

# A Literary and Historical Analysis of the Cremation of Sam McGee

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Robert W. Service's 1907 poem, "The Cremation of Sam McGee," chronicles the expedition of an unnamed Klondike pioneer as he fulfills the dying requests of his countryman and friend, Sam McGee. Through the study of this seminal work of Yukon poetry we are able to examine both the passing of a long-lost historical era and the literary traditions and tropes which continue to exist in Canadian literature to this day. This examination of Canadian historical literature will take place in two parts: first, we will examine the history of the Klondike Gold Rush and the life of Robert W. Service. Second, we will delve into the text's depiction of Canadian themes, including survival in the face of hardship, the inhospitable Canadian winter, and the enigmatic and supernatural qualities of the Canadian wilderness.

The Klondike Gold Rush, also known as the Last Great Gold Rush, began in 1896 with the discovery of gold in Rabbit Creek by George Carmack, Skookum Jim, Tagish Charlie, and Robert Henderson (Klinck 31, Lockhart 36). Despite its name, very little gold actually resided within the Klondike River; accessing a viable gold vein required traversing through a large expanse of uncharted wilderness to the area's smaller creeks and rivers (Allen 944). The remoteness of the region and the lack of established cities and villages made life all the more difficult for any potential prospectors; nonetheless, the appeal of the lifestyle and the potential for inconceivable wealth enticed over 100,000 would-be fortune seekers to begin their journey. In the end, less than a third of these aspiring pioneers actually made it all the way to the Yukon Territory's far north (Allen 946). The low percentage of prospectors who successfully journeyed to Dawson City (the main settlement for Klondike prospectors), compared to the large number of prospectors who attempted the journey, speaks to the true arduousness of the Yukon Territory and to the lifestyle's allure.

The Klondike Gold Rush proceeded in three waves (Allen 946). The first rush was initiated by area locals who were quick to claim the best gold veins and river basins for themselves (Allen 945). The second rush began in early 1897, when approximately 3,000 prospectors arrived from various parts of British Columbia and Alaska (Allen 945-946). Previous rushes left very few worthwhile plots for the third rush of prospectors, a massive throng of over 30,000, who had journeyed from throughout the United States and Canada (Allen 946). This last wave of miners marched from the docks of Skagway, Alaska, in huge, single-file lines, filling the Chilkoot Trail and the White Pass with a proverbial flood of prospectors (Berton 236). The two routes were so densely trafficked that they became a hotbed for criminal activity, with numerous pioneers falling victim to the ploys of the ill-famed "Soapy Smith Gang," who controlled and terrorized the region until their demise at the infamous Juneau Wharf Shootout on July, 8, 1898 (Berton 320-345).

Indeed, the vast abundance of adventurers had transformed the northern territories into a genuine wild west. Skagway became a bustling saloon town, and at its peak it was the largest city in Alaska, with a population nearing 15,000 (Cohen 20). Likewise, the population of Dawson City, which had once been a small First Nations encampment, ballooned to over 30,000 (Berton 396). Dawson City was often called "The San Francisco of

the North," complete with a motion-picture theatre, running water, and telephone service (Berton 354). Alas, with the establishment of a railway line in 1899, thousands of small-time miners found themselves completely outclassed by the arrival of heavy machinery. The rapid settlement of the Yukon River valley was mirrored by its abandonment. When gold was discovered in Nome, Alaska, in July 1899, over 8,000 prospectors departed Dawson City in one week alone (Allen 946). The Last Great Gold Rush was over.

Although "The Cremation of Sam McGee" went on to become a seminal work of Canadian poetry, few know of the author's humble origins. Robert W. Service (son of Robert Service) was born on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 1874 in Preston, England (Lockhart 1). By 1897, he was living with his paternal grandfather in Kilwinning, Scotland, a small town north of Glasgow (Lockhart 2). From a young age, Service demonstrated a knack for rhyme and literature, reciting his first poem during grace at his sixth birthday party:

God bless the cakes and bless the jam;  
Bless the cheese and the cold boiled ham;  
Bless the scones Aunt Jeannie makes,  
And save us all from belly-aches. Amen (Mackay 40-41).

Even in his earliest work, the poetic conventions for which Service would become known are evident: straightforward language, concrete themes, perfect rhyme, and a humorous tone (Mackay 41).

As a young adult, Service took a job with the Commercial Bank of Scotland and became an apprentice banker. It was here that he started writing verse seriously, reading and enjoying the works of Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson, and John Keats (Lockhart 11). Although Service attended the University of Glasgow, he did not graduate, departing after a bitter critique of his essay on Hamlet (Lockhart 15). Seeking greater adventures than what banking had offered him, Service read a number of pamphlets on the prospects of Canadian emigration, and by the age of 22, his mind was set; he was to journey to Canada and become a cowboy (Mackay 106).

