absent in much of the discussion surrounding the trial, are the ways in which the sequence of events is intimately tied to the histories and present-day settlement of the country currently called Canada” (O9).
- 4 The very first productions of *Still Stands the House*, on March 3 and June 6, 1938, were at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Carolina Playmakers School, along with four other plays Ringwood wrote there while completing her MA.
- 5 It should be noted that Ringwood was very aware of and did write about Indigenous issues and characters in other work. See Anthony.
- 6 Matthew 7:25.
- 7 In the introduction to the play in *New Canadian Realisms: Eight Plays*, Roberta Barker notes that her students sometimes come to the conclusion that Hester was the victim

of incest. Barker feels this interpretation risks “pigeonholing Hester as a victim and explaining away her towering will as the hysterical product of male cruelty” (6). I agree, and argue instead that Ringwood’s intention is to use Hester to illustrate the potential consequences of a strong woman being circumscribed by more generalized and socially acceptable forms of powerlessness.

- 8 For another example of Atwood’s evolving treatment of nature, see Rubenstein.
- 9 For example, in January and February of 2007, The Graduate Centre for Study of Drama at the University of Toronto presented both *Still Stands the House* and *Trifles* under the heading “Not Just Trifles: An Evening of Two One-Act Plays.”

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