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**Writing Women's Lives:  
The Fictional Aesthetic of Alice Munro**

**A Thesis  
presented to the  
Department of English  
Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario**

**In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts**

**by  
Meghan Grieve ©  
February 1997**



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***For Andrew and Mom***

In kitchens hundreds and thousands of miles away, she'll watch the soft skin form on the back of a wooden spoon and her memory will twitch, but it will not quite reveal to her this moment when she seems to be looking into an open secret, something not startling until you think of trying to tell it.

**Alice Munro, Open Secrets**

## **Key to Abbreviations**

*Dance of the Happy Shades: Dance*

*Lives of Girls and Women: Lives*

*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You: Something*

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### Abstract

When questioned by interviewers about matters of craft, Alice Munro is usually vague in her responses, once insisting that she has “no idea how to write a story” (The Globe and Mail E.1). Her reluctance to make any statements about the theory behind her writing forces readers and scholars to look to Munro’s fiction for answers. The frequent appearance of female artist figures in her stories, and the concern of these characters with practical and theoretical issues related to writing, suggests that Munro is allowing her work to speak for itself. The primary objective of this thesis is to explore Alice Munro’s fictional aesthetic and to delineate its components through specific reference to the stories themselves.

A survey of Munro scholarship reveals that little attention has been paid to the female artist figure in Munro’s work. Throughout her career, Munro presents us with female writers at various stages of life, and in so doing sheds light on her own thoughts about her craft. As Munro herself ages, so do her heroines, thereby allowing for an analysis of her women’s development through time. The stories examined in chapters three through five are arranged in a chronological format, from a sampling of early published stories to the most recent collections, and either feature female writers or deal with matters associated with writing. Chapter two is devoted entirely to a study of Munro’s only attempt at the novel form, Lives of Girls and Women. Lives merits close scrutiny because it traces the growth of a young woman writer from childhood into early adulthood.

A close study of Lives reveals several keys to Munro’s fictional aesthetic. The main character, Del, grows up in a rural Ontario farming community which frowns on such intellectual pursuits as reading and writing. Her struggle to reach the point at which she can begin to write

seriously provides insight into Munro's own development as a writer. Del's ultimate recognition that material for her novel exists in her seemingly ordinary surroundings is integral to Munro's sensibility.

In chapters three and four, additional aspects of Munro's fictional aesthetic are revealed through a study of five short stories. The women in these stories deal with such issues as the difficulties associated with being a woman pursuing a writing career, power and narrative authority, and the tension between fiction and reality. The importance of surface details or texture and the role of writer as observer are also examined through the experiences of Munro's female characters.

The concluding chapter includes references to stories contained in Munro's latest collection of new stories, Open Secrets. Similar themes and techniques resurface in these most recent stories but are artfully woven into the background with unprecedented sophistication. The elements of Munro's fictional aesthetic are disclosed in chapter five in an effort to identify what makes Munro's style so unique and captivating.

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Finally, I must acknowledge the simple joy that has been brought to my life by Alice Munro's stories.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

**“Writing’s something I did, like the ironing.”**

**(Munro, The Globe and Mail, Dec. 11, 1982)**

“I have no idea how to write a story,” Alice Munro has remarked in an article in The Globe and Mail (E.1). This statement provides an excellent example of the way in which Munro dodges questions about her writing. In fact, she claims to know little about craft, asserting that she does not know “why one uses the words or. . . about using language” (Hancock 78). Often reluctant to grant interviews, Munro concedes that writing, or talking about writing, makes her “superstitiously uncomfortable” (“The Colonel’s Hash Resettled” 183).

Despite her protestations, critics frequently return to the question of Munro’s fictional aesthetic, or theory of writing. A fictional aesthetic refers to the set of ideas and beliefs about writing which are unique to a particular author. Comprised of both practical and philosophical matters, this theory of writing need not be overtly defined, but may include characteristics, methods, and beliefs of which the author may or may not be conscious. It is entirely possible, according to this definition, that Munro may not be fully aware of her own fictional aesthetic; however, this does not mean that it does not exist. Even after a first reading of Munro’s collections, it is evident that several practical and creative concerns, themes, and philosophical issues recur.

It is difficult to accept the notion of such complex and sophisticated fiction as Munro's being produced strictly by intuition. Munro's reluctance to disclose her trade secrets may be explained in several ways. Firstly, there is an element of superstition surrounding her dislike for giving interviews and discussing matters of craft. In an interview with Geoff Hancock, Munro admits that, when asked to describe her writing process, she not only does it badly, but "it doesn't help the process at all" (76). Talking about writing also seems to Munro to be a waste of time and energy because it takes her away from the mental state in which she feels comfortable and from which writing is derived (Hancock 76). Munro confirms that she is "frightened of anything that cuts into that too much" (Hancock 76). Much like Del Jordan, in Lives of Girls and Women, Munro requires detachment in order to write.

Secondly, the possibility that Munro's consistent disclaimers about being aware of her methodology is mere posturing on her part must also be considered. She discusses the realities of being a public figure with John Metcalf and explains that handling being in the public eye requires a person to "construct something that you hold in front of you" (Metcalf, "A Conversation with Alice Munro" 61). In this case, what Munro hides behind is her insistence that she has no theory of writing and has no idea why she does certain things in her stories, thus preventing further intrusion.

A third explanation for her reluctance to discuss her craft may be culturally determined. Munro grew up in an extremely conservative southern Ontario farming community where occupations such as writing were thought unsuitable for young women. Even reading was something which Munro knew to keep secret because she grew up in a

community “where feelings were hidden and reading was subject to ridicule” (Ross 16). Coming of age and beginning to write in the 1950s did not make disclosure about her craft any easier.

In her study of women’s portrait-of-the-artist novels, Linda Huf examines Sylvia Plath’s novel The Bell Jar and in so doing provides insight into what it was like for women writers in the 1950s. Huf’s reference to the keynote speech at Plath’s own college graduation sets the tone for an understanding of the attitude towards women writers at that time. On that occasion, Adlai Stevenson claimed that the Smith College woman would one day be proud to “change diapers instead of shape policy, make laundry list[s] instead of write poetry” (Huf 128). The image of femininity created by women’s magazines in the 1950s is also found by Huf to contribute to the prevailing negative attitudes towards women’s work (128). Huf believes the image of the bell jar in Plath’s novel to be a “metaphor for the madness of an era, the Feminine Fifties, when all women were glassed into “belle” jars” (143).

By her own admission, Munro grew up in an “environment where the male and female roles were very clearly defined” (Murch 69). The influence of her upbringing is evident in her own thoughts about being a writer. In speaking with John Metcalf about women writers, she acknowledges that she has two women within herself: one who is ambitious and one who is “traditionally feminine, who is passive, who wants to be dominated, who wants to have someone between her and the world” (Metcalf, “A Conversation with Alice Munro” 59). Munro believes that her lifestyle as a housewife allowed her the opportunity to write as she did not have to be concerned with supporting

herself; however, she also thinks that she likely could have been a better writer without the frequent interruptions of family life (Murch 70).

As a woman beginning to write in the 1950s, Munro's reluctance to discuss her craft is understandable. In A Woman of Genius, Mary Austin states that there is a "general conspiracy" against a woman's telling the truth about herself (qtd. by Huf 13). Instead of revealing her thoughts and methods of writing in interviews and essays, Munro allows her women writers and other characters to supply this type of information. According to Linda Huf, "there is reason to believe that women are more truthful when presenting their lives under the guise of fiction than when offering them up as unembellished truth" (13). Similarly, Judith Kegan Gardiner finds that "twentieth-century women writers express the experience of their own identity in what and how they write, often with a sense of urgency and excitement in the communication of truths just understood" (354). In Gardiner's view, a female author may "define herself through the text while creating her female hero" (357). This attempt at self-definition as a writer, I believe, is precisely what Munro strives for and ultimately accomplishes in her stories.

While much of Munro's artistic ability may be attributed to natural talent, the simple fact that a good number of her stories contain female artists as main characters convinces me that this matter of a fictional aesthetic warrants further scrutiny. These female artists reflect certain issues which are central to Munro's own work and to her life as a woman writer. The women in these stories concern themselves with such practical matters as the need for a woman to have a room of her own and the difficulty of balancing marriage and family with a writing career. Power and narrative authority, the tension

between fiction and reality, and the importance of texture and surface details, are all issues which are examined by Munro's women artists. Interestingly enough, a study of the same interviews and essays, in which she denies possessing a fictional aesthetic, reveals that Munro's own thoughts about writing are similar to those voiced by her characters.

The frequency with which Munro utilizes the female artist figure points to the possibility that she is doing so for a reason. Although she claims in an interview with Geoff Hancock that she tries to avoid writing about writers because readers often assume that the result is autobiography, a survey of her collected fiction indicates otherwise. She not only writes about women writers, but male artists also appear in such stories as "Material" in Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You. For the purposes of this study, the fiction examined will include several stories containing female artists as main characters, as well as pieces which deal directly with artistic concerns. Such stories are found throughout the span of Munro's career, beginning with "The Office" in Dance of the Happy Shades (1968) and Lives of Girls and Women (1971). Munro's only work which resembles the novel form, Lives, traces the development of a female artist from childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood. This *Kunsterroman*—a German term for the portrait-of-the-artist novel—merits close scrutiny and will therefore be the subject of an entire chapter.

In "The Ottawa Valley," (Something) the main character is not explicitly named as an artist; however, she does explore creative issues and raises the matter of the limitations of art. Female artists appear in "Dulse" (The Moons of Jupiter) through both the narrator and the underlying presence of Willa Cather. In Munro's more recent collections, The



Progress of Love and Friend of My Youth, two stories focus on women artists, namely “Lichen” and “Meneseteung.” The fact that Munro has returned to this familiar figure throughout her career creates the opportunity for an analysis of any change or development in her depiction of the female artist figure over time.

Munro’s continuing use of women artists in her fiction, and the concern of these characters with practical and philosophical issues about writing similar to those of their author, indicates that perhaps she is embedding a fictional aesthetic within the stories themselves. While this theory of writing is neither clearly delineated nor all-encompassing, it exists nonetheless.

Despite the recurrence of the female artist figure in Alice Munro’s fiction, this matter has received little scholarly attention. Apart from acknowledging Lives as belonging to the genre of the portrait-of-the-artist novel, or *Kunstlerroman*, the major studies of Munro’s work have virtually ignored the existence of women artists. E.D. Blodgett, in his survey of Munro’s fiction, entitled Alice Munro, devotes a chapter to examining Lives. His discussion of this coming-of-age novel includes an insightful analysis of the numerous texts to which Del, the main character, is exposed during the course of the book. Although Blodgett considers Del to be a developing artist, he omits any consideration of the gender issue, preferring to view her simply as an artist, rather than as a maturing female who is also a budding writer.

Alice Munro: Paradox and Parallel, by W.R. Martin, contains a similar approach to the female artist figure as that taken by Blodgett. In Chapter Nine, Martin notes the frequent appearance in Munro’s fiction of an “imaginative young girl” (199) as first-

person narrator. The reason for this, he concludes, is that:

. . .not only is she likely to find herself in the middle, having to choose between opposed interests, forces, demands and loyalties, but it is the young who are most absorbed by discoveries, epiphanies, and who try hardest to catch new and often disturbing experiences in some sort of net of words (Martin 199).

In the above statement, Martin does realize the importance of the imaginative artist figure in Munro's stories; however, he fails to explore the fact that these creative young people are almost always female.

Of the major studies of Munro's fiction, Beverly Rasporich's book, Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro, comes closest to acknowledging the centrality of the female artist figure. Rasporich comments on Munro's perception of the woman-as-artist in Chapter Two. She claims that "the artist-heroine is in search of female muses in art and life," (34) because "for Munro, the feminist quest includes the search for freedom of imagination and expression through the medium of art" (Rasporich 32). While Rasporich does note the recurring presence of the narrator-as-artist, her thoughts on this matter are rather abstract. She seems to manipulate the presence of female artists into supporting her underlying theory of the "feminist quest" (Rasporich 32) in Munro's fiction, rather than considering it as an important issue in itself.

In her introduction, Rasporich contemplates the matter of autobiography in fiction, stating that she believes, "as Susan Gubar does, that currently, at least, the distance between the woman artist and her art is minimal" (xix). Should this statement be accepted

as true, it then becomes increasingly plausible to believe that Munro is voicing her thoughts on art, and on being a woman artist, through her characters. Rasporich discusses the importance of personal experience in writing by women in general, and particularly in reference to Munro's work. She claims that "the corpus of Munro's six collected works is constructed through the physical aging of herself and her heroines" (Rasporich xvii).

Rasporich's belief in the necessity of women using personal experiences as artistic material lends support to the idea that Munro uses her female artists as vehicles for the expression of her own thoughts on art and being a woman writer.

Those critics who have dealt specifically with the artist figure in Munro's fiction have generally limited their focus to studying her novel, *Lives*. While these studies prove helpful in analysing the function of the novel's narrator and main character, Del, they virtually ignore Munro's other female artists.

In his book, *Confessional Fictions: A Portrait of the Artist in the Canadian Novel*, David Williams understandably limits his material. Approaching the Canadian *Kunstlerroman* from an historical perspective, Williams devotes Chapter Nine to a discussion of metafiction in Munro's *Lives* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* He states that her female metafiction "interrogate an ideology which is quintessentially male in its rejection of influence" (34). He suggests that Munro parodies traditional metafictional strategies, and in so doing offers a "remarkable feminist challenge to the whole male project of postmodernism" (Williams 34). Realizing that the topic of his book is the portrait-of-the-artist novel, Williams cannot be faulted for neglecting Munro's other short stories which contain female artists as main characters. The discussion by Williams of

Munro's metafictional tendencies lends support to the theory that Munro uses her female characters to address matters related to writing.

J.R. (Tim) Struthers is one of several critics who have written papers exclusively on the portrait-of-the-artist aspect of *Lives*. Published in 1975, his essay compares Del Jordan with Stephen Dedalus, the hero of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. While he does examine Del's development as a young artist at length, he avoids discussing her particular situation as an emerging female artist.

In contrast, critics such as Lorraine York, Miriam Packer, and Rebecca Smith consider Del's development both as woman and artist. Smith, in an article entitled, "The Only Flying Turtle Under the Sun: The *Bildungsroman* in Contemporary Women's Fiction," identifies Munro's *Lives* as belonging to a new genre, namely the female *Bildungsroman*. Breaking free from the traditions of the largely male domain of the coming-of-age novel, Smith sees such women authors as Margaret Laurence, Erica Jong, Marge Piercy, and Munro as inscribing the realities of female experience into the modern *Bildungsroman*. Lorraine York and Miriam Packer each approach *Lives* as a journey undertaken by the female protagonist in search of identity and selfhood, a journey which is made both possible and problematic because she is a maturing artist.

