

## Alice Munro: Nobel Prize-winning Master of the Contemporary Short Story

*Alice Munro : la reine de la nouvelle contemporaine*

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# **ALICE MUNRO: NOBEL PRIZE-WINNING MASTER OF THE CONTEMPORARY SHORT STORY**

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This article surveys Alice Munro's achievements and consists of four parts: Alice Munro and the Nobel Prize; From Canadian Small Town Life to Global Literary Renown; Alice Munro's Art of the Short Story: Oeuvre, Characteristics, Poetics; Exemplary Text Analysis: Alice Munro, "Fiction." The article focuses on the virtuosity of Munro's short story poetics and how she breaks with traditional rules of short story writing for her purposes. The poetological analysis is complemented by a detailed analysis of one of her exceptionally well-constructed and moving stories, "Fiction" (2007), which is particularly suitable for teaching and representative of Munro's mastery of the short story form.

Cet article considère les succès d'Alice Munro et consiste en quatre parties : Alice Munro et le Prix Nobel ; De sa vie dans une petite ville du Canada à une renommée internationale en littérature ; L'art de la nouvelle d'Alice Munro : l'oeuvre, les traits caractéristiques, la poétique ; L'analyse d'un texte exemplaire : Alice Munro, « Fiction ». L'article se concentre sur la virtuosité de la poétique de Munro dans l'écriture de la nouvelle et sur sa manière de rompre avec les règles traditionnelles de l'écriture de la nouvelle pour imposer y son propre tempo. L'analyse poétologique est ici complétée par une analyse détaillée d'une de ses nouvelles, « Fiction » (2007) qui est particulièrement émouvante et exceptionnellement bien construite. Elle est aussi particulièrement bien adaptée à l'enseignement car elle reflète l'exceptionnelle maîtrise de la forme de la nouvelle, par Munro.

## **Alice Munro and the Nobel Prize in Literature**

On 10 October 2013, it was announced that the Nobel Prize in Literature for the year 2013 would be awarded to Canadian short story writer Alice Munro, a decision German literature critic Denis Scheck favourably called a "sensational choice," which other experts, however, had considered likely, since more than deserved. In the short video clip on the Nobel Committee's website, the immediate, on-site reaction of the convened journalists to the announcement of the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy is clearly audible: jubilant cries of approval. The spontaneous and very positive reaction of the assembled journalists upon the announcement of the laureate was sustained in the ensuing international reaction to the committee's selection. The Austrian journalist and author Eva Menasse, for instance, comes to the following conclusion in her homage to Alice Munro in the German national weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*:

The news that Alice Munro is the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature for 2013 has filled more authors in the world with deep,

honest joy and approval than most of the announcements of past years.  
(MENASSE 2013; my translation from the German original)

What, then, is distinctive or even exceptional about this particular choice, which has evoked almost exclusively approving, indeed enthusiastic reactions of moving praise for this author? I will summarize the multiple reasons justifying this reaction in five points.

For one, for the first time in the over one hundred years of its existence, this highest literary distinction has gone to Canada, which was considered to be long overdue and not only thrilled Canadians but Canadianists worldwide. It had become increasingly inexplicable that a country with such internationally renowned literary luminaries as Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, and Michael Ondaatje had not yet received the Nobel Prize. Douglas Gibson, Munro's longstanding publisher in Canada—a postcolonial country that has only found itself culturally since the 1960s and has since enjoyed a cultural heyday—stated with exultation: “All of Canada is just delighted by this news [...] it's as if all of Canada has won the award” (CBC News 2013) and “It's a great day for all of us, every Canadian should be walking a little taller” (LEUNG 2013).

A second reason for the momentous appreciation of this decision was that, of the 110 Nobel Prizes in Literature awarded at the time, Munro was only the thirteenth *female* writer to win this coveted prize. Considering that creative writing is not a field of which one could say that male writers are nine times better (or better at all) than female writers, the decade-long disregard of female writers, with a gender ratio of 1:9 in terms of prizes won, appears, to put it mildly, inappropriate. At any rate, the fact that seven of the latest twenty-two awards, that is, a third of the most recent prizes, had gone to female writers (after only six of the previous ninety) is an indication that the committee may have begun considering and judging nominations with both eyes, not only with one, in the meantime—healthily so.

