



## The Understanding of Metaphor in *Lives of Girls and Women*

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### Abstract

As the best writer of short stories in Canada, Alice Munro has consistently produced work in which precise social observation and penetrating psychological insight are expressed exactly with remarkable narrative strategies. Though my thesis is informed by my reading of Munro's published books, this study does not attempt to analyze the whole stock of her literary work. I concentrate on my discussion on one of her stylistic narrative techniques--- metaphor in *Lives of Girls and Women*, which is considered her most representative. With the understanding metaphor in the novel, readers know well the character's complex patterns of existence and the suppression endured by the female characters in a patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women*, Metaphor

### 1. Introduction

All of the areas of Canadian writing were stimulated by a renaissance of interest in literature and culture in the 1970s, but probably the greatest amount of attention in the 70s was focused on Canadian women writers, such accomplished writers as Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, and Jane Rule. But among many successful women writers, Alice Munro has emerged as the most accomplished one of that decade. Her stories have subsequently been widely anthologized in Canada, the United States, and Britain, and she is internationally recognized as one of the great short story writers in English. Alice Munro is known for stories focusing on the emotional lives of the inhabitants of rural Canada. Her accessible and moving stories set in small and provincial towns like the one where she spent her childhood, are mostly written from the point of view of a young or adolescent girl and address themes of particular interest to women.

Among Alice Munro's collections of stories, *Lives of Girls and Women* is her most popular fiction, which places her in the top rank in short story writing. It is a set of eight first-person narratives recounting the life of Del Jordan in Jubilee, a fictional small town in southwestern Ontario that bears a strong resemblance to Munro's own hometown of Wingham. Told retrospectively by an older Del, who has moved away and become a fiction writer, it traces her childhood crises and initiation into adulthood.

In this paper, metaphor will be examined to show how this rhetoric means helps readers impressively to understand the social environment and conventional ideas of the small town Jubilee and their impacts on the townspeople.

### 2. Metaphor analysis

#### 2.1 Metaphor in "The Flats Road"

The opening section, "The Flats Road", is notable for its evocation of place, as Del recounts for growing up in isolation with her parents and brother Owen on a fox farm that is "not part of town" but "not part of the country either." "We were in a house as small and shut up as any boat is on the sea" (Munro, 1971, p.29). Metaphorically, Del expresses her own ambivalent relationship to this place. She has an affinity for the natural world, but her sense of social alienation is profound. At the same time, the Flats Road is also a metaphor for backward and uncivilized world. For instance, Del's mother always tries to escape the Flats Road, which is for her the last place to live in. When people ask where she lives, she says: "at the end of the Flats Road" as if that makes all the difference. That the Flats Road farm stands for primitive isolation is made even clearer when the farm hand Uncle Benny went to the city to get and bring little Diane back and found himself lost in the huge metropolis. He finally gave it up disappointedly. Uncle Benny, a representative of the country people, is sure to get lost among factories, dead-end roads, warehouses, junkyards, and railway tracks in the

city.

### 2.2 Metaphor in "Heirs of the Living Body"

In "Heirs of the Living Body", the written records of Del's Uncle Craig, who is the clerk of Fairmile Township and a local historian, contrast with the gossip and stories of her Auntie Grace and Aunt Elspeth, who live by themselves in Jenkin's Bend. While mentioning Del's cousin Ruth McQueen, Addie, Del's mother, said

She is "afraid to stick her head out of her own burrow" (Munro, 1971, P. 42). This is a metaphor which refers to the event that Ruth McQueen had won a scholarship to go to college, for she was very clever, but she thought it over and turned it down. She decided to stay home and preferred not to go to college. To people in Jubilee, ambition is what they are alarmed by. They think that to be ambitious is to court failure and to risk making a fool of oneself. They are afraid of being laughed at, which is the worst thing in their life. They have the kind of self-respect of the countryside people. They do not think it is wise to pursue new ways or to do things offered. "They (the countryside people) like people turning down things that were offered, marriage, positions, opportunities, money" (Munro, 1971, P. 42). That is why Ruth McQueen made the decision of quitting college. She is bound by the local code of social behavior which has shaped her life.

Moreover, the hide of the dead cow that Del sees and examines is a metaphor, too. It is like a map of the world, a map which connects Del's existence in Wawanash County with the world." Tracing the outline of a continent again, digging the stick in, trying to make a definite line, I paid attention to its shape as I would sometimes pay to the shape of the real continents or islands of real maps"(Munro, 1971, P.49). Del examines a dead cow at the Wawanash River, she imagines that on the hide there is a map of the world which she feels compelled to understand. Further, the death of the cow is also connected with Uncle Craig's death. When Uncle Craig dies and a cousin tries to force Del to view the body at his funeral, in an attempt to escape the cousin's grip, Del bites her and tastes blood. Later in her musing, Uncle Craig's death is connected with other deaths. Such are glimpses of the human connection of which her mother has spoken in reference to a magazine article on transplants called "Heirs of the Living Body", from which this chapter also gets its title. The article says that people are made up of parts. When a person dies, only one part, or a couple of parts, may actually be worn out. And some of the other parts could in fact have run thirty, forty years more. In Uncle Craig's case, his heart breaks down but he still has some good parts that a sick person may use. Thus the death of the protagonist's Uncle Craig occurring in the second chapter "Heirs of the Living Body" is related to other deaths. He, like all of Munro's characters, shares one living body with others. Further more, his death is envisioned as part of a natural process, and himself even dead, is still a part of nature, so that the protagonist's mother can announce: "Uncle Craig doesn't have to be Uncle Craig! Uncle Craig is flowers" (Munro, 1971, P. 53).

