

Chapter - 2

Ontario's Small-town Shades

“People in small towns, much more than in cities, share a destiny”

- Richard Russo (*Happily at Home Winesburg East*)

The aim of the present chapter is to examine the depiction of the small town lives in Munro's selected short stories. The chapter will scrutinize the character and personality of the people who live in small town in connection with their surroundings. As a result, the chapter will also analyse the setting of short stories which is always a small town. Eventually, the chapter also intends to draw a sharp contrast between the world of technology and popular culture and the provincial culture and life style. William Butler Yeats in his book, *The Celtic Twilight: Faerie and Folklore* quotes:

In the little towns and villages there are no minorities; people are not numerous enough. You must see the world there, perforce. Every man is himself a class; every hour carries its new challenge. When you pass the inn at the end of the village you leave your favourite whimsy behind you; for you will meet no one who can share it. We listen to eloquent speaking, read books and write them, settle all the affairs of the universe. (23)

Yeats believes that, the small-town life is full of human relationships, love and care. Every single part of the small town creates memories which lasts forever in people's mind. The population is usually less and people live alongside natural world. As a result, they have their own distinctive identity and despite the small-town challenges they live on. The people living there have no caprices and they live to the fullest.

The present chapter analyses the short stories of Munro with the aid of transaction model. The chapter places a strong emphasis on the value of individual's experiences and viewpoints in navigating the complex web of readers interpretation of the text.

Canada is one country though it has two 'home cultures' viz., French and British. History discloses that Canada became susceptible to the overbearing American culture as it had captivated a large number of immigrants. As a result, the country has evolved as melting pot of multiple cultures. This has also affected the Canadian Literature which has shown a liveliness of its own. Canadian writing is enthused by a renaissance of attention in literature and culture. According to Ajay Das in "Characteristics of Canadian Literature", "Canadian Literature whether written in English or French replicates three main parts of Canadian involvement: Nature, Country life and Canada's position in the world" (41). Canadian authors often represent the effects of climate and geography on the lives of the people.

Country life is part of Canada's experience that gives the impression recurrently in its literature. In the article titled, "The portrayal of nature in the selected poems of Irving Layton's *A Red Carpet for the Sun*", where Yazhini quotes Bruce King's remarks, "Canadian literature goes from local humour through an early internationalism, historical romances, stories of provincial and settled life, realism and a new nationalism in the early 1940s" (743). Binding and connection are one common theme in Canadian Literature, which deals with human relationships with society and nature. It also depicts the network of human relationships and the social construction. Contemporary Canadian short story also portrays the provincial life in Canada in its fullest.

Munro's works help the readers in appreciating the Canadian Geography, especially, the small Canadian towns. She is able to connect the landscape of the habitat with the mindscape of the inhabitants. Undoubtedly, Munro's narratives are associated to definite geographical locations, because she is captivated by the environment and surroundings and her stories offer social maps of small-town life for example- rural Ontario. In the work *Contemporary Writers: Munro*, Holcombe discusses the writing style of Munro, "All is based

on the epiphanic moment, the sudden enlightenment, and the concise, subtle, revelatory detail” (26).

Reading Munro’s stories is to determine the pleasure of seeing two worlds at once: a regular everyday life and the ethereal map of another fictitious or secret world. Also, Oriana Palusci in the article *Plymouth Rocks and Christmas Turkeys: From Ecology to Metafiction in Two Short Stories by Munro* opines, “Although the Canadian landscape has always been crucial in our understanding of Munro’s fiction, her short stories have seldom been read with a focus on natural features” (11).

The setting of Munro’s short stories is usually provincial and countryside Canada. Munro gives more preference to the setting of her short stories which reconnoitres the life in the small town. In her short story collection *Too Much Happiness* she quotes, “Something had happened here. In your life there are few places, or maybe only one place, where something has happened. And then there are the other places, which are just other places” (162). She observes that, in every individual’s life there is connection between them and a place for some reasons.

One of the reasons to use the small towns as settings for Munro’s short stories is that she has a real time connection with these places. Nicholas Entrikin in his work, *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a Geography of Modernity*, contends for the supremacy of the place in the structure of the story plot, “Place presents itself to us as a condition of human experience. As agents in the world as we are always “in culture”. For this reason, our relations to place and culture became elements in the construction of our individual and collective identities” (21). Munro sets the short stories in the small town according to the connections she has with them: her birth place Wingham, Ontario; the place she was brought up, Huron County; the place where she lives in present, Clinton, Ontario, Canada.

From the short story collection, *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982 – *MOJ*), the short story “Turkey Season” is about an old woman’s childhood when she was fourteen years old, working as a turkey gutter at a turkey barn in a small town named Logan, Ontario. Turkey gutting is a common occupation that has been practiced in small towns, serving as a source of livelihood for the local residents. The narrator, a turkey gutter, is joined by three more gutters in their 30s and 40s: Lily, Marjorie, and Gladys, all working at the Turkey Barn. Herb Abbott, a supervisor at the turkey barn, assists the turkey gutters whenever they need help. Henry, an eighty-three-year-old, is a plucker who proudly refers to himself as “a devil for work” (*MOJ* 65). In small towns, even at an old age, people work hard to earn money for their individual lives, supporting each other as a family. Morgan Elliot and his son, the owners of the turkey barn, are responsible for killing the turkeys, which are then handed over to the workers for further processing in the turkey gutting.

In the short story, Munro depicts the importance of work and responsibility through characters who continue to work despite their age. The narrator works at the turkey barn for a few hours after her school during the Christmas season. After a few nights of working there, she finds herself envisioning only turkeys whenever she closes her eyes: “I saw them hanging upside down, plucked, stiffened, pale and cold” (*MOJ* 61). Within the turkey barn, Herb Abbott is the sole instructor on turkey gutting. His teaching style makes the narrator feel at ease with the work. He imparts his knowledge with intense care, and the narrator becomes very comfortable working alongside him. She credits Herb Abbott for her ability to learn turkey gutting, acknowledging that she would not have acquired the skill without his guidance. However, the narrator experiences discomfort in the presence of the two middle-aged turkey gutters, Lily and Marjorie, due to their fast-paced work and competitive mentality.

Munro skilfully illuminates the characters' inquisitiveness about one another's lives, particularly in the close-knit setting of a small town. Within this backdrop, Gladys, the sister of Morgan Elliott, is rumoured to be entangled in a romantic affair with Herb Abbott, who, in contrast, remains guarded about his personal life and shows no interest in Gladys. Despite residing in a small town, Abbott maintains a reserved demeanour and conscientiously shields his private affairs. While he assists colleagues at work, Abbott carefully navigates the delicate balance of helping others while preserving the boundaries of his own privacy. In contrast to Herb Abbott's discreet nature, Lily and Marjorie exhibit a keen curiosity about the lives of those around them, especially Abbott. Their contemplation takes on a more intense form as they wonder how he navigates life without a wife, family, or a permanent residence: "He aroused this feeling by being circumspect and not making the jokes some men did, and at the same time by not being squeamish or gentlemanly" (*MOJ* 64).

The employees at the Turkey Barn, where Herb Abbott holds the position of supervisor, are genuinely curious about his life. Abbott carries out his responsibilities diligently, aiding his colleagues in acclimating to their work environment. Importantly, he refrains from meddling in the personal lives of his co-workers. Despite his professional demeanour, there is a prevailing assumption among Turkey Barn workers that Abbott might be homosexual due to his lack of a family and apparent disinterest in women. Munro uses the voices of Lily and Marjorie to introduce the topic of homosexuality, shedding light on the small town's conservative views, where such orientations are deemed immoral, unlike in urban settings where they are more widely accepted. Munro intricately explores the interplay between personal privacy and societal expectations, offering a nuanced perspective on how individuals navigate their lives in the close scrutiny of a small town.

Herb introduces a newcomer, an eighteen or nineteen-year-old named Brian, described as having "taffy hair, bright-blue eyes, ruddy skin, well-shaped body—the sort of

good looks nobody disagrees about for a moment” (*MOJ* 69). Despite Brian’s striking appearance, his conduct at the Turkey Barn is far from admirable. He employs informal language unfamiliar to his co-workers, marking a departure from the established norms. Brian consistently mistreats his colleagues, especially the women at the Turkey Barn. This prompts Marjorie to take decisive action, wielding her gutting knife and demanding that Brian steer clear of her, Lily, and the narrator. While, Marjorie confronts Brian, the narrator notes her surprising decision not to report the incident to Morgan Elliot. Munro delves into the narrator’s contemplation, emphasising the societal norms prevalent in small towns. In such close-knit communities, women, even when standing up for themselves, often refrain from publicizing confrontations, prioritizing societal perceptions over personal grievances.

Gladys becomes a target of Brian’s troubling behaviour, causing her to spend the entire day in the restroom in tears. Upon learning of Brian’s true character, Morgan Elliot takes swift action, instructing him to leave the Turkey Barn and the town with a stern warning: “And out of this town—I mean it—and don’t you wait till tomorrow if you still want your arse in one piece” (*MOJ* 71). The narrator speculates that Brian’s expulsion is a result of his disruptive nature and idleness. However, she later discovers that Morgan Elliot deems Brian a pervert with a repulsive demeanour, leading to his expulsion.