From the perspective of literary studies, it is even more remarkable that with Alice Munro, a writer has been distinguished who has worked almost exclusively within the short story form. This had never happened before and it internationally constitutes an important symbolic appreciation of the short story form, which has long stood in the shadow of the novel—not so, however, in Canada. The short story has repeatedly been called Canada's preeminent literary form (NISCHIK 1987; NISCHIK 2007a), and already at the beginning of the 1980s, Munro's short story collection *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982) was the

narrative prose text (i.e., including novels) for which Penguin had paid the highest advance for the publishing rights of a paperback edition of Canadian literature at the time.

Fourth, it is notable that the prize went to an author known for her altogether withdrawn lifestyle, who—apart from her literary works—does not participate in public (e.g., political) discourse, unlike, for example, her writer colleague and friend Margaret Atwood, who has been in the spotlight for decades. Munro, on the contrary, seems to have only been interested in writing as such, along with her family, for the past six decades, and barely or not at all in the publicity that comes with success. Munro has appeared to be wary of such publicity; her public appearances such as readings are rare—and so it was not surprising that she did not personally accept the Nobel Prize in Stockholm. In the 1980s, Munro summarized the two main interests of her life as follows: “All I want is find time to write—what with my husband and my children – well, they’re grown up now ... but still”<sup>1</sup>. A variation of this statement that initially appears to be amusing, but is in essence discriminatory from today’s perspective, appears in the headline of a 1961 newspaper article on Munro in *The Vancouver Sun*: “Housewife Finds Time to Write Short Stories.”

Nevertheless, the domestic work context should not be underestimated since it does not provide the worst conditions for the writer’s tasks—as demonstrated paradigmatically in Munro’s life work. With this, we come to the fifth and essentially most important aspect of this honour, which was not always a matter of course with the Nobel Prize in Literature: Alice Munro is a grandiose writer who masters her craft with virtuosity and whose writing serves as a model for many other authors—with good reason, she has repeatedly been called a “writer’s writer”<sup>2</sup>. In her case, this has not precluded her success with a general readership. For decades, Munro has been a bestselling author in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain, and not least through translations of her works has also had an established reader base in other countries, well before winning the Nobel Prize<sup>3</sup>. Not only her sales success and her resonance in international

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Munro in an interview; source could not be reconstructed.

<sup>2</sup> See RESNICK 2012, 122: “A writer’s writer [...] is a writer that other writers read, and admire, and study, and try to learn from. And sometimes fall a little bit in love with.”

<sup>3</sup> In Germany, for instance, *Too Much Happiness* was number twenty-nine in the hardcover list on 2 October 2010, but after winning the Nobel Prize, number one on the paperback list on 28 October 2013. In a review of *The Beggar Maid* on 4 December 1981 in *Die Zeit*, Munro was called a “still unknown Canadian author here,” although this could only refer to the general readership at the time, since in academic circles she was already well known; in a review from 2 December 2000 of

literary studies, but also the prizes she has received for her writing were indicative of what was to come: Already for her very first short story collection (*Dance of the Happy Shades*, 1968), she received Canada's most illustrious prize for literature, the Governor General's Award for Fiction—two further prizes in this category would follow (in 1978 for *Who Do You Think You Are?* and in 1986 for *The Progress of Love*). Among many other distinctions, she twice received Canada's best-endowed award, the Giller Prize (in 1998 for *The Love of a Good Woman* and in 2004 for *Runaway*), the Ontario Trillium Award three times (in 1990, 1999, and 2013), the Commonwealth Writers Prize twice (in 1991 and 2004), as well as the US National Book Critics Circle Award (in 1998 for *The Love of a Good Woman*). When in 2009 she also won the distinguished Man Booker International Prize<sup>4</sup> for her life's work, many rightly assumed that it would likely not remain her highest distinction.

### **Short Biography: From Canadian Small Town Life to Global Literary Renown**

Who is this extraordinary talent who won the first Nobel Prize in Literature both for Canada and for the short story? A basic survey of Munro's biography shows diverse parallels between her life and work. Alice Laidlaw was born in 1931 on a farm on the outskirts of the small town of Wingham, Ontario, in Huron County, the rural area east of Lake Huron in Canada. Alice was the oldest of three children of a former teacher and a farmer—Munro dealt with growing up on such a farm in the context of traditional gender roles in her excellent early story "Boys and Girls" in 1964 (NISCHIK 2007b). While studying English Literature at the University of Western Ontario (today Western University) in London, Ontario, Alice met James Munro, a fellow student whom she married at age twenty in 1951, having dropped out of university after two years due to a lack of financial means. The couple moved to Canada's west coast, first to Vancouver and in the 1960s even further west, to Victoria on Vancouver Island. In Victoria, they opened a bookstore, "Munro's Books" (which still exists and is owned by Jim Munro).