Again, the main shortcoming of these articles is their neglect of the rest of Munro's collected fiction. There exists no sustained study of the function of the female artist figure over the whole range of Munro's work.

The fact that most major studies of Munro's work fail to recognize the significance of the female artist figure is not surprising in light of Ruth Feingold's claim that "most

critical discussion of the *bildungsroman* [SIC] has, until recently, focussed exclusively on novels of male development” (1). In her unpublished essay, Feingold states that the reasons for this neglect are numerous, but perhaps the best answer is that the female coming-of-age novel is in a constant state of change and development, and is therefore difficult to define (2).

Pieces written by women, about women, are often cyclical in their progression, as opposed to the traditionally linear form of development in the male *Bildungsroman* (Feingold 1). Judith Kegan Gardiner also supports this notion of women’s writing, particularly autobiographies, as being “less linear, unified, and chronological than men’s autobiographies” (355). Women writers face the unique challenge of attempting to trace the development of female artists through a circular model of “periodic growth and remission” (Feingold 1). The female experience is ill-suited to traditional plot lines and narrative structures, as “female identity is a process and writing by women engages us in this process as the female self seeks to define itself in the experience of creating art” (Gardiner 361). If we accept the idea of female identity as a process which is fluid and constantly changing, it is possible to understand why the realities of certain female experiences such as puberty, marriage, and motherhood are often not adequately described by the linear mode of development. The search for female identity does not necessarily follow a linear path, as it is fraught with roadblocks, such as the logistics involved with balancing the roles of wife, mother, and artist. Often, the demands of daily life take precedence over creative pursuits.

Certain characteristics of women’s writing can be identified as being unique. The

types of conflicts or crises which female protagonists encounter tend to be more personal in nature. While Joyce's Stephen Dedalus clashes with both Church and State, Del, in Munro's Lives, explores the issues of faith, sexuality, man-woman relationships, and growing up. Although Del's crises may be less spectacular or worldly than those experienced by Stephen Dedalus, they are equally significant. To Del, events such as auditioning for the school operetta, witnessing Mr. Chamberlain masturbating, and falling in love with Garnet French, are equally important as Stephen Dedalus's attempts to cast off the restrictive nets of the Catholic Church and the political turmoil of his native Ireland.

An absence of resolution is another common feature of women's writing in general and of the female *bildungsroman* in particular. The final chapter of Munro's Lives is entitled "Epilogue," and therefore implies a sense of closure; however, this ending actually serves as a new beginning for the narrator, who must now return to her past to find material for her fiction. This type of cyclical development makes it impossible to consider the ending a resolution. On the other hand, a traditional example of resolution occurs in Joyce's Portrait when Dedalus is finally able to free himself from his family, faith, and country, thus enabling him to pursue his vocation. Rather than liberating herself from her upbringing, Del realizes that it will be her family and community which will form the nucleus of her writing. Ultimately, the product of this realization is the novel, Lives of Girls and Women. By returning to her own beginnings in order to start writing her story, Del thwarts the traditional model of linear progression through time in novels. The ending of Lives is actually the beginning of the story.

One aspect of women's writing which is beginning to gain recognition from critics is the tendency of female authors to "turn inward, towards the body, the emotions, and ultimately the mind" (Gadpaille viii) to find material for their fictions. In reference to what she deems to be the dominance of women writers in the modern Canadian short story, Michelle Gadpaille suggests that this tendency to look inward has developed within the past 25 years. Similarly, Judith Kegan Gardiner believes that women possess a personal closeness to literature which is developed through two basic strategies: the manipulation of identifications among narrator, author, and reader, and through the representation of memory (Gardiner 349). In women's writing, "the author exercises magical control over her character, creating her from representations of herself and her ideals" (Gardiner 357); that is to say "the hero is her author's daughter" (Gardiner 349).

This 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 states that she writes stories that come from inside and outside (183). However, when she begins to analyse 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" (183). However, Munro is quick to warn readers about viewing her stories as autobiography. She concedes that she does use "bits of what is real" ("What is Real?"), 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.

Beverly Rasporich believes personal experience and, more specifically, her experiences as a woman, to be integral to Munro's work (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" (Dance). 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 14). This admission by Munro of the necessity of drawing on one's own life experiences when writing fiction lends credence to the notion that she is utilizing the female artist figure to express her own thoughts and feelings about art.

One of the central preoccupations of Munro's women artists is the particular challenges faced by female artists. The story, "The Office," for example, harkens back to Virginia Woolf's theory that a woman needs money and a room of her own in order to write. Although Munro herself insists that she would feel paralysed if someone set her up in a study ("Writing's something I did like the ironing" E.1), she is extremely particular about the conditions which must exist when she sits down to write. Speaking with Geoff Hancock about the room where she works, she describes it as being rather barren, located upstairs in her home, with a varnished wall sloping down in front of her and very tightly enclosed (Hancock 110). This space provides Munro with the security and isolation which she requires to work. Unfortunately, the office acquired by the main character in "The Office" results in a decrease in her writing output, largely due to the continued



invasion of her privacy by the landlord. The fact that this aspiring writer and mother/wife felt the need to seek out an office points to the logistical difficulties which are often associated with being a woman writer.

Other similarities exist between the narrator of "The Office" and Munro. Like the main character in "The Office," Munro confesses to having felt as if she should hide her art. As a teenager, and then as a young wife and mother, she found life to be less problematic if she played the role which society had delegated to her. In a similar fashion to the aspiring writer Del Jordan in *Lives*, Munro realized early on that writing was not "what the people around me thought of as a justifiable ambition" (Macfarlane 52) for a young girl. Rebecca Smith sees this need among writers to deny their art as being quite common. She claims that the female protagonists in many contemporary novels by women "must learn to deny their intellects and subordinate them to those of men" (128). This may also help to explain Munro's reluctance to discuss matters of craft, as she may feel unqualified and even, perhaps, intimidated by this type of discourse.

Beverly Rasporich cites a comment made by Munro regarding another problem which she sees as being unique to women artists. Munro claims that "writing is dangerous to the psyche. It's unbalanced. It's like a trip you take alone" (Rasporich 21). Noting that this type of solitary journey is something we are accustomed to associating with the male artist, Munro acknowledges that it "may not be very nice for his wife and kids but it is important that he do it" (Rasporich 21). On the other hand, we consider a woman to be the person who "doesn't go on journeys, the person who is there looking after the material wants but also providing a kind of unquestioning cushion" (Munro, qtd. in Rasporich 21).

Bronwen Wallace believes that Munro's writing is "powerfully centred in her understanding of her own experience as a woman" (53). As a result, her female characters are often described by critics as being realistic. Wallace puts it best when she says that

Munro:

gives us mothers and daughters, old women, awkward adolescents, jilted mistresses, gives them to us in all the strangeness and commonness of their particular situations. She acknowledges them, allows them even, in a way that gives us the chance to acknowledge them--these many women we are and could possibly be--in ourselves (67).

This recognition of women's different selves is significant, as it allows for a discussion of the woman-as-artist as one of the multiple layers of female experience. Munro's attempt to come to terms with these layers influences the techniques she employs in her writing.

In a similar fashion to constructing a house, Munro adds layers to her stories. She says that she goes into a story, as she does a house, moves back and forth, settles here and there, and stays in it for a while ("What is Real?" 224). Continuing with the house metaphor, Munro adds that "everybody knows what a house does, how it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way" ("What is Real?" 224). This, she says, is the "nearest I can come to explaining what a story does for me, and what I want my stories to do for other people" ("What is Real?" 224). Essentially, she is aware of wanting to create a certain kind of structure, and she knows the feeling she needs to get from being inside that structure ("What is Real?" 224). That feeling is the soul of the story ("What is Real?" 224).

In her writing, Munro is searching for an "...emotional exactness. . . and exactness of resonance," (Metcalf, "A Conversation with Alice Munro" 56) which is only achieved through careful selection of words. This emotional exactness is all-important, for "when the event becomes the thing that matters, the story isn't working too well" (Hancock 81). She claims, in an interview with John Metcalf, that the extreme care she takes in choosing her words is deliberate but not conscious (56). Sometimes the right word will come quickly, and other times she must search for it, but not with the aid of a dictionary or thesaurus (Metcalf, "A Conversation with Alice Munro" 56). Munro insists that this process comes to her naturally, that "where someone else would say 'here I am doing this,' I will just be doing it and not realizing what I am doing" (Hancock 81).

This seemingly instinctual aspect of her creative process is something which Munro insists upon when asked about her methods. She is conscious of weaknesses in a story, but she is not necessarily certain where and why they occur; instead, she claims to "feel a part that's wrong, like a soggy weight" ("What is Real?" 225). Critics often find such intuitive claims difficult to believe, given the cogency of character and surface details which are woven into the fabric of Munro's work.

Her concern with details, or the texture of the story, is obvious. By her own admission, she spends a great deal of time on surface details, (Hancock 100) in order to create a certain climate, to which the characters and the plot must be subordinated (Hancock 82). Fascinated by ordinary life, Munro is certain that she will never run out of material for fiction (Hancock 96). 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 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.

While Munro may be reluctant to articulate the elements of her fictional aesthetic, she certainly has definite ideas about what a story should do for a reader. The student of her work notices recurring themes, techniques, and ideas about art which comprise a loosely-defined theory of writing. That she is concerned with the difficulties involved in being a woman writer, as well as with other creative issues, is evident when reading her interviews and essays.

In order to begin examining Munro’s use of the female artist figure, an analysis of five short stories and Munro’s only novel will follow. The material to be considered in Chapters Two, Three, and Four is organized both topically and chronologically by order of publication. Beginning with *Lives*, the female artist figure in Munro’s fiction will be followed from childhood into maturity and old age. This method will allow for the opportunity to determine whether Munro’s stories about young artists differ from those stories which contain more mature artist figures. The chapters also follow a basically chronological format, starting with samples from her earliest collected work and ending

with a selection from a more recent volume of short stories, Friend of My Youth.

The fifth chapter will take the form of a conclusion, at which time I will expand upon what I believe to be Alice Munro's fictional aesthetic. Briefly, Munro's aesthetic consists of the following elements: the importance of texture and surface details; the tension between fiction and reality; the role of writer as observer; the difficulties associated with being a woman writer; and the use of personal experience in her fiction. While these conclusions are not meant to be all-inclusive or absolute, it is hoped that this study will generate interest in the use of the female artist figure by Alice Munro and by other contemporary Canadian women writers.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Portrait of an Artist:

### Girls, Women, and Writers

The novel, Lives of Girls and Women, provides an excellent starting point for examining Munro's method of using the female artist figure to express her own ideas about art, as well as to articulate certain aspects of her experience as a woman and a writer. Lives is Munro's second published work (1971) and is her only novel. In it, we are presented with Del Jordan, a budding young writer, at various stages of her development. Not only do we witness the experiences and events of Del's daily life, but we also watch her grapple with such artistic matters as power and narrative authority, the intricacies of language, the importance of texture and surface details, sources of material for fiction, and the issue of fantasy versus reality. These same concerns are consistently voiced by Munro in interviews and essays.

Lives belongs to the genre of the *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel. The fact that Munro utilizes this type of structure is extremely significant. This particular genre allows for a great deal of introspection on the part of the protagonist. The first-person narration by Del Jordan, the main character of Lives, allows the reader much insight into her thoughts and feelings regarding art and the process of growing up. The fact that the narrator of Munro's *bildungsroman* is female is often not discussed by critics.

For example, J.R. Struthers insightfully compares the situations of Del Jordan and another developing artist, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, but neglects to consider her particular experience as an emerging female artist. Many of Del's experiences are uniquely female. From her crush on the boy playing the lead role in the school operetta, to her concern over her physical appearance, Del is experiencing many of the same things as other girls her age.

The difficulties involved with expressing female experience are considered by Ruth Feingold in a paper presented at the Midwestern Modern Language Association Conference in Chicago in 1991. She claims that critics' frequent practice of comparing male and female attempts at the *Bildungsroman* has caused those novels produced by women to often be deemed incomplete, or lacking in some respect (Feingold 2). Feingold believes that "the female *Bildungsroman* has been largely ignored until recently, mainly because it does not measure up to the standards of the traditional male apprenticeship novel (Feingold 2). While female-written *Bildungsroman* novels such as Evelina and Northanger Abbey are studied in university literature courses, they are lesser known than Joyce's model of the coming-of-age novel, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Joyce's work seems to be the measuring gauge for the genre in English, and this may result in women's works being viewed by an unsuitable set of standards. For example, many coming-of-age novels by women lack the linear progression and ultimate resolution which characterize the male *Bildungsroman*.

The disparity between the male and female *Bildungsroman* is particularly evident in their respective definitions. In his study of the history of the *Bildungsroman*, Jerome

Buckley cites a definition of the genre, which states that the *Bildungsroman* is the “novel of all-around development or self-culture with a more or less conscious attempt on the part of the hero to integrate his powers, to cultivate himself by his experience” (13). Offshoots of the *Bildungsroman* include the *Kunstlerroman*—“a tale of the orientation of an artist” (Buckley 13), and the *Entwicklungroman*—“a chronicle of a young man’s general growth rather than his specific quest for self-culture” (Buckley 13). In discussing the portrait-of-the-artist novel, Buckley’s list of examples includes such authors as Dickens, Joyce, Hardy, Lawrence, and Maugham, all of whom are male. The lone female novelist to whom an entire chapter has been devoted in Buckley’s study is George Eliot, whose *The Mill on the Floss* is compared extensively to such traditional examples of the *Bildungsroman* as *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*.

In discussing the modern female *Bildungsroman* Ruth Feingold identifies several characteristics which separate these novels from the male coming-of-age novel. Most significantly, Feingold claims that an interrupted instead of smooth forward progress by the heroine is a common element in the 20th-century female *Bildungsroman* (3). She cites the circular narrative structure in Virginia Woolf’s novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, to substantiate this claim. In addition, Feingold emphasizes the realistic portrayal of women’s psychological and emotional development in recent apprenticeship novels by women (3).

Although women’s coming-of-age novels often trace a linear development through time, the protagonist generally experiences several backward steps in her growth, rather than progressing smoothly from childhood into adulthood. Along these lines, Rebecca Smith offers her own definition for the new female *Bildungsroman*. She explains



these works as novels in which:

sensitive female protagonists encounter the attempts of society to force them into stereotypical roles as they move from childhood through adulthood; they alternate between acceptance, the path of least resistance and rebellion; but finally they must attempt to live in the world on their own terms, so they suffer through to a new, authentic human role (127).

