Alice Munro as the master of story telling: "The Love of a Good Woman"

Nidhi Pandey[1]*, Dr. Aditi Dutta[2]

[1] Research Scholar, Shri Krishna University, Chhatarpur M.P.

[2] Professor, Shri Krishna University, Chhatarpur M.P.

Abstract - here are many people who have commented on Alice Munro's ability to create complicated narratives. Digression or deferral, discontinuity, layering, and so on are only a few examples of how "The Love of a Good Woman" defies short narrative form. Traditional theories of reading do not adequately explain how good "apprenticeship" with Munro's short stories may be achieved, according to Ross (2002). When it comes to teaching complicated narratives to students, this study examines Munro's creative skill in "The Love of A Good Woman" and offers forth a method for easing students' comprehension of difficult narratives. Writing in an online "wiki" encourages pupils to engage in the process of "layering" story and building and questioning complicated narrative linkages, it is said. In turn, this creative activity may aid their comprehension of short stories like Munro's.

Keywords - narrative complexity, Storytelling, love Feminisms

- X -

INTRODUCTION

When the narrative opens, a small-town Ontario Museum displays a box of optometrist's tools along with an explanation: "This box... has tremendous local importance, because it belonged to Mr. DMWilden, who perished in the Perigrin River, 1951.... It survived the disaster and was recovered, probably by the anonymous donor, who dispatched it to become a highlight of our collection" (Munro, 1999, p. 1). Box and accompanying letter form a complicated story that revolves around the subject of how we see the world around us and how we perceive it via our senses. There are several character-narrators and narrates, and the story's chronological sequence and causal linkages are very complicated for the reader to follow. To paraphrase, Carrington says that this is a "many-voiced narrative about narration, a tale that doesn't only reveal how and why stories are told (and not told), but also how and why they are recounted (and reinterpreted)" (Carrington, 1997, p. 160). In this article, I'd want to highlight how a response exercise in a wiki environment shed light on readers' readiness to interact with such narratives and how educators may prepare students to engage with such narratives, as well as some of the major aspects of the story itself.

NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY IN "THE LOVE OF A GOOD WOMAN"

Iconic Munro, "The Love of a Good Woman" has a complicated structure. An introduction of five paragraphs is followed by four parts titled "Jutland," which explain the optician's tools in great detail.

Mistakes, lies, and heart failure. Willens's automobile, drowned in the local river, is the subject of the first of two stories that make up more than a third of this ninety-page novel. An eye doctor's instrument box at a museum might be the key to solving a murder mystery for story-oriented readers, who may be interested in this particular occurrence. However, this hope is dashed: its twenty-five pages after the boys first discover the automobile and leave to report their finding before one of them finally tells an adult about it. Among other things, he accepts early garden flowers from an unsuspecting widow. "Jutland" is described as a "tour de force of deferral" by Ross (2002). (p. 795). This description fits the story as a whole since it's a mystery that won't go away.

Instead of returning to a busy city, "Heart Failure" sends us to a little country cottage with a dying mother and her two young children where the local practical nurse, Enid, cares for them. Few allusions to Willens are made in this lengthy portion, which concentrates on Enid's character and her increasing relationship to Rupert, the spouse of one of her patients. However, even when the story returns to "Mistake," the events surrounding the drowning remain unclear and conflicting. It is the patient's dying confession to Enid that her husband killed Willens in a fit of jealously that serves as the section's unreliable focal point, since her confessions are physically interrupted on each end by the word lies.

At the end of the story, we are still unsure of the circumstances of the drowning that the tale begins with. While on a rowing expedition, Enid plans to confront Rupert about the situation, and she waits for him to collect a set of oars from behind the willows on the bank. He is no longer visible among the trees, which is an important development. The article starts with a description of eye-testing tools and concludes with a discussion of different types of perception methods:

> She lost track of him in a split second. When her boots sunk a bit into the muck, they kept her in place as she walked closer to the water's edge. Rupert's motions in the bushes would still be audible even if she attempted to block them out. When she focused on the boat's movement, she felt as if the world around her had gone silent for a long time. (p. 89).