Alice Munro's stories set on Canada's west coast go back to these years, during which Munro also gave birth to three daughters, a familial background reflected

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the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of *The Love of a Good Woman*, however, Munro is called a "renowned author" in Germany.

<sup>4</sup> It is, perhaps, significant that Munro has received genre-related prizes to a lesser extent (yet there are also fewer of them), such as the PEN Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction or the Canadian Authors Association's Jubilee Award for Short Stories (in 1997).

in her stories. Alice's own mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease when Alice was only eleven years old, and died when Alice was twenty-eight, a life-changing experience she gave literary expression to during that same summer in "The Peace of Utrecht" (1960; in *Dance*) and later in "The Ottawa Valley" (1974, in *Something*) and "Friend of My Youth" (1990, in *Friend*). After giving birth to her first daughter, Alice Munro sold her first short story in 1953, at the age of twenty-two, to a Canadian magazine, and became known to a national audience in part through Robert Weaver's *CBC Anthology*, a long-lived Canadian radio programme that featured short stories, often read by the authors themselves. After the birth of her second daughter, Munro regularly wrote short stories and first published only in Canadian magazines such as the *Tamarack Review* or *Chatelaine*. After seventeen such magazine publications, Munro accomplished her national debut in 1968 with her first short story collection, the award-winning *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Her second short story collection, marketed as a "novel," *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), paved the way for her international breakthrough in the 1970s with *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978, also published as *The Beggar Maid* in 1979).

After twenty-two years, her first marriage to Jim Munro failed and after two decades on Canada's west coast in British Columbia, she moved back to her native Ontario. She lived there as of 1975 with her second husband, Gerald Fremlin (who passed away in April 2013), in his parents' home in Clinton, Ontario. Munro would spend the next forty years in Clinton, back in her beloved Southwestern Ontario, a mere thirty kilometres from her birthplace Wingham. Remarkably, for most of her career as a writer, she did not have an office—an experience she dealt with in literary form in "The Office" (1962; in *Dance*). In their house in Clinton, her husband, a geographer, had an office, while she wrote on a small table in the dining room with a view of the driveway. This was, however, not detrimental to her writing: 1976 marked the beginning of her decade-long association with the US monthly magazine *The New Yorker*, internationally the top address for the first publication of short stories. Significantly, this magazine, which contributed greatly to making Munro's work known in the United States, secured the first reading right for her short stories—no author, male or female, has published over a longer period of time or more short stories in *The New Yorker* than Alice Munro<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> On *The New Yorker's* potential influence on Munro's work, (BERAN 1999). See also Munro's "Author's Note" prefacing *The Love of a Good Woman*: "Stories in this collection that were previously published in *The New Yorker* appeared there in very different form."

### **Alice Munro's Art of the Short Story: Oeuvre, Characteristics, Poetics**

The oeuvre of the now 83-year-old Munro extends over half a century and encompasses fourteen short story collections published between 1968 and 2012. According to her personal statement, the latest volume with the resonant title *Dear Life* will be her last, as she cannot any longer muster the energy that writing demands. A July 2013 *New York Times* report on Munro's (already second) announcement of her resolution to retire is entitled "Alice Munro Puts Down Her Pen to Let the World In," and quotes Munro as stating:

There will be no more books after *Dear Life* [...]. I don't have the energy anymore, [...] it's very hard, and you get very tired. [...] I feel a bit tired now – pleasantly tired. [...] I feel that I've done what I wanted to do, and that makes me feel fairly content. (MCGRATH 2013, 1, 2, 3)

A Nobel laureate now, it seems as though we are looking at a *completed* life work.

What exactly are, then, the characteristics of Munro's short stories, what are their poetological conditions and finesses? First of all, Munro is among the authors who have placed a particular region and its inhabitants on the map of world literature, thus immortalizing it: in her case, Southwestern Ontario, especially Huron County around London, Ontario, nowadays sometimes called "Munro Country." From her early texts (e.g., "Walker Brothers Cowboy," 1968) to her late work (e.g., "Dear Life," 2011), this region has been evoked and recreated in her literary work. Although some of her short stories also have other, in part international settings, such as Western Canada or Scotland (where her ancestors originate from), Australia, or Albania, the great majority of her short stories are set in the small-town context of Southwestern Ontario. As many authors do, Munro dismisses generalizing attributions and differentiates her classification as a regional author as follows:

A lot of people think I'm a regional writer. And I use the region where I grew up a lot. But I don't have any idea of writing to show the kind of things that happen in a certain place. These things happen and the place is part of it. But in a way, it's incidental. (MUNRO in HANCOCK 1987, 200)