Thinking in such terms, nature is going on and on, though parts of it are constantly changing into something else. All those elements such as liver, stomach and brain that once made up Uncle Craig are only changing and going back into nature again. They will appear in birds and animals and flowers. So Uncle Craig is also seen as the metaphor for human connection with nature.

By dwelling on Uncle Craig's death and its connection with not only other deaths but also with the living world, Munro is working on a big metaphor. What is implied here is that although Del does not seem to value much of Uncle Craig's heritage, especially his effort as a writer of local history, she is nevertheless an heir of him, a partaker of one shared living body, so to speak, only that Del grows up surpassing Uncle Craig's generation to become a better writer in the end.

### 2.3 Metaphor in "Princess Ida"

"Princess Ida" focuses on Del's mother, Addie, who sells from door to door encyclopedias, which pose as a metaphor for her rationality, independence and mobility. She writes letters to newspaper editors, including letters to a city paper. She signs them with the *nom de plume* "Princess Ida", a reference to Tennyson's poem "The Princess", in which the royal heroine sets up a college for the education and emancipation of women. Her life ambition is to become independent, but she cannot quite make the full journey towards autonomy and she never escapes the consequent feeling of failure, a failure which finally sends her to the sick-bed, defeated by the coming to ruin of her best laid plans to guarantee her children's escape from the provincial life. Her efforts of equipping the region with encyclopedias, and spreading knowledge from house to house are looked down upon as eccentric in the neighborhood. And even Del feels ashamed when watching her mother being rejected at each door. Addie who tries to lift herself out of her narrow life and who pursues rationality, independence and mobility is frustrated by people with conventional ideas and is presented by the author as the victim of a rural, male-dominated society.

Another interesting metaphor in Addie's story is built around the image of "cobwebs": "Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace wove in and out around her, retreating and disappearing and coming back, slippery and soft-voiced and indestructible. She pushed them out of her way as if they were cobwebs" (Munro, 1971, P. 40).

Addie thinks that people, including Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace, are representatives of country values, which is like

a “cobweb” often wanting to catch her, their “prey”, for she is so different from them and longs for a different kind of existence. Addie’s world is full of serious skeptical questions and she disregards housework. Unlike other country wives whose future and prospect end in marriage and children, she struggles for intellectual improvement. But her trust in knowledge meets headlong with hostile anti-intellectualism of her surroundings. It is not easy for her to realize her ambitions. Therefore, all her own frustrations are channeled into the hope and expectation that her daughter will have a different type of existence and a development of the life of the mind rather than the life of the body.

The above quoted passage not only shows how Addie must all the time fight the countryside values imposed on her by people like Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace and attempt to push cobwebs out of her way, but also implies that Addie will not easily break away from the cobwebs woven to capture her. The last sentence “I knew better than that” points to Del’s emphasis on the tenacity of cobwebs. They only look weak and Addie obviously has overlooked how tenaciously spiders weave cobwebs to catch flies. Her misunderstanding of the situation is proved by the sad fact that she cannot free herself from her unsatisfactory life, no matter how hard she has worked towards her aspiration. The cobweb, therefore, functions effectively as the central thematic metaphor in the chapter “Princess Ida”.

#### 2.4 Metaphor in “Epilogue: The Photographer”

In “Epilogue: The Photographer”, the question of illusion and reality and role playing is focused in the question of art in relation to life. Del conceives in her mind a Gothic novel set in Jubilee concerning the members of the Sherriff family and all their tragedies. A significant figure in her novel is an evil-looking photographer who takes pictures which are frightening because they somehow make people look older and reveal hidden things in their personalities. Here Alice Munro has created a metaphor for her own kind of art which reveals something of the mystery of existence. As Del sets off from Jubilee in search of her real life, she abandons the Gothic “black fable” she has invented out of her small town childhood and takes with her only the intuition of “Epilogue: The Photographer” that familiar things are both more ordinary and more amazing than she has given them credit for. They stubbornly resist being turned into fiction: “It is a shock, when you have dealt so cunning, powerfully, with reality, to come back and find it still there” (Munro, 1971, P. 275). Del in “Epilogue: The Photographer” is faced with the irreducible reality of Jubilee. Del sees the world in terms of her favorite novels, and is distorted of her fanciful notions. But Munro can accommodate both the ordinary and the bizarre in her fiction and enhance observation and experience without wrenching them out of what is true.

Alice Munro has talked about her fictions being fundamentally concerned with looking at what people don’t understand, what we think is happening and what we understand later on. The fiction is actually a subtle description of the lives of girls and women generated by the narrative techniques which combine the insights of the mature writer with the adolescent experience of herself as the subject in the stories.

The dominant metaphor gets readers a vivid and impressive understanding of how social environment and conventional ideas influence lives of people in Jubilee and how the mystery of ordinariness is revealed in the process. Such technique also helps throw light on the suppression endured by the central female characters in a patriarchal society, guide our interpretation and promote us toward a better understanding of the story’s complexities and overall meaning.

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