Enid's summer of trying to piece together the bits and pieces of knowledge she's collected throughout the course of the summer, as well as her own unpleasant recollections, thoughts, dreams, and aspirations, seems to have made her more aware of life. If personality is an unbroken series of successful gesture, then there was something gorgeous about him, some elevated sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away" if personality is defined as "the ability to recognize and respond to the tremors of human potential" (Fitzgerald, 1953, p. 1).

A fundamental theme of this novel is to challenge the reader's sense of self-awareness, just as Enid did. Despite the fact that they are encouraged from the start to concentrate on the box of instruments, any reading of this tale driven only by the desire to unravel the riddle of the circumstances of the drowning is doomed to fail. It's more of a meandering story about human relationships in a tiny town. Three boys, their families, and the gendered roles played by the adults in their life are the focus of this storyline. As she nears the end of her life, a grieving mother makes one last, forlorn effort to make a difference in her children's lives. And, most importantly, it is the narrative of the "good lady" practical nurse who cares for her patient till the end of her life and then, presumably, steps into her shoes.

When it comes to complicated narratives, Munro has long been recognized as one of the best. Ross (2002) sums up the skepticism in a succinct manner:

> In the past, "the art of disarray" (Mathews) was used to describe Munro's interest in the absences, gaps, discontinuity, disruption, fragmentation, parallel lives, "strange leaps," and missing portions of material he writes about.

Deconstructing the creative imagination or vision as it manifests itself in story may be attempted by reading "The love of a decent lady" in particular. It's possible that this Endeavour is hinted to in the story's third and fourth paragraphs, which describe the optometrist's equipment in great detail. The ophthalmoscope is used to "inspect the interior of the eye visually" (Simpson & Weiner, 2004, p. 1), while radioscopy examines the retina's response to refraction of light in the eye "by the observation of the movement of a shadow on the retina, caused by the rotation of [a] mirror" (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, p. 1). Despite the fact that Munro depicts two devices, current ophthalmoscopes typically do both functions, in line with more ancient technology.

Retinoscopes include mirrors, which Munro points out: "out of the top of the column a small light is meant to shine. Is constructed of glass and looks like a "dark mirror" (p. 1). The mirror and the light (Abrams, 1953) is a famous work on Romanticism's influence on Western culture's conception of creative imagination, and I believe that this is where the reference is to be found in this passage. Early mimetic ideas, which first occur in Plato's dialogues, describe art as "basically a copy of characteristics of the cosmos" (p. 8) — that is, art as a mirror. Abrams observes For those in the Romantic era who want to show that a poet reflects a world already bathed in an emotional light they've projected, people like William Hazlitt, an early nineteenth-century journalist and critic, mix the mirror and the lamp (p. 52). It has been noted in Western philosophy and religion that each metaphor has been seen as having various constraints. As a candle, the imagination's inventiveness might lead to blasphemy or arrogance" (p. 78). "The labyrinth of mirrors, in which the imagination produces only endless reproductions, copies of copies of copies where there is no longer any original, a kind of self-deconstruction of imagination that erases the very distinction between the imaginary and the real, leading to the collapse of the concept of imagination itself" is the postmodern response to the plight of the imagination put forth by Kearney (1988) and here summarised by Green (2002, p. 78). "This dismal attitude" is rejected by Green, who instead advocates for an alternative metaphor that "preserves the representational goal of language" and "allows us to make sense of what we observe" (2002, pp. 78-79).