In other words, Munro does not primarily have a *documentary* interest when selecting settings, although the description of regional idiosyncrasies certainly

informs her writing; rather, she is interested in the overarching topics of the human condition, not bound to the region depicted. Instead of recreating the known or recognizable in her settings, in her attempt to grasp what she once metaphorically called “deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum,” she focuses on the puzzling, the unseen, the surprising, and the alienated of the region she is so familiar with. This approach is indicative of the influence of female writers of the American South on Munro’s work, such as Flannery O’Connor, Carson McCullers, and especially Eudora Welty, so that Munro’s texts have been called “Ontario Gothic” (BERNDT 2010). As Munro once remarked on Southwestern Ontario: “The part of the country I come from is absolutely Gothic. You can’t get it all down” (MUNRO in GIBSON 1973, 248).

Apart from Munro’s preferred regional settings, which, for instance, may result in the realism in her use of place names, a second characteristic is that her stories often have female protagonists, are written from a female perspective, and emphasise the corresponding themes: mother-daughter relationships, daughter-father relationships, sister-brother relationships; restrictive gender roles, gender-related professional problems, often also in artistic or writing contexts; love relationships and relationship problems, the wonder of and the wonderful about love, along with its failure and its transience; or problems of growing older and of ageing—such thematic emphases are generally rendered from female perspectives that refer back to Munro’s own life.

Indeed, the evident regional origins and the gender-specific accentuation of her topics point to the third main characteristic of Munro’s writing: the strongly autobiographic, or, as Munro herself put it, “personal” roots and dimensions of her work (MUNRO in STRUTHERS 1981, 17). It can thus be argued that Munro has a tendency to write in line with her own life experiences, focussed on processing her childhood and adolescence at the beginning of her career, then on career and partnership experiences, and finally on the ageing process—Munro’s stories not only have a propensity to become lengthier, her protagonists also become progressively older<sup>6</sup>—until, consequently, Munro announced she would rest her pen, as cited above: “I’ve done what I wanted to do, and that makes me feel fairly content” (MCGRATH 2013, 3). In a sense, Munro’s work can thus be seen as a long, discontinuous, and wide-ranging narration parallel to her own experiences—it is not without reason, for instance, that in the last story of her eponymous last collection, “Dear Life,” there is a

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<sup>6</sup> As Howells concurs: “with an accompanying sense of individual lives scrolling out over many decades” (HOWELLS 2003, 54).



moving reminiscence of her mother, and that a highly complex, incomplete mother-daughter relationship is a substantial motif in many of Munro's stories. This moving last passage of the story "Dear Life" is not only the last in this collection, but perhaps, by her own account, the final chord of her writing career:

I did not go home for my mother's last illness or for her funeral. I had two small children and nobody in Vancouver to leave them with. We could barely have afforded the trip, and my husband had a contempt for formal behavior, but why blame it on him? I felt the same. We say of some things that they can't be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves. But we do—we do it all the time. (*Dear Life*, 319)

What many scholars and readers are fascinated by in Munro's texts—the fourth and perhaps foremost characteristic of her work—is less the "what" than the "how" of her stories, less the content than the form, or rather, the content in combination with the form: style, narrative technique, the manner of narrative transmission. It is distinctive of Munro's texts that main statements and narrative form elaborately intertwine, resulting in a refined yet comprehensible, indeed readable narrative art that can only be marvelled at on a complex level of reception. Munro broadens the boundaries of the short story, experimenting with the genre form in her non-linear, expansive, seemingly digressive, and often montage-like style (e.g., "Dulse," 1980, in *Moons*), or with a multi-perspectival, epiphanic manner of narration (e.g., "Lichen," 1985, in *Progress*), conveying the exceptional, the amazing, but also the threatening in everyday life. Often, her texts reflect on creative writing as such, the relationship between reality and fiction, thus integrating poetological problems into the stories: "And what happened, I asked myself, to Marion? [...] Such questions persist, in spite of novels. It is a shock, when you have dealt so cunningly, powerfully, with reality, to come back and find it still there" ("Epilogue: The Photographer" in *Lives*, 247).

In such passages, Munro repeatedly emphasizes the fragmented, incomplete, and unfathomable of the human experience, as well as the ultimate inability of literary texts to definitively grasp the entire scope of even an individual life. Of the attempts to approach and explain life, the one of which we can be most certain is the focus on the momentary, the fleeting, itself but only just a "still point of the turning world," as T. S. Eliot once put it. Consequently, Munro's aesthetics is an aesthetics of the moment, her texts a series of episodes, between which the connection gaps tend to be more evident than explanatory bridges.