Herb Abbott, deeply affected by Brian’s betrayal and mistreatment of Gladys, grapples with the emotional aftermath. Unfortunately, Brian remains indifferent to Herb’s feelings, displaying no remorse for his actions. Munro skilfully unfolds the consequences of Brian’s disruptive presence, offering a nuanced portrayal of small-town dynamics, where societal harmony often takes precedence over individual grievances.

Munro adeptly goes beyond merely depicting the quaint charm of small-town life; she exhibits a keen awareness of how social institutions and interpersonal dynamics unfold within the intimate confines of these communities. In Oriana Palusci’s article, “Plymouth Rocks and

Christmas Turkeys: From Ecology to Metafiction in Two Short Stories by Munro,” she engages in a thoughtful discourse, stating, “At the very end of ‘The Turkey Season,’ the texture of everyday provincial life is rent by the fairly irrational behaviour of a character. . . . The still innocent narrator slowly realizes that trespassing perceived norms implies a transgressive social choice similar to the disembowelling of a harmless festive animal, the turkey” (12). Munro, as a brilliant author, skilfully intertwines these social dynamics with nature and mundane human activity, offering a nuanced portrayal of the harsh reality of violence in daily life by juxtaposing the ritualistic gutting of a turkey with the disruptive incident caused by Brian.

Furthermore, in the article “Re-writing the Nativity in Munro’s ‘Turkey Season’,” Heliane Ventura opines, “Munro is able to weave a compelling story depicting the complex social dynamics of a small town without compromising the nativity associating with such a life” (55). Munro’s genius lies not just in portraying the idyllic aspects of small-town existence but also in her ability to delve into the intricate complexities and conflicts that shape these communities. Despite adversities, the narrator fondly recalls Christmas Eve, holding a photo of the Turkey Barn crew taken by Herb, the trusted one to capture moments. She asserts, “I don’t need the picture of Herb Abbott to remember him and his generous nature.” The Christmas Eve celebration, with mugs of rye whiskey, reveals the festive spirit of the group, indulging despite weariness (*MOJ* 73).

As the story draws to a close, the narrator recollects past memories, savouring the richness of her life with strangers in the small town. In alignment with Tausky’s insights in the article “Biocritical Essay (Munro),” she notes, “Such remembrance of the past with the view to claim it in the present is one of the common themes of Munro’s stories” (7).

“Labor Day Dinner” unfolds as a captivating narrative focused on George, a character deeply connected to farming and agriculture, rendering him oblivious to Roberta’s

unexpressed affection. Set in an obscure small town in Ontario, a characteristic backdrop for Munro's storytelling, the tale explores the complexities of human relationships against the serene yet intricate small-town life. Within this nuanced narrative, Angela and Eva, Roberta's daughters, discover an unexpected paternal figure in George, who assumes a protective and nurturing role in their lives.

The story begins with a gathering at Valerie's residence, where the quartet convenes for a celebration. Munro skilfully delineates the charm of Valerie's abode, situated in the heart of a small Ontario town, surrounded by nature's embrace - two majestic elm trees preside over her front yard, their shade meticulously preserved, while a vibrant border of dahlias adorns the green expanse beneath them, as described by Munro: "Valerie's front yard, under the shade of two aloof and splendid elm trees that have been expensively preserved. The grass underneath them has been kept green all summer, and is bordered by fiery dahlias" (*MOJ* 134).

Delving into the theme of small-town aesthetics, Munro explores the distinctive architectural style prevalent in these close-knit communities. Valerie's residence, a microcosm of local taste, features a facade constructed from pale-red bricks, with windows artistically outlined in white bricks – a common motif in small-town bungalows and houses, as Munro details: "The house is of pale-red brick, and around the doors and windows there is a decorative outline of lighter-coloured bricks, originally white. This style is often found in Grey County; perhaps it was a specialty of one of the early builders" (*MOJ* 134). Captivated by Valerie's home, Roberta views it as an aspirational abode sought after by many in the countryside.

Valerie's dedication to her home, having sold her city dwelling to devote herself to this rural haven, resonates deeply with George, who, inspired by her commitment, acquires his own piece of land in the countryside. In "Labor Day Dinner," Munro weaves a tale not

only of unrequited love and familial bonds but also explores the intrinsic connection between individuals, their homes, and the landscapes that shape them. The narrative transcends its characters, offering a vivid picture of small-town life in Ontario and the profound impact it exerts on those who call it home.

George's residence boasts a flourishing farm, adorned with apple and cherry trees, raspberry canes, and lush grass. Munro vividly describes the idyllic scene: "there is the garden: the apple and cherry trees, which have been pruned; the raspberry canes, which have been cleaned out; the lawn, which has been reseeded, reclaimed from patches of long wild grass and patches of bare ground and rubble under the shade of some ragged pines" (*MOJ* 142). From the raspberries cultivated on George's farm, Roberta skilfully prepares a raspberry bombe, transforming the fruits of their labour into a delightful dessert. Despite George's dedication to the farm, he prefers to toil in solitude, away from onlookers. While Roberta actively contributes to George's agricultural pursuits, her daughters, Angela and Eva, do not share in the labour. George voices his frustration, claiming that Roberta prohibits her daughters from working, leaving them with idle days. This dichotomy highlights the contrasting attitudes toward work in their small-town existence. Roberta serves as a source of inspiration for Angela's literary pursuits. Munro subtly draws a distinction between city and small-town life, suggesting that reading books is a city-centric pastime.

Angela immerses herself in works such as "*Anna Karenina*, *The Second Sex*, *Emily of New Moon*, *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, *The Autobiography of W. B. Yeats*, *The Happy Hooker*, *The Act of Creation*, and *Seven Gothic Tales*" (*MOJ* 148). This literary engagement stands in contrast to the activities of small-town life, characterized by gardening, farming, and communal interactions. Eva, on the other hand, devotes her time to nurturing kittens, with a special affection for Diana, a beloved cat she refuses to leave alone. Munro underscores the divergence between the sisters, portraying one engrossed in the world of

books, associated with city life, and the other immersed in the care of animals, reflecting the qualities of small-town inhabitants and their close connection to nature.

Even though George is amicable with the two daughters of Roberta, he dislikes when they do not indulge themselves in working in the farm. Roberta pleases her daughters and she involuntarily encourages them to not do any work. Later, George has seen her begging to Angela and Eva to do some works of their own like arranging their beds, to collect the dirty dishes, to clean their rooms, “this is what it sounds like to him. Is this the middle-class fashion of bringing up children?” (*MOJ* 145). George is bothered by the behaviour of Roberta of bringing up the children. She has made many mistakes in bringing up the children, “This seems to George not only frivolous but heartless” (*MOJ* 146). Here, Munro discusses the parenting method of George, who thinks in the view of small-town people and Roberta thinks in the view of city people, where Roberta wants her daughters not do any work and lead a sophisticated life, while George wants them to help in the farm works and wanted them to work for their life. In this short story, Munro clearly gives the importance of farming in the lives of small-town people and also about their livelihood.

Munro continues to enmesh the lives of her characters with nature and the settings of her stories. The story, “Labor Day Dinner” also testifies to the statement as the main characters Roberta and George progress in their relationship, rather regress alongside their surroundings and the natural environment. Roberta’s comprehension is itself situated in relation to others’ understanding of space, particularly her partner George’s. In the article, “Roberta’s Raspberry Bombe and Critical Indifference in Munro’s ‘Labor Day Dinner’”, Ryan Melsom opines, “metonymic connections between bodies and buildings run throughout the story, and the moments when those spaces threaten to rupture, they form a pattern in which the failure to understand the spaces one occupies can result in a horrific threatening of self” (146).

The intertwining of nature and human existence in Munro's narratives, particularly evident in "Labor Day Dinner," receives additional validation through B. Anitha's observation in the article "Between the Dream and Reality Middle Aged Woman Cravings and Contentment in 'Labor Day Dinner'": "Munro uses the nature as a suitable backdrop to the human beings as the moods and emotions of the human beings are symbolically reflected in the nature" (3359). Munro's adept portrayal of human emotional intricacies within the context of the surrounding space is further emphasised in the work *Possibility-Space and Its Imaginative Variations in Munro's Short Stories*, where Ulrica Skagert notes: "In the stories the nature of human behaviour, the very nature of selfhood, is at a remove from conventional paradigms of psychological development and expectation. Possibility-space and compilation are entries into Munro's reconfigured inner landscape of emotion and intellect, causality and purpose. Subjectivity in Munro requires locating her in an extended trajectory from Wordsworth and Whitman, to Joyce, to Woolf and to Beckett and beyond" (5).

The short story "Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd" delves into the lives of two elderly individuals, each distinct in their personalities and needs. Munro explores the dynamics of their friendship and their perspectives on life as residents of a small town. Their abode, Hilltop Home, caters to the elderly residents of the town, strategically perched atop a hill to afford a panoramic view of the village. This nomenclature reflects the small-town tradition of naming places based on their surroundings, showcasing the locals' profound connection to their environment.

Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd, long-time friends, find themselves living together in their twilight years. Despite their shared history, they remain unique individuals with different interests. Mrs. Kidd's love for books is evident, as her children frequently send her literary gifts tailored to her preferences. In contrast, Mrs. Cross receives gifts of ornaments, pictures, and cushions from her children, reflecting a distinction in their interests: "Their thoughts run

to ornaments, pictures and cushions” (*MOJ* 163). This disparity in gift preferences symbolizes a broader dichotomy between city life and small-town life. The act of sending books suggests an engagement with the intellectual pursuits commonly associated with city living, while the choice of ornaments signifies the contentment found in cherished possessions—a hallmark of small-town values. Munro subtly contrasts these two perspectives, using the characters of Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd to illuminate the varying lifestyles and priorities that define the inhabitants of small towns.

