



## Special Collections

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**Alice Munro**

**Biocritical Essay**

**by**

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Widely regarded as Canada's best writer of short stories, Alice Munro has consistently produced work in which precise social observation and penetrating psychological insight are complemented by an unerring instinct for exactly the right form of expression.

Alice Laidlaw was born in Wingham, a small Huron County town, in 1931. Her father's family had lived in Western Ontario for several generations, whereas her mother's family had settled in the Ottawa Valley. In the Depression, Robert Laidlaw found little success as a breeder of silver foxes. His wife, previously a school teacher, at one time sold the furs at a Muskoka resort to help the family survive. Alice Munro has described this episode, which reveals her father's stoicism and her mother's determination, in a recently published memoir, "Working for a Living".

In several forthright and revealing interviews, Munro has commented on both her outer circumstances and her inner life during the period of her childhood. The Laidlaw house was a little distance from the town (as in the "Flats Road" section of *Lives of Girls and Women*); Alice attended a primary school much like the rough school portrayed in the "Privilege" story of *Who Do You Think You Are?*. "Life was fairly dangerous", Munro has told Alan Twigg. She continued:

We lived outside the whole social structure because we didn't live in the town and we didn't live in the country. We lived in this kind of little ghetto where all the bootleggers and prostitutes and hangers-on lived. Those were the people I knew. It was a community of outcasts. I had that feeling about myself.

Depressing as this situation sounds, Munro was undismayed: "I thought my life was interesting. There was

always a great sense of adventure".

Munro found herself to be an outsider in spirit as well as social position. She grew up in a "very traditional community" (Graeme Gibson interview), a society in which "it's necessary...always to think practically ...I always realized that I had a different view of the world, and one that would bring me into great trouble and ridicule if it were exposed". For her own protection, therefore, "I always operated in disguises" (Gibson), a strategy many of her fictional characters were to adopt.

Adolescence for Munro was a time of divided values and loyalties. She told the present writer:

As a child, I always felt separate, but pretty happy to be so. Then in high school, suddenly with puberty and everybody getting down to business - girls especially getting down to what their role would be - I began to feel terribly out of things and in a way superficially unhappy about that because I wanted to be an ordinary girl. I wanted to be very attractive to boys, and I wanted to go out, and I wanted to get married, and get a diamond: those things, more or less as signs of being a fully OK kind of woman. The plan to write got crystallized about puberty too, and I was actually doing it all the time. And I was quite happy in that world. (Interview, July 20, 1984; next five quotations from an interview are from this source.)

Munro began writing down her stories at the age of twelve, beginning with imitative adventure stories. She also indulged in daydreams picturing herself in heroic roles (as the protagonist does in the story "Boys and Girls"), but she now feels that it was the impulse to imitate that defined the potential writer: "Trying to make a story like 'The Little Mermaid' [by Hans Christian Andersen] and then later on trying to make a story like *Wuthering Heights*: those were not daydream stories - there was some apprehension there of what fiction is". The Bronte imitation, a bleak work entitled Charlotte Muir for which much was imagined but only the death scenes were written down, now seems to Munro to have allegorical significance: "I can see what was going on. I can see that those were the twin choices of my life, which were marriage and motherhood, or the black life of the artist".

Munro's private dedication to her writing was a great source of confidence in her teenage years. She recalls:

I felt able to cope with everything. I really felt so buoyed up, so excited, by this writing thing that I had latched on to. It gave me in those years the most enormous happiness. I was quite stunned by what I was able to do, at fifteen or sixteen. It's just that way of being able to translate a kind of rapture that I think everybody feels - the thing is to find a way of expressing it. And I really felt able to do that then.

Munro won a scholarship to attend the University of Western Ontario.

"The Dimensions of a Shadow", her first published story, appeared in *Folio*, the student literary magazine, when Munro was an eighteen-year-old freshman. The magazine's notes on "The Contributors" describe Alice Laidlaw as follows: "Overly modest about her talents, but hopes to write the Great Canadian Novel someday". *Folio* published two other stories, "Story for Sunday" and "The Widower", in subsequent issues.