The result of such a porous view on human experience *and* literature are texts with explanation gaps that contrast various interpretations and different perceptions of the same situation, also of the same character, often at different times: setting the past and the present next to each other connotes parallel rather than sequential plot lines through montage-like renderings: “worlds alongside,” as Munro formulated in *Lives*<sup>7</sup>. In her texts, the structural principle of parallel supplementation and extension is preferred to linear sequencing. There are hardly discernible shifts in perspective and the constant postponing, indeed the withholding of fixed meanings, underlining the fluidity, variability, ambiguity, and ultimate unfathomability of the human existence. As is said with metafictional significance in Munro’s story “The Ottawa Valley” (1974, in *Something*): “I wanted to find out more, remember more. I wanted to bring back all I could. Now I look at what I have done and it is like a series of snapshots” (197).

The format of the short story most congenially unites Munro’s literary views by privileging snippet-like views of the flow of life, an episodic and condensed time structure, a fragmented presentation, and open endings. Enamoured with linguistic style, the shorter prose form also indulges Munro’s penchant for manifold, laborious revisions of her writing. Despite the author’s desperate integration attempts, as late as in the proofreading stages, in her earlier two books, in which Munro dabbled in the novel form, mostly at the request of her publisher at the time<sup>8</sup>, the underpinnings of the short story are incontrovertible—consequently, I would call the results (namely *Lives* and *Who*) short story cycles, not novels. As Munro herself emphasised in the 1980s:

I think the most attractive kind of writing of all is just the single short story. It satisfies me the way nothing else does. [...] It took me a long time to reconcile myself to being a short-story writer. (MUNRO in HANCOCK 1987, 190)

And although her stories are generally longer in her later collections, Munro has remained faithful to her preferred genre, expanding it according to her literary needs.

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<sup>7</sup> “So lying alongside our world was Uncle Benny’s world like a troubling distorted reflection, the same but never at all the same” (“The Flats Road,” in *Lives*, 26).

<sup>8</sup> See Munro’s answer to an interviewer’s question regarding the revision of *Who*: “Oh, it’s the most confused revision in history” (STRUTHERS 1981, 29 *passim*).

What Coral Ann Howells calls “indeterminacy” (HOWELLS 1990) in Munro’s stories, which Munro masterfully uses for her purposes, influences both her narrative and her linguistic style (especially starting with *The Moons of Jupiter*, 1982) and lends itself to literary compositions rich in resonance that activate her readers. Consider the expressiveness of this one sentence from *Lives of Girls and Women* (249): “People’s lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing, and unfathomable—deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum.” This sentence alone demonstrates a transcending, generalising extension of meaning beyond the local or regional, as well as an oxymoronic, that is, self-contradictory, ambiguity: If lives are “dull,” they can hardly also be “amazing”; if they are “simple,” how can they also be “unfathomable”—and yet, through this adolescent writer’s view in *Lives*, they are all of these attributes simultaneously. They become interesting in numerous ways through the multidimensional perception the writer aims at, looking behind the façade of the commonplace, the kitchen linoleum, challenged by the “deep caves” of the humane behind the surface of the everyday. In this manner, the quoted sentence also has metafictional value. The principle of indeterminacy and its semantic surplus noticeable here in but one, and a relatively short sentence of Munro’s early writing period especially widens the stories of her middle and late career. The texts create spaces of resonance in which various different possibilities of meaning and interpretation circulate, resisting definitive plot developments and interpretations. The narrative techniques described above interrupt clear plot lines, resulting in multidimensional stories that address both the intellect and the emotions, and with their affective force resonate with the readers and incite them to continue deciphering the text. Munro’s words in a narrative context at the end of her story “Simon’s Luck” (1978) may also self-reflexively apply to her own narrative art. At the end of that story, the protagonist Rose, having belatedly, and agonizingly learned of the death of her new, much-desired lover Simon, contemplates “those shifts of emphasis that throw the story line open to question, the disarrangements which demand new judgments and solutions, and throw the windows open on [...] unforgettable scenery.” (*Who Do You Think You Are?/The Beggar Maid*, 177)

### **Exemplary Text Analysis: Alice Munro, “Fiction” (2007)**

Of the countless stories that could be paradigmatically analysed here—in her fourteen collections, Munro has published a total of 147 short stories—I have chosen one of her later narratives, “Fiction” from *Too Much Happiness* (2009). The story contains all the characteristics of Munro’s art of the short story I have described, with the exception of her preferred setting of Southwestern Ontario.