Despite his open-range prairie dreams, Service chose to settle in the Cowichan Valley of Vancouver Island. He lived with a Scottish family, known as the Mutters, where he worked as a farmhand for a period of several months (Lockhart 19-21). After this time Service relocated to another farm further inland, where he quickly discovered a distain for physical labour, writing:

There [is] nothing Don Juanish about us farm hands. When a man works  
sixteen hours a day, it takes all the lasciviousness out of his system  
(Lockhart 22).

Indeed, it appears that Service had abandoned the dream of being a cowboy. He penned a poem entitled "The Men that don't Fit in," which summarized his desire for travel, and then spent a two-year period exploring North America, venturing from Seattle to Los Angeles to Mexico (Lockhart 22-23). Service's desire for travel was recapitulated in his work:

There's a race of men that don't fit in,  
A race that can't stay still;  
So they break the hearts of kith and kin,  
And they roam the world at will... (Lockhart 22).

Throughout his travels, he worked odd-jobs, frequently walking barefoot in order to save money on shoe leather (Lockhart 24). Eventually, Service returned to the Cowichan Valley, where he took a job as a shopkeeper (27). He was more than happy to return:

Once again a white collar man. How happy I was! I wanted to sing and dance.  
On Monday I was hustling sixteen hours a day. On Tuesday I was watching  
others hustle and getting the same pay for it... (Lockhart 27).

Service worked as a shopkeeper for three years before returning to banking at a post in Victoria (Lockhart 27-33). He was then transferred to Kamloops, B.C., and eventually, to a posting in Whitehorse, Yukon. It was here that Service's most prolific works were written. He later became known as the Bard of the Yukon.

Service arrived in Whitehorse during the winter of 1904 (Klinck 31). The Last Great Gold Rush was over, and the population of the area was plummeting. Between 1901 to 1910, the population of the Yukon Territory had dwindled to about 9,000 people, less than a third of Dawson City in its prime (Klinck 31). Service, working as both a bank clerk and a part-time guard, lived in a flat above the bank (Lockhart 33-41). His arrival in the Yukon was met with great personal happiness. Service once stated:

As I stepped onto the Whitehorse platform it seemed jammed with coonskin coats. But for the rosy faces of the men inside them, it might have been a coon carnival. (Lockhart 42)

After living in Whitehorse for a period of two years, Service began work on what would become his two most renowned poetic works: "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" and "The Cremation of Sam McGee" (Klinck 33). He had taken a commission by the editor of the *Whitehorse Star* to write "something about our own bit of earth" for a church concert, and had found inspiration while observing the activities of the lively Whitehorse tavern (Klinck 33-34). Finding his creativity in the late hours of the night, Service rushed back to his office in the bank, where he was mistaken for a burglar and nearly shot by one of his co-workers (Klinck 34). Writing later, Service stated that "[it's fortunate] he was a poor shot or 'The Shooting of Dan McGrew' might never have been written" (Klinck 34).

One month later, Service again struck a creative goldmine when he attended a party where a grizzled miner told a story of a prospector cremating a deceased comrade (Klinck 35). Upon hearing the story's surprise ending, Service stated that he felt "a decisive moment of destiny," and he immediately began composing "The Cremation of Sam McGee" (Klinck 35-36). Service had penned the entire poem by late the next morning (Klinck 36), and had taken the name Sam McGee from a real Whitehorse settler whose cabin is now on display outside the Whitehorse museum (Lockhart 46-47). Unlike "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," which was written like an American saloon tale, "The Cremation

of Sam McGee" was revered for its depiction of the Yukon, enlightening its readers of "the cold, so familiar to all Yukoners" (Lockhart 47).

Although "The Cremation of Sam McGee" and "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" went on to become seminal works in Yukon literature, they were not originally intended for widespread publication. Their original release in *Songs of a Sourdough* was envisioned by Service as "a tiny volume of verse which he would present to his pals" (Klinck 39). In fact, if not for a Christmas bonus Service received from his job at the bank, *Songs of a Sourdough* would never have been published (Klinck 39). From these unassuming roots, Service's work quickly became world-renowned. He published his second collection of work, *Ballads of a Cheechako* in 1908 while living in Dawson City (53-54). Overall, the poet spent a total of nine years living in and taking inspiration from the Great White North before moving on to other inspirations (Lockhart 76). In his later years, Service went on to become a war correspondent, ambulance driver, and world traveller (Lockhart 84-91). His later works include *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*, *Ballads of a Bohemian*, *Songs of the Far North*, and *Why Not Grow Young? Keeping Fit at Fifty* (Mackay 401-402). Service passed away on September 11, 1958 (Mackay 394).