Feingold uses Virginia Woolf's novel, To The Lighthouse, as a prime example of this new female *Bildungsroman*. Woolf's method of expressing her experience involves the construction of multiple visions of her life through three female protagonists (Feingold 4). This multiplicity is a common feature of women's writing, as "many women, pulled between the conflicting demands of vocation, family, and social expectations, have responded by creating multiple narratives of their existence" (Feingold 6).

In a similar fashion, Alice Munro attempts to address certain aspects of her experience through characters such as Del Jordan. On the surface, Munro appears to utilize the format of the traditional *Bildungsroman* in Lives by tracing Del's development from childhood into adolescence and finally young adulthood. While this progression seems at first glance to be linear, it is not that simple; the entire novel, narrated by Del herself, is actually a recollection. The fact that Del is remembering the events of her past forces us to consider the possibility that this is merely one version of her life. Any account of a life is problematic and misleading because, in the words of Virginia Woolf, "the things one does not remember are as important; perhaps they are more important" (Moments of

**Being 69).**

The great detail with which Munro renders the early life of Del Jordan inevitably raises the issue of autobiography in fiction. The startling clarity of her depiction of everyday life in a rural southwestern Ontario community makes readers wonder if Munro is actually describing the events of her own childhood. This has been a contentious issue for residents of Munro's hometown of Wingham, who see themselves and their surroundings in the fictional town of Jubilee. Despite Munro's insistence that she is not attempting to depict Wingham in her stories ("What is Real?" 223), comparisons are constantly made between the two towns. She concedes that the "fictional room, town, world needs a bit of starter dough from the real world" ("What is Real?" 225), and therefore she uses bits and pieces of memories, observations, and anecdotes, supplemented by material which she invents. Although she claims to be unconcerned with trying to make any point, or with attempting to depict people, places, and events as they really are ("What is Real?" 226), the similarities between Munro and her character, Del Jordan, are difficult to ignore.

Critics and writers of fiction, Munro included, are often reluctant to examine connections between authors and their work for fear of reducing novels and short stories to a type of documentary. George Woodcock believes that this tendency to resist autobiography is a result of years of judging autobiography as descriptive, rather than imaginative, writing ("Don't Ever Ask for the True Story" 16). While it would not be accurate to describe the similarities between Munro and Del as autobiographical, in fact, it is possible to consider that the young narrator in Lives is being used to explore Munro's

own thoughts on art and her feelings about becoming a writer. Woodcock states that “it is the truth of experience rather than the literalness of fact that the autobiographer is presenting, and sometimes his white lies contain the deepest truths” (“Don’t Ever Ask for the True Story” 24).

For Munro, the truth of experience is all-important, as she believes that stories “must be made in the same way our dreams are made, truth in them being cast. . . in any kind of plausible, implausible, giddy, strange, humdrum terms at all” (“The Colonel’s Hash Resettled” 183). After writing a story, it becomes difficult for her to differentiate between the real memories and the things she has invented; the reason for this difficulty, she claims, is that “it is all deeply, perfectly true to me” (“The Colonel’s Hash Resettled” 182).

Bearing these comments in mind, it is possible to understand the function of a character such as Del Jordan in Lives. In her determination to convey the truth of Del’s experience of growing up and becoming a writer, Munro has used pieces of her own memories and her knowledge of what it is like to be a developing female artist. The artistic issues with which Del must struggle, and ultimately attempt to resolve, are the same concerns which Munro has had to reconcile in her own writing.

While Del, as a young girl, seems unaware of artistic matters, she possesses certain characteristics which Munro clearly feels are essential to her own artistic makeup. Early in the first chapter of Lives, a number of signs are present which indicate that Del is an extremely imaginative young girl. She demonstrates a keen attention to detail, which is well beyond her years. She and her younger brother, Owen, amuse themselves by trying to list the things in Uncle Benny’s junk-filled home, knowing that they are remembering

less than half of the objects (Lives 3). In describing the house in which she and her family live, nothing escapes her eye. She needs everything—"the plain back wall of home, the pale chipped brick, the cement platform outside the kitchen door, washtubs hanging on nails, the pump, the lilac bush with brown-spotted leaves" (4-5)—to make her description complete.

Del's hunger for reading introduces her to a world entirely different from her own. She greedily devours the fantastic details in Uncle Benny's collection of tabloid-style newspapers, aware that her mother would not approve. Describing the enjoyment she derives from reading these newspapers, she says: "I read faster and faster, all I could hold, then reeled out into the sun. . . I was bloated and giddy with revelations of evil, of its versatility and grand invention and horrific playfulness" (4). This points to an early realization by Del that, alongside the stable and seemingly logical world of her parents, lies another world of fantasy and illusion, where anything is possible.

The man who introduces Del to this alternate world is Uncle Benny, her father's hired man and friend of the family. He allows Del to perch on the edge of his porch and read his newspapers, offering to let her take them home if she wants. These tabloids are Benny's only connection to the outside world, but it is a world with which Del is unfamiliar. In his study of Munro's work, E.D. Blodgett finds much significance in the role of Uncle Benny, suggesting that he is the "impetus that prepares Del to see the world as textual material" (40). Indeed, Del's awareness of this fantastic world, and the delight she takes in reading about it, are evidence of her imaginative powers at an early age.

In Chapter Two, "Heirs of the Living Body," Del is introduced to yet another

world by Uncle Craig, that being the world of public events. During Del's summer visits, Uncle Craig takes time out from compiling a complete history of Wawanash County, as well as working on a family tree, to teach her the concepts of time and history. Most of the information he provides is statistical, and therefore of little interest to a young girl. Sometimes, however, he entices her appetite for the romantic by telling such stories as the one about the tragic death of a young man who had been killed just up the road by a falling tree (25).

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Del's contact with Uncle Craig is her awareness of his need to include absolutely everything in his history of Wawanash County. His interest, not in the strange or extraordinary, but in the events of everyday life, foreshadows Del's ultimate recognition in the final chapter that daily life is actually suitable material for fiction.

In addition to Uncle Craig's influence, Del is also affected by her relationship with her two spinster aunts, sisters of Uncle Craig. At a young age, Del observes a difference between men's and women's work while visiting with the aunts and Uncle Craig. In reference to her aunts' admiration of their brother's work, Del claims that it "would have made no difference if Uncle Craig had actually had 'abstract, intellectual pursuits,' or if he had spent the day sorting henfeathers; they were prepared to believe in what he did" (27). The aunts fill their days with household chores such as gardening, canning, pickling, cleaning, and ironing. The difference between men's and women's work is painfully clear to Del, yet she senses that this disparity is strange, for the aunts "respected men's work beyond anything; they also laughed at it" (27).

Del also learns in Chapter Two that society often expects women to keep any unusual talents or intellectual abilities secret. The aunts seem to admire Del's cousin Ruth McQueen, not because she won a scholarship to attend college, but because she elected to turn it down and stay home (32). To Del, this whole matter is very confusing. She wonders: "Why was this such an admirable thing to have done? Like certain subtle harmonies of music or color, the beauties of the negatives were beyond me" (32).

At an early age, Del realizes that creative or intelligent women feel they must deny their abilities and pursue their ambitions secretly; she knows that it is considered proper to follow cousin Ruth's example. Later, in Chapter Five, this type of denial becomes commonplace, as she states that "reading books was something like chewing gum, a habit to be abandoned when the seriousness and satisfactions of adult life took over. It persisted mostly in unmarried ladies, would have been shameful in a man" (99). The idea that certain intellectual pursuits should be hidden is a major issue for a developing artist, and is something which Del must overcome if she is to become a writer. It is ironic that the pressure placed upon her by society to keep her writing secret results in the privacy she requires to think and write.

Del's identity as a budding artist is easily observed in Chapter Two. Her love of language is particularly evident in this chapter. Words often create vivid visual images for Del, such as "birth canal," which she envisions as a "straight-banked river of blood" (33-34). Del is also fascinated by the sounds of words. For example, when she and her cousin Mary Agnes discover a dead cow along the river bank, Del takes great pleasure in repeating "'day-ud cow', . . . expanding the word lusciously" (37). When Uncle Craig

dies of a heart attack, to Del, the word “attack” sounds like “an explosion, like fireworks going off, shooting sticks of light in all directions” (39). These examples of visual and auditory associations with language are the products of a creative mind.

Del’s awareness of the conflicting roles of women in society continues into the third chapter, entitled “Princess Ida.” Her mother has recently begun selling encyclopaedias door-to-door, or as Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace refer to it, “going on the road” (54). Del feels the weight of her aunts’ disapproval of her mother’s non-traditional activities, yet she still wishes to defend her mother. These three women, as Del’s main female role models, exercise much influence over her. In these women, she is presented with two very different lifestyles. On the one hand, the aunts represent the traditional female role of caregiver and nurturer. Their home is described by Del as being perfectly tidy, “and over everything the clean, reproachful smell of wax and lemons” (54). While they concede that Del’s mother “knows such a lot of things” (55), their subtle method of criticizing her makes Del realize that “to some people, maybe to most people, knowledge was just oddity; it stuck out like warts” (55).

In contrast to the stable, simple lifestyle represented by the elderly aunts, Del’s mother continually searches for fulfilment through various intellectual and economic pursuits. Whether it be selling encyclopaedias, waging letter-writing campaigns with local newspapers, or taking correspondence courses, Addie tries desperately to find something for herself outside the home. Addie is a significant character in that she provides Del with an alternative view of womanhood and gender roles in society, and also encourages her to be motivated and ambitious.

Del's response to her mother's pursuits outside the home is rather ambiguous. She acknowledges that she shares her mother's delight in knowledge, but at the same time, she recognizes that such an appetite for knowledge is rather unusual for a small-town girl. Del happily accompanies her mother on her encyclopedia sales route and recites lists of facts on demand in order to demonstrate the usefulness of the volumes and perhaps to gain her mother's approval. On one of these trips, she senses that this show of knowledge is somehow abnormal, and decides that she will not do it anymore. She says that the "decision was physical; humiliation prickled my nerve ends and the lining of my stomach" (56). Her mother responds to this decision with dismay, stating that "you want to hide your brains under a bushel out of pure perversity but that's not my lookout" (57).

This decision by Del to reject her intellectual impulses, at least in public, is difficult to make, for she recognizes that she is not so different from her mother (68). The immense pressure that she feels to deny this aspect of herself is something which she must withstand in order to grow and ultimately to pursue a career as a writer.

Del's questioning of religious faith in Chapter Four, "Age of Faith," is similar to the crisis of faith experienced by Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man; however, the two budding writers deal with this issue in rather different ways. For Dedalus, the Catholic Church symbolizes fear and repression, and it must therefore be cast aside in order for Joyce's hero to locate his artistic identity. Del, on the other hand, finds organized religion to be a kind of curiosity. Regarding the Catholics in town as a "small but unintimidated tribe" (78), the Baptists as slightly comic, and the Presbyterians as the "leftovers" (79), she has little use for religion and finds it all rather



confusing.

At age eleven, Del decides to explore the world of religion in the hope that God might materialize before her, thereby making praying and going to church seem sensible, useful, meaningful. Initially, going to the United Church is like attending a theatrical performance for Del. She hopes that by going to church she will draw attention to herself, and people will be “intrigued and touched by my devoutness and persistence” (80). Seeing the townspeople of Jubilee as a potential audience, she sits defiantly in her pew, daring people to whisper about her.

This theatrical motif is also apparent in Del’s decision to turn to the Anglican Church for answers about God. She selects the Anglican Church instead of the other denominations mainly because it is the only church in town with a bell. After sitting amidst the Anglican congregation, Del is delighted to find “what all those Methodists and Congregationalists and Presbyterians had fearfully abolished—the theatrical in religion” (83). Dramatic aspects of the service thrill her, such as the “kneeling down on the hard board, . . . bobbing the head at the altar at the mention of Jesus’ name, the recitation of the Creed which I loved for its litany of strange splendid things in which to believe” (83). In addition, she enjoys calling Jesus “Jesu,” because it “made Him sound more kingly and magical, like a wizard or an Indian god” (83). Del’s love for the exotic, as well as her interest in the sound of words, is consistent with her artistic sensibilities.

Apart from these surface observations, Del’s keen intellect detects a different feeling in the sanctuary of the Anglican Church. The ritualistic aspects of the service make the existence of God seem plausible; she is later disappointed, however, when she realizes

that God's power cannot be used to make desired things happen.

Del's interest in religion seems rather advanced for a twelve-year-old girl, as does the intensity with which she pursues answers to her questions about God. She is unable to imagine how people could be satisfied without actually knowing whether or not God is real: "How could they even go on breathing and existing, until they were sure of this?" (84). The maturity and sincerity with which Del sets about finding answers to these important questions indicate an inquiring mind. The fact that she never does completely accept religion as an answer for herself is unimportant; instead, what is significant is that she undertakes this quest for knowledge at all.

Del's artistic impulses become particularly evident in the fifth chapter, "Changes and Ceremonies." Early in the chapter, Del describes the contentment she feels by just being in the town's public library. She says: "I was happy in the library. Walls of printed pages, evidence of so many created worlds--this was a comfort to me" (99). To critic J. R. Struthers, this library scene confirms Del's identity as an artist. Struthers claims that "in the library, Del found confirmation of her belief that the real world was her imagination" ("Reality and Ordering" 39).

Realizing that a love of reading is regarded as unusual in a small town such as Jubilee, Del attempts to pacify her friend Naomi's anxiety over being in the library by selecting for her the most sexually explicit passage she can find in a book. The only way she can interest Naomi in a book is by finding something spectacular for her to read. This distraction allows Del to remain in the library a little longer. She regards this use of a book as a type of betrayal, but justifies it in the name of survival, as "it seems the only

way to get along” (100). Again, Del finds herself needing to hide her imagination, and its accompanying hunger for books, in order that she not be made to suffer the shame and humiliation of being deemed abnormal by her peers.

The school operetta is another significant event in Chapter Five. The annual production, with its elements of fantasy and illusion, helps to fulfill Del’s imaginative appetite. She finds herself moved by the story itself and by the “powerful and helpless and tragic” (110) character of the Pied Piper. The play provides a break from the daily routine of school life, and also creates the opportunity for Del to develop a crush on Frank Wales, who earns the lead role as the Pied Piper. This average boy is suddenly transformed into a prince-like figure by Del’s imagination. Even his clothes become a source of romance for her, as she thinks about his blue-gray sweater which he wears every day; she says that its “smoky colour, so ordinary, reticent, and mysterious, seemed to me his colour, the colour of his self” (110).

