

# Extraordinary Power of Perception into the Inner World of Human Heart and its Caprices in the Short Stories of Alice Munro

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Awarded the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature for her work as “master of the contemporary short story”, Alice Ann Munro is a Canadian author writing in English. Munro’s work has been described as having revolutionized the architecture of short stories, especially in its tendency to move forward and backward in time. Munro’s writing has established her as one of greatest contemporary writers of fiction and has been even called “Our Chekhov”. Her stories explore human complexities in an uncomplicated prose style. She is tremendously skilled at mapping out the contours of her characters’ psyches which at once make them familiar. It is this very special skill that this article endeavours to elaborate.

In an interview, Munro strongly objected to the word- ordinary, saying “I don’t understand this; I don’t know who the ordinary people are..... Everyone is extraordinary.....May be it is because I am not talking about the secret agents or people with psychic experiences or maybe I have not yet met anyone who is extraordinary in that sense” (Richler).

With her warmth, unique and piercing insight and compassion, she delves into a wide range of lives and personalities, into their personal dramas in such a way that they appear extraordinary.

In the Nobel Prize presentation speech, Peter Englund has also emphasized the same point saying :

It may seem like a paradox, but it is actually quite logical: what we call world literature is generally rooted in the local and individual. In her writing, Alice Munro portrays with almost anthropological precision a recognisable, tranquil everyday world with predictable external accoutrements.....The tranquillity of the outer world is always apparent in Alice Munro’s works, which then opens the portals to an inner world where the opposite is true. Munro writes about what are usually called ordinary people, but her intelligence, compassion and astonishing power of perception enable her to give their lives a remarkable dignity – indeed redemption – since she shows how much of the extraordinary can fit into that jam-packed emptiness called The Ordinary. The trivial and trite is intertwined with the amazing and unfathomable .....Her short stories rely very little on external drama. They are an emotional chamber play, a world of silences and lies, waiting and longing. The biggest events occur inside of her characters. ....Over the years, numerous prominent scientists have received their well-deserved reward in this auditorium for having solved some of the great enigmas of the universe or of our material existence. But you, Alice Munro, like few others, have come close to solving the greatest mystery of them all: the human heart and its caprices (Englund).

The surface of Alice Munro’s works, its simplicity and quiet appearance, is a deceptive thing, beneath that surface is a store of insight, a body of observation, and

a world of wisdom that is close to addictive, a set of thoughts that we do not want to miss about characters and events that we feel a need to understand.

All the times Munro comes up with the observations that are gained by the experience of age and felt by an extremely sensitive soul. These observations are such that we immediately agree with them and say that -YES, this is exactly what it is like, but we have never been able to word them in this way. For example, in the story *Face*, the narrator who has a disfigured face tells that in spite of this disgusting mark on his face, he had not been lonely in his life, in his adulthood, he too had many friends, and amongst them were women too. And then he describes the reason of having such friends—"Some women, of course, specialize in the kind of men they imagine are in need of bucking up — they are eager to sport those men around as a sign of their own munificence" (Face).

There is finesse to Munro's writing that makes even her most painful stories appear like moments of redemption in the midst of utter loss. Or as one of her characters, Neal, the sometime actor who abandons the mother in the story *Gravel* just as she is about to have his child, tells the narrator, the younger daughter who has been witness to the shiftless behaviour of the adults around her:

The thing is to be happy," he said. "No matter what. Just try that. You can. It gets to be easier and easier. It's nothing to do with circumstances. You wouldn't believe how good it is. Accept everything and then tragedy disappears. Or tragedy lightens, anyway, and you're just there, going along easy in the world (Gravel).

This can be paraphrased in the plain statement or one of the formulas quoted in every motivational book that- Do not try to change the things and accept them as they are but the effect is much more than that.

Like Chekhov, with whom she is often compared, Munro seems to draw universality from a relatively narrow experience. It can be hard to describe this universal quality of Munro's writing. Alice Munro narrates in her own unique style of lucid honesty and sincerity, using simple expressions, spot-on vocabulary, and basic phrases for expressing everyday thoughts and mundane incidents. She eloquently highlights the many complex emotions of human relationships, mysteries, happiness, depression, desperation and enchantments of dear life with accessibly beautiful linguistics. If you read any of her short stories, you will most certainly find that you will never require the assistance of a dictionary. The jigsaw of words she uses to help readers comprehend the intriguing mysteries of universal human life.