"The Cremation of Sam McGee" provides a fanciful description of the reality facing 19<sup>th</sup> century Klondike prospectors. Additionally, it highlights a great number of the motifs and symbols we use to define Canadian literature, while still retaining a certain playfulness that adds to the approachability of its dark subject matter. The poem begins and ends with the famous lines:

There are strange things done in the midnight sun  
By the men who toil for gold;  
The Arctic trails have their secret tales  
That would make your blood run cold;  
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,  
But the queerest they ever did see  
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge  
I cremated Sam McGee (Service 552).

For readers unfamiliar with the poem, a general outline follows: Sam McGee is a compatriot of the narrator, who came from Tennessee in search of Northern gold. Sensing his imminent death, McGee pleads with the narrator for a proper cremation, for his greatest fear is of the cold. The narrator begrudgingly agrees, and by the next morning, McGee has passed away. Throughout the next few days, the narrator is forced to transport the body of his deceased friend for many miles, losing his own sense of sanity all the while. Eventually, the narrator comes across a derelict ship "on the marge of Lake Lebarge," which he uses as a makeshift crematorium. In the poem's twist ending, when the narrator decides to open the boiler room door to check on his friend, he finds Sam McGee smiling and well, saying: "Since I left Plumtree, down in Tennessee, it's the first time I've been warm" (Service 552-553).

The main themes expressed in "The Cremation of Sam McGee" are the burdens of survival, the harsh, unforgiving nature of the Canadian landscape, and the presence of uncanny, supernatural elements within the woodlands of yore. These themes parallel those expressed in the writings of the Canadian pioneers, illustrating the essential similarities that arise in many works of Canadian literature. For example, all three of these same

characteristics can be seen within the early Canadian text, "The Walker of the Snow," written in 1859 by Charles Dawson Shanly.

"The Walker of the Snow" tells the tale of an early Canadian trapper on a voyage across a haunted valley. The poem vividly describes the harshness and danger of the winter environment from the point of view of an early Canadian settler. It also builds up an emotion of desperation and madness, culminating with the unnamed narrator singing and shouting to himself, frantic for some company. Eventually, company does come in the form of a ghostly "Shadow-hunter" who walks the midnight snow. The narrator then sinks into a snowdrift, and when he is found the next morning, his hair has been bleached ghastly white, terrifying his colleagues (Shanly 238-239). Briefly put, "The Walker of the Snow" reflects the same essential Canadian themes seen in "Sam McGee": an arduous journey to survive, the desolate character of the environment, and the presence of supernatural entities within the Canadian wilderness. Finally, although the two works rely upon the same three quintessential themes, it is worth noting that the authors use them in vastly different ways: Shanly uses these elements in a tale of horror and suspense, while Service uses them to convey devotion to duty and humour.

According to Margaret Atwood's 1972 thesis entitled *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, survival and the survivor are the archetypal symbols of Canada (Atwood 32). She justifies this claim through the existence of many distinct forms of survival: bare survival, the maintenance of life in the presence of overwhelming hostile environments; grim survival, the survival of an individual or group through an acute, specific incident; cultural survival, in which a group of people try to maintain their distinct identity under the bombardment of external cultural influences; and spiritual survival, in which an individual strives to attain some level of self-actualization (Atwood 32-33). Atwood concludes that each of these four forms of survival exists to a varying degree within Canada, and that due to its continuous cultural oppression by the United States, the whole of Canada can be described as a victim, the central character in any form of survival (Atwood 36).

In accordance with Atwood's thesis, the survival themes of "The Cremation of Sam McGee" are manifested in two ways: the speaker's bare survival in the harsh Canadian wilderness, and his quest for spiritual survival in keeping his promise to McGee. The physical survival of the narrator amidst the cold (as opposed to the death of the decidedly-American Sam McGee) perfectly captures a statement of Atwood's thesis: Canadian Literature is "not [the] tales of those who made it, [but rather] those who made it back" (Atwood 33). Similarly, in the narrator's search for spiritual survival and self-actualization, he is made into a victim on three fronts: first, to his own abhorrence for the corpse, referring to McGee's frozen body as a cursed load and a loathed, hateful 'thing' (Service 552-553). Second, to his own deteriorating state of mind, as the narrator describes singing to McGee's frozen corpse and it returning with a spiteful grin; and third, to the narrator's mysterious, dreadful compulsion to reopen the boiler and check on McGee (Service 553). Of course, when McGee finally completes his quest for spiritual survival, he is rewarded with the brief reappearance of his departed colleague, and the knowledge that he has kept his vow (Service 553). Although the narrator of Service's text is presumably a seasoned Yukon veteran, he is made into a victim and a survivor by the hostile nature of the Canadian wilderness.