Alice Laidlaw left Western after only two years. Her scholarship was for a two-year period, and she simply had no more money. Shortly afterwards, she married James Munro, and the couple settled in Vancouver. Two children, Sheila (b. 1953) and Jenny (b. 1957), were born early in the marriage; a third daughter, Andrea, was born in 1966. For several years, James Munro worked as an Eaton's executive in Vancouver. With his wife's assistance, he subsequently opened a bookshop in Victoria.

Living in a Vancouver suburb, Alice Munro lost the faith in her artistic powers she had felt as an adolescent:

The big period of the failure of confidence all came in my twenties, not in my adolescence at all. I began, as every artist does, to get a much more realistic notion of what those powers were, and that combined with a life in which there was not too much opportunity to work, and not too much recognition - well, really no recognition, except I always mention that my husband recognized it because without that I couldn't have survived.

The stimulus an interesting environment could provide was no longer available: "It was much more enclosed in the suburbs than Wingham was. It was much more boring. I have never even been able to do much with it fictionally because I hated it so much".

All these factors slowed Munro's output in the Fifties and Sixties. Nevertheless, she wrote several stories which were accepted by Robert Weaver for broadcast by the CBC, and her stories appeared in such journals as *The Canadian Forum*, *Tamarack Review*, *Queen's Quarterly*, *The Montrealer*, and, in a brief fling of commercial success, *Chatelaine*. Fifteen stories were collected in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), a volume assembled with the encouragement of Earle Topping and Audrey Coffin of the Ryerson Press. The book won the Governor General's Award, but had not sold out its first printing of 2,500 copies by 1972 (John Metcalf interview).

In interviews with Metcalf and J. R. (Tim) Struthers, Munro has given a chronology of the stories included in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, and has also provided a commentary on their place in the evolution of her work. She regards the stories written from 1953 to 1959 ("The Time of Death" and "Day of the Butterfly" are the two earliest, followed by "An Ounce of Cure", "Thanks for the Ride", "Sunday Afternoon", "The Shining Houses" and "A Trip to the Coast") as essentially "exercise stories...the work of a beginning writer" (Metcalf interview). In the Summer of 1959, Munro wrote "The Peace of Utrecht", which she sees as a major turning-point in her career: "It was the first story I absolutely had to write and wasn't writing to see if I could write that kind of a story" (Struthers interview). In this story, Munro dealt with a very personal subject, her own mother's illness (Mrs. Laidlaw had contracted Parkinson's Disease when her daughter was twelve). Munro came to this material hesitantly and involuntarily rather than through straightforward choice. She now feels, however, that the self-understanding she thereby acquired brought an artistic breakthrough:

That [the writing of "The Peace of Utrecht"] came out of my mother's death. Until my mother died, though the relationship with her was a very painful, deep one, I wasn't able to look at it or think about it....It's as if up to a certain point I was much more an artist than a person. I was essentially fairly tight emotionally. (Tausky

interview)

Most of the *Dance of the Happy Shades* stories written after "The Peace of Utrecht" have autobiographical elements. "The Office" is based directly on an actual incident. "Boys and Girls" recalls the modest expectations ("She's only a girl") reserved for girls in Huron County. "Red Dress-1946" reflects the competing temptations of social acceptance and independent womanhood. "Walker Brothers Cowboy" fictionalizes the social and economic decline of the Laidlaw family, and also draws on a specific occurrence:

When I was a much younger child, my father took me for some reason I've forgotten to that woman's house, and she taught me how to dance. There was something about the revelation of this whole Catholic style of life that seemed much freer and jollier and poorer - if you can imagine poorer than ours!"

(Tausky interview)

Though none of Munro's stories are without interest, the line she draws at "The Peace of Utrecht" does seem to divide well crafted but slight stories from those which demanded greater resources of feeling and understanding. In three stories especially - "Images", "Walker Brothers Cowboy" and "The Peace of Utrecht" - Munro attains a richness of suggestion that has continued to characterize her work. "The Peace of Utrecht", one of Munro's best stories of family bonds and bondage, had as its starting point the author's own experience of being offered her mother's clothes by her aunt and grandmother. The narrator and her sister both have a burden of guilt: the narrator has left her sister to shoulder the responsibility of caring for their chronically ill mother; Maddy has ultimately found it necessary to put her mother in a nursing home. The narrator states flatly at the beginning of the story that she and her sister "at heart reject each other", yet as the story unfolds, the sisters' emotional ties seem to matter as much as their opposed choices in life. Moreover, the narrator is linked to her sister, her mother and even her aunt, in that each, with greater or lesser success, has "tried to *run*".

