

Circumpolar Studies exemplar course: instructional materials

Representations of the Circumpolar North in Literature, Film & Popular Culture

Sample Lesson Plan: “Spotting Metaphors in Northern Literature”

Relevant modules: 3, 4, 7

This sample lesson plan is intended to give prospective instructors an example of ways in which U Arctic students may be encouraged to make connections between scholarly discussions surrounding the Circumpolar North, and the kinds of representations of the Arctic region that pervade popular culture and literature.

Subject: Representations of the Arctic in the titular short story “**The Stone Mattress**” by Margaret Atwood (2014).

Objective: To introduce students to the idea that literature (as well as other cultural forms) can be read on multiple levels. This lesson will hone their skills of contextual analysis as critical readers, and to appreciate the use of metaphorical devices in literary fiction and visual culture.

This lesson will prepare students to write a short essay or piece of creative writing in which they will consider a short story in terms of its metaphorical significance. A key goal of this class is also to encourage students to make connections between the class material and their own lives, communities and cultural contexts. Frequent links will be made between the canonical literature of the Canadian North and the experience and perspective of indigenous peoples in the region.

Total Estimated Time: ~90 minutes.

Work Completed Before Class: Students will have read “The Stone Mattress” by Margaret Atwood. They will have been introduced to the over-arching theme of this class (The North in Canadian Literature) and will have read a series of comparative pieces which will serve as a point of contrast and context for this discussion. They will have been introduced to related concepts in literary studies such as identity, indigeneity, symbolism, narrative, plot, tension, setting, character, context and cultural representation.

{The following two prompts can be given to students to brainstorm on their own for the first 5-7 minutes of class. This is designed to encourage self-initiated, active learning and to provide a common basis for class discussion}

- The term ‘**metaphorical**’ is one of those slippery abstract concepts important to the critical study of literature. The use of metaphor is usually easy to understand when you *see* it, but the term is often hard to define in concrete terms. To start this class discussion, what do you think it means if a story has *metaphorical significance*? Take a moment and write your answer below.
- Having read Margret Atwood’s short story “The Stone Mattress”, what do you think could potentially be some of the **key metaphorical devices** at work in this text? They might be elements of the plot, setting, characters, inanimate objects, or points of conflict in the narrative itself. Jot down a few general ideas.

{When this short individual reflection task is complete, instructor can then open these questions for group discussion taking care to facilitate the conversation to include all students who wish to contribute ideas. The pedagogical objective here is to come up with a ‘working definition’ as a class for the term ‘metaphorical’, and then to write on the board several crowd-sourced aspects from Atwood’s short story that interest the students, and which can be interrogated further as a group.}

“Stromatolites are the fossilized mounds of blue-green algae that created oxygen in our atmosphere billions of years ago. Our planet didn’t come ready-made with oxygen; it was created as these organisms split oxygen off water. Every time you breathe, you are breathing an inheritance from those very fossils. In my short story, “Stone Mattress,” the murder weapon is one of these stromatolites. The word translates literally as “stone mattress,” and they’re very sharp and pointy when they fragment.” - Margaret Atwood, December 1, 2013-
Canadian Geographic Interview

{Next, depending on the size of the class, encourage the students to form smaller discussion groups. Their first task will be to reflect upon the above quote from Margaret Atwood regarding Stromatolites, objects they will likely have already identified as a key potential site of metaphor in this piece, and to evaluate their metaphorical potential according to the definition they already came up with together. Instructors may also use a multi-media clip of an interview with the author at this time. Next invite the groups to move onto a discussion of the first TWO question outlined beneath which they will have as a handout. Each group must appoint a note taker and spokesperson. After approximately 10-15 minutes reconvene as a class and discuss

*their answers. This time is designed to encourage the students to make **explicit connections** between this reading, their own lives, and the lives of their peers. By focusing on the ways in which stories shape our cultural identities, and by situating “The Stone Mattress” in both regional and national contexts, they will then be better prepared to embark on a close-reading of the text together.}*

Discussion Questions

1) So far this semester, we have been discussing representations of ‘**The North**’. Literary scholar Caroline Rosenthal has identified a difference between “the real and the imagined North” and tells us that “...what is North very much depends on one’s cultural standpoint and interest in the North.” As people who currently live, study, work, raise families and make our homes in ‘The North’ – what kinds of **representations** matter to us? What do you think is the ‘**Idea of The North**’ in the global imagination? How might these stories affect us? What kinds of different stories would you like to tell about this region?

2) What do you think we can say about the ways Margaret Atwood’s short story employs or works against existing ideas of ‘the Arctic North’? As perhaps Canada’s most celebrated author, what **responsibilities** do you think she holds when telling stories about The North? How do you think her identity as a Euro-Canadian female, born and raised in Ottawa during the mid-twentieth century, shapes the literary conversation she enters when she chooses to set her tales in the territories?

{Now address the final two questions in class discussion, during which you can conduct a close reading of the story together. Facilitators should aim to let the discussion flow, but also direct it towards specific ideas, moments in the narrative and literary concepts that are important to cover. These include: Layers, trauma, strangeness, gender, identity, memory, revenge, religion, personality, mirages, old-age, imagined communities, and the Arctic north as a place of mystery, challenge, and hidden layers.}

Once the conversation is moving in the right direction, instructors could introduce the following quote from Caroline Rosenthal regarding canonical representations of this region in Canadian Literature - ideally the class will have already read Rosenthal’s essay. This quote will serve the dual purpose of connecting this story to the main theme of our course, and also cementing the metaphorical significance of the Arctic voyage in its much wider cultural and literary context.}

“The North was represented as a femme fatale with an alluring yet often destructive and fatal charm for the southern male adventurer.” - Caroline Rosenthal

{This discussion now places the students in a strong position to evaluate the power of story-telling in forming cultural and regional identities, as well as a more nuanced consideration of the many erasures of Indigenous narratives and ways-of-knowing in the global imagination of the Circumpolar North. Encourage students to critically revisit Margret Atwood's writing alongside later texts from an Indigenous perspective, and to make solid connections with existing knowledge they have from their communities and other classes }.

3) On one level Margaret Atwood is telling us an intriguing tale about murder, happenstance, premeditation and revenge - and it's engaging enough on just this level... but on what **other levels** do you think we could read this story? Do you think Atwood could be using this story to make a larger comment about any other aspects of Canadian society, the Arctic region or The North? How might she use **metaphor** to achieve this?

4) As society continues to work towards a greater competency in our knowledge of Indigenous peoples, the study of Northern film and literature raises many important issues for us to discuss. Making **connections** with knowledge you might have from your own communities, families, backgrounds or with other classes you have taken during your studies, evaluate the metaphorical significance of the Arctic voyage in 'The Stone Mattress' from the perspective of **indigenous peoples** in this region?

Take Home Essay Assignment (1-2 pages)

Using what you have learned during this discussion about metaphors and the significance of the Arctic voyage in "The Stone Mattress", what do you think happens next in the story? Does Verna get away with the murder, or does her past catch up with her eventually? What about the role of memory in this story? You may choose to answer this question in standard essay form or, if you prefer, as a work of creative writing continuing the 'voice' Margaret Atwood uses in her story. Pay special attention to the **secondary levels** of meaning and **metaphor** your chosen ending might create.