The twenty-nine-page text is split in two sections, set off by the Roman numerals I and II. Part I is set in a forested area behind the boundaries of the fictional town Rough River on Canada's west coast. A house or trailer is situated every 400 metres of the woodland, with inhabitants who maintain alternative lifestyles dedicated to nature, among whom the protagonist Joyce and her husband Jon who have settled in a simple, self-renovated house. Joyce is a music teacher and comes home from her day at work at the Rough River Schools. She is also happy to come home to her husband Jon, a dedicated carpenter who works at home.

The beginning of the story evokes the scenic setting of Canada's west coast, emphasising as early as in the second sentence, seemingly parenthetically, how close to each other integral differences can be in everyday life:

The best thing in winter was driving home, after her day teaching music in the Rough River schools. It would already be dark, and on the upper streets of the town snow might be falling, while rain lashed the car on the coastal highway. (32)

The second paragraph then turns to Joyce's delight at her late return home and her fascination with patio doors illuminated by the light from within, in homes that radiate the smug safety and comfort of living inside with the glimpses they offer:

These [patio doors] were usually left uncurtained, and [...] seemed to be a sign or pledge of comfort, of safety and replenishment [...] they displayed the haven of home so artlessly. (32-33)

The (outward) domestic coziness and security, both important for Joyce, as seen in this passage, are countered by two contrary aspects in the very same short paragraph (or supplementarity principle). First, Joyce is aware—in a further variation of Munro's façade motif—that what seems comfortably attractive from the outside can be entirely different from within (“scenes that beguiled her, even if she knew things would not be so special inside,” 33)—it all depends on the perspective. Second, the central motif of intrusion and the intruder into private comfort zones is evoked from the outset by her looking into lit houses through unshielded terrace doors.

A kind of exposition follows, with highly condensed retrospective views of Joyce and Jon's school days, when they met, and how they both dropped out of college after their first year and travelled the North American continent living a bohemian lifestyle before settling for a year along the US Oregon coast, then deciding to study and lead calmer lives, thus eventually landing near Rough River on Canada's west coast. At Joyce's urging ("she believed they had an obligation to society," 35), Jon hires a female apprentice, Edie, within the scope of a government programme. What follows is, in turn, masterful storytelling: In the couple's few conversations about Edie and their exchanges with her, Edie is characterised as a self-assertive, confident, direct, even apodictic, and physically strong woman—ideal for the job of a carpenter; at the same time, the couple's initially belittling, distanced attitude towards Edie is revealed: "They would laugh about something Edie had said. But not in a disparaging way—Edie was like a pet, Joyce sometimes thought. Or like a child" (35).

This condescending opinion toward Edie, held by Joyce in particular, soon turns out to be deceptive narrative irony. Through highly condensed narration, it becomes clear on the next page that (a) Jon has fallen in love with Edie and (b) the couple's relationship is about to end as a consequence. Hardly noticeable at first, this turn of events is revealed by Jon's account of Edie, a now-sober alcoholic unable to bear the sight of the couple's open wine bottles on their kitchen table. The ensuing conversation between Jon and Joyce marks the devastating changes in all their lives, first indirectly, and then—evidently from a retrospective view<sup>9</sup>—pinpointing it epiphanically:

Also, she thought Jon and Joyce—well, really Joyce—should not leave wine bottles with wine in them right out in sight on the kitchen table.

"That's her business?" said Joyce.

"Apparently she thinks so."

"When does she get to examine our kitchen table?"

"She has to go through to the toilet. She can't be expected to piss in the bush."

"I really don't see what business—"

"And sometimes she comes in and makes a couple of sandwiches for us—"

"So? It's my kitchen. Ours."

"It's just that she feels so threatened by the booze. She's still pretty fragile. It's a thing you and I can't understand."

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<sup>9</sup> Part I is written in past tense, Part II in present tense.

Threatened. Booze. Fragile.

What words were these for Jon to use?

She should have understood, and at that moment, even if he himself was nowhere close to knowing. He was falling in love. (37)

Joyce then ponders the implications of the literal meaning of this particular, for her completely inexplicable “falling in love,” interpreted by her as being negative in this case:

No way this could be seen as probable or possible, unless you think of a blow between the eyes, a sudden calamity. The stroke of fate that leaves a man a cripple, the wicked joke that turns clear eyes into blind stones. (37-38)

Joyce’s subsequent, at first optimistic attempt to save the marriage (““We will ride this out,’ she said”), fails in the smallest narrative space—with but four words Jon utters: “There is no ‘we,’ he said” (38).