"Images" and "Walker Brothers Cowboy" have in common that they both deal with the "bewilderment" that is the young imagination's response to dark experiences. The narrator in both stories pledges to share her father's secret. In "Images", the narrator feels herself to be ambivalently "dazed and powerful with secrets"; in "Walker Brothers Cowboy", the spell she is under disconcerts and also threatens the loss of control: the "enchantment" can change "into something you will never know". In each case, the allusion to fairy stories, while appropriate to the narrator's situation, at the same time suggests the author's continuing interest in the expression of the imagination through romance.

In "Images", a sombre romance atmosphere prevails throughout the dramatization of an encounter with a paranoid recluse. "Walker Brothers Cowboy" is an extremely poignant story within the realm of mundane experience. As in much of Munro's work, the narrator's inner drama complements the spiritual turmoil she observes. The narrator is the victim of time in two contexts: she faces her own insignificance in geological time at the beginning of the story, and in the story's conclusion she grapples with the mystery of her father's love affair before her birth. Meanwhile, her father and his former girl friend have been robbed by the years of the possibility that their relationship might be renewed:

"We've taken a lot of your time now".

"Time", says Nora bitterly. "Will you come by ever again"?

Together with its haunting psychological veracity, "Walker Brothers Cowboy" has in abundance that other striking feature of Munro's fiction, her extraordinarily vivid re-creation of physical reality. Many paragraphs from the story could be chosen to illustrate Munro's ability to evoke not only a place (a Lake Huron town like Goderich), but also a sense of period (the Depression). In part, this power is derived from a gift of nature. Munro has told Kem Murch: "I remember all experience very vividly....Last year I saw a black-and-white photo of my high school class that was taken in grade 10, and I *did* remember the colour of everyone's clothes". Of equal importance, however, is a strong emotional attachment to the tangible properties of reality. She has told Graeme Gibson that this attitude comes close to a kind of religious feeling about the world; speaking to Geoff Hancock a decade later, she remarked that:

Even totally commonplace things...are just sort of endlessly interesting in their physical reality. I find them that way. That they seem to mean something way beyond themselves.

The work of other writers has probably been most important to Munro when it has provided an external sanction for her own inclination to present reality concretely, minutely, but also through the filter of a very individual, fully realized sensibility. It is in following this artistic path, rather than in making explicit borrowings, that Munro has gained from the example of such Southern writers as James Agee, Eudora Welty and Reynolds Price.

Yet another factor contributing to the success of Munro's stories is the immense care she lavishes upon their composition. The University of Calgary papers provide a privileged opportunity to observe a superb intuitive imagination at work. Often completely separate drafts are created for the sake of seemingly minor, but in reality crucial, adjustments of nuances in the choice of word or incident.

The Calgary papers also allow their reader to follow the complicated artistic challenges and decisions Munro took upon herself in writing her second book, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971). This work, composed over a relatively short period of time - about a year - nevertheless involved writing crises in its early and concluding phases. Munro began the book with the intention of producing a conventional novel, but came to realize that the medium of separate but inter-linked stories was more suited to her talent. The abandoned novel, in re-written form, became the middle section of the book, from "Princess Ida" through to the story "Lives of Girls and Women". "Baptizing" was written next, followed by the two opening stories, and, after much agonizing, the epilogue (Struthers interview).

Munro had been thinking about *Lives of Girls and Women* for some years before she turned her full attention to the book. One can find several links with the mature stories of *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Del Jordan is not the first Munro protagonist to have to struggle with poverty and isolation. Like the Jordan girl of "Walker Brothers Cowboy", Del has an ambitious, dissatisfied mother, and a gentle, detached father; like the narrator of "The Peace of Utrecht", she has prudent aunts; like the narrator of "Red Dress-1946" she faces a choice between conventional and unconventional directions for her life; like the protagonist of "Images" she has to confront madness and death.

