

Writing the Proper Story: The Importance of Personal Experience and Inadequacy of Fiction in Alice Munro's Story "The Ottawa Valley"

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Abstract

The tendency among contemporary women writers to look inside themselves for material for fiction is particularly evident in the work of Alice Munro. Munro's practice of utilizing personal experience in her stories is central to her work, and is therefore identified as an essential element of her fictional aesthetic. In "The Ottawa Valley," the parallels between Munro's experiences with her own terminally-ill mother and those of the narrator whose mother has Parkinson's Disease, are immediately recognizable. Other stories also contain bits and pieces gathered from Munro's memories; however, she is adamant that her stories should not be seen as strictly autobiographical. Her refusal to allow her work to be described as autobiographical serves as a protective shell into which the author may retreat, and as a reminder that Munro's stories operate on many levels of reality. In the postscript added to the story, Munro, in the guise of the narrator, deals with the inadequacy of fiction. In several stories the reader is left wondering whether certain events actually occurred or if they were imagined by the teller. This ambiguity between fiction and reality is evident in stories where Munro and/or the characters seem to be second-guessing themselves. For example, the narrator in "The Ottawa Valley" wonders at the end if she has really told a "proper story." This paper examines the importance of personal experience and inadequacy of fiction in writing by Alice Munro in general, and particularly in reference to her short story "The Ottawa Valley." The parallels between the narrator's experiences in "The Ottawa Valley" and Munro's own experiences with her mother demonstrate that Munro frequently utilizes material from her own life in her stories.

Key words: Alice Munro, Postcolonial literature, personal experience, fiction, short story

1. Introduction

The tendency among contemporary women writers to look inside themselves for material for fiction is particularly evident in the work of Alice Munro. In an essay entitled "The Colonel's Hash Resettled," Munro (1972) states that she writes stories that come from inside and outside (p. 183). However, when she begins to analyze this comment, she determines that it is far from being that simple. She says: "When I get something from outside...I have to see it in my own terms, at once, or it isn't going to be a story" (p. 183). However, Munro is quick to warn others about viewing her stories as autobiography. She concedes that she does use "bits of what is real" (Munro, 1982, p. 223), but this is done in order to strengthen the truth of the experience that she is attempting to convey. Whether Munro is writing about a real or imagined event, it is her personal experience which shapes the final product. It is impossible for Munro to step outside her life as woman, writer, mother, wife, and daughter and write about something which has little immediate meaning for her.

Munro's practice of utilizing personal experience in her stories is central to her work, and is therefore identified as an essential element of her fictional aesthetic. In "The Ottawa Valley," the parallels between Munro's experiences with her own terminally-ill mother and those of the narrator whose mother has Parkinson's Disease, are immediately recognizable. Other stories also contain bits and pieces gathered from Munro's memories; however, she is adamant that her stories should not be seen as strictly autobiographical. Her refusal to allow her work to be described as autobiographical serves as a protective shell into which the author may retreat, and as a reminder that Munro's stories operate on many levels of reality. In the postscript added to the story, Munro, in the guise of the narrator, deals with the inadequacy of fiction. In several stories the reader is left wondering whether certain events actually occurred or if they were imagined by the teller. For example, the narrator in "The Ottawa Valley" wonders at the end if she has really told a "proper story" (p. 246).

This paper examines the importance of personal experience and inadequacy of fiction in writing by Alice Munro in general, and particularly in reference to her short story "The Ottawa Valley." The parallels between the narrator's experiences in "The Ottawa Valley" and Munro's own experiences with her mother demonstrate that Munro frequently utilizes material from her own life in her stories.

2. Turning inward: Features of Alice Munro's aesthetic and writing style

Beverly Rasporich (1990) believes personal experience and, more specifically, her experiences as a woman, to be integral to Munro's work (p. 14). In an interview cited by Rasporich, Munro discusses the idea of using personal experience, which first came to her when writing "The Peace of Utrecht." She claims that if she had not arrived at that point when she knew that she needed to call on her own experiences for material for her fiction, she "would not have had enough power to work as a writer" (Rasporich, 1990, p. 14).

This practice of using personal experience as material for stories has caused much dissension among critics of Munro's work. There are those who would argue that Munro's use of real events and experiences is a negative aspect of her work (Blodgett, 1988, p. 6). These critics seem to feel that making too much of the autobiographical links in her work reduces it to the level of the documentary (Blodgett, 1988, p. 1). Blodgett prefers not to view Munro as a realist, because he finds her "photographic or documentary realism" to be the "negative aspect of art, that against which her writing has struggled in the three and a half decades of her engagement with her craft" (p. 6). In contrast to this position, critics such as Beverly Rasporich (1990) and Michelle Gadpaille (1998) believe that it is her very personal closeness to her work that makes it strong. It is interesting to note a possible gender split in these assessments of Munro's work. The dichotomy which appears to exist between female and male critics with regard to Munro's autobiographical tendencies may be at least partially explained by recent trends in feminist criticism toward viewing a woman's body as the origin of her art, with the result being an intense closeness between the woman and her writing (Gubar, 1981, p. 248). In light of these theories, feminist critics may find accepting autobiography as a positive aspect of writing fiction to be easier than their male counterparts.