In the story *The View from Castle Rock*, Mary, who is taking care of her nephew Young James on the ship, whom she loves more dearly than her own life, is lost for a while when she gets engaged in talking to other women and she frantically searches for him. The narrator here says:

This is what Mary sees plainly in those moments of anguish: that the world which has turned into a horror for her is still the same ordinary world for all these other people and will remain so even if James has truly vanished, even if he has crawled through the ship's railings—she has noticed everywhere the places where this would be possible—and been swallowed by the ocean. The most brutal and unthinkable of all events, to her, would seem to most others like a sad but not

extraordinary misadventure. It would not be unthinkable to them. Or to God. For in fact when God makes some rare and remarkable, beautiful human child is He not particularly tempted to take His creature back, as if the world did not deserve it (The View from Castle Rock)?

All of us get engrossed in such philosophical brooding in critical moments. That is why Alice Munro is familiar and universal.

Same brooding is there by Sally in the story *Deep Holes*. Alex and his wife Sally with their children go for a family excursion, their younger son Kent falls into the hole and breaks his legs, Sally goes to the examining room with him and when she comes out, Alex angrily & sternly says to her- "Kids have to be watched every minute in there," ..... "Haven't they got any warning signs up" (*Deep Holes*)?

With Alex, she thought, he would have spoken differently. "That's the way boys are. Turn your back and they're tearing around where they shouldn't be" (*Deep Holes*), he would have said. But at that time, "Her gratitude – to God, whom she did not believe in, and to Alex, whom she did – was so immense that she resented nothing" (*Deep Holes*).

The forgiveness and gratitude of the mother in the last three words is so typical of any mother and so gratifying to the reader. The genius of Alice Munro is that such moments and observations and feelings that many other authors might forget or consider too trivial to contemplate, she excavates and reveals for what they are, moments where the meaning of life, but not only that, the FEELING of life is laid bare, and not only understood, but relived.

In the story, *The Moons of Jupiter* the narrator is both a daughter and a writer. She is in Toronto with her father, who is in the hospital awaiting a heart operation. The daughter, with time on her hands while her father is undergoing tests, wanders along Bloor Street and, impulsively, she goes into the planetarium where the show is about to begin. "Awe" Munro writes, "What was that supposed to be? ... Once you knew what it was you wouldn't be courting it" (217). The daughter has grown daughters of her own, one of whom she rarely hears from and, in the street afterwards, she imagines seeing her. In a few lines, Munro conveys the narrator's acceptance of this estrangement – more than acceptance, her awareness that this growing up is as it should be – and in the same few lines, an overwhelming immensity of loneliness. The story is of course about parents and children, aging and death, and in true Munro style, emotion floods the narrative at perfectly calibrated moments, though the diction never changes.

The truth is what really matters in writing is not theme and subject, but the micro-dramatics of each moment. She has an uncanny gift for that. In another Alice Munro story, there is a description of how just before a fight begins, both the husband and wife know the shape of the fight and both change gears to go from saying mild annoyances to truly hurtful things that is eerily true, it has an X-ray's quality of truth.

Another story *differently* is not just a fiction master-class, though. It's also an emotional depth bomb. No one does romantic agony scenes like Munro, Georgia lies all night on her couch, waiting for the phone to ring. "She lay still, as if the smallest

movement would sharpen her suffering, until she saw the day getting light and heard the birds waking" (350).

There is a writer who can depict pain so well that it gives you pleasure.

Again, in *The Moons of Jupiter* a daughter seeks to acknowledge her husband's kindness to her mother by touching his arm, and the observing mother remarks: "I knew that touch - an apology, an anxious reassurance. You touch a man that way to remind him that you are grateful, that you realize he is doing for your sake something that bores him or slightly endangers his dignity" (210)

Munro does this penetration again and again. And there is a bouquet of those micro-moments to really explain why she's so great.