Del can, nevertheless, be distinguished from her predecessors (and indeed, from many of her successors) in the Munro canon by virtue of her ability to act firmly, confidently and constructively in order to shape her own future. She makes up her mind about the various members of her family, and doles out proportionate

quantities of love and trust; she pursues an independent course in finding her way into and out of a religious crisis; she overcomes the temptation of sexual submission. Right from the opening pages, there are grim events in *Lives of Girls and Women*, but the central character's freedom to experiment and choose for herself gives the book a light-hearted spirit not always found in Munro's work. The self-assurance Del exhibits derives from the confidence Munro herself felt in adolescence: the book "probably accurately reflects my own emotional and artistic life as a teenager" (Tausky interview).

The title is a meaningful indication of the book's nature. Male figures are given roles of some prominence, but only as supporting actors in the drama of Del's life. The characters who linger in the memory as powerfully imagined creations are all women: Del herself, her mother, her mother's boarder Fern, her aunts. The aunts are evoked with special brilliance, both as individuals and as representatives of country values.

Munro presents with wry affection the aunts' world of "work and gaiety, comfort and order, intricate formality". For a person of Del's determined and adventurous temperament, however, the charms of the aunts fade when the danger of their prideful humility is grasped. Del's straightforward escape from her aunts' principles finds no counterpart in her tangled, ambivalent feelings about her mother. If Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace are marvellous comic inventions, Del's mother is a penetrating study in a more serious style. As Del herself comes to realize, she is in perpetual conflict with her mother because she is so much like her. Del's condescending judgment of her mother is always made available to the reader, but is not always an accurate guide. Addie's righteous secularism needs to be evaluated with sympathy in the light of the fanatical piety embraced by her own mother; her naive, and in its own way, touching, trust in knowledge is to be understood in relation to the virulent anti-intellectualism of her surroundings. On the other hand, it is unwise to swallow whole, as some critics have done, Addie's now famous words, "There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women". The passage is an apt expression of Addie's meliorist views, rather than the sudden intrusion of a feminist lecture.

*Lives of Girls and Women* could easily have ended with Del's rejection of Garnet French's claim upon her. Indeed, it almost did: Munro at one point was so unhappy with her efforts to write the "Epilogue" section that she told her publisher to leave it out of the book. Munro's painstaking efforts to get the epilogue right can be observed in the numerous drafts preserved in the Calgary papers. What finally emerged from this travail was a major addition to the novel that also substantially altered its character. Munro has underlined its significance in her interview with Struthers:

Up until now this was not the story of the artist as a young girl. It was just the story of a young girl. And this introduced a whole new element, which I felt hadn't been sufficiently prepared for. And yet, I found eventually that the book didn't mean anything to me without it.

To some readers, Del's resolve to abjure romance fantasies and to embrace the facts of Jubilee life adds up to an endorsement of realism. Not so, Munro states:

People have taken this to mean more of a siding with realistic writing than I would take it to mean. I'm not making judgments there....It's not a direct plumping in favour of a certain kind of writing because that dark stuff keeps coming back to me

even now. You see, it hasn't gone. (Tausky interview)

The "dark stuff" of Gothic fiction is represented in the epilogue by the story of the photographer. Munro had worked on versions of this tale years before she wrote *Lives of Girls and Women*. Though Del adopts an attitude of self-mockery towards this "black fable", it does indeed contain the "powerful" implications she ironically ascribes to it. The photographer who takes "unusual, even frightening" pictures and thereby intimidates the community, is the naive writer's allegorical vision of the artist's dark power. The story also contains the implication that art needs to go beyond the documentary level to achieve its effect.

Del turns for inspiration to the more homely materials of her existence: Bobby Sherriff's curiously matter-of-fact conversation, lists of businesses and of street-names. Coupled with the novelist's imagination, this information is to provide the foundation of Del's new literary art. The evocative phrase "deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" has been taken, with some justice, to be an appropriate description of Munro's own method.