The setting of Munro's stories is another important element of her craft, as it provides a connection to her "real life." The majority of the stories are set in small-town southwestern Ontario. These towns bear a striking resemblance to the Huron County area where Munro was raised and currently resides. This rather ordinary setting provides the backdrop for Munro to explore deeper levels of a seemingly simple existence. She "uses 'normal' surroundings--farms, middle-class living rooms, kitchen tables--as the flat paper on which her sensitive pen registers sudden alarms and shuddering shocks to the social bedrock" (Ross, 1994, p. C1). The world of her experience is food for the world created by her imagination.

Another matter which is present consistently in Munro's work is the tension between fiction and reality. In several stories the reader is left wondering whether certain events actually occurred or if they were imagined by the teller. This ambiguity between fiction and reality is evident in stories where Munro and/or the characters seem to be second-guessing themselves. For example, the narrator in "The Ottawa Valley" wonders at the end if she has really told a "proper story" (p. 246).

The final ingredient in an Alice Munro story is the women. Overwhelmingly, her stories are populated by females; children, adolescents, young wives and mothers, middle-aged women, and spinsters dominate these stories. While men are present in the stories, they are usually in the background as someone's father, brother, lover, or husband. Speaking in reference to her story "A Wilderness Station" (*Open Secrets*, 1994), Munro explains that the plot centers around two brothers, yet she found herself needing to include a woman. She admits that she "can't make a story without a woman" (Ross, 1994, p. C1).

The reasons for Munro's inability to write stories without women are not completely clear; however, her habit of drawing on her experiences may be a possible explanation. In addition, Munro's well-documented preference for the role of observer may also offer insight into this matter, for the world with which we are presented in the stories is seen through women's eyes.

The fact that Munro's protagonists are mainly female does not mean that the stories appeal strictly to women. The relationships explored in the stories, the themes of love, power, and truth versus reality have universal appeal. Munro's characters are sincere and believable because they are closely linked to their creator.

3. Elements of personal experience and inadequacy of fiction in "The Ottawa Valley"

"The Ottawa Valley," the last story in the collection *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You* (1974), marks a turning point in Munro's career. After writing this piece, she agonized over the possibility of ceasing to write fiction. Her dissatisfaction with the limitations of art made her feel "tormented by the inadequacy and impossibility and feel that maybe this is quite a mistaken way in which to spend one's life" (Struthers, 1983, p. 28). Not only did she begin to question her ability to represent personal material and real lives, but she also began to doubt her "right to represent them at all" (Struthers, 1983, p. 28).

This self-doubt, which is evident from the beginning of her published career with such stories as "The Office" and "The Peace of Utrecht," becomes increasingly important in Munro's third volume of stories. In "Material" and "Winter Wind" Munro explores the issue of using personal material for artistic purposes. It is in "The Ottawa Valley," the story which concludes the collection, that she finally admits her failure to represent real lives accurately.

From the outset of the story, it is clear that the narrator is obsessed with her late mother. The recollections of her mother which form the framework of the story occur when the narrator is in her early forties, approximately the same age at which her mother developed Parkinson's Disease. This connection is important, for the narrator's identity is closely tied to that of her mother. In the opening paragraph, she states that she frequently thinks of her mother when she looks in the mirror (p. 227).

The plot centers around the narrator's memories of a trip which she took with her sister and mother to the Ottawa Valley during wartime. Returning to her birthplace, it seems as if the mother is attempting to reclaim her past in an effort to form some semblance of identity. Similarly, the narrator's remembered version of this journey represents her attempt to "mark off" her mother, to "describe, to illuminate, to celebrate, to get rid of her" (p. 246).

By her own admission, "The Ottawa Valley" is the most autobiographical of Munro's stories (Hancock, 1983, p. 104). It is impossible to ignore the fact that Munro's own mother suffered from Parkinson's Disease, and that her illness had a tremendous impact on Munro (Hancock, 1983, p. 104). Magdalene Redekop (1992) even goes so far as to say that the story "could be said to be about referentiality" (p. 106), for there is no doubt that the "I" in "The Ottawa Valley" is Alice Munro (p. 106). The whole object of the narrator's journey, according to Blodgett (1988), is to come to terms with the mother in the story and with Munro's real-life mother (p. 72). The parallels between the narrator's experiments in "The Ottawa Valley" and Munro's own experiences with her mother demonstrate that Munro frequently utilizes material from her own life in her stories.

