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An Appreciation of Alice Munro

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***Abstract** – I consider Alice Munro to be one of our most important writers of psychological fiction. She has the courage to emphatically revive the psychology of the Romanticist Movement, to stick up for Freud when that's still justifiable, and to blend the two approaches with her own insights and technical genius, to come to her own bold conclusions.*

The day that I realized that she's describing the terrors and the horrors of the patriarchal world was the day that I began to understand Munro. She doesn't underline her social message. She doesn't underline any message. Neither Chekhov nor Munro would be so vulgar as to state the message the way you'd put it in a slogan, or on a flag. That's not art. Art gives us a situation in which we feel the message, if we're sensitive to it. One of the great things about Munro is that she forces us to participate in her stories. We have to see connections; she's not going to point them out for us.

A typical situation in a Munro story is that a woman's predicament, in some family or social situation—something that seems trivial, or everyday-ish—will explode into a major problem. For example, in "Runaway," Carla lies to her husband, Clark, telling him how her employer's husband lured her to his bed. This sexually excites them both, initially, but then leads to something more threatening. Carla tries to solve the issue by running away, and the choices she makes lead her and Clark to discovery.

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It becomes clear that Munro is a good psychologist when you see how often her characters have to act out a solution before they can think it out. That's the human condition—we feel our way through a situation. We rely on interaction and imagination before we find the rational path. In other words, intermediate irrationality must often precede rational behaviour. This is an unpopular idea in a world of computer logic, but we need writers with Munro's scope and talent, *especially* in our time. We go to literature, and to art generally, for explanation—we're hungry for it. Munro has the courage to show that modern life is almost senseless and inexplicable, and she proves that it's more complex than we can bear to know.

She is a master of representing how the mind works, how we come to truths through strange pathways; how all of our mental experience—lying, concealing, denying, free-associating, and rationalizing—leads to discovery, to revelation, if we cooperate with our powers of imagination, intuition, and impulse—those "glories" that are described by the Romantic poets. Acting out our petty behaviours is part of struggling toward insight and revelation, if only we can cooperate with our powers; if we are not bludgeoned into ignoring them. We all lie and conceal things, and there will always be thoughts we don't say aloud; but reflecting upon these issues, even silently by ourselves, leads to discovery and an appreciation of how full of contradictions life is.

Munro reminds her readers that we must not let the walls of the prison-house grow around us, not let custom weigh on us, not see getting and spending as living. From Munro, we infer that we must make friends with our own intuition, our own imagination, our own native.

Numerous critical studies have acknowledged Munro's mastery of the cultural and vocal tones of a region; her acuteness in delineating social

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class is now a critical commonplace. Munro often narrates her stories in a manner reflecting the outlooks of her relatively unsophisticated characters. They appear before us as if we had bumped into them at the mall or the hairdresser's or the home and school meeting, relating their experiences in ways that the author then uses to reveal deeper meanings. Her amplitude of style and approach, it is often noted, give her short stories the moral density of lengthier novels. Munro's craft exerts a radial power, in which a central motif or situation mutates or recurs throughout various contexts within a story, often concluding with a reflection upon experience that seems anything but definitive. Munro's is the fiction for a culture in which the nostalgia for lost certainties seems as potent as the unshakeable realization of that loss. Written within the conventions of literary realism, her fiction reflects the preoccupations of figures who must remain satisfied with momentary illumination rather than life-changing revelations. Her international audience finds its own uncertainties and concerns paralleled in those that shape her characters' experiences. Time spent in re-reading her stories is seldom wasted.

Two representative stories, "Meneseteung" (in *Friend of My Youth*)and the title story in *The Love of a Good Woman*, display Alice Munro's skill at depicting, then questioning and redefining, the experiences of her characters. Both offer accounts of women engaged, however unwittingly, in processes of self-definition that can take the form of wary hesitation in the face of new prospects, a process concluding in understanding rather than happiness. Almeda Joynt Roth of "Meneseteung" - based remotely upon obscure 19th-century women writers in the Munro Tract - must shatter the mirror of her nostalgic historical poetry when faced with the hard facts of sex and blood. Jarvis Poulter, a commercial pillar of the town, has made some tentative gestures toward Almeda. Her distress at his casual disregard toward a lower-class female victim of male violence leads her to deflect his overtures. The story-within-the-story concludes with Almeda enduring the start of her menstrual period, under the influence of a pain-killer, reconciled to an unprotected, unmarried destiny that will not end well. The tale's intrusive yet distant narrator makes the story's meaning more complex with an admission of her own inability to grasp exactly what has taken place in Almeda's sensibility.

Uncertainty also marks the conclusion of Munro's "The Love of a Good Woman," whose protagonist Enid lingers in suspense as the male who has attracted her interest approaches. Is he propelled by desire, or by malice? The story opens with the discovery of a local optometrist's automobile, along with his body, sunk beneath the river. The reader - who already knows that someone donated the optometrist's gear to the local museum - learns a version of what lies behind the death by water, and the effect of this knowledge upon Enid. Her role as caregiver for a dying "bad" woman, the unreliable tale-bearing of that dying woman, and the power this woman's husband exerts over Enid's refined sensibilities leads to the question that ends the story. Such a tale, with its unabashed usage of such formula-fictional devices as the mysterious death of one character, the reluctant romantic involvement of the nurse and the inscrutability of the male figure, displays Munro's powers as a fiction writer. The story's progression through layers of consciousness and association, alongside the delicate architecture of the story's telling, demonstrates how Munro can net both literary and general readers within her audience.

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