At the end of *Leaving Waverley*, a man whose wife has died after lying in hospital in a coma for years experiences this loss as the 'outrageous fact' that "she had existed and now she did not. Not at all, as if not ever." Outside the hospital, "What he carried with him, all he carried with him, was a lack; something like a lack of air, of proper behaviour in his lungs, a difficulty that he supposed would go on forever" (*Leaving Waverley*)

The simplicity of the language - the repeated negative, the unqualified 'all he carried', 'forever' - perfectly conveys the absoluteness of his loss.

In *Dolly*, an ageing woman, who with her husband has been calmly planning a suicide pact, experiences a storm of intense jealousy when an old girlfriend of his appears in their life. "All is over," she decides as she drives off in a fury. When the high melodrama is finally over, the husband reminds her that 'we can't afford rows'. 'No, indeed,' she thinks. "I had forgotten how old we were, forgotten everything. Thinking there was all the time in the world to suffer and complain." The final point of the story is not this wise insight, but rather the rush of 'rage and admiration' that she feels for him: "it went back through our whole life together" (*Dolly*)

Munro's characters, who are called ordinary, till now seen as unsuitable material for serious fiction, as too limited to accommodate the universal, be it an adulterous mother and her neglected children, a forlorn husband, an ailing couple, an unsuccessful writer, a university scholar, a guilt-ridden father, a young teacher jilted by her employer are all flawed and fully human. The situations they enter into are banal - marriage and adultery, conflicts between parents and children, ageing and its discontents, loneliness in many forms. But illumined by Munro's unflinching insight, these lives draw us in with their quiet depth.

Munro is an unflinching writer: she allows her characters, their fixedness, their self-imposed strictures, their surprised failures, their amoral acts, and she observes without judgment. There is an intransigent core within many of Munro's female characters, "That's what I do," thinks Greta, a young mother and poet in the opening story, *To Reach Japan*. "I save myself up, most of the time"; later, the same character considers the lack in her own mothering, "her tenderness often tactical. ... She had given her attention elsewhere. Determined, foraging attention to something other than the child" (*To Reach Japan*).

Greta, who is hoping to meet a possible lover at the end of her journey, rushes towards her fate with a quick sexual skirmish aboard the train, during which she believes Katy, who is three or four, is asleep in their berth. When she checks on Katy, she is gone. Greta, panicked, finally finds her sitting alone and lost “on one of those continually noisy sheets of metal” that join the carriages together. Katy is not hurt, but she is not safe; the potential for disaster is enormous.

Look at that word, ‘*continually*’, which does so much work and yet which is so unobtrusive. It does, or says what it means: the metal goes on moving, continually. But there is more: its syllables are like the metal plates, shifting against each other. And so the meaning of this phrase deepens, in a way we may not understand but will certainly feel.

Shrewd, amused, self aware, each of the book’s heroine is perfectly capable of recognizing and regretting a mistake or indiscretion. But Mrs. Munro’s women are also capable of relishing an indiscretion. They’re risk takers at heart, plucky, independent, and sexually vibrant. In *Floating Bridge* the woman, having completed her chemotherapy with little expectation of recovery, receives — as it hesitatingly emerges over the story’s course — the cautious good news from her oncologist that there has been a ‘significant shrinkage. . . . A favorable sign’. So the ‘low-grade freedom that accompanied the expectation of death has been suddenly pulled away’. Allowing herself, through a train of odd events, to be kissed by a young man, she feels “a swish of tender hilarity, getting the better of all her sores and hollows, for the time given” (*Floating Bridge*). There is an active struggle in Munro’s language that inoculates the woman against anything more resolute than a ‘swish . . . for the time given’: both character and reader are aware of the momentary, if pleasing, deception.