Lorraine York views these elements of fantasy and illusion as being important to Del’s development. She states that this “escape into an otherworld of fantasy, wherein the strictures of Jubilee lose their potency, has a correspondingly liberating effect on Del’s private world; she falls in love for the first time” (“Lives of Joan and Del” 4). York also believes that the opposition between reality and fantasy is a common characteristic of the modern *Bildungsroman* (“Lives of Joan and Del” 4).

The eventual drowning of Miss Ferris, the co-producer of the operetta, provides more material for Del’s romantic fantasies and for her imagination to take shape. York cites the scene in which Del arranges a sort of “mental photograph album” (5), containing

pictures of Miss Ferris. In her mind's eye, Del sees the romantic figure of Miss Ferris in her velvet skating costume, alongside the image of "Miss Ferris floating face down, unprotesting, in the Wawanash River" (118). According to York, "Del does recognize that the last picture must irremediably alter the others; that fantasy cannot avoid being stained by the pain and dirt of reality" ("Lives of Joan and Del" 5). This realization is significant for Del; as a developing artist, she must eventually learn to achieve a balance between the real and the fantastic.

Del confronts the issue of sexuality and the roles of women in society in the novel's title chapter. Having recently entered high school, Del and Naomi are fascinated with sex. A change in their perception of sex has occurred from a year ago; this is apparent when Del says: "we had liked to imagine ourselves victims of passion; now we were established as onlookers, or at most cold and gleeful experimenters" (123). This transition from an imagined active role in sex to a more passive form of participation is significant. As the chapter progresses and moves into Chapter Seven, Del regards sex as something that is done to a woman, rather than as an act in which both male and female participate equally. Her description of herself and Naomi as onlookers indicates that Del is most comfortable in the role of observer.

From the vantage point of an observer, Del is able to witness things as they appear, absorbing all the details. In the scene where she watches Mr. Chamberlain masturbate, she notices everything. She even notes the expression on his face, which she describes as "blind and wobbling like a mask on a stick" (141). The theatrical motif is evident not only in her description of his face as a mask, but also in the way she perceives the sounds he is

making, as “involuntary, last-ditch human noises” (141), which were “at the same time theatrical, unlikely” (141). Likening the entire act to an Indian dance, Del regards it as a performance. The elements of ritual in this dance, including the predictable movements and use of masks, might imply that this is a familiar act for Mr. Chamberlain.

The fact that Del’s imagination transforms this sexual act into a theatrical performance is evidence of her artistic capabilities. Rather than thinking about whether this act is right or wrong, she views it in such a manner that it becomes distanced from her. By assuming the role of observer, Del is able to articulate what is actually happening, without being influenced by moral considerations.

The only suggestion that Del is affected by this experience with Mr. Chamberlain is buried within her feelings for the surrounding landscape. Prior to Mr. Chamberlain’s performance, Del thinks about the emotions she is able to derive from nature and from inanimate objects. She is aware of these feelings, claiming that, “for a year or two I had been looking at trees, fields, landscape with a secret, strong exaltation. In some moods, some days, I could feel for a clump of grass, a rail fence, a stone pile, such pure unbounded emotion as I used to hope for, and have inklings of, in connection with God” (140). She notes that this emotion can only be achieved when she is alone.

After she witnesses Mr. Chamberlain’s act, her feelings for the landscape are altered. As they are about to leave their secluded spot, Del states that the “landscape was postcoital, distant, and meaningless” (142). The change in feeling seems to indicate that this has been a negative experience for Del. It is interesting to note that, rather than simply voicing her displeasure with what she has seen, Del chooses to express these

negative feelings through her perception of nature and the physical surroundings.

The isolation that Del requires in order to experience emotions toward such objects as trees and fences is also necessary for her to write poetry. In fact, she does not want anyone else even thinking about potential topics for her poems. When she and Naomi pause to watch Pork Childs' peacocks beneath the oak trees, Del thinks that she might like to write a poem about them. When she realizes that Naomi has also been thinking about the peacocks, she is disturbed, because "to have her thinking about it too was almost like trespassing; I never let her or anyone in that part of my mind" (134). Del appears to feel that she needs to own an experience, so that it truly belongs to her, in order to make it into a poem. By describing the peacocks with her own words, Del is able to provide her version of a shared experience. Del seems afraid that, by acknowledging Naomi's thoughts about the peacocks, she will be unable to write about them in a way that is true to her observations.

Although Del's love for reading is still strong, her selection of reading material changes by the end of Chapter Six. Discarding her old romantic and historical favourites such as Kristin Lavransdatter, she now reads what she describes as "modern books" (146). Works by Somerset Maugham and Nancy Mitford now comprise her reading material. She prefers to read about "rich and titled people who despised the very sort of people who in Jubilee were at the top of society--druggists, dentists, storekeepers" (146). Her hunger for glamour and big city life is hardly surprising. Throughout her childhood, she has never felt as though she belongs in Jubilee. She has not yet reached the point when she will recognize that real life actually does provide suitable material for fiction.

Chapter Six ends with the much-quoted scene in which Del's mother provides her viewpoint on the changing future for the "lives of girls and women" (146). She encourages Del to put her intelligence to use, and to find other means of defining herself than simply by connections with men. Although Del resists her mother's advice, she has similar ideas about women's roles. She resents people who give this type of advice, because they:

assumed being female made you damageable, that a certain amount of carefulness and solemn fuss and self-protection were called for, whereas men were supposed to be able to go out and take on all kinds of experiences and shuck off what they didn't want and come back proud. Without even thinking about it, I had decided to do the same (147).

Del's rejection of the traditional roles of women and her need to experience life to its fullest heighten her awareness that she is a rebel. This sense of being on the periphery makes the world of fiction seem all the more attractive. In order to see her own world as textual material, Del must remain an outsider.

The feeling that she does not belong in Jubilee is even more poignant for Del in the seventh chapter, "Baptizing." Now into her third year of high school, Del realizes that she has little in common with her friend Naomi, who has recently become employed in the office of the local creamery. Naomi's sudden interest in her physical appearance is intimidating to Del. She claims that "well-groomed girls frightened me to death. I didn't like to even go near them, for fear I would be smelly" (149). Feeling as if they are worlds

apart, Del begins to distance herself from her childhood friend.

Del's awareness of being different from other girls her age is also evident in her response to a magazine article written by a Freudian psychiatrist. The author's comment that a boy looking at a full moon will think about the universe and "its immensity and mystery" (150), while a girl looking at the same moon will think about washing her hair, makes Del extremely angry. She knows that she will never think like the girl in the article; she says that "the full moon would never as long as I lived remind me to wash my hair" (150). At the same time, however, Del acknowledges that she also wants to be the type of woman with whom men fall in love (150). This ambiguity regarding the roles of girls and women never seems to be resolved. Del's ultimate decision to write is not born of a firm choice to live life one way or the other; she realizes that to argue against fate would be pointless. She is a writer.

The main focus of Chapter Seven is Del's relationship with Garnet French. After their brief encounter at a revival meeting, Del senses that she is sexually attracted to him. From the start, however, the relationship revolves around the issue of power. Del faithfully attends weekly meetings of the Baptist Young People's Society because Garnet expects her to be present. Realizing that they have little in common, Del claims that she "successfully hid from him what I was like. More likely, he rearranged me, took just what he needed, to suit himself" (183). There is a lack of honesty in the relationship, as Del once again feels compelled to hide her true self and to deny her intellect.

Del recognizes Garnet's need to dominate her in the scene where they are swimming in the river. Garnet mentions the idea of getting married, but demands that first



Del must join his church and be baptized. When she rejects this idea, he pushes her under the water and holds her down. In the midst of this action, Del feels amazed, not because of the struggle with Garnet, but “that anybody could have made such a mistake, to think he had real power over me” (197). This amazement is a result of her belief that the powers which Garnet had over her were actually granted to him by her (197). This assertion of power is vital to Del’s development as both woman and artist. Her freedom from Garnet’s domination has not come without sacrifice and pain. Although she knows that she cannot be subordinate to Garnet or any man, she still feels pain at the loss of her lover.

These two conflicting emotions--pain and power--represent Del’s multiplicity of selves. Looking at herself in the mirror, she is able to observe herself; however, the image which she sees is unclear, for she says that “I was amazed to think that the person suffering was me, for it was not me at all” (200). According to Blodgett’s analysis of this final scene, Del has achieved a false sense of freedom. He states that “we would be deceived . . . if we were to believe that now, like Stephen Dedalus, Del is free. Her choice is not to be free, but to reckon with the ambiguity she cannot escape” (Blodgett 57). The difficulty in balancing the two selves--the pain of loss and the exhilaration of being free--is something with which Del must come to terms. As she decides to leave Jubilee and embark upon “real life” (201), she is attempting to escape that part of herself which Jubilee and Garnet represent. Del’s challenge is to reconcile these conflicting aspects of her identity.

The final section of the novel, “Epilogue: The Photographer,” seems to have been

added in order to satisfy some of Munro's own artistic concerns. In terms of chronology, the action described in the epilogue actually takes place prior to Del's decision to leave Jubilee. It is during her last summer in Jubilee that Del has the opportunity to meet Bobby Sherriff, after whose family she has modelled her novel. Realizing that she needs to write a novel, she picks a local family, the Sherriffs, about whom to write. The family holds great potential as fictional material; Marion Sherriff committed suicide by drowning in the Wawanash River and her brother, Bobby, is a patient in a mental asylum. Del selects this particular family because "what had happened to them isolated them, splendidly, doomed them to fiction" (203).

The novel centres on Caroline Halloway, an altered version of Marion Sherriff, and her numerous sexual encounters with men. One of these men is the Photographer, a strange figure who appears in town one day to take photographs at the local high school. Described as having "black hair parted in the middle, combed back in two wings, dandruff, rather narrow chest and shoulders, and a pasty, flaky skin" (205), the Photographer seems at once both ridiculous and evil. What the townspeople find most frightening about him is the fact that people's appearances are drastically changed in his photographs.

According to Lorraine York, these photographs do not distort life, but rather they "reveal what is present--whether in the past or in the future--or what is potentially true" (The Other Side of Dailiness 38). Both fantasy and reality exist in these photographs, and it is Del's task to realize that the same may be true of fiction.

Bobby Sherriff's ballerina-like act of rising up on his toes in the final chapter indicates an offering of some kind, as does Del's implied acceptance of his act with the

word “yes” (211). Her meeting with Bobby changes her perception of him as a madman, but his final act of rising up on his toes still presents her with the element of mystery that she needs for her novel. The realization that “people’s lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable—deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum” (210) is essential for Del to finally be able to write. The old novel will be discarded, and “her new novel will not be as much a repudiation of the vision in her Gothic novel, as an inclusion of the beauties as well as the grotesqueries of reality” (York 39).

Achieving this balance between fantasy and reality will eventually enable Del to write the novel which we have just been reading. Instead of rejecting her experiences in Jubilee, she will one day want to write everything down: “every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together—radiant, everlasting” (210).

Not only does the novel, Lives of Girls and Women, trace the growth of a young girl into adulthood, but it also chronicles the coming-of-age of an artist. It is easy to identify with Del as the girl-next-door growing up; however, Munro has added another layer to her heroine’s experience, thereby setting her apart from the average young girl. As a budding writer, Del displays an above-average imaginative capacity. Her finely-tuned powers of observation, love of language, and keen attention to detail are qualities which Munro considers essential for a writer.

Del’s struggle for freedom in her relationship with Garnet French symbolizes her quest for authority over her own story. In the epilogue, she finally realizes that her melodramatic novel about the Sherriffs must be abandoned, and a new story must take its

place; one day, she will recognize that her own experience in Jubilee will provide her with the material for fiction, as well as the authority to write the story.

During the course of the novel, Del frequently deals with the tension between fiction and reality. Her early interest in tragic historical events and her fascination with the fantastic are juxtaposed against the stark reality of life on the periphery of Jubilee. Her ultimate realization that madness and reality exist in each other provides her with the will and desire to begin seriously writing.

It is clear that Munro is attempting, by means of the epilogue, to reconcile several of her own concerns about writing. One senses that she desperately needed to write this final chapter, as the story could stand on its own without this chapter's inclusion. Published at an early stage of her career, Lives of Girls and Women represents an attempt, on Munro's part, to define her own fictional aesthetic. She does not actually state the components of this theory of writing; instead, she subtly positions Del in ways that do this for her. By examining such matters as power, texture, language, fictional material, and the tension between reality and fantasy, Munro provides us with the backbone of her fictional aesthetic. The importance of the character of Del Jordan is aptly summed up by Judith Kegan Gardiner: "The hero is her author's daughter" (349).

## CHAPTER THREE

### “A Proper Story”

In 1961, Munro rented a space to be used as an office; ironically her attempt at finding a room of her own proved to be one of the most unproductive periods of her writing career (Blodgett 4). Similarly, the narrator in Munro’s story “The Office” attempts to locate a space in which to write. By her own admission, “The Office” is one of Munro’s most autobiographical stories (Carrington 141), and it is therefore difficult to ignore the parallels between the unnamed narrator and the author herself.

Published in her first collection, Dance of the Happy Shades, “The Office” represents an early attempt by Munro to reconcile her own ambivalence about art. As a young wife and mother, she found it difficult to balance the demands of her home life with her need to become a serious writer. In an interview with John Metcalf, Munro discusses the difficulty of fulfilling the roles of wife, mother, and writer. She believes it is:

hard to be a married woman and a writer because . . . in traditional marriage, as it’s been up to now, as it is with most women in my generation. . . a woman abdicates. . . she is no longer a completely unbiased observer. There may be truths that she sees that she would prefer not to see; that she can’t see if she wants to maintain her situation and a writer, of course, has to be free of shackles of this

sort (Metcalf 59).

Munro's experience with these seemingly incompatible roles clearly provided her with material for "The Office."

The unnamed narrator in "The Office" finds herself in a situation similar to the one Munro describes as having experienced herself. The narrator's difficulty in identifying herself as a writer is associated with her situation at home. She cites the difference between a man bringing his work home and a woman spending time alone, working on something other than household chores or child care. A man "brings his work into the house, a place is cleared for it; the house rearranges itself as best it can around him. Everybody recognizes that his work exists" (60). While he is busy working, he is isolated from the demands of the household; as the narrator states: "He can shut his door" (60). In contrast, the house does not rearrange itself for a woman because "she is the house; there is no separation possible" (60). The narrator realizes that, unlike her husband, she cannot simply shut her door. She says: "a woman who sits staring into space, into a country that is not her husband's or her children's is likewise known to be an offence against nature" (60).