Yet Del's new-found technique is not presented without reservations and qualifications. "Damage had been done" to Del's Gothic novel, but she has found its replacement only in anticipation. The task before her is daunting, for "the hope of accuracy...is crazy, heart-breaking" and lists will not suffice. A telling comparison is invoked in Del's suggestion that she is "voracious and misguided as Uncle Craig out at Jenkin's Bend, writing his history". Del will not, presumably, echo the tedious literalism of Uncle Craig's narrative, but the mention of his name reminds us that there are literary dangers in adherence to fact, just as there are risks in neglecting fact. In coming to understand the complex blend of madness and the mundane to be found in Bobby Sherriff's character, Del has deepened her understanding of the mysteriousness of life; in repudiating dramatic inventiveness, she has renounced a valuable means of portraying that dimension of life (Del has voluntarily denied herself the principal means Munro used to deal with this kind of subject in "Images"). Munro's labours in multiplying drafts can be seen as an effort to strike a viable balance between the sense of profit and of loss involved in Del's adoption of her new literary strategy. The third-to-last paragraph is not contained in any of the early drafts - Munro has said that it was only "when that [paragraph] came to me" that she knew "I could leave it [the epilogue] in" (Tausky interview). Bobby Sherriff's enigmatic gesture is a "special thing" which gives Del both pleasure and the insight of an epiphany; on the other hand, it is only "a letter, or a whole word" in "an alphabet I did not know". The incident therefore captures in miniature the mixture of new knowledge and open-ended challenges that is also to be found in the section as a whole.

*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974), Munro's second collection of unrelated stories, is the Janus volume in her development as a writer. Stories like "Winter Wind" or "The Found Boat" might have been at home in *Dance of the Happy Shades*: the family tensions of the one story and the condescension towards girls of the other, both within the Huron County setting, constitute familiar material. "Executioners", with its grisly ending, is a reversion to an even earlier Gothic phase. But stories such as "Walking on Water" and "Forgiveness in Families" are studies in the hippie and cult movements of the time, and "Marrakesh" and "The Spanish Lady" almost seem like anticipations of *The Moons of Jupiter* in their dramatizations of a new protagonist, the sophisticated, intellectually inclined woman suffering through fragile relationships. Many of the stories seem designed to discard polished, but also contrived, effects in favour of an acceptance of stylistic and narrative fragmentation as a mirror of fragmented lives.

Among the most ambitious and accomplished stories in the volume are "Memorial", "Material" and "The

Ottawa Valley". "Memorial" and "Material" are built upon a characteristic Munro situation, the tensions inherent in the linkage of two people with opposite temperaments. "Memorial", like "The Peace of Utrecht", is a story of sisters, but in the more recent story the narrative is told from the perspective of the more contemplative, less assertive sister. Eileen may not grasp the technique of garbage re-cycling, but June's "built, planned, lived deliberately, *filled* life" is mocked by the events of the story - the accidental death of June's son and the impulsive seduction of Eileen by June's husband. With its sardonic treatment of June's hollow "Memorial Party" and her attempt to "live by values", "Memorial" is in part a satiric commentary on the quest for faith in a post-religious world, a theme also raised in "Walking on Water".

The religion of art is subjected to a heretic's exegesis in "Material", one of Munro's most dazzling feats in balancing poignancy and comedy. The narrator's re-examination of her previous life as a matrimonial servant of the artist is precipitated when she discovers her ex-husband's short story about a person who was part of their shared past. Dotty, the "harlot-in-residence" who takes in customers in a basement apartment below Hugo and the narrator, is a pathetic figure worthy of compassion to the narrator, merely "material" to the writer. The "special, unsparing, unsentimental love" Hugh eventually bestows upon Dotty in his story is "not enough", his ex-wife ultimately decides, after initial admiration for his achievement. "Material" cleverly incorporates several levels: it is a persuasive study in individual psychology, with the narrator's judgment of Hugo (and, by implication, her own self-esteem) in doubt until the end; it raises the wider question of the validity of distinctions based on gender (the narrator becomes convinced that Hugo and her very different present husband "both have authority" and she does not); it is a story, and a subtle one, about the act of writing itself. The narrator is in the unusual position of documenting a personality who, thanks to her ex-husband, has already "passed into Art". The story, therefore, resembles the conclusion to *Lives of Girls and Women* in using alternative methods of representation as a means of arousing the reader's active interest in the process whereby reality is made into fiction.

The potential in art to falsify reality is raised as an issue yet again in the final paragraph of "The Ottawa Valley". Indeed, by the time this final story of the volume came to be written, Munro herself had grown so distrustful of fictonalizing that she seriously contemplated giving up the writing of fiction altogether. Munro's own testimony is that the story is autobiographical; the protagonist's dilemma in having to choose between "making a proper story" of her mother's illness and wanting "to bring back all I could" may reflect the author's own quandary. The apparently episodic quality of the story gives it the air of a painfully sincere recollection, art giving the impression of avoiding the contamination of artifice.