It's interesting to see Green use the lens as an alternative metaphor to Munro's eye instruments, one that recognises the function of our imagination in concentrating as well as projecting our perceptual and creative energy. The two ways of engaging imagination, perception and creation, "employ the lens in opposite directions," Green explains. "In the first case, the lens gathers in light from the outside, focusing it internally for apprehension; in the second, the lens projects light outwards, replicating it for potential use" (2002, p. 80). It appears that Munro, like Green, is exploring metaphors of perceptive and creative imagination by highlighting instruments that allow for examination of the eye in distinct ways (one through magnification for the purpose of close inspection and the other through projection of light for the purpose of measuring refraction). As a means

Nidhi Pandey[1]*, Dr. Aditi Dutta[2]

of imagining and refracting the tale (fitted with a mirror, light and lens), we are urged to use these tools of imagination.

READING THE COMPLEX NARRATIVE

The complexity of Munro's storytelling is often seen as a challenge for readers (see, for example, Clark, 1996; Carrington, 1997; Ross, 2002). According to Ross (2002), standard reading theories fail to capture the process of "apprenticeship" with Munro's short stories. The "rules of reading" proposed by Rabinowitz are one example she uses to illustrate her point (1987). In Rabinowitz's "rules of noticing," he encourages readers to recognize important facts and separate them from less important ones. Recalling the idea of narrative organization offered by Chatman (1978, pages 53 ff.), Rabinowitz's "laws" remember the distinction between kernels (main events) and satellite events (minor events). One of the most widely accepted reading models is predicated upon a belief that readers must distinguish between the "wheat" and the "chaff" of a story. There are several models of how readers create meaning, such as Kintsch (1988)'s Construction-Integration Model, which describes how readers identify and integrate potentially significant aspects of the text into a cohesive whole. According to Ross (2002), using an approach like Rabinowitz's "The love of a decent lady" would "create instabilities," since reading this work frequently elicits "interpretations that, far from converging, are in contradiction" (p. 791). It defies genre conventions, for example, by omitting key parts that were introduced early in the plot but are later reintroduced later on.

Reading hypertext fiction, a genre that is just as difficult to understand as complicated narratives, has led me to conclude that models like Rabinowitz's fail to account for the process of understanding such tales (Dobson, 2001). "Anti-stories" or "anti-narratives," in the words of Chatman (1978), are tales that defy conventional narrative structure (pp. 56-57). His example is Borges' 1962 "The garden of forking pathways," in which "all alternatives as equally legitimate" (Borges, 1962) are treated (p. 56). As a result, a large number of first-generation hypertext theorists cited this tale as a precursor to hypertext fiction in their work (for example, Bolter, 2001; Landow, 1997). "It is erroneous to state that they are without plot since plainly they rely for their impact on the premise of the conventional narrative line of choice," Chatman says (p. 57). There are limits to what you can do when you fall in love with a decent woman, and "the love of a good woman" uses a different strategy to get around them: postponement.

Short-story readers are less used to hanging on to certain pieces of the story while other plot threads emerge, which may be true for readers of longer works of fiction like novels. To put it another way, "long-distance transport of meaning" separates short stories from novels, according to Hollingshead (1999):

> *There are many ways to tell a good short narrative, but one of the best is when the meaning is not abstracted, but rather incorporated in the text's formal features. There may just be one scene in a short narrative, but it has a strong centrifugal force. An important part of the energy that a scene in a book expends is looking not just backwards and forwards in the text but also sideways, outside the text to the material world, to that collection of shared assumptions in everyday life. That energy is centrifugal, which means it expands outward rather than focusing on its own centre. (p. 878).*

"Diverse tales of the Twentieth and Twenty-First centuries" (p. 5) are incompatible with modern narrative models in part because these models represent a Western viewpoint, Van Peer & Chatman (2001) note (and, I would add, do not take account of new media genres). However, just identifying the shape wills not enough (or antifoam). As a result, we must reexamine our assumptions about story structure, reading processes, and literature-based teaching techniques in order to better understand how readers engage with these challenging tales. Next, I'd like to talk about a creative writing project that nine students performed in response to the first five paragraphs of "The love of a good lady." Perspective and creative patterns emerged in response to the opening section, which may suggest that the story establishes expectations for perspective complexity early on and that readers can be made aware of these expectations through instructional strategies that encourage students' engagement with the text in new ways.