"The Cremation of Sam McGee" reiterates the characteristic inhospitality of the Canadian wilds on multiple occasions, relying on the use of visceral description and stark contrast. According to the text, the northern cold is capable of many dreadful acts, including: stabbing through a parka, freezing eyelashes solid, and chilling clean through to the bone (Service 552). This bitter cold is repeatedly contrasted to various forms of warmer environments, as Sam McGee hails from Tennessee, a lovely, warm, southern state where "the cotton blooms and blows" (Service 552). Another comparison arises when McGee states "he'd sooner live in hell" than the cold, northern territory he finds himself in (Service 552). Finally, according to McGee's dying words, the cold is even worse than death, contrasting the heat of cremation to the threat of an icy grave (Service 552). When the narrator finally cremates McGee, and fire makes its first real appearance in the poem, the flames are grandiose and spectacular, equally matching Service's description of the Yukon's severe cold. When fire and ice come together, we are greeted with the text's final theme, characterized by the ghastly resurrection of Sam McGee.

The presence of supernatural elements within "The Cremation of Sam McGee" is most firmly established by the author's use of diction in describing the far north, and through his personification of McGee's frozen body. The midnight sun is a reference to the Yukon Territory's high geographic location, as in some areas, the sun's constant presence stretches the entire summer into one long and uncanny day. Additionally, besides the ever presence or long absence of the sun, the area also possesses the phenomenon of Northern Lights, providing an accurately spooky backdrop for the poem's supernatural content. The presence of the supernatural is alluded to very early in the work, as the arctic tales described are said to "make your blood run cold," a reference to both chilling temperatures and chilling frights (Service 552-553). Additionally, when McGee is on his deathbed, he is described as ghastly pale, alluding to the ghost-like being he eventually becomes (Service 552).

The first instance of personification being used as a means to convey the supernatural occurs when McGee's corpse verbally reminds the narrator of his obligation. The reminder is written (and even given quotations) in such a way as to suggest that McGee's body is talking to the narrator, stating "...it's up to you to cremate [my] last remains" (Service 552). The next instance of personification occurs when the narrator begins singing to McGee's corpse, perhaps due to his isolation, stating that the corpse would often reply with a grin, as if teasing him (Service 553). When McGee's cremation begins, the sky itself seems to comment on the macabre spectacle, as "the heavens scowled, and the huskies howled, and the wind began to blow" (Service 553). Finally, when the narrator decides to check in on McGee and see if he's cooked, the supernatural quality of the poem becomes blatantly apparent, as McGee smiles at the narrator and politely asks him to close the door (Service 553). With the long journey at an end, the poem restates its refrain, and this time the queer sights seen by the Northern Lights are readily known and apparent.

Long before Shanly and Service depicted supernatural entities as a characteristic of the Canadian wilderness, these beings existed in the various myths and legends of First Nations oral histories. For example, the creature known as the Wendigo (also spelled Windigo) can be found within the lore of the Algonquin, Cree, Ojibwa, and Naskapi First Nations peoples, who historically covered a geographic area ranging from Saskatchewan to Quebec (Wonderley 69). These mystical beings, which were often described as ghoulish

giants with hearts of ice, were the personification of two real fears: starvation and cannibalization (Wonderley 73). Indeed, unlike other woodland cryptids such as the Sasquatch, Wendigoes were believed to have once been humans who had been transformed by famine, punished by guardian spirits, or been exposed and preyed on by another Wendigo (Wonderly 74). Although the depiction of Wendigoes varied dramatically amongst different First Nations peoples, at their roots they represented the worst danger of the Canadian woodlands, starvation.

Through the examination of Service's poetry, we can find a perfect illustration of the tried and true themes of Canadian literature: the ever-present burden of survivors, the harsh nature of Canadian winters, and the presence of supernatural occurrences and beings in the uncharted wilderness. Although its publication began as nothing more than a by-product of a Christmas bonus, Robert W. Service's "The Cremation of Sam McGee" went on to become the seminal work of Yukon poetry. It is a poem that parallels the hard lives and formidable journey facing the Klondike prospectors, and it is a poem that has truly captured the imagination of Canadians. All in all, "The Cremation of Sam McGee" might be Canada's most iconic work of poetry.

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