The narrator's attempt to reconcile her feelings about her mother is presented through what Blodgett refers to as a series of snapshots (p. 78). Attempting to freeze the memory of her mother in time, the narrator relates bits and pieces of the trip to the Ottawa Valley. The difficulty with these snapshots is that they do not represent the entire picture; they are merely fragments of reality which have been distorted by the trickery inherent in memories.

The unreliability of memory is particularly evident in the scene in which Aunt Dodie tells the story of the practical joke which she and the narrator's mother had played on Allen Durrand, the hired man, many years earlier. Both ladies agree on the details of what had happened up to a certain point. After sewing up the fly on Durrand's pants, they mixed up two pails full of lemonade, one of which Durrand thirstily consumed. Later, when the lemonade took effect and he needed to relieve himself, he was unable to open his zipper. Aunt Dodie and the narrator's mother disagree on just what they saw when Durrand finally ripped down his overalls in desperation. According to Dodie, they "had the full view;" however, the narrator's mother insisted that he had his back to them (p. 236). This amusing anecdote illustrates the subjectivity involved in telling stories of remembered people and events.

In her search for identities for both her mother and herself, the narrator wrestles with the inadequacy of fiction. By attempting to mark off her mother through a series of remembered incidents, the narrator succeeds in doing little more than assembling a collage of memories. Realizing that such snapshots are subject to personal interpretation and are often colored by time, she eventually understands the futility of her task. The facts of these remembered incidents are much easier to gather than the emotions associated with them. Without the feelings, the facts have little significance and then their authenticity is called into question. Viewing these images of the past in hindsight, Munro's pain and possibly even regret blur the line between fantasy and reality.

In the postscript added to the story, Munro, in the guise of the narrator, deals with the inadequacy of fiction. This self-conscious analysis of the method used by the narrator in trying to define her mother seems almost an apology. The narrator feels a need to explain why she has been unable to write a "proper story" (p. 246). The intensely personal nature of her quest for her mother has rendered her unable, and even perhaps unwilling, to end the story without a final attempt to reach her mother. Blodgett (1988) considers the narrator's inability to tell the proper story to be an abandonment of method for the sake of truth (p. 9). The ultimate truth is that she cannot adequately represent her mother because she [the mother] "...is so much a part of the narrating 'I'" (p. 9).

What the narrator means by the phrase "proper story" is problematic. Is she referring to the accurate version of the story, or is she hoping to provide herself with a suitable story in which her mother fits neatly into place? The latter of these explanations seems the most plausible in view of the narrator's final comments about needing to "mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to get rid of her" (p. 246). The narrator will never be able to detach herself sufficiently from her mother to write the "proper story" because their identities have become intertwined. The proper story would ostensibly be comprised of an introduction, the

body of the story, a climax, and some form of resolution. The lack of resolution is what troubles both the narrator and Munro. If resolution is impossible, what is the point of writing at all?

This admission of failure to write the proper story is extremely significant. Redekop (1992) sees this story as a “courageous confrontation with failure” (p. 114). She feels that “The Ottawa Valley” has special power because “a community of readers is formed by this process and the mutual vulnerability, the risk of exposing subjectivity is crucial to that experience” (Redekop, 1992, p. 104). The pain which Munro clearly feels in attempting to depict her mother and their relationship truthfully, and her inability to do so properly, creates a feeling of empathy for the writer. That the narrator, and by extension Munro, is only human is a gratifying realization which serves to increase the closeness between the reader and the story. In spite of her inability to reach the truth about her mother, Munro continues to use personal material in her stories. She does concede, however, that she will not likely write any more stories about her mother and her childhood (Hancock, 1983, p. 104). The distance which Munro requires to write a “proper story” about her mother is impossible to achieve.

4. Conclusion

Clearly, the quest undertaken by the narrator of “The Ottawa Valley” has been about more than defining her mother, it has also been a search for a balance between real life and fiction. W. R. Martin (1987) believes that this balance is indeed achieved. He says of Munro:

[W]hat she shows is simply that an artist can fail--through lack of skill or application, or perhaps because she is a daughter and too close to her subject, her mother--but also that the artist sometimes succeeds. If art were always a betrayal, what point would there be in devoting one's life to writing short stories? (Martin, 1987, p. 91)

Fascinated by ordinary life, Munro is certain that she will never run out of material for fiction (Hancock, 1983, p. 82). She finds that “even totally commonplace things like a shopping centre and a supermarket and things like that are just sort of endlessly interesting in their physical reality” (Hancock, 1983, p. 101). Because of the accuracy with which she depicts everyday life, and the fact that she so often draws upon her own experience of growing up in a rural area of Southwestern Ontario, Munro is frequently dubbed a realist. This label is most unfortunate, for it seems to imply a somewhat limited range of imagination, which is certainly not the case with Alice Munro. Instead, Munro's abilities of keen observation and detailed description should be viewed as skills which are essential to any writer. The result of putting these skills to use is a body of fiction which encourages us to identify with characters, places, and events.

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