RESPONDING TO MUNRO

I worked with a group of fifteen students who had recently earned their bachelor's degrees with English majors or minors and were enrolled in a post-degree teacher preparation program as part of a series of seminars on digital literacy. It was our goal to expose this group to new computer-based literary forms (e-literature) and get them involved in reacting to and creating such texts as part of a wider study project on digital literacy. Before beginning collaborative creative writing projects in a "wiki" setting, students study many examples of hypertext fiction and poetry. Wikipedia, for those who are unfamiliar, is an online collaborative writing tool that allows users to collaborate in a networked environment. As of this writing, Wikipedia is the most widely used use of the programme. It is common to refer to wikis as "anarchistic writing environments" due to the ease with which they may be edited and the fact that many of them are "open access," allowing anybody with Internet connection to make edits to the content. Thus, wikis challenge traditional conceptions of the distinct text and intellectual property rights.)

Before asking them to finish an individual creative writing project in the Wiki environment, students had

Nidhi Pandey[1]*, **Dr. Aditi Dutta**[2]

been working intermittently with e-literature and other places for networked writing for roughly three months. The trigger was the start of "The love of a nice lady." The five-paragraph introduction was put into nine wiki pages and distributed to the nine people in attendance. The wiki pages were simply named "Museum1" through "Museum9," and I made it clear from the start that none of the students knew the prompt text's title or author.

Participants saw this as an invitation to write in a networked format, given their familiarity with e-literature and wiki writing spaces. Because the texts they generated were not structured linearly, participants included a variety of connection patterns into the five-paragraph beginning or a subordinate node, which then functioned as the "hub" of a text with a few more "spokes" (see Figure 1). In the next parts, I will use the present tense to refer to these stories since they exist as literary objects.
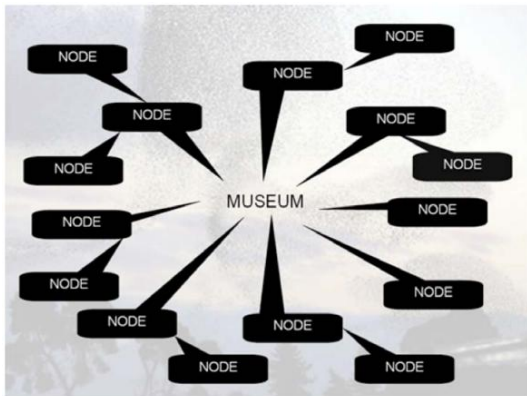

Figure 1: There are multiple nodes placed around a centre node2 to form the "wheel structure."

It is clear that the wheel linking structure is present in five of the narratives: in some cases the structure is simple, with only one layer of spokes and little interlinking between spoke nodes; in other cases the structure is complex, with a high degree of interconnection between the spoke nodes, occasional branching out to a second or third layer of nodes, and extensive cycling back to the primary node.

As seen in Figure 1, a "wheel construction" is created by layering numerous nodes around a centre node

It is clear that the wheel linking structure is present in five of the narratives: in some cases the structure is simple, with only one layer of spokes and little interlinking between spoke nodes; in other cases the structure is complex, with a high degree of interconnection between the spoke nodes, occasional branching out to a second or third layer of nodes, and extensive cycling back to the primary node.