In *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), Munro returned to the method of inter-locking stories she had adopted for *Lives of Girls and Women*. The books also have in common a complicated pre-publication history. In both the Struthers and the Hancock interview, Munro has given a detailed account of an earlier conception of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, according to which some of the stories eventually about Rose were narrated by another character named Janet. The book was to be half Janet stories and half Rose stories, a structure Munro felt "was just too fancy" (Hancock interview). Then, after the volume was in galleys, Munro quickly wrote "Simon's Luck" and the title story, and killed off Janet. Three Janet stories ("Connection", "The Stone in the Field" and "The Moons of Jupiter") eventually were included in *The Moons of Jupiter*.

*Who Do You Think You Are?* was written after Munro moved back to Western Ontario from British Columbia. Her marriage with James Munro had dissolved, and she married Gerald Fremlin, a fellow undergraduate when she was a student at Western. Munro has told Hancock that when she returned to Huron



County "one of the things I noticed immediately was the class system". This perception soon found a fictional translation in *Who Do You Think You Are?:* Hanratty is a far more class-ridden community, as well as far more violent and menacing, than Jubilee.

Beaten by her father, hearing tales about vigilante justice, witnessing incest in the Entryway of the Boys' Toilet at school, Munro's new protagonist Rose has one educational challenge: "learning to survive". This is, indeed, the task she is engaged in throughout the book, as she moves from childhood by way of an unsuccessful marriage into a precarious middle age. Like the narrator of "Material", she feels that it is her individual destiny, and the fate of her sex, never to be "the free person, the one with that power".

Del Jordan did have much of that freedom, and *Lives of Girls and Women* consequently has an easily understood unity: in each successive story, Del tests her capacities in relation to some basic experience of life - religion, sex, authorship. Such a straightforward, confident assault upon reality is foreign to the world of Munro's more recent fiction. As she said to Hancock: "What I have is people going on .... There are just flashes of things we know and find out. I don't see life very much in terms of progress".

Rose's life, in contrast to Del's, is made out of modest illuminations and limited victories. Each story is a snapshot of Rose's existence at a particular point in time, and the book avoids the smooth transitions which, in Munro's present view, would violate psychological truth. Yet there is an inner coherence to Rose's character which results from two ingrained habits, exhibited at every stage of life: flight to and from men, and story-telling.

Rose's retreat from her father's wrath is but the first of many abrupt physical movements to which she resorts as a way of handling male dominance. She surrenders to the "violent temptation" to run into Patrick's library carrel and reinstate their engagement; she is frustrated in her efforts to run towards Tom, the Calgary academic, and eventually runs away from the experience of being jilted by Simon, the Queen's academic. As she herself reflects: "she thought...how many overblown excuses she had found, having to leave a place, or being afraid to leave a place, on account of some man". These episodes in most instances suggest not so much a failure of will as a need to acquire self-definition and self-regard through the flattering mirror of a lover. In her two final responses to men (involving Simon, and then Ralph Gillespie, her former schoolmate), Rose shows signs of freeing herself from this pattern of dependence. Running away from Simon represents a disinclination to pine away on the spot, and Rose is eventually rewarded by a renewal of emotional contact with the tangible world. In talking to Ralph, Rose finds a bond of feeling that is not based on "sexual warmth"; recognizing Ralph's self-sufficiency, she moves closer to achieving independence for herself. The book ends with Rose seemingly in a positive frame of mind, though there is no assurance of permanent self-reliance.

Throughout the book, Rose is associated with imitations, acting and story-telling - all seen as expressions of the same psychological impulse. Until the final story, Rose attempts to bolster her feeble self-esteem through acting and story-telling. In essence, however, each of these gestures involves disparagement of self, or of origins, in the act of striving to appear significant. This blend of abasement and theatrics is evident in the royal beatings Rose endures: part of the ritual is that "Rose must play her part in this with the same grossness, the same exaggeration, that her father displays, playing his". In later life, Rose attempts to play the role of Barbara Stanwyck to retain Clifford's interest; she charms people at parties, and acts the parts of interviewer

and interviewee with apparent public success, "but sometimes Rose was deeply, unaccountably ashamed". The enterprise of creating an admired but unreal public personality is by its nature humiliating, since it suggests to Rose that her true inner character is either not worthy, or does not exist. Similarly, Rose's stories about her primary school, or about Flo "had considerable effect", but since they record true experiences but are not prompted by sincerity in motivation, "the effect was off-balance".