Knowledge of human feeling is the same when this writer, seldom sentimental yet never mean, takes us inside the experience of letting go - accepting the end of a human connection:

When you start really letting go, this is what it’s like. A lick of pain, furtive, darting up where you don’t expect it. Then a lightness. The lightness is something to think about. It isn’t just relief. There’s a queer kind of pleasure in it, not a self-wounding or malicious pleasure, nothing personal at all. It’s an uncalled-for pleasure in seeing how the design wouldn’t fit and the structure wouldn’t stand, a pleasure in taking into account, all over again, everything that is contradictory and persistent and unaccommodating about life. I think so. I think there’s something in us wanting to be reassured about all that, right alongside - and at war with - whatever there is that wants permanent vistas and a lot of fine talk (*Floating Bridge*).

Though convinced of the feeling of not getting along with their lovers, Munro’s heroines have a capacity of wishful thinking like every lover who just keeps it inside the caves of heart but Munro lays these wishful thinkings bare, like the young woman in *Amundsen* who is seduced and abandoned by an older man is fully conscious of her participation in the process. Readers are privy to her awareness of sexual attraction and surrender but also to her self-deception about the man’s character. His treatment of one of her pupils, who obviously has a crush on the doctor herself, is a clear indication of what he will do to the heroine. Her capacity for wishful thinking is revisited at the

story's conclusion when, years later, she sees him crossing the street in the opposite direction and "it still seemed as if we could make our way out of that crowd, that in a moment we would be together" (Amundsen).

But the very next moment she realizes the *reality* "But just as certain that we would carry on in the way we were going" (Amundsen)., the reader may feel that this expresses exactly the truth of what people generally do with their lives – '*carry on in the way we were going*'. This phrase '*carry on in the way we were going*' is characteristic of Munro's diction, which is extraordinarily literal.

The very same feeling is there in the story *The Beggar Maid* where Rose, a poor university student on scholarship, gets romantically involved with a history graduate student named Patrick who is high-minded; self-righteous, judgemental; and rich. Patrick takes Rose home to meet his family, and she takes him. These visits allow the reader as well as Rose to see the social class difference between them and alter her view of Patrick's attachment to her: she comes to see his love as a kind of condescension and admits to herself that she doesn't love him. Yet she accepts his marriage proposal, then breaks it off, then changes her mind again and goes through with it. After ten years of their unsuccessful marriage, Rose, or to say Munro gives a peak to her wishful thinking at that time:

What she never said to anybody, never confided, was that she sometimes thought it had not been pity or greed or cowardice or vanity but something quite different, like a vision of happiness. In view of everything else she had told she could hardly tell that. It seems very odd; she can't justify it . . . Sometimes, without reason or warning, happiness, the possibility of happiness would surprise them (150).

The story jumps again to nine years after the divorce. Rose sees Patrick standing with his back to her at a coffee bar in the middle of the night at the Toronto Airport. At the sight of him, she stops, struck by the same sense of a possible happiness together, again a wishful thinking. He turns and sees her:

He made a face at her. It was a truly hateful, savagely warning, face; infantile, self-indulgent, yet calculated; it was a timed explosion of disgust and loathing (151).

She hurried away, then down the long varicolored corridor, shaking. She had seen Patrick; Patrick had seen her; he had made that face. But she was not really able to understand how she could be an enemy. How could anybody hate Rose so much, at the very moment when she was ready to come forward with her good will, her smiling confession of exhaustion, her air of diffident faith in civilized overtures (151)?

And here also Rose realizes his enduring spite and says: "Oh, Patrick could. Patrick could" (151).

Such are the immersive experiences that Munro provides. The characters that populate an Alice Munro story live and breathe; in the finely drawn detail of their lives we find a reflection of ourselves. Passions hopelessly conceived, affections betrayed, marriages made and broken, the joys, loves, and awakenings of women echo throughout her stories, laying bare the inescapable pain of human contact. Munro is one of those writers who, no matter how popular her books are, is *our* writer. This may

have to do with the frank intimacy of her tone, which is stripped of ornament and fuss, yet also, in its plainness, contains huge amounts of terrible, sublime, and contradictory feeling. And it's her small stories that make Alice Munro a truly global writer, accessible to people everywhere who feel, struggle, and (fortunately or unfortunately) live and function in the mundane. Some people say Alice Munro's stories are little slices of life. But to be true, it is life, every life.

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