The other six responses are all based on Willens' personality or the circumstances surrounding his drowning. Using the word "mirror" in the prompt text as a connecting word in "Museum6" and "Museum9" emphasizes the importance of perception. Willens is

shown as a guy who, through hours of self-reflection in an ancient mirror, has developed the ability to see into another person's soul, which he uses in his professional life. In "Museum9," reflection is examined in terms of distortion, perceptual immersion, imaginative contemplation, and memory as the following beautiful paragraph shows. "Museum9":

> *Reflection has always served as a source of consolation, recognition of one's own presence and existence. However, some mirrors aren't able to accurately reflect their surroundings. Mirrors at a carnival or the orbiting universe reflected in an intimate's gaze might distort. Some of these mirrors do not reflect, but rather absorb distant entities into the proximate, such as the telescope of fame and the microscope of solitude, the charged imagination of the optical nerves, the embodied mirrors that are our children and in their absence our domestic appendages, our pets and possessions, obsessions and fascinations; and the grotesque reliquary of memory, which is the concavity of the self, the convexity of the world and its wine-darkly shining seas. (ADarkSortofMirror9).*

There are just two narrative points presented here: Willens' drowning in 1951 and the anonymous giving of the instrument box a few years later. This is important to remember. The ophthalmoscope and the retinoscope are described in great depth throughout the rest of the text, as are other things in the museum. The Munro narrative begins with no indication of the time of year or the method of the drowning. As a result, the striking resemblance between the "Museum1" and "The love of a decent lady" scenarios in terms of plot points (the springtime drowning, the buried automobile, the love triangle) and the narrative's driving metaphor (perception and imagination) is striking. A published short story writer who did not participate in the workshop writing but who later read "The Love of a Good Woman" "and contemplated aspects of the nine narratives was astounded by how close some of the writers came to identifying key narrative features and patterns, observing that she herself had found the opening paragraphs obtuse (albeit in a delightful Munro sense) and that she did not glean such understanding in the workshop writing."

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Participants' reading and response to "The love of a decent lady" provided a two-pronged approach to gaining insights:

1. Students' imaginations were shifted from the perceptive to the creative mode by allowing them to engage the material via writing;

2. The wiki environment seems to devalue a story-driven approach, encouraging authors,

Nidhi Pandey[1]*, Dr. Aditi Dutta[2]

instead, to focus on narrative components other than plot.

A writing-prompt exercise such as mine is obviously not new, but it's nevertheless interesting to see how it's used. As a way to help new readers get familiar with typical story patterns and to foster so-called proper reader expectations, predictive tactics based on reading narrative fragments are commonly used. Although the prompt text was chosen because it lacked conventional narrative qualities, the purpose here was not to foretell the future, but rather to utilize the prompt text as a springboard for the imagination.

It is obvious that a writing prompt exercise like the one I've offered is not a new idea. As a way to help new readers get familiar with typical story patterns and to foster so-called proper reader expectations, predictive tactics based on reading narrative fragments are commonly used. Although the prompt text was chosen because it lacked conventional narrative qualities, the purpose here was not to foretell the future, but rather to utilize the prompt text as a springboard for the imagination.

Secondly, I believe that the network capability of the writing space in which students wrote their narratives was key to their insights as demonstrated in their writing; specifically, how the wiki allowed students to create complex linking structures that reflected the implicit structure of the Munro story. As an artistry or story manqué, "The Love of a Good Woman" challenges traditional narrative logic. Critics have noted that Munro seems to be more concerned with "layering" language than constructing a story "line" in his work. According to New (2002), "story' is neither linear nor one-dimensional; story overlays narrative–and as these tales make apparent, no one ever knows how many levels there are" in Munro's work (p. 570). By "digging down through layers" and "following threads backward through to previous handlings of the same subject," Ross (2002) notes that understanding the tales in The Love of A Good Woman requires "following threads backward to prior handlings of the same topic" (p. 786). Also, Munro acknowledges that writing "The love of a decent woman" required a layering process, as she does in the essay. An instance in British Columbia when a woman's lover was killed by her husband is mentioned in her contributor comments for the 1997 O. Henry Award prize story collection (Munro, 1997). It was a surprise that they worked together to dispose of the corpse in the water. "Said Munro," according a press release.

According to Ross, it seems that Munro's writing technique involves having the "initial scene suitably contained in a tale that grows around it, frequently overlaying genuine and created occurrence, past and present to portray the emotional truth, which is what the story truly about" (2002, p. 788).