As a result of the difficulties that married women and mothers face in trying to pursue vocations unrelated to their family lives, women such as Munro and the narrator in "The Office" attempt to shield themselves from ridicule by hiding their talents. As a young girl growing up in a small town, Munro found it necessary to keep her ambition of becoming a writer secret. She states: "By the time I realized what I wanted to do, it was evident to me that this was not what the people around me thought of as a justifiable

ambition. So I began to conceal part of myself" (Macfarlane 52).

Similarly, the narrator in "The Office" feels uncertain about defining herself as a writer. She claims that this disclosure is difficult for her (59). By whatever means she chooses to state her vocation, "the words create their space of silence, the delicate moment of exposure" (59). The response to her disclosure is usually: "how wonderful, and good for you, and well, that is intriguing" (59). Because of her own ambivalence about declaring herself a writer, she views her desire for an office as a "finicky requirement, a piece of rare self-indulgence" (60), rather than as a necessity.

The narrator's and Munro's hesitance to define themselves as writers stems from more than their situations as wives and mothers. It is also possible that, at such early stages of both of their writing careers, they are unsure of their abilities. As is the case with most young writers, both the narrator and Munro are involved in a certain amount of experimentation, not only with subject matter, but also with techniques. Their insecurities about their talents are magnified by the fact that few people take them seriously as writers. Munro's writing of "The Office" indicates a need to say something about art and to define herself as a woman writer. The story's less-than-subtle message about difficulties faced by women writers is a product of a troubled, confessional mode of writing.

Critics such as W.R. Martin find "The Office" to be unsatisfying and "less shaped by the imagination" (54) than subsequent stories. Martin's claim that this story is less imaginative than later ones is accurate; however, that does not diminish the importance of "The Office" to the development of Munro's craft. Munro's need to write this story is clearly linked to her need to reconcile the multiplicity of her roles as wife, mother, and

writer and to articulate how frequently women's space is invaded.

In addition to voicing uniquely female concerns about pursuing a writing career, Munro also uses her speaker to identify several artistic matters connected with writing fiction. These more practical concerns are overshadowed by the narrator's failure to identify herself, with confidence, as a writer; however, their presence suggests that Munro was experimenting with various ideas and methods at this early stage in her career. The inaccuracy of memory is one such artistic concern articulated by the narrator of "The Office." Her description of the landlord, Mr. Malley, is questioned when the narrator notes that it is impossible to determine how many of the details are remembered from their first encounter and how many are decided upon later (62). In another instance on the same page, the narrator remarks that certain characteristics of Mr. Malley's portrait are probably the result of hindsight (62).

This ambivalence toward retrospection is evident in much of Munro's writing; however, many of her stories are written about recollected people and events. Munro claims to "remember all experience. . .very vividly" (Murch 70), but that does not mean that details about remembered people, places, and incidents are necessarily accurate. The factual accuracy of the event is insignificant, as Munro is more interested in reconstructing the emotional quality of an experience. Rather than simply reporting the facts as she observes them, the narrator in "The Office" brings her own perceptions about people and things to her descriptions. This type of description is similar to what happens when two people attempt to describe the same photograph; inevitably, the descriptions will differ.

In her study of the use of photography in Munro's works, Lorraine York discusses



the author's "photographic vision" (The Other Side of Dailiness 22). This vision includes a celebration of detail as well as conflicts between past and present (York, The Other Side 22). York views Munro's creative process as beginning on the level of documentary with "the desire to capture and fix reality" (The Other Side 26) and ending on an imaginative level (The Other Side 26). Stated more succinctly, York says that, "In Munro's world. . . a surface is not merely a surface; it is a reflection of a deeper mystery, either in the perceived world or, more often, within the perceiver" (The Other Side 27).

Munro's frequent use of the technique of flashbacks alludes to this notion of layers of reality. While the narrator of "The Office" may be inventing certain characteristics of Mr. Malley and his portrait, she is not being untruthful. To say that she is depicting something remembered in a flawed manner is inadequate; she is actually going beneath the surface and creating another level of reality and, in so doing, is exercising her authority to tell the story as she deems appropriate.

Authority is a major concern for Munro's narrator in "The Office." Throughout the story, she is engaged in two battles for authority: against Mr. Malley and his attempts to control her; and within herself, for the ability to claim authority over her own story. From the outset of the story, the narrator has difficulty asserting authorial control. She lacks confidence in her abilities as a writer, and therefore produces little of merit during her stay in the office. Similarly, she is unable to put an end to Mr. Malley's constant interruptions and efforts to impose himself on her story. He even goes so far as to suggest possible topics, should she run out of material for stories (66).

The narrator's inability to take control of her life and her writing is particularly

evident in the final office scene, when Malley accuses her of defacing the washroom. In her book, Mothers and Other Clowns: The Stories of Alice Munro, Magdalene Redekop finds this scene significant. She states that “the author of the writing on the wall is never identified and this throws the notion of authority into question” (49).

E.D. Blodgett also discusses the importance of Mr. Malley, viewing this character as a kind of “secondary focalizer” (28). Malley forces the narrator to “revise not only what she thought an office would be, but also who she thinks she is” (28). Because of the narrator’s lack of confidence in her identity as a writer, Blodgett finds that “her scrubbing with words is just as vain as Mr. Malley’s scrubbing with soap and water” (29).

By the end of the story, it is clear that renting an office has failed to solve the narrator’s artistic problems. In fact, her lack of confidence as a writer is probably worsened by the whole experience. In the final paragraph, she mentions that she has not managed to locate another office; it is also possible that she has not yet started to write again. The image of Mr. Malley scrubbing the bathroom walls, “arranging in his mind the bizarre but somehow never quite satisfactory narrative of yet another betrayal of trust” (74) has particular resonance for the narrator, as she does not trust herself to sit down and begin to write again. This may be due to her unwillingness to acknowledge that it is impossible to occupy a bubble and to detach oneself completely from the rest of the world.

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Munro’s own ambivalence over whether or not to continue writing reaches a climax with “The Ottawa Valley,” the last story in the collection Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You. This story 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, “The Real Material: An Interview with Alice Munro” 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, “The Real Material” 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 (“The Ottawa Valley” 227).

The plot centres 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 illumine, to celebrate, to get rid of her” (246).

Munro’s use of personal experience in her stories continues with “The Ottawa Valley.” By her own admission, “The Ottawa Valley” is the most autobiographical of Munro’s stories (Hancock 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 104). Magdalene Redekop even goes so far as to say that the story “could be said to be about referentiality” (106), for there is no doubt that the “T” in “The Ottawa Valley” is Alice Munro (106). The whole object of the narrator’s journey, according to Blodgett, is to come to terms with the mother in the story and with Munro’s real-life mother (72). 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.

The narrator’s attempt to reconcile her feelings about her mother is presented through what Blodgett refers to as a series of snapshots (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 (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" (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 considers the narrator's inability to tell the proper story to be an abandonment of method for the sake of truth (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'" (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" (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 sees this story as a "courageous confrontation with failure" (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 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 104). The distance which Munro requires to write a “proper story” about her mother is impossible to achieve.

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 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 91)

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Similar creative issues are explored by Munro in her short story, “Dulse” (The Moons of Jupiter). Not only does Munro’s angst regarding the fallibility of the artist resurface in “Dulse,” but other artistic concerns arise: power and narrative authority, the writer’s role as observer, and the pursuit of art as vocation.

Through a third-person form of narration, we learn that the protagonist in “Dulse”—Lydia—is a middle-aged editor and poet, seeking refuge following a separation from her live-in lover. She has chosen an island off the coast of New Brunswick for her escape.

She later learns that American author, Willa Cather, spent her summers on the same island. Immediately we realize that the breakdown of her love relationship has left Lydia scarred. Her lack of self-confidence is apparent from the beginning of the story. We are told that she is an editor for a publisher in Toronto; the fact that she is a poet is offered almost as an afterthought (36). Her identity as a poet is something which she usually conceals.

This need to deny the artistic side of her personality is common among Munro's female protagonists. Like Del Jordan in Lives of Girls and Women, Lydia prefers to keep her writing secret. Reasons for this are never clearly expressed; however, it seems likely that Lydia fears disapproval by her peers. Her self-esteem is terribly low and she is acutely conscious of other people's perceptions of her. For instance, she is aware of a group of workmen listening to her conversation with Mr. Stanley and admits to herself that their presence may be an explanation for her lack of participation in the discussion about Willa Cather (39).

Lydia's self-consciousness extends to concern over her attractiveness. She is convinced that "people were no longer so interested in getting to know her" (36). The belief that she is less desirable has an almost paralyzing effect on her. Everything she does requires an immense amount of effort: "She set little blocks on top of one another and she had a day" (36).

At this particular point in time, Lydia feels that she will not write any more poems (37). The finality of this statement is lessened, however, by her admission that she has had the same belief, on numerous occasions, that she will cease to write poetry (37). Why she



has had this thought before is not explained; it is possible that her response to crises in her life is to declare that she will never write again. To be able to write, she, like most artists, must be able to step outside herself and observe and analyze her life. The pain which accompanies such self-examination may cause her to feel that writing simply makes her feel worse.

Ironically, Lydia does precisely what she finds most difficult during hurtful times: she transforms herself into an observer, watching herself from outside. In the midst of her island retreat, Lydia's story returns to the last time she had tried to contact her former lover. In describing her state of mind following the dissolution of her relationship with Duncan, she seems to have stepped out of her body. She watches herself getting on and off the subway, purchasing groceries, and performing various other routine tasks. These tasks seem strangely difficult (41) to her, and she is aware that she is behaving in a rather detached fashion.

Looking at an image of herself, Lydia sees that she is "something like an egg carton, hollowed out in back" (41). By thinking in such a metaphorical fashion, she achieves the distance necessary to tell her story. Carrington believes that Munro's characters gain some degree of control by shifting from the role of participant to the role of observer or watcher (31). This claim is reasonable in light of Munro's own belief in the importance of the role of writer as observer (Hancock 97).

This transformation from participant to observer is common among Munro's female writers, such as Del Jordan and the unnamed narrator of "The Ottawa Valley." Carrington takes this idea one step further by stating:

Even if Munro's protagonists do not write or create art in any way, from the very beginning of her work they nevertheless adopt the psychological position of the writer, splitting into two selves, the observer and the participant (31).

One method of achieving such a split is to tell a story from a retrospective point of view. The distance created by time allows the character to observe the past events of her life from a different perspective. Carrington points out the use of this technique in "Dulse." By referring to the recent past through a series of flashbacks, Lydia is able to step back and analyse her relationship with Duncan (Carrington 146).

For Lydia, the most significant aspect of the relationship is the transfer of power which she believes took place. Clearly, it was Duncan who controlled the relationship: Lydia felt powerless, like a "dancer on her toes, trembling delicately all over, afraid of letting him down on the next turn" (54). When she moved into his apartment, no space was made for Lydia; instead, "she learned pathways around the apartment and found places where she could sit" (54). In order to make him love her, she felt that she had to change all those aspects of her personality which he did not like, things which he listed precisely (53).

During conversations with a psychiatrist, Lydia attempts to sort out this tug-of-war for power. She believes that "she made him a present of such power, then complained relentlessly to herself and finally to him, that he had got it. She was out to defeat him" (55). This statement is reminiscent of the baptizing scene in Lives of Girls and Women, when Del claims that it was she who granted Garnet his power (197).

This giving of power by women to men appears in several stories (Carrington 12). Munro prefers to limit her characters' power, says Carrington, and "her female characters, like Del, hand over their powers to men, an act she repeatedly refers to as abdication" (12). It becomes necessary to ask: why do women such as Lydia and Del give up their power? Carrington cites an interview in which Munro states that the power of her artistic vision is the "direct result of her lack of power as a woman" (12). Perhaps Munro feels that, by writing, she regains the power she lost to men. Because Lydia and Del are both writers, it follows that their power is also recovered through their art. The ability to step back, analyse, and learn the truth about their relationships is perhaps a more valuable form of control.

The validity of authorial power comes into question in "Dulse." During a conversation with Mr. Stanley, Lydia expresses her doubts regarding the perception that artists are all-knowing. She questions Willa Cather's ability to provide advice about marriage since she had spent her life in the company of another woman. In response to this cynicism, Mr. Stanley insists that "she knew things as an artist knows them. Not necessarily by experience" (57). Lydia counters this argument by wondering, "But what if they don't know them" (57)?

Lydia's doubts regarding an artist's ability to inherently know things is a concern which Munro consistently displays in interviews and in her stories. Munro insists that she does not possess any special knowledge, that "the author is no more privileged than anyone else" (Blodgett 113). Her ambivalence about writing to get at deeper truths has been well documented. In fact, she often lets the story almost write itself, "backing off

and waiting to see what this story is really about instead of telling myself I know what it's really about" (Hancock 78).

Her seeming abdication of control is somewhat deceiving because, as the author of characters and plots, Munro "obviously exerts controlling power herself, the power to envision her characters' predicaments and to manipulate language into art" (Carrington 12). This power is, however, not infallible. The control which she possesses through the medium of language is a device. In the epilogue of "The Ottawa Valley," the narrator refers to writing stories as "using what tricks I know" (246).

Munro's uncertainty regarding authorial power forms the nucleus of what Carrington deems her fictional aesthetic. Munro's "conviction that the author cannot really know or control anything completely" (Carrington 14) forms the basis of this theory of writing. While Munro's belief in the ambiguous nature of artistic knowledge and control is central to understanding her technique, it is insufficient to claim that this one statement comprises her fictional aesthetic. Carrington identifies Munro's seemingly surprise endings as evidence for this theory, claiming that her stories are about what we do not understand (14).

Understanding by the reader and characters is reserved for the end of the story, at which time the expectations of both parties undergo a reversal (Carrington 14). This reversal, Carrington persists, "is of course, not the result of confusion but the epitome of artistic control" (14). Carrington finds the purpose of this reversal in Munro's statement: "I know the ending when I start a story" (qtd. fr. Hancock 113). In Lives of Girls and Women, for instance, Del realizes in the "Epilogue" that what she needs to do in order to

write is to revisit her childhood and her own experiences and start from the beginning. This realization is the opposite of what she expected, as Del originally believed that she needed to leave her life in Jubilee behind. Real power is attained through the writer's ability to arrange events in time. Through the use of flashbacks, Munro's characters are able to watch the events of their lives, and in so doing, add another layer to their perceptions of reality. Munro's method of working backwards, beginning with the end of the story, allows her to piece together events and situations. The end result is not usually a resolution, but an insight into the situation.