Munro underscores the significance of marriage and relationships in reflecting the high regard small-town residents place on matrimony. Early unions, exemplified by Mrs. Kidd and Mrs. Cross, mirror the cultural emphasis on marriage, with parents encouraging their offspring to wed at a young age. Mrs. Kidd, wedded to a science teacher, bears three children, while Mrs. Cross, married to a lake boat worker, raises a family of six. The propensity for larger families is another hallmark of small-town values, as highlighted by the observation, “Mrs. Cross had six children, Mrs. Kidd had three” (*MOJ* 161).

The narrative of “Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd” once again delves into the fabric of life within a quaint small town, this time examining the dynamics within an old-age institution through the enduring friendship of two elderly women. Munro skilfully portrays the intricacies of their relationship—its complexities, moments of harmony, and instances of discord, capturing the conjunctions and disjunctions that characterize real-life connections. Despite disparities in personalities and characters, their enduring friendship mirrors the resilience often witnessed in genuine human relationships.

The article, “Of Beasts and Stones: ‘Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd’ by Munro,” by Daziron Heliane delves deeper into this theme, stating, “It begins with a state of conjunction between the two elderly ladies in the institution, unfolds with a transformation of the conjunction into disjunction, and finishes with a renewed conjunction” (75). This observation

encapsulates the cyclical nature of their relationship, reflecting the ebb and flow inherent in enduring connections. Munro addresses the theme of old age homes in her short stories, exploring the lives of elderly individuals and their experiences in navigating societal norms during their later years.

In *The Progress of Love* (1986 – *POL*), the short story titled “The Progress of Love” revolves around female characters, offering a portrayal of the contrasting lifestyles led by women in small towns and cities. The narrator, Euphemia, draws inspiration from her mother Marietta’s life, which serves as a testament to willpower and determination. Marietta leads a modest existence in the small town of Ramsay. Conversely, Euphemia, driven by a desire for independence, departs from her home at fifteen to forge her own path. Euphemia also reflects on Beryl, Marietta’s sister, whose life unfolds in the sophisticated setting of California. Through the characters of Euphemia, Marietta, and Beryl, Munro skilfully highlights the dichotomy between small-town simplicity and the more urbane lifestyle found in the city.

In “Shockingly Like, and Unlike, Home’: Gothic Realism in ‘The Progress of Love’,” Tomasz Sikora observes the character of Euphemia as an optimistic person, noting, “Even the narrator’s name, despite her dislike for it, suggests an optimistic reading: the Greek word Euphemia refers to ‘words of good omen’” (57). The optimism embedded in her name permeates her spirit, motivating her to work for her living. To sustain herself, Euphemia takes on a job as a waitress and enrolls in night classes for typing and accounting, aiming to secure better employment opportunities.

The short story revolves around Euphemia’s narration of her mother Marietta’s ordinary life. Marietta has a sister named Beryl residing in California. The two sisters were separated in childhood when their father married another woman following their mother’s death: “These two sisters hadn’t seen each other for years. Very soon after their mother died, their father married again. He went to live in Minneapolis, then in Seattle, with his new wife

and his younger daughter, Beryl. My mother wouldn't go with them. She stayed on in the town of Ramsay, where they had been living" (*POL 7*).

When Marietta's father decides to remarry, she opts not to accompany him. Instead, she chooses to remain in her hometown, Ramsay, where she resides with an elderly couple. Embracing the sentiment echoed by country music's golden girl, Kacey Musgraves, Marietta appreciates the simplicity of small-town life, echoing Musgraves' sentiment which is given in the website *Brainyquote.com* under the title, "Kacey Musgraves Quote", that "I'm all about small towns, I think it's a great place to grow up" (Web). Marietta's decision to stay in Ramsay is multifaceted. Apart from her fondness for a modest life, she harbours resentment toward her father. This bitterness stems from his prompt remarriage following her mother's death, a situation that Marietta finds emotionally callous. Unlike her sister Beryl, who adopts a pragmatic approach, Marietta struggles to accept her father's new marriage and perceives it as an affront to her late mother's memory.

Marietta's aversion intensifies as her father relocates to California, embracing a new lifestyle. Her disdain for him and his affluent choices becomes so profound that she burns a bundle of three thousand dollars received from her father's insurance. This act, despite their economically strained circumstances, underscores Marietta's refusal to accept money tainted by her resentment. Euphemia recollects, "My mother once burned up three thousand dollars" (*POL 26*), depicting Marietta's unforgiving stance towards her father and her rejection of his urban lifestyle. Marietta finds it increasingly challenging to endure her father's transformed demeanour following her mother's demise, perceiving his swift decision to marry another woman as a betrayal. Unlike Marietta, her sister Beryl appears indifferent to their father's attitude and envisions a more comfortable and affluent urban life. This divergence in perspectives ultimately fractures the family, with Marietta and Beryl living in disparate locations, leading distinct lives.

Beryl, an American from California, visits Marietta in Netterfield County. The glaring dissimilarity in their lifestyles is palpable, originating from the stark contrast between Beryl's city life in California and Marietta's existence in the small-town confines of Netterfield County. Beryl prioritizes beauty and wealth, showcasing a materialistic outlook, while Marietta places significance on family bonds and emotional connections. Euphemia reflects on Beryl's peculiarity, stating, "Beryl was strange in every way—everything about her was slanted, seen from a new angle" (*POL 22*). Marietta, in contrast, remains grounded in her values of love and affection, eschewing materialism.

An illustrative episode occurs when Beryl invites her family to dine at Wildwood Inn. Despite Beryl's intention to provide an enjoyable experience, Marietta feels discomfort with the unfamiliarity of dining out, which contrasts with her customary small-town lifestyle: "Nevertheless, this was a huge event. Not exactly a pleasure—as Beryl must have meant it to be—but a huge, unsettling event" (*POL 20*). Marietta, unlike Beryl, prefers homemade meals over dining out, expressing a preference for the comfort and familiarity of home-cooked food. She perceives eating outside as unhealthy and is uneasy with the idea of strangers serving her meals.

To Marietta, eating in a hotel was like an unsettling event, "Eating a meal in public, only a few miles from home, eating in a big room full of people you didn't know, the food served by a stranger, a snippy-looking girl who was probably a college student working at a summer job" (*POL 20*). Here, the act of consuming food in a hotel exteriorizes the symbols of city life, contrasting with the home-cooked meals that symbolize small-town life. Despite her discomfort, Marietta accepts Beryl's suggestion to dine at the inn, given the infrequency of their reunion after many years. Marietta's small-town life stands in stark contrast to Beryl's city existence, with the rural surroundings playing a pivotal role in shaping Marietta's lifestyle. She embraces her circumstances and what has been bestowed upon her.

Quoting from the article “Emotions in Everyday Life” by Debra Trampe, et al., they define, “provincial emotions, that is, emotions that are strongly connected to several other emotions, but only of the same valence. For instance, love, gratitude, pride, and awe are strongly connected to many other positive emotions but do not inhibit negative emotions” (1). This perspective aligns with the genuine expression of positive emotions by individuals from provincial backgrounds, reflecting their character and attitude without inhibiting negative emotions.

Munro is able to present life in its unadulterated form because she keeps her storytelling and her stories to be simple and straightforward. It is this aspect of her art that allows her to easily connect nature and human existence. It is evident in the following observation, where Lynn Blin in the article, “Sweet Dissonance in Munro’s ‘The Progress of Love,’ ‘Friend of My Youth,’ and ‘Free Radicals’” remarks:

normality implies the fears and foibles, the cowardliness, and self-deception that go into the fabric of human nature. And it includes illness and death, suffering and disappointment. ... Though Munro in no way makes light of tragedy and pain, she unassumingly but authoritatively establishes in its rightful place the inevitability of struggle and the way in which certain circumstances reduce choice. In all the “free space around” her. (47)

Munro, in allowing her main characters to narrate the story provides a subjective interpretation to reality itself including the environs in which it takes place. It also allows her to accomplish the task of entangling nature and human life with the backdrop of the small-town life, which would have seemed illogical if the narration should happen to be objective. Whereas in the article titled, “*The Progress of Love: Enfolding the Magic of Everyday Dailiness*”, Bindu Singh opines, “boundaries between fiction and reality in Munro’s world are very thin, a matter of belief and the ironic awareness of the fictionality of reality is in part a

defensive strategy employed by narrators that provides protection from and artistic coherence to a chaotic reality.” (3)

“Lichen” explores the complexities of fractured human relationships within a broader collection focused on intricate emotional entanglements. The title carries a dual meaning, symbolizing the strained marriage of Stella and David through the union of fungus and algae, as well as embodying the free-spirited Dina through the fruticose lichen. Stella, residing alone in the serene Huron County, grapples with her father’s illness, while David, despite their divorce, maintains a connection through birthday visits, displaying enduring care. Post-divorce, David relocates to the city with his new partner, Catharine. The twenty-one-year marriage, marred by David’s infidelity, has weathered eight years of separation.