Hypertextual writing spaces are understood and experienced in the same manner as Munro's storytelling process. One of the most common observations is that hypertext and/or hypermedia are "layered." Everyone who took part in this research did so because they saw the medium as such, and that perception shaped how they interacted with hypertext reading and writing environments. According to one reader of distributed electronic literature, accepting the form's quirks, such as how it "layers actions with emotions and intents," helped her feel more at ease while reading the writings (2004- 05). Another participant described his writing process as "interlocking rings" or "spirals, where you have this fundamental concept and then around that is something else – an elaboration, rather—and then another layer of elaboration around that" in the wiki environment. " (2004-08). While Munro's approach is detailed in the previous paragraph, it is interesting to note that the procedure described here is very much in line with his own. The ability of hyper textual spaces to explicitly teach students about layering and challenging traditional narrative logic would seem to make them perfect teaching tools for print tales that accomplish the same.

CONCLUSION

Human imagination is deep and nuanced, and Munro's stories reflect this in their own way. We must use our own creative efforts in a variety of ways to connect with such tales, whether they are printed or digital, in order to better grasp the many points of view and how they relate to one another. According to complexity theory, it is necessary to understand the relationships between subsystems and how those subsystems combine to generate bigger, more complex systems in order to fully comprehend complex systems (Davis and Sumara, 1997). A hypertext writing exercise provided the students with the tools they needed to investigate the Munro text's intricate narrative relationships, which in turn enhanced their comprehension of the work.

"The air was clean in certain areas, but suddenly you would enter a swarm of small bugs," Enid reflects as she follows Rupert to the riverside at the conclusion of the narrative. In the form of a cloud or a pillar, the bugs were continually moving yet stayed together in the same place. I don't know how they accomplished it. Why did they chose one location over another to carry out their activity? After Willens's death, Enid has shifted her attention away from the specific sequence of events that led to his death and onto the swirling objects, layers of imagination gathering around an unseen core, and the ways these layers join together. While remaining in the darkness, a boat speaks to her: "You know."It's true," you say.

REFERENCES

1.   Awano, Lisa Dickler. 2013, "An Interview with Alice Munro". The Virginia Quarterly Review. 89:2.

Nidhi Pandey[1]*, Dr. Aditi Dutta[2]

http://www.vqronline.org/vqr-portfolio/interview-alice-munro. Assessed on January 05. 2017. Web.

2. Baldick, Chris. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms.* Oxford, England: New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1990. Print.

3. Barthes, Roland. *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative.* New Literary History, Vol. 6, No. 2, On Narrative and Narratives, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Winter, 1975.

4. May, Charles. *The New Short Story Theories.* Ohio University Press. 1994.

5. Nischick, Reingard M., Editor, *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations,* Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007, p.244.

6. Nobel prizewinner Alice Munro: 'It's a wonderful thing for the short story'|Books|The Guardian
    http://www.theguardian.com>dec>alic...

7. Oates, Joyce Carol. 'Who Do You Think You Are?', *New York Review of Books* 56, 19 (3 December 2009(, 42. Pacey, Desmond. *A Book of Canadian Stories.* Ryerson Press 1947. University of California.

8. Schorer, Mark. "Technique as Discovery." *Critical Approaches to Fiction.* Eds. Shiv. K and Keith Mc Kean. Eds. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2003.

9. Scott, Gail. "Shaping a Vehicle for Her use: Women and the Short Story. *"In The Feminine: Women and Words.* Ed. Ann Margaret Dybinkowskie. Edmonton: Long spoon Press, 1985. 40-80, 184-191. Print.

10. Smith, D. Smith. *The Nation in History: Historiographiccal Debates About Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2000) p. 3.

11. Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Readsing Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2001)

Research Scholar, Shri Krishna University, Chhatarpur M.P.

Corresponding Author

Nidhi Pandey*

Nidhi Pandey[1]*, Dr. Aditi Dutta[2]