A case in point is Lydia's dependence on men. Throughout the story, the reader is provided with examples of her reliance on her former lover to create a sense of identity for herself. When presented with an opportunity to sleep with Eugene, a member of a telephone crew staying at Lydia's rooming house, Lydia surprisingly declines. She believes that she has changed somehow, that she refuses such adventures (50). Yet, at the end of the story, she feels warmed by the gift of dulse from Vincent. This reversal at the end is somewhat surprising, as it seemed that, during the course of the story, she was attempting to lessen her emotional reliance on men. The effect of Vincent's present suggests that certain types of men will likely always have a hold on Lydia.

The ending is far from a resolution, yet it does signal a new understanding by Lydia. The fact that she is cognizant of her weakness for seemingly powerful men provides hope that she will handle subsequent relationships in a less destructive fashion. Fully aware of her need to be dominated, she is empowered by her new knowledge. Whether or not Lydia will resume writing poetry is also ambiguous. Based on her

admission of having decided to cease writing “innumerable times in her life” (37), it is likely that she will begin to write again. There is no evidence that this time is any different from the other ones. Lydia’s identity as a poet is basically left unexplored. Apart from casual mentions and the discussion with Mr. Stanley about artists’ knowledge, we are given little information about her poetry. The fact that she is a poet is significant, as it makes her tendency to think in a metaphorical way and to question certain aspects of her life and personality seem much more plausible. Her ability to view her life from the vantage point of observer rather than participant is also important to creativity in general.

Her rejection of the idea of writing poetry as a career is posed against the determination of American author Willa Cather to pursue her vocation. Although Cather’s presence in the story is somewhat limited, Robert Thacker views her as an actual character in “Dulse” (43). Thacker believes that Mr. Stanley and Cather frame the story, as the presence of Cather provides Lydia with another person’s life to ponder (46). Considering the life of this famous woman writer gives Lydia the opportunity to measure herself against someone. Cather’s presence suggests that Lydia’s solution to her problems may be to focus on her art for a change. Thacker comments on the relevance of the inclusion of Cather in “Dulse.” He finds her presence most appropriate because:

... of the unwavering persona she presented to the world throughout her life. For her, the preeminence of art, and of her own vocation as artist was, always, the uncompromised value (Thacker 48).

Cather represents the figure of the eccentric, unmarried woman writer who must reject the traditional lifestyle of marriage and family in order to pursue her art. Lydia, on the other

hand, has difficulty dealing with the image of herself as someone whom "people were no longer interested in getting to know" (36). She needs to feel attractive to and needed by men.

The difficulty of reconciling the need to write, unfettered by daily life, with the desire to fulfill the roles of wife and mother is familiar to Munro herself. In an interview with John Metcalf she admits to being frightened by the idea that many successful women writers lead atypical, sometimes eccentric lifestyles (59). In attempting to deal with the dilemma of wanting the security of a traditional lifestyle and also needing the freedom to be able to write, Munro states that she has developed disguises (Metcalf, "Conversation" 59). According to Thacker, Munro's "version of Willa Cather in 'Dulse' is essentially a meditation on the artist's need for both self-absorption and disguises" (49). A balance between the two seems to be the path that Munro has chosen for herself, yet one cannot help sensing her admiration of Cather's total dedication to her art, as depicted through the adoring eyes of Mr. Stanley.

From the beginning of her work to more recent stories, Munro has attempted to reconcile her own ambivalence toward writing through her female protagonists. The difficulty her character has in "The Office" with identifying herself as a writer is still seen in later stories such as "Dulse." Dissatisfaction with the inadequacies of fiction, which is explored heavily in "The Ottawa Valley," is also evident in more recent stories, albeit in a more subtle, artful fashion. The concern the narrator in "The Office" shows with regard to the difficulties associated with being a woman writer reappears in "Dulse" by virtue of the presence of Willa Cather. The use of personal memories and experiences is a

technique which Munro continues to employ, despite the fears expressed about such subjectivity in "The Ottawa Valley."

The three stories examined in this chapter are representative of the early and middle stages of Munro's career. Her self-consciousness about her abilities is evident in the artistic issues with which her characters deal in "The Office," "The Ottawa Valley," and "Dulse." The metafictional tendencies exhibited in these stories indicate an ongoing, constantly developing interest by Munro in matters of craft. Her habit of exploring these ideas through her writing, as opposed to articulating them in essays and interviews, provides her with the licence to experiment through the protective colouring of fiction.



## CHAPTER FOUR

Stella and Almeda:

### Eccentric Artists Come of Age

In Munro's more recent collections, The Progress of Love and Friend of My Youth, we are presented with women writers who are older than most of their counterparts in earlier stories. According to critics such as Beverly Rasporich, this tendency by Munro to use older women in her more recent work is not an accident. Rasporich believes that "the corpus of Munro's six collected works is constructed through the physical aging of herself and her heroines" (xvii). As a result of being middle-aged, these women face several different issues in connection with their writing and their lives in general.

Both Stella in "Lichen" and Almeda in "Meneseteung" represent the type of eccentric, solitary lifestyle of the woman writer that was glimpsed earlier through Willa Cather's presence in "Dulse." As suggested in the previous chapter, Munro's ambivalence about this lifestyle is apparent in an interview with John Metcalf when she says that it frightens her that many successful women writers have led atypical lives (59). The fact that she continues to not only include these unconventional women in her stories, but to make them the protagonists in these two cases, testifies to her curiosity and possibly her admiration of this type of woman writer.

Stella, the main character in "Lichen," is a middle-aged, slightly eccentric woman who lives alone in a converted cottage on Lake Huron. She is described, through the eyes of her former husband, as a "short, fat, white-haired woman, wearing jeans and a dirty T-shirt" (43). He labels her a troll. This is consistent with Linda Huf's belief that the image of the woman writer as a freak recurs in stories about such characters (12). Her apparent lack of concern about her appearance is viewed by David as a deliberate statement about men. He claims that Stella is the sort of woman who:

has to come bursting out of the female envelope at this age,  
flaunting fat or an indecent scrawniness, sprouting warts and  
facial hair, refusing to cover pasty veined legs, almost gleeful  
about it, as if this was what she'd wanted to do all along.

Man-haters, from the start (43).

In his egotism, David prefers to think of Stella's "deterioration" (43) as a stab at men such as himself, ignoring the possibility that she may simply be unconcerned with how she looks.

Catherine, David's current girlfriend, stands in stark contrast to the almost comical appearance of Stella. David views Catherine as a "tall, frail, bony woman with fair hair and sensitive skin" (44). What he apparently liked most about her when they first met was her relative youth; after eighteen months, however, David thinks that Catherine has aged since the beginning of their relationship.

Age is a central issue in "Lichen;" much is made of it by the main male figure in the story. The physical aspects of aging are introduced at the outset, with David's description

of his estranged wife. Upon glimpsing Stella for the first time, Catherine attempts to rationalize Stella's lack of concern with her appearance by stating that "she's an older woman" (43). One is forced to wonder why Stella has chosen to ignore her appearance. Is it that she simply cares little for beauty aids and fashion, or is it that she is attempting to defy society's expectations of women to grow old gracefully?

One answer to this question takes into account both possibilities. In the solitary life that Stella has created for herself, there seems to be no room for such superficial things as cosmetics and hair curlers. Her life is filled with projects and events to which she devotes her time. We are told that her home is scattered with the evidence of this busy life: plants to be potted, jam to be donated to bake sales, wine to be made.

Amidst the paraphernalia of these various hobbies sits Stella's typewriter. When David and Catherine spot the typewriter in the cluttered living room, Stella explains its presence by jokingly saying that she is writing her memoirs (47). Actually, she confesses, she is writing an article on an old lighthouse for the historical society and local newspaper. She ends her explanation of her writing with a sarcastic remark: "Quite the budding authoress" (47). And with that comment, all discussion about her writing ends and Stella continues her monologue about the various organizations to which she belongs.

Stella's mocking of her own writing is not uncommon among Munro's heroines. As early as "The Office" and Lives of Girls and Women, Munro's women writers devalued their work and had difficulty identifying themselves as writers. The way in which we learn that Stella is a writer makes this fact seem almost incidental. Stella makes light of her writing and places it in the same category as the rest of her hobbies. The reasons for her

writing almost being overlooked are unclear. It is possible that, like the heroine in "The Office," Stella is unsure of her ability to write and uses sarcasm as a defence mechanism against potential negative comments about her work. The fact that Stella writes is not integral to the story's plot development. One of the central issues in this story is the aging of women and men's responses to this process. The mere mention, however, of Stella's writing, makes it difficult for the reader to believe that it is meaningless to the story. Is it just coincidence that Munro has added the dimension of writer to her character's personality once again?

If we accept Rasporich's view of Munro's writing career as a progression through time, paralleling the author's own aging, the reason for Munro making Stella a writer becomes clearer. The character of Stella, a middle-aged woman, represents a change in the type of women who appear in Munro's earlier stories. For example, Stella's lack of concern with her physical appearance and with her solitary lifestyle signifies a less self-conscious, more independent woman than ever before in Munro's fiction. Where many of Munro's women's lives, such as Lydia in "Dulse," seem to revolve around finding and/or keeping a man and maintaining a loving relationship, Stella appears reasonably happy without a man in her life. Her life is described as "busy and sometimes chaotic" (46), filled with ongoing projects and a diverse group of friends. That is not to say that she is completely happy with her separation from David. There are moments in the story when Stella finds herself referring to Catherine with a "certain viciousness of tone" (56), which may be attributed to slight pangs of jealousy on Stella's part. Despite this bitterness, Stella has managed to create a full and apparently satisfying life for herself.

Of major concern in "Lichen" is the issue of power, and men's and women's power over each other in particular. According to Carrington, "Power is another word that Munro uses with great frequency. Power can be hidden under the deceptive daily surface of life, but only to erupt in the violence that powerful characters inflict upon others and themselves" (11). One type of power found by Carrington in Munro's work is the power of sexuality (11), which is something that David attempts to use against Stella. His distaste for her physical appearance contrasts with his hunger for younger, more sexually appealing women such as Catherine and, most recently, Dina.

David's need to feel powerful in his relationships with women is evident, and his type of power is wielded in the form of cruelty. His perverse desire to tell Stella about his latest young lover illustrates this facet of his personality. When David speaks of Dina, his new girlfriend, Stella detects a difference in his voice: "a deliberate, cruel sweetness" (56). Stella wonders "whom does he want to be cruel to--Stella, Catherine, the girl, himself?" (56). In addition, David's attempt to have Stella keep the Polaroid shot of Dina naked further demonstrates his need to be cruel to his ex-wife.

Carrington uses Stella's viewing of the photograph to illustrate the "shamefulness of watching" in this story (10). Although David forces her to look at the picture, Stella does not ask him to put it away (55); instead, she observes it critically, likening the spread legs to fallen columns and the pubic hair to moss or lichen or the "dark silky pelt of some unlucky rodent" (55). In looking at the photograph, Stella finds herself in the role of voyeur, a common role for many of Munro's characters, artists and non-artists alike.

Despite David's attempts to hurt Stella and overpower her with his cruelty, it is

actually Stella herself who possesses the power in this relationship. Although they are separated, Stella retains her power because David still feels the need to come back and see her occasionally, particularly when he is avoiding a decision which needs to be made about a love interest. Her knowledge of every aspect of his life is extremely unsettling to David. He feels that “he could never feel any lightness, and secret and victorious expansion, with a woman who knew so much. She was bloated with all she knew” (72). It is David’s fear of another woman knowing as much about him as Stella does that prevents him from maintaining lasting, meaningful relationships with women.

In addition to her powerful knowledge about her husband, Stella possesses an intuitiveness about people and their behaviour which may be likened to a writer’s keen observation skills where people are concerned. An example of Stella’s intuition is found in the scene which takes place following dinner. Stella is beginning to clear the dishes away and tidy the kitchen when Catherine tries to lend her assistance. Upon observing her state of physical clumsiness, Stella suggests that Catherine leave the pots and let Stella take care of them later. Stella asks herself why she does not say “Sit down, I can manage better by myself” (59). She realizes that she “doesn’t say it because she’s wary of something. Catherine’s state seems so brittle and delicate. Tripping her up could have consequences” (59). Her statement about the pots is based on more than her observations of Catherine’s apparent drunkenness; rather, it arises from an intuitive sense that handling the situation in any other manner would upset Catherine’s precarious mental state.

Similarly, Stella’s sense that David feels uncomfortable being seen by a young girl while embracing his older, less attractive wife at her father’s nursing home, illustrates her

ability to read people and understand their thoughts and behaviours. After the girl passes by the room with her beverage cart, Stella says to him: "Never mind, David. I could be your sister. You could be comforting your sister. Older sister" (72). Stella's perceptiveness seems instinctual, but perhaps may have sharpened as she has grown older.

In *Stella*, we are presented with a complex middle-aged woman who appears to have emerged from a failed marriage with strength and determination to make a decent life for herself. Her lack of concern for her physical appearance seems less a conscious decision to "come bursting out of the female envelope" (43), than a simple absence of vanity. As Munro's heroines grow older, they of necessity bring the issue of aging to the fore, an issue which receives little attention in earlier stories. In subsequent collections, we are presented with a diverse group of older female characters, some of whom lead atypical lives and others who live in a more traditional fashion. *Stella* in "Lichen" signifies a gradual shift in Munro's characterization, reflecting a certain amount of ambivalence about the aging woman.

Several technical changes are evident in Munro's second-most-recent collection, *Friend of My Youth*; yet familiar artistic concerns resurface in this volume. In particular, the story "Meneseteung" exhibits Munro's continuing concern with such artistic matters as the lifestyle of the woman writer, the role of writer as watcher, the need to capture the details of daily life, and the validity of fiction as a means of deriving truth. In later stories such as "Meneseteung," the protagonist's concern with artistic matters is handled in a more subtle fashion than ever before. Instead of the self-conscious epilogues added to many of the earlier stories such as "The Ottawa Valley" and *Lives*, matters of craft are

deftly woven into “Meneseteung.”

Two female artists are present in “Meneseteung.” The first-person narrator of the story recounts Almeda’s life and death from a modern vantage point. As the writer of the story, this narrator has the power to select which aspects of Almeda’s life will be included. The subject of the story, Almeda Joynt Roth, is a nineteenth-century poet with one published volume, Offerings, to her credit. The story appears, at the beginning, to be framed by historical facts and details. Dates, a photograph, and excerpts from the preface to Offerings create the impression of a factual, precise story based on meticulous research. Redekop notes that this illusion of historical accuracy makes the reader expect similar factuality throughout the story (216). By the end of the story, however, we realize that these facts have lulled us into a false sense of security, and we are forced to wonder if Almeda Joynt Roth existed at all.