Several scenes follow that show Joyce’s lack of understanding and in particular her desperation: “Her life gone. A commonplace calamity” (40). She moves from their house into an apartment in town, hoping in vain that Jon might come back to her—instead, Edie moves in with him, together with her daughter Christine. Joyce is now exceptionally active in her job as a music teacher and, moreover, tries to appeal to everyone, especially men—yet all her actions, as her focalising perspective betrays, are geared towards Jon, whom, lacking alternatives, she tries to impress in this manner:

She had some idea that Jon would hear about how pretty she looked, how sexy and happy, how she was simply bowling over all the men. As soon as she went out of the apartment she was on stage, and Jon was the essential, if second-hand, spectator. (40-41)

Even though Edie’s daughter Christine is Joyce’s student and a participant in the recital at the end of the school year, this time prepared with special zeal—Joyce hopes Jon and Edie will attend the concert—the two do not appear, apparently steering clear of Joyce.

The story’s second part begins with an abrupt leap in time and place. We are suddenly at a party hosted by Joyce and Matt, Joyce’s second husband, with whom she lives in a big house in North Vancouver. In the meantime, Joyce has

become a professional musician, a now grey-haired cellist whose sixty-five-year-old husband, who is married for the third time, is a neurology professor. The life of the culturally interested couple is eventful and fulfilling, full of familial and other social contacts, and Matt and Joyce are both successful in their respective professions. They seem to lead a happy marriage. Their togetherness in bed seems to consist of their reading and discussing their reading material with one another. It is mentioned that Joyce had also invited Jon—who is also in his third marriage, after his second marriage to Edie—to Joyce and Matt's birthday party. Jon, however, had to decline due to another familial obligation, the baptism of a grandchild. Joyce seems to have moved on from the previous chapter of her life with Jon. Both of them have apparently found new happiness, and Joyce will likely have felt consoled by the fact that Jon's marriage with Edie did not last either.

In spite of the contented, on the surface, indeed, happy current state, the past intervenes, at first going unnoticed both by Joyce and the readers. When at the party Joyce approaches a group of younger people standing around her stepson Tommy and makes brief yet witty small talk with them, a young woman called Christie distances herself from the group—to smoke a cigarette in the bushes, as she declares when asked. Joyce initially feels an instant aversion to this woman and for a moment loses her good spirits because of her diffuse thoughts about the woman (“Joyce feels a lot of her cheer drained away,” 47) and even loses her poise (“At a loss, for a moment, as to what to do or where to go next,” 47). After the party, when interrogating her stepson while washing the dishes, she learns that the woman is Christie O'Dell, who is married and has just published her first short story collection. Passing a bookstore some days later, Joyce recognizes the woman's likeness on a poster and purchases her book; the saleslady informs her that the young author will give a reading in the bookstore in a few days' time. At home, reading in bed at night with her husband, the title of a short story in the book Joyce bought arouses her attention: “*Kindertotenlieder*,” also the name of a song cycle by Gustav Mahler. First beside her reading husband who while reading engages Joyce in conversation, and later, withdrawing herself from his vicinity to the kitchen, Joyce devours the story “*Kindertotenlieder*”—and at this point, Munro's story develops a riveting intensity.

Captivated, as Joyce reads Christie O'Dell's story, the reader is equally fascinated by the gradual revelation that Christie could be/is Christine, Edie's daughter, as the events Christie describes in her short story are decidedly reminiscent of a possible past reality which only Christie could know. From the

perspective of a child, Christie's story recounts the triangular relationship of a music teacher with her husband and the child's mother, who intrudes in the marriage and outrivals the music teacher. Everything that follows could have happened as told in the story "*Kindertotenlieder*". The girl is infatuated with the music teacher who is oblivious to this fact and tries to use the girl to get information about the relationship of her ex-partner with the girl's mother, with whom the girl now lives in the music teacher's former house. Christie's short story mesmerizes Joyce. Some days later, she visits the bookstore to obtain Christie O'Dell's signature, excited, as she apparently takes Christie's story at face value and thus construes it as being autobiographical. She brings a present for the author that is inspired by the story "*Kindertotenlieder*," chocolate tulips, wanting to find out if the author will recognize her. She does not seem to. Christie is restrained with Joyce, much as she is with the other readers waiting for her to sign their book copies.

Christie O'Dell sits there and writes her name as if that is all the writing she could be responsible for in this world. [...] She] has raised her eyes to greet the next person in line, and Joyce at last has the sense to move on [...].