Marianne Micros, in her analysis titled “Et in Ontario Ego: The Pastoral Ideal and the Blazon Tradition in Munro’s ‘Lichen’,” aptly describes the story as a narrative of absent presences and present absences. She notes, “‘Lichen’ is a story of absent presences and present absences, of attempts to communicate that do not succeed: the photographed body of an absent woman, a woman made silent and invisible, becomes merely a sign to both her male and her female interpreters, each of whom reads the sign differently” (44). The tale encapsulates the intricate dynamics of relationships marked by silence, revealing the profound impact of unspoken words and unseen emotions.

Stella and David frequent the nursing home where Stella’s father resides, named ‘Balm of Gilead Home’ after the nearby Balm-of-Gilead trees, emblematic of the town’s affinity for nature-infused nomenclature. Munro portrays the significance of trees in small-town life, where affection for nature is articulated through naming houses and buildings. Erected in the nineteenth century with weathered bricks, the nursing home bears the marks of time, described as “disfigured by ramps and fire escapes” (*POL* 50). The green-painted

corridors echo nature's hue, reminiscent of Gwendolyn Brooks' poem *To the Young Who Want to Die*, where green symbolizes the vitality of life encompassing both joy and sorrow.

The nursing home's ambiance is vividly captured by Munro, with corridors adorned with pictures and permeated by the scent of sanitizers. Amid this setting, Munro delves into the father-daughter relationship, portraying Stella's decision to have her father in a nursing home while still harbouring deep love and care for him. She handles him tenderly, exemplified by the scene where "Stella went behind the chair and put her arms around his neck. She touched him very lightly" (*POL* 50). Despite the separation between David and Stella, he strives to sustain his connection with his father-in-law. Through Stella's character, Munro illustrates the profound love shared between a daughter and her father, showcasing the meticulous care that small-town residents bestow upon their relationships.

David leads a life of affluence, in stark contrast to Stella's humble existence marked by resilience and strength. Stella's abode, a summer house near Lake Huron, stands as a testament to her grounded nature. The structure, described by Munro, features bare wood painted in grey, evoking the essence of a farmhouse. Surrounded by mountains and beach, it reflects the idyllic living preferred by many in the small town. Stella's attachment to the house is evident in her gardening pursuits, cultivating vegetables and nurturing a "jungle of wild blackberry bushes" at the back (*POL* 32).

In contrast, David, hailing from the city, is uncomfortable staying in the summer house. Despite his wealthy lifestyle, he grapples with internal complexities. He maintains a relationship with Catharine but harbours a secret crush on Dina, leading to reflections on the strange and transformative nature of love. Munro portrays David's vulnerability, noting, "Love is strange, it does strange things. David is actually a sensitive person—he's a vulnerable person. Love can make you mean" (*POL* 44). The narrative delves into the complexities of city life, where multiple affairs are deemed common.

David's inclination to confide in Stella about his secret crush on Dina stems from her accommodating and understanding nature. Despite their divorce, the comfort in sharing feelings and thoughts persists between them. Stella, acting as his trusted confidante, provides a safe space for David, and he finds solace in unburdening himself to her. Munro captures this dynamic, noting, "All his ordinary and extraordinary life—even some things it was unlikely she knew about—seemed stored up in her" (*POL* 54).

Munro's narrative sheds light on the challenges faced by women within a male-centric social framework, where the repercussions of relationship crises disproportionately affect women, both directly and indirectly. This becomes more pronounced in the context of middle and old age. Isla Duncan, in the article titled, "Disparity and Deception in Munro's 'Lichen'," opines, "while Munro, in this story, explores the consequences of ageing for both men and women, she exposes more starkly its transformative effects on her female protagonist, Stella". Duncan's insights further unravel the nuanced portrayal of gender dynamics in Munro's storytelling.

In this narrative, Munro intricately weaves nature as an active and symbolic backdrop, enhancing the aesthetic appeal and infusing poignancy into the harsh realities of life, entangled in the complex web of social, familial, and man-woman interactions. The utilization of nature in the storytelling not only adds depth but also serves as a lens through which the intricacies of human relationships are observed.

In her book, "Stories in the Landscape Mode: A Reading of Munro's 'Lives of Girls and Women,' 'Walker Brothers Cowboy,' and 'Lichen,'" Claire Omhovere underscores the significance of landscape in Munro's works. Landscape, in Munro's stories, becomes a catalyst for moments of recognition, where clarity of insight coexists with irony, grotesquerie, and at times, even humiliation. Omhovere notes how these elements, in varying degrees, align with the aesthetic conventions governing the appreciation of landscape,

delving into the political and poetic implications of the feminization of the land. This exploration, as she contends, has been a constant theme in Canadian painting and literature since their inception, “Landscape triggers moments of recognition when clarity of insight is mitigated with irony, ... constants of Canadian painting and literature since their inception” (82).

In the third short story, “Miles City, Montana,” Munro explores the complexities of small-town relationships and family dynamics, with a focus on parenthood. The narrative revolves around the aftermath of Steve’s tragic death and Meg’s near drowning, revealing the struggles of the Gauley family. Steve’s father, depicted as a disreputable drunkard, sets the stage for the family’s challenges. Despite strained relationships, the narrator’s father extends assistance, organizing Steve Gauley’s funeral in their cramped home due to the Gauley family’s limited space. Munro skilfully captures the interconnectedness and shared responsibilities inherent in small-town life, especially during times of tragedy.

Munro also depicts the narrator’s resentment towards her father and mother for hosting Steve Gauley’s funeral in their home. The narrator’s disgust stems from her strained relationship with Steve, who mirrors his father’s mischievous behaviour. Despite Steve’s troubled life and lack of maternal support, the small-town community comes together, showcasing the compassionate nature of its residents. Munro highlights the complexities of Steve’s life, his strained relationship with his father, and the kindness inherent in small-town people who depend on and help each other in times of need.

Twenty years after the initial events, the narrator, now an adult with a family, eagerly anticipates her husband Andrew’s three-week holiday from his legal job at B. C. Hydro. Excited about the prospect, she plans a trip back to her hometown in Ontario, expressing deep affection for the small-town life she misses after relocating to Vancouver. Before embarking on their journey, Andrew captures moments with photographs of the narrator, their children

Cynthia and Meg, the garden, and the house. This act, a family tradition, aims to preserve memories and echoes Karl Lagerfeld's sentiment that photographs capture fleeting moments impossible to reproduce in the interview with Eric Wilson under the title "In Orbit Around Lagerfeld," where he states, "What I like about photographs is that they capture a moment that's gone forever, impossible to reproduce". While modern technology simplifies the process through mobile phones and memory cards, there's a reflection on how it alters relationships, potentially making them less healthy.

In the era of emerging technology, the narrator faces challenges while traveling to distant places. Lacking the convenience of modern tools like 'Google Maps,' the narrator resorts to using a traditional paper map to navigate their route to Ontario. With no digital assistance available, the narrator engages Cynthia in the task of finding their way, stating, "First I showed her the map of the whole United States, which showed also the bottom part of Canada. Then I turned to the separate maps of each of the states we were going to pass through. Washington, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin" (*POL* 89). The absence of contemporary technology highlights the reliance on traditional methods and the collaborative effort needed to navigate the intricate route.

Cynthia comprehends the route and imparts the knowledge to Meg, bringing joy to the narrator as their children learn practical skills like reading maps through day-to-day experiences. Along their journey, they encounter a tragic scene of a dead deer in front of a pickup truck, prompting Cynthia to express her empathy, saying, "I would cry if we hit one" (*POL* 90). This incident symbolizes the interconnectedness between the habitat and its inhabitants. The excitement of the children to swim in a pool remains unfulfilled until they reach Miles City. After allowing the kids to enjoy the pool, the narrator, comparing the cool breeze of small-town Ontario with the heat of Miles City, steps away to fetch drinks to alleviate the warmth. In this moment, Munro, through the narrator's perspective, contrasts the

two environments. However, the idyllic scene takes a turn as the narrator discovers her daughter Meg drowning in the pool, fortunately saved by her husband in a moment of stark reality.

The narrator draws a connection between her daughter Meg's pool accident and the tragic death of Steve Gauley in the river during her youth. Steve's demise is attributed to his neglectful upbringing, described as being "next thing to an orphan" (*POL* 104) and allowed to run free, leading to his drowning. In *Reading Munro: 1973-2013*, Robert Thacker compares Steve Gauley's death and Meg's near drowning, noting that Munro explores complicity between parents and the child's drowning, except for Steve's father, who views life as random:

Munro refers to the image with which she began the story—the drowning of eight-year-old Steve Gauley, his body carried across the field by the narrator's father, though the narrator doubts the veracity of her memory of the event.

Munro also develops complicity between the parents and this child's drowning—only Steve's father, who believes life is merely random, is exempt.

(85)

Steve Gauley's death is treated with indifference, seen as an accident that happened to a neglected individual with no meaningful relationship with his father.

In contrast, the narrator reflects on the care and guidance provided by her husband, Andrew, who serves as a great father teaching valuable qualities to their children. Drawing a parallel, J. K. Rowling's quote from *Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban*, "Family is a life jacket in a stormy sea of life" (7), underscores the importance of family bonds. Munro portrays the contrast between Steve Gauley's unfortunate circumstances and the caring environment within the narrator's family, emphasising the significance that small-town people place on family members.

Once again, Munro delves into the portrayal of a woman's anxieties and concerns within a family, unravelling the intricate interpersonal dynamics even in a narrative seemingly filled with secrets. In the article "Munro's Two Secrets," Lecercle notes the apparent focus on a secret in the story, possibly related to the boy's drowning, but highlights the narrator's sudden awareness of a different secret: "the mystery of otherness" (34-35). Munro eschews the traditional detective story approach to mystery, opting to use it as a scaffold for interpersonal tension among her characters.