The narrator paints a detailed picture of Almeda’s home and community, substantiated by clippings from the local newspaper, The Vidette. References to several of her published poems are intended to lend authenticity to the narrator’s version of Almeda’s life. The narrator attempts to gain insight into Almeda’s life and personality by analyzing these poems. Whether or not this analysis is an accurate method of learning about Almeda as a person is debatable. For example, the poem “Children at Their Games,” contains a reference to someone named Meda (52). The narrator speculates that Meda is a shortened form of Almeda, and therefore suggests that the poem is rooted in an actual experience had by the author. There is, however, no way to determine if this assumption is true.



Munro's concern with the figure of the eccentric woman writer resurfaces in "Meneseteung." Almeda is unmarried and lives alone in the house which her late father bequeathed to her. Her age is not stated explicitly; however, the reader is told that she is "not too old to have a couple of children" (58). It is likely that she is nearing middle age, as she is clearly past her prime marrying years.

Almeda's status as a spinster is defined in various ways. Although she is reported to be an adequate housekeeper, she has a "tendency toward fancy iced cakes and decorated tarts that is seen fairly often in old maids" (58). The question of why she never married has several possible answers, one of which is that her habits of reading and writing poetry were regarded as undesirable characteristics (59). The narrator comments that in Almeda's time books and poetry were viewed as being much more suitable interests for a middle-aged woman who needed something to fill her time, rather than something which a young girl should be pursuing.

Although the local newspaper, The Vidette, refers to her as "our poetess" (50), Almeda has difficulty in accepting writing poetry as an appropriate vocation. Her self-consciousness about her writing is evident in the following statement: "From my earliest years I have delighted in verse and I have occupied myself. . .with many floundering efforts at its composition" (51). She claims to have pursued writing poetry as a hobby, as her fingers proved too clumsy for crochet work and embroidery (51).

It is clear that Almeda's poetry is devalued by other members of her community. Her writing is viewed as something which she may "get over" (59) eventually. The narrator's research of references to Almeda in the town's newspaper, The Vidette, reveals

a “mixture of respect and contempt, both for her calling and for her sex—or for their predictable conjuncture” (50). Writing poetry was obviously an unorthodox way for a woman in this town to spend her life.

A photograph of Almeda, described by the narrator at the beginning of the story, provides a masculine picture of its subject. The narrator states that “from the waist up, she looks like a young nobleman of another century” (51). The narrator infers much about Almeda from this photograph. The rather plain hat worn by Almeda in the picture makes the author see “artistic intentions, or at least a shy and stubborn eccentricity” (51). One wonders if the narrator’s appraisal of the photograph is clouded by her knowledge of Almeda’s unconventional lifestyle or if it is possible to determine so much about a person by simply viewing a photograph.

Almeda’s marital status seems to be less a result of choice than of circumstance. She admits to herself that she does think of Jarvis Poulter as a potential husband (59), but she does not want to raise her hopes. According to the narrator, Almeda desires marriage, but when she thinks about sexual contact with Poulter, a “meek shiver raises the hair on her arms” and she experiences a feeling of submission (60). This is interesting, for Munro believes that the kind of submission necessary for a woman to have a successful marriage is harmful to that same woman as a writer (Metcalf 59).

The numerous references in the story to menstruation and images linked to menstruation suggest some sort of wasted potential, thereby highlighting Almeda’s situation as a spinster (Carrington 215). Because Almeda is unmarried, there is little chance that she will ever bear children; therefore, her menstrual flow represents her

wasted potential as a mother. During the scene in which she is making grape jelly, the swollen cheesecloth containing grape pulp is likened to Almeda's stomach, bloated due to the onset of menstruation (68). Despite her wasted potential as a mother, Almeda's poetry constitutes another form of creation which ensures that she will leave a legacy behind once she dies.

Spinster figures appear frequently in Munro's work. The number of times this type of character is used suggests some preoccupation with this non-traditional lifestyle. The difference between Almeda and other spinsters in Munro's stories, such as Willa Cather, is choice. Cather chose to remain unmarried; Almeda, on the other hand, seems to desire a husband. Almeda's wish for marriage is consistent with Munro's own belief that within herself exist two women: the wife/mother and the writer. While she outlines the difficulties for a woman writer in maintaining a traditional marriage, Munro acknowledges her own need to be both women (Metcalf 59).

Another matter central to the act of writing for Munro is the position of writer as observer. The watcher appears frequently in Munro's stories. In a similar fashion to Lydia in "Dulse"—who seems to step outside herself and observe everything she does—Almeda watches herself getting out of bed in response to a commotion outside and drawing back the bolt on the door (64).

The scene in which Almeda discovers the body of a drunken woman slumped against her fence also reveals the importance of the writer acting as an observer. Upon making her discovery, Almeda refrains from touching the body and instead runs to fetch Jarvis Poulter to help (65). Redekop finds this refusal by Almeda to touch the body

extremely important, claiming that:

if Almeda had brought herself to touch the woman, this whole story would not have existed. If she had stooped to acts as a 'keeper,' she would not have taken up the position of 'watcher' or writer (224).

Here Redekop suggests that, not only is it desirable for a writer to function as an observer, but it is necessary. It is likely that Munro would agree with this statement.

Observation is also important to Almeda in "Meneseteung." For example, she observes her surroundings in minute detail, taking in the "walls covered with dark-green garlanded wallpaper, lace curtains and mulberry velvet curtains on the windows" (69). She watches all of these things dutifully, "for every one of these patterns, decorations seems charged with life, ready to move and flow and alter" (69). Almeda needs to understand this alteration and "to be a part of it" (69). The fruit of these observations is poetry, for "Almeda in her observations cannot escape words" (69). Reminiscent of Uncle Craig's need to include everything in his history of Wawanash County (*Lives*), Almeda wants to create "one very great poem that will contain everything and. . .that will make all the other poems. . .inconsequential, mere trial and error, mere rags" (70).

In order to write this great poem, Almeda realizes that certain things will have to be included. There must be more than stars, flowers, birds, trees, and angels in the snow (70). In addition, "you have to get in the obscene racket of Pearl Street and the polished toe of Jarvis Poulter's boot and the plucked-chicken haunch with its blue-black flower" (70).

Almeda's recognition of the necessity of including both the beauty and brutality of life strikes a familiar chord with readers of Munro's work. In much the same way as Almeda reaches her conclusion, Del Jordan realizes—in the final chapter of Lives of Girls and Women—that her story must include “every last thing” (Lives 210).

The medium of poetry is Almeda's means for dealing with the many facets of real life. She believes that “all this can be borne only if it is channelled into a poem” (70). In choosing “The Meneseteung” as the title of this unwritten, great poem, Almeda provides a symbol for her writing and her life. The Meneseteung is a river, and Almeda states that the poem is the river. By nature, a river symbolizes life; it is constantly flowing, changing with the seasons. This river contains the tranquillity of a summer day, as well as the harshness of “grinding blocks of ice thrown up at the end of winter and its desolating spring floods” (70). In short, it contains everything.

Another artistic matter which is raised in “Meneseteung” is the question of the validity of fiction. Munro's concern with this question is evident from her earliest work, such as “The Office” and Lives of Girls and Women, through to her more recent work in “Meneseteung.” In “The Ottawa Valley” (Something), the narrator questions the authenticity of what she has written and doubts that she has created a “proper story” (246). Similarly, the narrator of “Meneseteung” concludes the story by suggesting that she “may have got it wrong” (73). The “it” to which the narrator refers is the truth of Almeda's life. The narrator states that she does not know if Almeda ever took laudanum or made grape jelly, or whether the other details were actually true.

This deliberate subversion of the story's authenticity is typical of Munro. In stories

such as "The Ottawa Valley," "Meneseteung," and Lives of Girls and Women, the factuality of details is questioned. Redekop deals with the question of whether or not Almeda actually existed. She believes that there must have been such a person; however, she has no real evidence to substantiate this feeling (216). What Munro is attempting to do is to differentiate between truth and reality. We need to ask: Does it matter if the details of the story are correct? If these details are inaccurate, does that make the story less true? Considering Munro's own comments about truth and reality which she has articulated in several interviews (Hancock, Metcalf), it is safe to say that the details of the story simply form the surface layer and that which lies beneath is far more important.

In "Meneseteung," Munro has touched upon several matters of craft and issues of concern to women writers. Almeda's self-consciousness about her writing and her difficulty in being accepted as a poet by the community and claiming that identity for herself are common among Munro's women. Munro's handling of these issues in "Meneseteung" is more clever and subtle than in stories such as "The Office," and the point of view from which the story is told results in a new sophistication in plot development. The structure of the story is complicated by references to Almeda's poetry, the "Vidette," and by the narrator's inferences about what Almeda's life must have been like. Much like "The Ottawa Valley," "Meneseteung" ends with the narrator questioning the truth of the story which she has pieced together from written sources. The concern with being unable to write the "proper story," exhibited by the narrator in "The Ottawa Valley," is absent in "Meneseteung." While the narrator of the latter story admits the possibility of having gotten it wrong (73), this admission seems more casual than the one



in "The Ottawa Valley." It is as if the narrator has accepted that she may have included inaccurate details of Almeda's life, but it does not matter to the truth of the story as a whole. In this sense the matter of truth versus reality and the validity of fiction is included in the story, but in an almost offhand manner.

The lifestyle of the woman writer is a personal concern of Munro's and it manages to work its way into several stories other than "Meneseteung," including "Dulse" and "The Office." The spinster figure as a main character begins to appear with greater frequency in Munro's more recently published stories, indicating a shift in Munro's own thinking about the lifestyles of women writers. Munro is concerned less about having time and space to write in more recent stories and instead seems to be interested by the devotion to their craft demonstrated by several of the spinsters in her stories. That both Stella in "Lichen" and Almeda in "Meneseteung" live alone is interesting, as each character has a different reason for her solitude. Unlike Almeda, Stella has had the experience of living with a man. Stella's solitary lifestyle, although prompted by the infidelity of her husband, is a conscious choice. Almeda, on the other hand, has never had the opportunity to marry, and one senses that she wishes she had. She has not chosen to live alone, but from her loneliness arises her poetry. It is ironic that marriage, the very thing she desires, would likely have rendered Almeda incapable of writing poetry. The involving, all-consuming nature of marriage would have removed Almeda from her position of detached observer, thus making it impossible for her to write. Almeda is so overwhelmed by the experience of witnessing the drunken woman slumped against her fence (65) that she feels physically ill and unable to deal with what she has seen until she

distances herself from it and puts it into a poem.

Two of the cornerstones of Munro's fictional aesthetic are revisited in "Meneseteung": the need for a writer to capture life in all its beauty and brutality; and the tension between truth and reality. By having the narrator research the life of Almeda Joynt Roth and then tell her story, Munro reminds the reader that fiction can only hope to provide one version of a life, a version which is no less true than other ones.

The role of watcher is bestowed upon both Stella and Almeda. As stated earlier, the act of watching or observing is practised frequently by Munro's characters, signifying the importance of this act to Munro herself. Whether they are watching themselves, as in the cases of Almeda in "Meneseteung" and Lydia in "Dulse," or simply by watching others, Munro's women absorb the details of their observations hungrily and often put them to use when writing. Munro's own need for details in her stories is well-documented and self-proclaimed.

It is clear that the stories "Lichen" and "Meneseteung" represent a gradual maturity and sophistication in Munro's work. Aside from her use of more mature heroines in these stories, Munro displays a subtlety in dealing with matters related to writing that has not been present in previous collections. For example, Munro's concern with the validity of fiction is still apparent in "Meneseteung," but is more complex than in earlier stories such as "The Ottawa Valley." The inclusion of references to the local newspaper by the narrator in "Meneseteung" adds a new dimension to the matter of the truth of the story. By referring to an actual source—the newspaper—the narrator's story about Almeda is perceived to gain authenticity, but in reality these newspaper clippings provide little



more than gossip and result in huge inferences by the narrator. In "Meneseteung" Munro provides us with several versions of one woman's life and lets the reader decide which one is true. There is never a value judgement made regarding the validity of the story; the narrator merely warns that the details may not be accurate. In "The Ottawa Valley," however, the narrator states outright that her version of her mother's life is flawed and is not to be believed.

Similarly, the self-consciousness toward writing shown by Munro's early women writers is less obvious in her more recent characters such as Stella and Almeda. Although Stella refers to her writing as one of her many hobbies, she is much more secure about her life than women such as the narrator in "The Office," and is free to pursue the things that make her happy. Almeda's self-deprecating tone in the preface to her volume of poetry suggests a need to placate the public rather than a desire to justify her vocation. The women in Munro's recent published stories do not seem to question their right to pursue their art as they did in earlier stories such as "The Office."

Artistic matters do surface in Munro's recent work, but as her characters have developed over time, so has Munro's own thinking about writing. Stories such as "Lichen" and "Meneseteung" represent a shift by Munro away from practical matters associated with writing toward a fascination with layers of reality and intricate narrative structures.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Layers of Life

With the publishing, in 1994, of her latest collection, Open Secrets, Alice Munro has taken her career in a new direction. Comprised of eight relatively lengthy short stories, Open Secrets reaffirms much of what is already known about Munro's fictional aesthetic, as familiar places, themes, and types of characters reappear; however, Munro also enters new territory with her complex, deftly-crafted, and often mysterious stories in Open Secrets. Although most of the stories are rooted in the small, fictional town of Carstairs, Ontario, Munro's characters venture as far afield as Albania, Australia, and possibly even outer space. Familiar themes resurface in this collection, such as love and aging, yet the reader senses that these seemingly simple themes are operating on a number of levels, with greater complexity than ever before. The overwhelmingly-enthusiastic critical reception to this new collection has solidified Munro's status as one of Canada's premiere short story writers.

In previous collections, Munro's tendency to second-guess the truth or reality of the story is seen frequently. The deliberate subversion of endings is common in these earlier stories such as "The Ottawa Valley" and "Meneseteung." Instead of merely questioning the veracity of the ending, Munro, in Open Secrets, offers alternative endings.

In “Carried Away,” the reader is presented with the story proper, then, just as the ending seems clear, a different ending is suggested. Did the librarian, Louisa, marry factory owner Arthur Doud and live happily following the tragic death of former soldier Jack Agnew? Or did Jack Agnew survive and meet with Louisa by chance at a bus depot many years later? Initially, this type of “choose your own adventure” ending is puzzling to the reader, who is forced to wonder which version of events is actually true. The second possible ending is presented in the form of an hallucination: “She had gone under a wave, which nobody else had noticed” (“Carried Away” 50).