Yet the positive ending of the book also extends to the aspect we have been examining. On the penultimate page, Rose is said to feel ashamed of her acting, because "she might have been paying attention to the wrong things, reporting antics" - dramatizing herself rather than using the art form as a means of illumination. "That peculiar shame" has, however, been eased by the selfless interchange with Ralph. It is a sign of regeneration in her that she deliberately avoids sullyng her feeling for Ralph: "Rose didn't tell this to anybody, glad that there was one thing at least she wouldn't spoil by telling". Rose's self-serving and yet masochistic story-telling seems far removed from Del's ambitious plans as a writer, but both books end with a reminder of the distortions inherent in telling tales.

Since Munro's most recently published work, *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), includes material originally destined for *Who Do You Think You Are?*, it is hardly surprising that the two books have much in common. In many of the *The Moons of Jupiter* stories, women like Rose, or at least in Rose's situation, find their lives are defined by unsatisfactory but inevitable relationships with predatory men.

A collection of unrelated stories, *The Moons of Jupiter* nevertheless contains themes that are developed in more than one context. That familiar Munro subject, the attempt to reclaim the past through a return journey, figures in "The Stone in the Field" and "Accident". The frailties of old age, so devastatingly revealed in "Spelling" of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, are once again unsparingly examined in "Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd", and touched upon in a lighter fashion in "Visitors". The boundaries and limits of puritanism in Huron County are defined in "The Stone in the Field" and "The Turkey Season".

This collection is not, however, dominated by Huron County character types, or even by the return to Huron County of those who survived their childhood in that area. The representative protagonist of the book is a middle-aged woman of unspecified or briefly indicated origins with both a career orientation towards some form of the arts, and a troubled personal life. With variations appropriate to the individual narrative, such a character is central to six ("Dulse", "Bardon Bus", "Prue", "Labor Day Dinner", "Hard-Luck Stories", "The Moons of Jupiter") of the eleven stories. A less gifted writer might be guilty of creating an impression of monotony through the repeated use of similar personality types. Munro's ability to interweave meditation, action, and a variety of settings eliminates this potential problem - the collection has both an appearance of diversity and the depth that results from several approaches to the same issues.

"Dulse" and "Labor Day Dinner" are particularly intriguing and innovative explorations of the pattern just outlined. The former story manages, within the space of scarcely more than twenty pages, to play a dazzling and complex set of variations upon the theme of love. The protagonist, Lydia, has been dumped by a selfish academic lover (most of Munro's scholars are not to be trusted) and flees, as Rose might, to a New Brunswick island (clearly modelled on Grand Manan). There she finds three more male candidates for sexual favours - a young but experienced French Canadian, a wistful middle-aged potato farmer, and their boss, an assertive and vulgar self-made man. Lydia is tempted to indicate her availability either to Eugene, the imploring boy, or Lawrence, the self-confident man of the Maritimes world: "in the past she might have done it....Now it

seemed not possible". Lydia's rejection of both the masochism the professor demanded of her and the cold-hearted opportunities open to her on the island heightens her sensitivity to more delicate forms of emotion. She appreciates the rural gentleness of the farmer more than the more overt advances of his companions: she can regard with some nostalgia his loyalty to a culture in which "love is managed for you". She regards with admiration as well as some skepticism a fellow-guest's unquestioning devotion to the memory of Willa Cather, the American novelist who in reality did spend several summers on the island. Mr. Stanley's love for Cather is "a lovely, durable shelter" even if it is erected upon a foundation of sentimentality. It stands in contrast to Lydia's more sophisticated desperation; in another way, Cather's relentless dedication to her craft makes its comment upon Lydia's repudiation of her own claims as a poet.