Carol L. Beran, in "Munro: Writing Her Lives," emphasises Munro's perspective that mystery is an integral element in an individual's life experience, generating anxiety that spills into character behaviour and interactions within familial or social contexts: "To Munro, mystery is an element in an individual's life experience that persists in creating the anxiety which in turn spills out into the behaviour and interaction of the character with others in a familial or social setup" (106). The protagonist's approach to her family in the pool scene reflects the enduring impact of the childhood drowning tragedy, consciously kept as a secret, which continues to influence her actions and reactions over time. Munro adeptly captures the psychological anxiety of her characters, turning her stories into valuable depictions of human profiling.

The fourth short story in the collection, "The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink," unfolds the lives of Sam and Edgar, both seventeen, as they arrive in Gallagher, a provincial Canadian town. Munro explores the theme of a comfortable and affordable life in a small town, emphasising the disciplined nature of its inhabitants. Sam and Edgar, driven by dreams of becoming acrobats inspired by circus performances and roadside entertainers, run away from home to pursue their aspirations.

In the small-town setting, Sam and Edgar find affordable accommodation in a boarding house, where they attend business school and practice acrobatics to realize their

dreams. Munro uses the character of Miss Kernaghan to portray the disciplined mindset prevalent among small-town residents. The boarding house, under Miss Kernaghan's strict rules, exemplifies the emphasis on discipline, "No drinking, no smoking, no bad language or bad morals, she told the Grazier boys on their first day. No eating in the bedrooms" (*POL* 135). Miss Kernaghan's insistence on adherence to rules reflects the small-town ethos of maintaining order and discipline among its residents.

Within the boarding house, Callie Kernaghan, a distant relative of Miss Kernaghan, resides as one of its members. Callie earns her stay by diligently performing various household tasks, including cooking, cleaning, dishwashing, and tending to the garden. Despite her significant contributions, Sam and Edgar, the cousins with dreams of becoming acrobats, display a lack of interest in Callie due to her role as a domestic worker and perceived lack of attractiveness. They view her as a "little slavey, forever out of things, queer-looking, undersized" (*POL* 142), expressing a condescending attitude towards her.

Callie Kernaghan is depicted with boyish attributes, embodying a scuffling walk, thoughtful yet independent, alert to possibilities of fights or adventures, "She had a scuffling boy's walk, thoughtful but independent, alert for possibilities— a fight or an adventure" (*POL* 143). Her heavy, rough black hair is concealed under a cloth cap, giving her a less pale and scrunched-up appearance. The spitting, mocking, fierce look she sometimes exhibits disappears when her hair is hidden, revealing a soberer and more self-respecting demeanour. Referred to as Cal, her character, personality, and attitude challenge traditional gender norms.

Munro presents fictional characters embodying small-town desires and dreams, with Sam, Edgar, and Callie each harbouring their own aspirations. Sam and Edgar, in particular, proactively create opportunities by relocating to Gallagher to pursue their dreams of becoming acrobats. John M.G. Barclay in the article, "Paul and the Philosophers: Alain Badiou and the Event", has quoted Alain Badiou's concept of a pure event as an "opening of

an epoch, transformation of the relations between the possible and the impossible” (172), aligns with Sam and Edgar’s dedicated efforts to make their wishes come true. Despite their commitment, they grapple with contemplative questions about the future of an acrobat, reflecting the common hesitations of young individuals chasing their dreams, “How do acrobats earn a living? Where were they from? How did they get paid? How did you find about joining them?” (*POL* 135).

During winter, Sam and Edgar face a setback in practicing acrobatics due to the impracticality of wearing winter clothes for performances. However, they discover solace in ice skating at the Orange Street rink, two blocks away from their place. Despite financial constraints preventing them from officially using the rink, the cousins, with Callie’s assistance, clandestinely visit after hours. They skate under the moonlight, fostering a closer bond through their shared act of sneaking into the skating rink. The friendship that develops among Callie, Sam, and Edgar, as highlighted in the website *Goodreads* by O. Henry’s quote, “No friendship is an accident,” adds meaningful depth to their lives.

This story serves as another manifestation of Munro’s fascination with presenting interpersonal dynamics from a fresh perspective, a motif that critics like Ajay Heble identify as Munro’s “paradigmatic discourse” in *The Tumble of Reason: Munro’s Discourse of Absence* where, “Paradigmatic discourse enables Munro’s characters to imagine possible correlations between sets of phenomena and contemplate how ‘reality’ might differ if something absent or potential were substituted for the existing state” (7). The narrative is characterized by the potential for life to unfold as a continuous journey of happiness, a hope that people grasp onto amid life’s uncertainties and challenges.

In *A Thousand Plateau*, Deleuze and Guattari note the short story’s definition as lines constantly interfering with and acting upon one another, with happiness in “The Moon” distinctly identified as a moment of possibility, “the short story as being defined by lines

which constantly interfere with and act upon one another. In ‘The Moon,’ the moment of happiness is clearly defined as the moment of possibility” (195). The theme of possibility in an individual’s life is intricately tied to the concept of positioning, shaping interpersonal relationships. Munro’s stories often depict characters in roles of either victim or victimizer, influenced by their developmental stages and choices. The narrative explores how positioning impacts the relationships between teenagers, showcasing the tension, imbalance, and sudden shifts in attitude or revelations that define many of Munro’s interpersonal dynamics.

The short story “Circle of Prayer” explores the innocent minds of provincial people living near the hillside, who believe that a circle of prayer can restore normalcy to life. The narrative follows a mother and daughter, Trudy and Robin, and a significant heirloom necklace. Despite its sentimental value, Robin offers the necklace as a tribute to her friend’s death. When Trudy discovers this, she is desolate and miserable, longing to retrieve the necklace. The necklace, symbolic of family values, transcends being a mere piece of jewellery; it represents love, warmth, and family inheritance.

Trudy learns about the death of a fifteen-year-old girl, Tracy Lee, through Kelvin, a co-worker at “Misses Weir’s house” where Trudy works. Worried about her own daughter, Robin, who works on country roads, Trudy is emotionally distressed. Munro portrays Trudy’s motherly care, vividly describing Robin’s golden hair and her concern for her daughter’s safety. Trudy’s anxiety eases when she learns about the details of Tracy Lee’s accident from her co-worker Janet. The funeral ceremony unfolds as a tradition and ritual in small-town culture, where Tracy Lee’s friends express condolences to her family. The girls, overcome with grief, manage to sing a funeral song with sweet voices. As part of the ritual, they walk past the coffin, throwing their belongings into it. Robin, following suit, places her necklace into the coffin. The family allows this gesture, interpreting it as an expression of love and

affection toward their deceased friend, “They shook hands, they said sorry-for-your-loss, just the way everybody else did.” (*POL* 262-263).

Trudy learns that Robin has placed her late mother’s necklace in a coffin, unaware of its sentimental value. Robin, ignorant of the necklace’s emotional significance, holds no understanding of its profound value to Trudy, who grapples with despair due to her husband Dan’s infidelity. Seeking solace for her grief over the necklace, Trudy confides in her friend Janet, leading to a discussion about the ‘Circle of Prayer’ tradition. Janet introduces Trudy to this tradition, where a person with worries confesses them to a stranger, initiating a chain of prayers for that individual. Though initially hesitant, Trudy questions how the tradition could retrieve the necklace thrown into the coffin. Janet, invoking biblical wisdom, convinces Trudy, “It’s not up to you to say that. You don’t say what’s possible or impossible. You just ask for what you want. Because it says in the Bible, ‘Ask and it shall be given.’ How can you be helped if you won’t ask? You can’t, that’s for sure” (*POL* 269). Trudy, while not praying directly to God, chooses to believe in the tradition’s potential.

In the website *Goodreads* under the title “The Philosophy of Boredom Quotes”, Lars Fr. H. Svendsen’s observation, “Traditions bring continuity to one’s existence, but this sort of continuity is precisely what has been increasingly lost throughout modernity”, underscores the impact of modern life on traditions and relationships. In the story, Munro does not disclose whether Trudy regains the necklace, but it highlights Trudy’s desire to preserve memories and strengthen her relationship with her daughter and deceased mother. In this narrative, Munro once again explores the experiences of women confronting indifference, lack of recognition, and a dearth of understanding from their male counterparts. Notably, Munro is evolving her female protagonists, endowing them with increasing assertiveness, inner strength, and initiative to protect their interests. Carol A. Armstrong, in “*The Fascinating Pain; the Humiliating Necessity*”: *Delicate Moments of Exposure in*

Munro's Fiction, observes that in "Circle of Prayer," Munro captures the "fascinating pain, the humiliating necessity" inherent in human relationships. Armstrong notes that, "Munro transcends this depiction, enabling her female characters to achieve levels of self-knowledge and expression not as evident in her earlier works" (73).

Munro, an observant and compassionate writer, portrays the complexities of human relationships and suffering across various social institutions. In her straightforward manner, she imparts a message encouraging readers to face life with courage and fortitude. This clarity in her message becomes increasingly apparent in her later stories when compared to her earlier works. In the article titled "Socio-Cultural Reality of Canadian Women in the Fiction of Munro," Anil Kumar Mandal and Arjun Kumar assert, "What Munro wants us to understand is that life has its own challenges and one has to accept of as a part of life. They highlight Munro's exploration of deserted women left to fend for themselves, a theme evident in 'Circle of Prayer'" (170).