Walking up Lonsdale Avenue, walking uphill, she gradually regains her composure. This might even turn into a funny story that she would tell some day. She wouldn't be surprised. (61)

"Fiction" thus ends in self-reflexive manner. Important questions remain unanswered. Why does Joyce react so highly emotionally to the story "*Kindertotenlieder*"? At the book signing, she remarks to Christie: "It means a great deal to me. I brought you a present" (60). Is this merely the effect of recognition? Or does she take Christie's story at face value and is flattered and touched by the impact she had on the girl at the time, in keeping with such an autobiographic reading? Or is her love for Jon revived, the emotions and strong pains of that former phase of her life? And why does Christie O'Dell behave in such a distant manner toward Joyce? Did she recognize her? If not, then her distanced attitude toward a mere reader, from her perspective, is legitimate; but why, then, did Christie immediately leave the conversation group of the young people earlier, when Joyce joined them at the party? Was Christie overwhelmed by Joyce's sudden appearance or did she want to avoid her? If Christie does recognize Joyce, which would be more plausible, her distance toward Joyce suggests several possible explanations.



The revelation of her past feelings for Joyce may be discomfiting for her in front of Joyce, if the story is autobiographically grounded. Or—bearing in mind the story's title, "Fiction"—the adult author Christie O'Dell fictionally developed this story of one-sided infatuation between a schoolchild and her music teacher, although she based the story on the triangle constellation of lovers she experienced as a child. With her artistic story, through this narrative, Munro likely wants us to consider that despite all the autobiographic inspiration of her stories, they remain elaborate pieces of fiction and are by no means descriptions or memories of life. At the same time, "Fiction" is a literary mirror for how profoundly her own and fictional experiences intertwine in Munro's work—for without her specific life experiences, Christie O'Dell would not have written her story "*Kindertotenlieder*" the way she did.

With the unexpected ending of "Fiction" in mind, in the form of "the story within a story", and going back to the first part of Munro's story in search of possible indications for such a plot line related to the relationship between the music teacher Joyce and her student Christie, Edie's daughter, in Joyce's Rough River period, only very few illuminating aspects can be found, as that part is written from the focalising perspective of Joyce. In Part I, it is mentioned that Joyce also teaches Edie's daughter and so makes a special effort for the recital, hoping Jon (with Edie) might be in the audience. The *one* potential indication is not recognizable as such in its multiple significance upon the first reading; depending on the perspective the very same situation is observed from. This hint could consolidate the fictional "reality" in different ways. It is in fact emphasised in Part I that Joyce was extremely committed to preparing even the youngest and least gifted of the girls for the school recital: "Even with the youngest or the dullest children she taught, her tone had become caressing, full of mischievous laughter, her encouragement irresistible" (41). However, this passage is clearly placed in the context of Joyce's former partnership with Jon, so that all of Joyce's actions are aligned with Jon, even though she is ultimately self-involved. In this case, then, she is interested in a successful concert in order to impress Jon and wants to motivate her students especially for this reason (and Part I tellingly makes no mention that Edie's daughter allegedly has the main role in the school concert—as is later rendered in Christie's story). Such a divergence of perspective by two characters with regard to the objectively same situation is—in Munro's words—an example of the aforementioned "shift of emphasis that throws the story line open to question"—the reader, who depends on the narrative filtering of the events through the characters and the focalizers, is confused with which events are "true." The question remains unanswered, with a further complicating reference

to yet another fictionalisation at the very end of the text (namely to the story we are reading).

We should thus avoid confusing literary texts, even those apparently rooted in autobiographical events, with reality. A further example of this can be found in yet another metafictional passage of the story "Fiction," in which Munro self-deprecatingly and self-ironically refers to the lesser acceptance of the short story, long in the shadow of the novel, when she writes from Joyce's perspective about Christie O'Dell's short story collection:

*How Are We to Live* is the book's title. A collection of short stories, not a novel. This in itself is a disappointment. It seems to diminish the book's authority, making the author seem like somebody who is just hanging on to the gates of Literature, rather than safely settled inside. (49-50)

It is a further irony that with passages that enforce genre hierarchies or indeed discriminate against certain genres as in this self-ironic example from the exquisite story "Fiction," Munro herself has contributed to the fact that similar derogatory statements about the genre of the short story should now finally belong to the past: For in 2013, the highest international distinction for literature went not only to Alice Munro, and not only to Canada, but in similarly overdue fashion to not only Alice Munro's favourite literary form, the short story.

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