"Labor Day Dinner" is also a story with much to say about love, but it is not focused upon the perceptions and reactions of a single protagonist. In this story, Munro set herself a formidable technical challenge - to create a wide variety of points of view within the narrow limits of the short story form. At one time or other in the story, the reader is given considerable access to the thoughts of the four guests and the hostess at the dinner party. Munro also ventures into new territory in other ways: George, the sculptor of Hungarian descent is one of the few explicitly non-WASP characters in her fiction; the story is about the strategies of people playing at country living, rather than about the habits of country people. Munro has her customary success on more familiar ground in evoking the imaginations of a girl in late adolescence and her pubescent sister. But the core of the story is built around the contrasting sensibilities of two middle-aged women. Roberta, the victim of middle-aged "subtle withering", feels she has "no clear moments of authority" in living with George - she has given up her work as an illustrator of children's books in order to help him with his endless home improvement schemes. Valerie, the hostess, has been physically unattractive all her days, but thrives in an existence independent of love. Since her husband's death, she has master-minded her own house renovations, and her air of lively self-command contrasts with Roberta's edginess. By the end of the story, Roberta feels that temporarily "she has power" in her relationship with George, but the reader is left with the impression that she, like Lydia, is doomed to be "up and down". In general, the story opposes the volatile emotions of Roberta's household to the more controlled, but also more limited, feelings of Valerie and her daughter Ruth, the inheritor of her virtues. The story presents these two responses to life, making their consequences clear, but not choosing between them. We have noticed temperamental oppositions as a structural principle in such major stories as "Red Dress-1946", "The Peace of Utrecht" and "Memorial". In the broader context of Munro's work, we find Valerie's self-sufficiency, arising out of different causes, in Del Jordan, and Roberta's dependency upon male approval in Rose. It is perhaps legitimate to conjecture that Munro understands and recreates radically opposed types of female emotion because she finds some counterpart to each kind of feeling within herself. She told Hancock, without elaboration, that "I feel that I am two rather different people, two very different women", and elaborated on what seems to be much the same insight in talking to Graeme Gibson, a decade earlier:

There's the desire to give, even to be dominated, to be, at least I, in many ways, want a quite traditional role, and then of course the writer stands right outside this, and so there's the conflict right there.

The ambivalence Munro feels about being a writer is one of several personal concerns which contribute to the vitality and emotional depth of her fiction. Some of Munro's finest stories express feelings that evoke responses from any sensitive reader, but are at the same time explorations and discoveries of the writer's own emotion, translated into the partial distance fiction provides. Yet Munro is also a gifted objective chronicler

of such subjects as the traditional values of her childhood environment, the pathos of old age, and the frantic search in our time for a vanished sense of wholeness. For all her fundamental seriousness, Munro has not forgotten the writer's obligation to give pleasure: her stories attest to her remarkable powers of observation, her unfailing ear for speech of all kinds, and her capacity for the kind of wit which is unsentimental without deserting compassion.

Munro's qualities as a writer have been widely recognized. It requires a substantial research effort to unearth any reviewer or critic who has the slightest reservations about the value of her work. Among the hundreds of reviews in the Calgary collection and at the offices of Munro's current publisher, one comes across a handful of lukewarm notices. American and English reviews are just as uniformly favourable as Canadian ones. Critical articles, a growing stream since the early Seventies, have lately swelled into a torrent. A good sampling, dealing with such matters as Munro's early work, her narrative technique and use of language, and (the best essay in the collection) the "art of disarrangement" in *Who Do You Think You Are?*, may be found in the volume *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*, edited by Louis K. MacKendrick.

"I will never, never run out of things to write about" (Hancock interview). We all have reason to hope that Munro will keep this pledge, so that we will continue to have an abundant supply of stories from this versatile, supremely talented and profoundly moving writer.

### Note

Interviews quoted in this essay are taken from the following sources (given in chronological order): John Metcalf, *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 4 (Fall 1972); Graeme Gibson, *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (1973); Kem Murch, *Chatelaine* (August 1975); Alan Twigg, *For Openers* (1981); J. R. "Tim" Struthers, in Louis K. MacKendrick, ed., *Probable Fictions* (1983; interview done on April 27, 1981); Geoff Hancock, *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, 43 (1983).

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*The Alice Munro papers: first accession. An inventory of the archive at the University of Calgary Libraries.*  
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