In Munro's "Passion" from the collection *Runaway* (2004), the protagonist Grace revisits her small-town near Ottawa Valley after thirty years, observing significant changes. The Canadian Shield's numerous lakes, often unnamed on maps, now feature additional roads from the county road, "This part of the Canadian Shield has many small lakes, which most maps have no room to identify" (*Runaway* 159). Grace notes the absence of street names and pavements from thirty years ago, highlighting the transformation reflecting the evolution of village life.

Despite some villages lacking post offices and convenience stores, Grace observes the enduring aspects of the village. Houses, closely situated along the lake, still bustle with people, bikes, and cycles. Even on a September day, villagers continue their routines, enjoying drinks. Grace reminisces about the octagonal Woods house and Travers's house, particularly the wraparound veranda evoking memories of hot summers, "It was the first

house of its kind that Grace had ever seen—one story high, the roof continuing without a break out over that veranda, on all sides—a style that makes you think of hot summers” (*Runaway* 161).

Munro emphasises the significance of flowers and trees in her short stories to vividly depict the backgrounds of small towns. As Grace walks along the road, she encounters wildflowers and strawberries along the path she used to take to visit Travers, “the stand of maple and cedar and balm-of-Gilead trees” (*Runaway* 161). The lakes, hidden behind tall houses, remain obscured from view due to their height. Grace recalls the details of Travers’s house, noting the sheltered roof, screened windows, and the surrounding trees, with the house facing the lake. Enhanced with dormer windows and painted in blue, the house reflects Munro’s tendency to use natural colours to convey the vibrancy of small towns. In this case, the colour blue symbolizes both the lake and the sky.

Reflecting on the past, Grace, after completing high school, initially worked in her uncle’s chair caning business but sought “a taste of life” (*Runaway* 166). Opting to work as a waitress in Bailey’s Falls, north of Sabot Lake, Munro introduces chair caning as a small-town occupation. Grace’s romantic entanglement begins when Maury, a restaurant patron, proposes to her, initially seen as a dare common among restaurant patrons. However, Grace realizes Maury’s genuine intentions, leading to her acceptance of the proposal. Subsequently, she frequently joins Mr. Travers’s family for dinner, drawn by her fondness for Mrs. Travers, as Maury becomes the bridge bringing Grace into the family due to his deep affection for her.

Munro skilfully describes the Travers house as more than a mere structure; it symbolizes family life. Originally a surprise anniversary gift from Mr. Travers to his wife, Mrs. Travers, the house has stood for thirty years, becoming a haven of love and children, “Gretchen, twenty-eight or twenty-nine, already married and a mother herself; Maury, twenty-one, going into his last year of college; and then there was Neil, in his mid-thirties”

(*Runaway* 162). After the death of her first husband, Mrs. Travers supported the family by teaching Business English at a secretarial school. Marrying Mr. Travers marked a transformative shift from challenging difficulties to a life of comfort and happiness. At meals, Mrs. Travers shares tales from her past, while Mr. Travers, though reserved, displays a keen interest in rocks.

Maury's frequent trips with Grace to the theatre highlight a contrast between the affluent city girl, Elizabeth Taylor, and the financially constrained small-town girl, Grace. Elizabeth, despite having everything, continually yearns for more. Grace, working as a waitress due to financial limitations, lacks the means to attend college. Her sentiments are not rooted in jealousy but in a sense of indignation. It's not that she is incapable of wearing clothes like Elizabeth; rather, it underscores societal expectations for women to conform to certain standards and prioritize marriage and motherhood.

Within the intricate dynamics of Munro's narrative, Maury emerges as a supportive figure, understanding and embracing Grace's thoughts. The discourse of their marriage is a recurring theme, with Maury envisioning a future where they can travel extensively due to his job. Notably, Munro juxtaposes Grace's excitement for travel against her more reserved feelings about marriage. As a small-town girl rooted in her upbringing, Grace's enthusiasm for exploring new places stems from a desire to gain a virtuous perception of life beyond the boundaries of her familiar village. Grace's connection with Neil, Maury's older brother and a doctor, adds layers to the narrative. Neil becomes a pivotal figure when he rescues Grace from a minor accident, leading to him teaching her to drive and the development of an immoral relationship. Faced with guilt, Grace avoids facing Maury, only to later discover Neil's tragic death in a car accident. As a small-town girl wrestling with her conscience, she finds herself unable to return to Maury or Mrs. Travers.

The unexpected visit of Mr. Travers introduces a twist in Grace's journey. Ensuring her well-being, he presents her with an envelope containing a thousand dollars, a gesture that symbolizes both financial support and a lifeline for her new beginnings. Munro skilfully captures Grace's internal struggle, torn between rejecting the check and recognizing its practical value, "The check was for a thousand dollars. Immediately she thought of sending it back or tearing it up, and sometimes even now she thinks that that would have been a grand thing to do. But in the end, of course, she was not able to do it. In those days, it was enough money to insure her a start in life" (*Runaway* 196).

Despite departing her small town three decades ago, Grace cherishes memories of the Travers family, delving into the theme of women's subjugation. Unlike Munro's prior works, this narrative empowers Grace to assert herself and make independent choices. Zhitong Chen, in "The Plight and Choice of Grace: Women's Subjectivity in Munro's 'Passion'," compares it with "Runaway," stating, "Unlike Carla, Grace chooses her path and never returns, as the construction process of Grace subjectivity is much more successful" (166).

In "Passion," Munro explores interpersonal dynamics, emphasising the conflict between personal desires and societal ethics. In their article, "Ethical Dilemma and Nihilism in Munro's 'Passion,'" scholars Xiyang Liu and Hongbin Dai argue, "Munro's short story reveals the humility, fragility, and complexity of human nature" (2). The narrative underscores emotional vulnerability in the pursuit of companionship, unveiling a complicated interpersonal dynamic with facets of social and domestic behaviour. This complexity and its detrimental impact on individuals are vividly portrayed in the story "Circle of Prayer."

From the short story collection *Too Much Happiness* (2009 – *TMH*), the short story "Fiction" revolves around Joyce, a woman deeply attuned to the scents of "wood or a stove or trees" (*TMH* 52). The setting is the small town of Rough River, where Joyce and her husband Jon reside in a renovated old farmhouse. Despite leaving college to marry, they face financial

challenges, leading Jon to learn carpentry for survival, while Joyce obtains a music degree to teach in local schools. Settling in a practically valueless “tumbledown house” (*TMH* 34), they transform it with a small garden.

The story begins with Joyce driving home after teaching music in Rough River schools, a routine she finds comforting in winter. The streets, dark with falling snow and rain, provide a backdrop for her emotive journey. Munro vividly describes a forest filled with “great Douglas firs and Cedar trees” (*TMH* 32), where people live amidst the wooded landscape. Munro illuminates the archetypal qualities of small-town life, marked by “market gardens, sheep and riding horses and enterprises like Jon’s- who restored and made furniture” (*TMH* 32). Diverse housing options, from rented homes to those with “thatched roofs and log ends” (*TMH* 32), capture the traditional small-town setting. Patio doors, providing views of the dark forest, represent a haven for small-town residents. The scent of wood and trees in Jon and Joyce’s home mirrors the industrious spirit of small-town life, offering a vivid portrayal of these communities.

The narrative unfolds with Edie, appointed as Jon’s apprentice through a government program. Initially hesitant, Jon reluctantly accepts, and over time, he becomes captivated by Edie’s work and personality. This leads to Joyce’s departure, and in the city, she marries Matt. Despite the urban setting, she yearns for the small-town’s presence and scent. The celebration of Matt’s sixty-fifth birthday with family, friends, and neighbours highlights the communal nature typical of small-town life. Even after Joyce’s move to Vancouver, Matt’s house maintains a country life ambiance with a spacious ground and garden. Situated on the edge of the forest on Windsor Road, the house reflects the encroachment of new houses up Grouse Mountain, symbolizing the small-town’s gradual transformation into a city while retaining its inherent qualities. Munro adeptly illustrates the dichotomy between small-town and city life through these nuanced depictions of homes and communities.

The story “Wood” centres around Roy, a small-town man deeply enamoured with woods and various tree types. Described as an upholsterer and furniture refinisher, Roy’s love for working alone in wood cutting, a common occupation in small-towns, is evident. Munro details Roy’s shed, emanating scents of “paint stripper, wood stain, linseed oil, polish, and wood smoke” (*TMH* 224), typical of spaces dedicated to woodwork. In the unspecified small-town setting, where few engage in wood cutting, Roy’s workload exceeds his capacity, yet he refuses to hire help due to his preference for solitary work.

Munro introduces Roy’s tools, a four-wheel-drive truck, a chainsaw, and an eight-pound splitting axe, emphasising the blend of modern machinery with traditional wood-cutting practices. Roy’s expertise with both machine and axe showcases his adaptation to contemporary woodwork methods. Despite the small-town backdrop, Munro highlights modern houses with fireplaces, drawing a contrast with traditional small-town homes lacking such amenities. The narrative also touches on the communal aspect of small-town life, where people gather around backyard fires for a shared leisure experience. Munro skilfully weaves these contrasting images to depict the evolving dynamics between small-town and modern living.