Munro herself comments on this story and its two endings in an interview with Stephen Smith. She states that, while writing “Carried Away,” she had a parallel story developing in her mind. She then realized that “what really interested me was two strains of reality that could have developed” (Smith, “Layers of Life” 24). Referring to the point at which these two stories converge, Munro explains that she was “trying to find something that was in a way always the same, no matter what incidental forms life took” (Smith, “Layers of Life” 24). She does not mention what that “something” is, but one may surmise that Munro is referring to Louisa’s identity as the one constant in this complicated web of plots. Regardless of whether Jack Agnew lived or died, Louisa would have remained the same mysterious woman who moved to Carstairs to run the library.

This practice of layering her stories with multiple realities is quite common in Munro’s fiction, though not accomplished as deftly elsewhere as it is in *Open Secrets*. By her own admission, these new stories were more difficult to write (Smith, “Layers of Life” 24), as the layering of stories became more intricate. In keeping with her belief that the

emotional reality of a story is more important than the factuality of the incidents that comprise the plot, Munro makes the following succinct comment about what she is attempting to achieve through layering:

I want the story to have a lot of levels, so that the reader can draw back and perhaps instead of thinking about what happens in this story as far as the development of the plot goes, to think of something else about life (Smith, "Layers of Life" 24).

Similarly, in another story contained in Open Secrets, "The Albanian Virgin," Munro plays with the conflict between fiction and reality. The story opens in the mountains of Albania, where a Canadian woman has become separated from her travelling companions and taken in by a local tribe. Several pages later, we learn that what we have just read is a story being told by a woman named Charlotte from her hospital bed to a visiting acquaintance. The storyteller recounts the tale because she believes it would make a good movie script. In spite of Charlotte's insistence that the story is purely fictitious, the reader wonders if it is based on real experience. We are never told whether Charlotte is actually "Lottar," the heroine of the story.

Munro's penchant for details continues with the stories in Open Secrets. From the "white roses, lacy scallops, hearts and garlands and silver leaves," ("A Real Life" 70) which adorn Dorrie's wedding cake in "A Real Life" to the depiction of everyday life with a mountain tribe in "The Albanian Virgin," Munro's concern with capturing everything in her stories is very much in evidence in the newest collection. In his review of Open Secrets, George Woodcock finds that Munro "has the same meticulousness of detail, the

same vivid recollection of the minutiae of ordinariness” (2) as in prior collections. In addition to the typical precision of detail in Munro’s stories, A.S. Byatt finds something different in what Munro does with these details in Open Secrets. Byatt claims that “Munro’s later stories, more and more flamboyantly, contain chance violence, blood, drowning, woven into the even tapestry of richly-differentiated dinners, dresses, weathers, loves and losses” (D18).

Byatt’s statement is consistent with her belief in a progression in Munro’s work, culminating with significant technical change in Open Secrets. In contrast to Munro’s concern with vocation in her earlier stories, Byatt finds a more confident, mature Munro in later stories such as those which appear in Open Secrets. Byatt states that:

A young writer is preoccupied with her vocation: Why write at all? What am I looking at? An older one knows that writing is her business and is gripped by the nature of life itself, its shortness, the relations between what is caused and what happens by chance (D18).

Munro’s newly-evolved method for handling this matter of life itself, according to Byatt, involves a sophisticated manipulation of time and point of view, with numerous changes of each occurring within a single story (D18). For example, the plot in “Carried Away” progresses in a linear fashion until the last page, at which point it reverts to the time, many years past, when Louisa first took up residence in Carstairs and replaced the deceased librarian.

Critic George Woodcock also finds a changed Munro in Open Secrets. He notes

that “unlike her early stories which were so largely episodic, these tend to embrace the real or imagined content of a life” (Woodcock, “The Secrets of Her Success,” 2). Woodcock believes Munro’s depictions of older women in Open Secrets to be more plausible than in earlier stories (“The Secrets of Her Success,” 2). He attributes this achievement to Munro’s own aging and subsequent changes within herself. The effects of her own aging on her writing are not lost on Munro. In an interview with Stephen Smith, she discusses the changes found in her most recent work and acknowledges that “all this change has something to do with getting older. The older I get, the more I see things as having more than one explanation. I see the content of life as being many-layered” (24).

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This survey of stories spanning the length of Munro’s career reveals certain patterns with regard to theme, craft, and characterization, which form Munro’s fictional aesthetic. Particularly in the early stages of her career, Munro unveils these aspects of her craft through the use of several female writers or emerging female artists as protagonists. In such stories as “The Office,” Lives of Girls and Women, “The Ottawa Valley,” “Dulse,” and “Meneseteung,” we view the world through artists’ eyes.

According to W.R. Martin, “the material of the stories is the process of art itself” (188). This statement is especially true in the earlier stories, as many of the characters concern themselves with matters associated with writing. Developing artists, such as the narrator in “The Office” and Del Jordan in Lives of Girls and Women, are concerned with their vocation as writers, as well as with practical and theoretical issues linked to writing.

Similarly, Munro’s fictional aesthetic may be divided into two basic categories:

practical concerns and philosophical issues surrounding writing. It should be stressed that the concern of Munro's women writers with practical matters is most evident in the early stories. After The Moons of Jupiter, these self-conscious artists from the earlier work are replaced by mature women who are comfortable with their identities as writers. It follows that Munro herself progressed to a point in her career where she was no longer questioning her right to be a writer and the purpose and validity of writing fiction.

Several of Munro's early women writers seem preoccupied with practical matters associated with being a writer. For the narrator in "The Office" obtaining space and time in which to write was crucial. Her struggle to perform the roles of wife and mother while attempting to write parallels Munro's own difficulty in balancing her multiple lives as wife, mother, and artist.

Munro's ambivalence about the lifestyle of the woman writer is evident in stories which feature unmarried/spinster women, most of whom are approaching middle age. These stories include: "Meneseteung," "Lichen," and "Dulse." Although the main character in "Dulse"—Lydia—is not a spinster, her life as a young single woman is seen in comparison to the chosen solitude of noted American author Willa Cather, who is referred to at various points throughout the story.

The presence of Willa Cather in "Dulse" offers a glimpse into the life of a successful woman writer who chose to live outside the traditional boundaries of marriage and motherhood. Munro's fears, voiced in several interviews, that a woman cannot truly function at her full potential as a writer if she is encumbered by the realities of marriage and motherhood, are examined through the depiction of solitary, slightly eccentric women.

Generally speaking, Munro's spinster figures are not painted as pathetic, lonely women for whom the reader must feel pity; on the contrary, women such as Stella in "Lichen" and Willa Cather in "Dulse" are shown to be strong, independent, and relatively satisfied with their lives. It is worth noting that the stories containing 'old maids' appear in recent collections, thereby lending credence to the idea that as Munro ages so do her characters.

The foundation of the technical/philosophical component of Munro's fictional aesthetic is the question of finding meanings in life. Her attempts to understand the world and life itself manifest themselves in her writing. So, too, do her female writers and women characters in general wrestle with the immense question of the meaning of life through the telling of their stories. E.D. Blodgett identifies this central question for Munro as an artist: "How is the world to be understood, and is it possible, finally, to do so?" (6). It is Munro's hope that her readers will gain some insight about life as a result of being exposed to her work (Smith, "Layers of Life" 24).

Life, as depicted by Munro, is that which we experience every day and which seems on the surface too ordinary for fiction. Woodcock believes that Munro is taking the world of experience and discovering its inner light, so that, however mundane the situation, however tedious and sometimes repellent the characters, life stands before us" ("The Secrets of Her Success," 2).

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,” for instance, 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. Both of these ideas are essential to understanding her fictional aesthetic.

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 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 1). Blodgett prefers not to view Munro as a realist, because he finds her “photographic or documentary realism” (6) 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” (6). In contrast to this position, critics such as Beverly Rasporich and Michelle Gadpaille 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 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 C1). The world of her experience is food for the world created by her imagination.

Another technical/philosophical aspect of Munro's fictional aesthetic is her penchant for details. The clarity with which Munro sets the scene for her stories is startling. Detailed descriptions of such things as clothing, physical appearances of people, food, homes, and landscapes are found in every story. The importance which Munro attaches to surface details is evident in the final chapter of Lives of Girls and Women, when Del realizes that her stories must contain everything (210), for "people's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable--deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" (210).

Munro's ability to describe everyday life in vivid detail stems from careful observation. Similarly, many of Munro's characters assume the role of watcher in order to

tell their stories. In particular, those women who are identified as writers derive their material from their observations of the people, places, and events around them. Those women who are not explicitly identified as artists also attempt to gain insight into their lives by watching.

The detachment necessary for an author to write is also essential for individuals to examine their lives objectively. Carrington finds the “conscious adoption of this split attitude Munro has defined not only as the genesis of a writer but also as a mode of control” (31). It is the practice of viewing life from a distance which helps Munro, her characters, and her readers to sort out life’s mysteries.

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” (246). Similarly, the story told by Charlotte in “The Albanian Virgin” makes the narrator question whether it is ‘just’ a story, as Charlotte claims, or if it actually happened.

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), Munro explains

that the plot centres 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, 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.

In reviewing Munro’s latest collection, Selected Stories, A.S. Byatt outlines the development of Munro’s career through time. She finds that the chronological arrangement of the 28 previously published stories provides evidence of “progress from the earlier voice, wry, apparently detached, level and then suddenly shocking, to the magnificent daring of the later narrative shifts and leaps” (Byatt D18). The self-conscious young women and insecure writers of the earlier collections have given way to experienced, mature women in more recent stories.

The use of the female artist figure with such frequency in early stories indicates Munro’s concern with practical and technical matters of writing. The exploration of these issues was necessary for Munro to establish her own sense of identity as a writer. The women in recent collections use the tricks of the writer to tell their stories; these tricks

include the use of observation and the idea of detachment from reality being necessary to gain control over one's own story.. The increasing complexity of plot and voice is also indicative of Munro's development as a writer.

Munro's claim that she has "no idea how to write a story" (Munro, The Globe and Mail E.1) may itself be a fiction because a survey of her work does reveal an evolving fictional aesthetic. Conscious or not, her style is unmistakably her own.

One of the most memorable images in Munro's work occurs at the end of Lives of Girls and Women, when Bobby Sherriff, fork, napkin, and plate in his hands "rose on his toes like a dancer, like a plump ballerina" (211). Much like Bobby Sherriff's offering, Alice Munro makes the reader a simple, sometimes troubling, yet often beautiful offering: life.

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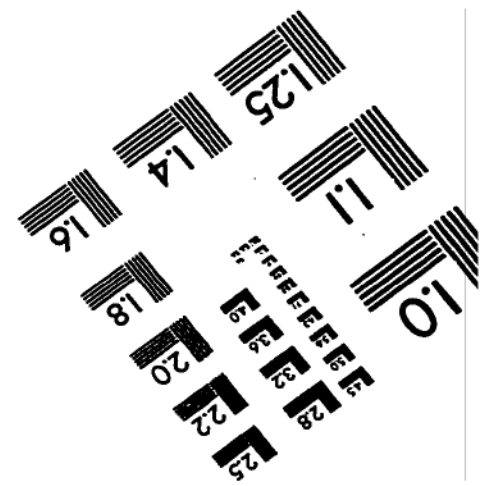
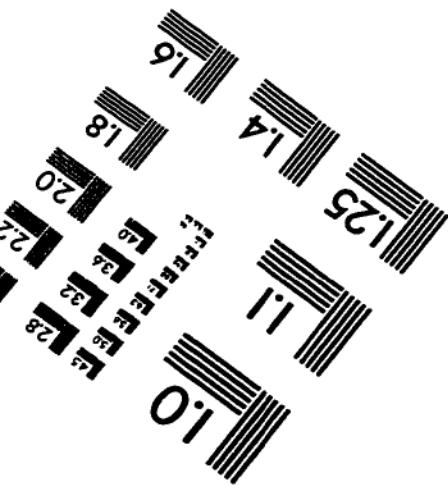
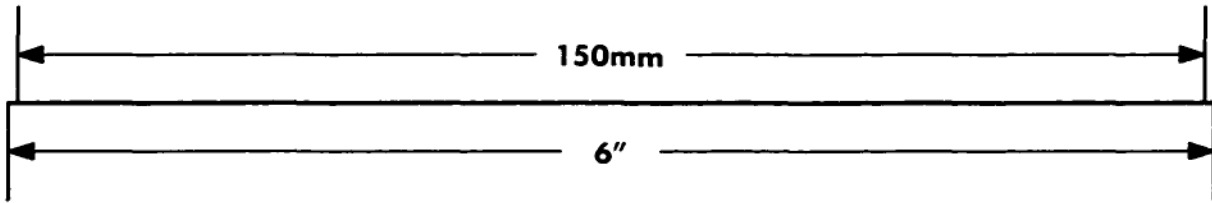
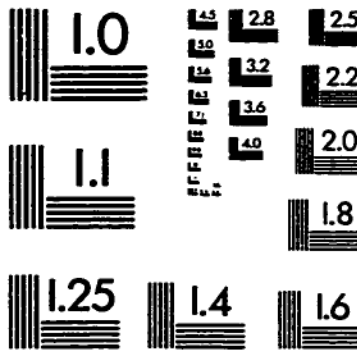
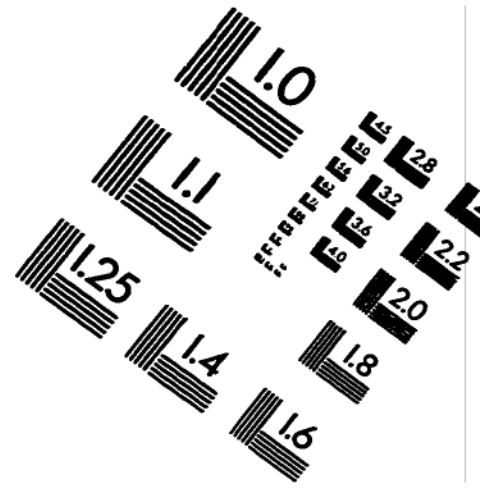
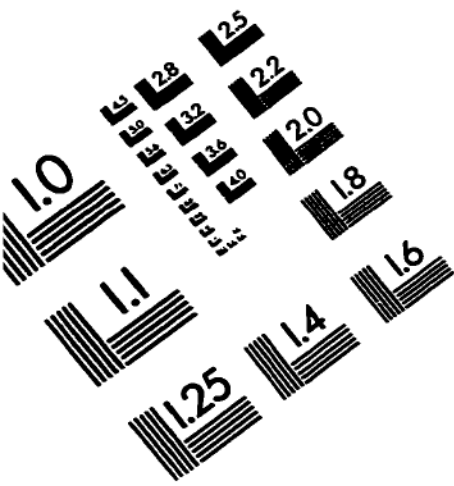
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