Lea’s social inclinations and vibrant personality sharply contrast with Roy’s preference for solitude and nature. The tradition of selecting a house for festive celebrations takes an intriguing turn at Roy and Lea’s home, where Roy retreats to his woodshed, favouring the sweet aroma of applewood. Munro draws a poignant parallel between the city-bred Lea, a receptionist reveling in urban parties, and Roy, a small-town man absorbed in woodcutting and trees, shunning social gatherings. This narrative explores the inherent contrasts between urban and rural existences, symbolized by Lea’s dynamism and Roy’s contemplative connection to nature. Roy’s knowledge of trees becomes a metaphorical bridge, enriching the thematic exploration of their divergent lifestyles.

Munro intricately explores Roy's unique connection with the trees in small-town life, detailing how locals typically identify trees by leaves or shape. Roy, however, stands out by recognizing them through their bark, showcasing a profound botanical knowledge. Munro skilfully weaves Roy's insights into the narrative, from the Ironwood used primarily as firewood to the Cherry tree, the darkest in the forest, bearing the tastiest fruits. Roy's expertise extends to Apple trees, small representatives of orchards. As Roy eloquently puts it, "Ironwood, mostly used as firewood and the limbs are reddish with smooth ends. Cherry tree is the blackest tree in the forest, which gives tastiest fruits. Apple trees are small and it is one of the "orchard representatives" (*TMH* 228). This quote encapsulates Roy's ability to name and appreciate trees based on bark, showcasing the narrative's rich portrayal of his deep connection with nature.

Roy further delves into his arboreal expertise, shedding light on Oak trees that thrive both in urban settings and as backyard fixtures. Munro intriguingly highlights the literary significance of these trees, noting that many storybook openings evoke the phrase "Once upon a time in the woods" (*TMH* 229), where these woods symbolize the presence of Oak trees. The dark allure of the Oak is emphasised in tales, especially when its leaves shed, revealing a legendary appearance characterized by "thick corky bark with its grey-black colour" (*TMH* 229), evoking a devilish visage.

Through Roy, Munro also explores the meticulous art of wood cutting, with Roy asserting that understanding the process mitigates the dangers involved. Roy elucidates the method: "When you are going to cut down a tree, the first thing is to assess its centre of gravity, then cut a seventy-degree wedge, so that the centre of gravity is just over it. The side of the wedge is on, of course, determines the direction in which the tree will fall" (*TMH* 230). This narrative layer, enriched by Roy's insights, adds depth to the portrayal of his relationship with trees, linking his knowledge to both practicality and folklore.

In small towns, the residents, unafraid of the dark forests, often navigate through them for work. Roy, benefitting from this familiarity, finds solace and joy working alone in the dense woods and deep thickets. His comfort extends beyond the skill of wood cutting to a profound knowledge of various tree species in his small town. This symbiotic relationship with the forest not only underscores the unique connection between the locals and their natural surroundings but also amplifies Roy's expertise, blending his practical understanding of wood cutting with an intimate knowledge of the diverse trees that populate his community.

This represents a pivotal work in Munro's oeuvre, reflecting her consistent incorporation of nature as a vital narrative element. In the context of her inclination to integrate the natural world into her stories, this piece stands as a notable achievement. Heliane Ventura, in her article titled "The Legacy of the Forest: A Source Study of 'Wood' by Munro," characterizes the narrative as deceptively simple yet possessing epic ramifications. Ventura emphasises the story's ability to renew the short story genre and challenge our expectations of literature, offering, as she states, "rejuvenation and empowerment through the possibilities of rewriting the ordinary scripts of our ordinary existence against our 'natural cultural' legacy" (422). Munro's adept integration of nature into the narrative elevates the story's significance, contributing to its impact in the broader literary landscape.

Anjali Hembram further reinforces this assertion in her article, "Treatment of Human Attitude and Complexity in Munro's 'Too Much Happiness'", contends that Munro's works delve into a spectrum of human complexities, including environmental concerns, class prejudice, and the subjugation of women. Drawing a comparison with Margaret Atwood, Hembram notes Munro's shared passion, obsession, and dedication towards Canada's ecological system.

Also, Hembram observes that Munro, like Atwood, “depicts various human complexities such as environmental concerns, class prejudice, subjugation of women, etc. Like Margaret Atwood, she is also passionate, obsessive and dedicated towards the ecological system of Canada” (70). In Munro’s exploration of these themes, she demonstrates a keen awareness of human behaviour and complexity, cultivated through her observations of contemporaries. This parallel with Atwood not only accentuates Munro’s thematic depth but also underscores her commitment to addressing multifaceted aspects of the human experience within the Canadian context.

In the short story “Haven” from the collection *Dear Life* (2012 – *DL*), Uncle Jasper embodies the mindset of a small-town resident, navigating life with that perspective. The narrative explores the prevalent theme in small towns where wives exhibit unwavering devotion to their husbands. Aunt Dawn personifies this devotion, dedicating her entire life to Uncle Jasper. The story delves into Aunt Dawn’s profound commitment, emphasising her belief that her world revolves around her husband. The narrator, a thirteen-year-old girl, recalls her mother’s words about Aunt Dawn:

“Dawn’s life is devoted to her husband,” my mother had said, with an attempt at neutrality. Or, more drily, “Her life revolves around that man.” The narrator reflects on this observation, noting that it was a statement made at the time and not necessarily disparaging. However, the narrator admits, “I had not seen before a woman of whom it seemed so true as Aunt Dawn”. (*DL* 112-113)

This portrayal delves into the intricacies of relationships in small-town settings, exploring the dynamics of devotion and the central role of familial bonds in shaping individuals’ lives.

The narrator has recently moved in with her Uncle Jasper and Aunt Dawn, and the story unfolds during an afternoon lunch. A conversation ensues between Uncle Jasper and the narrator about her parents, with Jasper attempting to assert his opinions. During the meal, the

narrator, absorbed in her thoughts, doesn't notice Uncle Jasper's prayer and begins eating. Surprised by her behaviour, he questions if her parents say a different prayer, to which she responds that they don't say any prayer before meals. It becomes apparent that Uncle Jasper holds religious beliefs, while the narrator leans towards a belief in doing good works.

After Uncle Jasper departs, Aunt Dawn, displaying unwavering devotion to her husband, begins to eat her meal. The narrator observes Aunt Dawn's actions but refrains from questioning her. Reflecting on this, the narrator notes, "She was used to holding back until she was sure that my uncle had said all that he meant to say. Even if I spoke to her directly, she would wait, looking at him to see if he wanted to do the answering" (*DL* 112). This narrative unveils the complexities of relationships within the family, exploring themes of belief, devotion, and the dynamics between the characters.

The home is entirely shaped by Jasper's desires, as he views it as his personal haven, and Aunt Dawn is tasked with the responsibility of maintaining it accordingly. When Jasper is away, he assumes a different persona compared to when he is at home. As one of the most esteemed doctors in the community, Jasper commands respect. The home is unequivocally Uncle Jasper's domain, with the narrator noting, "The house was his, the choice of menus his, the radio and television programs his. Even if he was at his practice next door, or out on a call, things had to be ready for his approval at any moment" (*DL* 113). This depiction reveals the dominance of Jasper's presence within the home and the meticulous control he exercises over its every aspect.

Aunt Dawn's freedom is curtailed, as she is not permitted to visit neighbours or venture outside for any reason. Her role is confined within the four walls, contributing to the creation of a haven at home. One day, a couple of neighbours extend an invitation to Aunt Dawn, and she accepts, sparking anger in Jasper. Despite this, they both visit the neighbours. However, a problem arises, as the societal norm dictates that if someone invites you, you

should reciprocate the invitation. Aunt Dawn is aware of this expectation but struggles with the social niceties involved. The narrator explains, “She understood that when people had invited you to their house and you had gone you were supposed to ask them back. Drinks for drinks, coffee for coffee. No need for a meal. But even what little was required she did not know how to do. My uncle had found no fault with the neighbours—he simply did not like having people in his house, on any account” (*DL* 119). This passage sheds light on the challenges Aunt Dawn faces in navigating social expectations within the confines of her husband’s preferences.

Aunt Dawn finds herself in a quandary, contemplating whether to invite the neighbouring couple or not. During this uncertainty, the narrator shares news about a forthcoming music concert in the city. The neighbours express their intention to attend the concert and invite Aunt Dawn’s family to join them. Unbeknownst to Uncle Jasper, the concert features his estranged sister, Mona, with whom he has not spoken for decades due to unresolved family issues. The family decides not to inform him about the destination. Upon reaching the concert venue, Uncle Jasper remains impassive, offering no reaction to the unexpected reunion with his sister.

After some time, Uncle Jasper questions the narrator, asking, “Now, tell me do your parents go in for this sort of thing? What I mean is, Concerts and the like? They ever pay money to sit down for a couple of hours, pay money simply to perpetrate a fraud? You ever know them to do that?” (*DL* 124-125). The narrator truthfully replies that her parents have not attended any concerts. As a small-town man, he believes that people attend parties and concerts just to show off their wealth, viewing them as places for enjoyment and conversation rather than displays of affluence. Despite Uncle Jasper’s rigid attitudes, Aunt Dawn remains silent, refraining from contradicting him and dutifully fulfilling his needs.

Aunt Dawn refrains from intervening in conversations or disagreements between Jasper and the narrator. She becomes apprehensive when neighbours extend invitations to her, even getting anxious at the slightest movements of her husband. She waits for Uncle Jasper's permission to answer questions directed at her. Eventually, it becomes evident that Uncle Jasper's patriarchal dominance compels Aunt Dawn to remain silent in various situations. This situation can be compared to the words of Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, where she writes, "The situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other" (37). This comparison illustrates the constraints Aunt Dawn faces in a society shaped by traditional gender roles and male dominance.

In Munro's "In Sight of the Lake," nature becomes a poignant canvas, skilfully depicted through the eyes of the protagonist, Nancy. An avid traveller with a profound affinity for the beauty of her surroundings, Nancy grapples with memory loss, a complex condition that propels her into the realms of her imagination. Seeking resolution, she undertakes a solo journey to consult a doctor in the small town of Highman. Munro's narrative intricately weaves the interplay of light and shadow, as seen in Nancy's observation of the evening: "The evening is beautiful. But when she turns off the highway, driving west, she finds that the sun is just low enough to shine into her face. If she sits up quite straight, however, and lifts her chin, she can get her eyes into shadow" (*DL* 219). Through Munro's evocative prose, the external landscape becomes a metaphorical reflection of Nancy's internal struggle, inviting readers to intimately engage with her sensory experiences and the profound connection she shares with the natural world.

The ambiance of Highman village proves to be serendipitous for Nancy, evoking a sense of promise that leads her to contemplate spending the remainder of her life in this idyllic setting. After marvelling at the village's charm, Nancy sets out on foot in search of the

doctor, leaving her car parked nearby. In small towns like Highman, doctors often reside in houses where their working quarters seamlessly blend with the residential space: “Reddish brown bricks, and sure enough the sign, Medical/Dental. A parking lot behind the building” (*DL* 219). The architectural aesthetics of these houses harken back to the early nineteenth century, adding a historical dimension to Nancy’s journey.

Despite grappling with forgetfulness, Nancy’s unconscious mind becomes a source of solace, cocooning her in a realm of happiness within her imaginative world. As she traverses the streets in pursuit of the elusive doctor, the houses in the village captivate Nancy with their distinctive construction. Delving into her musings, she discerns that these houses were crafted in the nineteenth century, with some fashioned from wood and others from brick. Nancy envisions the bygone eras, picturing scenes of people leisurely sitting on verandas engaged in hours of conversation, housewives completing their daily chores, and husbands returning home after a day’s labour. The village becomes a repository of enchanting memories, and Nancy finds herself enamoured with its allure. Highman village stands as a testament to the magnetic pull even a small locale adorned with captivating elements can exert on individuals.

Nancy’s profound love and reverence for nature guide her footsteps to enchanting places where the beauty of the natural world captivates her soul. Settling in a garden, she discovers a bench amidst vibrant flora, observing, “In between the paths, and bursting from the grass, there are flowers. She knows some of them—the dark gold and light-yellow daisies for instance, pink and rosy and red-hearted white phlox” (*DL* 223). The garden’s owner, initially silent, eventually shares the rich history of his private haven, fostering a camaraderie that blossoms amid the lush surroundings. In this narrative, nature emerges as a catalyst for fostering connections, bringing forth the inherent goodness in human beings.

Upon reaching her destination, Nancy encounters a gravel pile with a sign indicating Lakeview Rest Home. As her gaze rests on the pale blue lake along the horizon, she is

enraptured by its beauty. Immersed in the serenity, she walks through the grass like a solitary cloud, reaching the lake reflecting the hues of the setting sun. The sunset's reflection in the lake mirrors a radiant daffodil, akin to the sun appearing as a colossal flower. Along the lake's edge, she discovers inviting spaces with well-appointed rooms, secluded compartments, and small gardens enclosed by latticed fences. Each detail of the picturesque lake captures Nancy's attention, reminiscent of a proud mother admiring her growing child.

Approaching the house, Nancy seeks a bell to announce her arrival, yet the door graciously swings open unprompted. As she steps into the threshold, the door elegantly closes behind her, revealing a captivating interior that captures her imagination. The house, adorned with silvery tiles and an air of grandeur, elicits a smile as Nancy envisions patients finding joy in whimsical slips and slides. Despite its designation as an asylum for individuals contending with emotional troubles, Nancy discerns a hopeful silver lining within the confines of the space. In this unconventional setting, Nancy's keen observations divulge both the aesthetic allure and functional design, emphasising the duality of the asylum as a place of refuge and introspection, "Four doors ... where the inmates are housed" (*DL* 230).

Entering one of the rooms, Nancy inadvertently finds herself locked inside, the confinement intended for her treatment. Despite the situation, she manages to discover a welcome distraction. Gazing through the window, she finds solace in the sight of pots adorned with flowers and the gentle passage of cars in the mild evening light. Amidst the confines of the room, a sense of suffocation envelops her, prompting introspection: "She doesn't know if the panic has taken a long time or a short time. Her heart is pounding but she is nearly safe" (*DL* 232). In this tense moment, Nancy's observations of the external world through the window become a lifeline, offering a connection to the outside that tempers the intensity of her internal struggle.

In the conclusion of this short story, the narrative unravels as a dream woven with the threads of Nancy's deep love for nature. In the embrace of the natural world, she senses a profound transport to an alternate reality. Despite being attired in a nightgown and directed towards dinner in a facility catering to individuals with emotional challenges, Nancy's dreams persistently weave the fabric of her experiences around her drives through nature. The protagonist, grappling with mental illness, finds solace and delight in the beauty of nature, a dream that becomes a source of immense pleasure for her soul. Amidst the serenity and allure of her natural surroundings, Nancy loses herself in a reverie that transcends the confines of her mental struggles. The potent connection between her unconscious mind and the soothing embrace of nature becomes the guiding force that propels her forward to lead the remainder of her life with resilience and grace.

Nancy finds herself in unfamiliar territory, intensifying her sense of displacement. Examining the significance of the home environment for women, scholars Dena Shenk, Et al, assert in "Older Women's Attachments to their Home and Possessions" that a woman's home, with its contents, serves as anchors, symbolizing her past roles as a wife and mother while offering guideposts to navigate her future as a widow" (158). James Krasner, in "Accumulated Lives: Metaphor, Materiality, and the Homes of the Elderly," emphasises that the physical arrangement of a home not only mirrors the owner's identity but also encapsulates her life story (211). In essence, maintaining familiar habits at home enables the repetition of earlier experiences, fortifying one's sense of self.

The title short story, "Dear Life," unfolds through the lens of an unnamed narrator, delving into her life in a small town near Ontario and her familial connections. Munro's introduction not only establishes a distinctive sense of place within the framework of small-town life but also showcases her ability to emotionally penetrate the lives of her characters, especially the young narrator. Born in the 1930s into a middle-class family capable of

providing her with a rural upbringing, the narrator grapples with the limitations of her small-town environment and school. Despite financial constraints, her father, driven by a commitment to education, ensures her enrolment in a town school by paying town taxes.

Initially, the transition to the town school proves challenging for the narrator, who senses a disparity in her knowledge compared to students who have been together since grade one. However, amidst this discomfort, she finds solace and contentment in the town's offerings, "In many ways it wasn't easy for me in town, either, because everybody else had been together since grade one, and there were many things that I hadn't learned yet, but it was a comfort to see my new school's unsoiled seats and to hear the noble urban sound of its flush toilets" (*DL* 301). Munro's narrative skilfully captures the complex emotions of the narrator, navigating the intricacies of adapting to a new educational environment while finding unexpected sources of comfort and happiness in the town's unique features.

In the new school, the narrator forges a friendship with Diane, a connection that leads them to Diane's grandmother, who treats both girls with equal warmth. Despite the frequent tardiness attributed to their admiration for the houses lining their way home, Diane's grandmother extends understanding rather than reprimand. One particular house, perched on a small hill near Waitey streets, captures the narrator's fascination. Inhabited by a one-armed veteran of the First World War, his wife, and a flock of sheep, this dwelling, although not entirely representative of a classic small-town setting, exudes the quintessential qualities of such locales.

The narrator's visits to Diane's grandmother become a routine, a habit disapproved of by the narrator's mother. The disapproval is evident when, upon being summoned by a car horn, the mother ignores a friendly wave from Diane's grandmother. The strained relationship between the narrator's mother and Diane's family reaches a breaking point when the narrator's mother reveals the cause of her animosity. Diane's mother died from a disease

associated with prostitutes, a revelation that instils resentment in the narrator towards her own mother. This discord highlights a characteristic small-town trait where societal norms and judgments dictate relationships, causing the narrator's mother to insist on distancing her child from Diane due to perceived associations with illegal activities. The narrative subtly explores the complexities and prejudices embedded within the fabric of small-town dynamics.

Furthermore, Munro delves into the significance accorded to animals in her short stories, a distinctive trait of small-town people. The narrator's father, invested in animal husbandry, tends to cows and horses, constructing their shelters with his own hands, "He built all the pens and shelters in which the animals would live, and put up the wire walls that would contain their captive lives" (*DL* 217). On their twelve acres of land, adorned with twelve elm trees, the father also maintains a grassland. The narrator actively participates in caring for the animals, finding joy in fetching water and cleaning their shelters.

The family's residence, an aged structure, faces the river, flanked by a row of trees. Munro adeptly showcases the distinctive characteristics of small-town individuals through the narrator, her father, and her mother. The narrator's affinity for nature and animals' manifests in her eagerness to work for and feed them. Meanwhile, the father's commitment is evident in his hands-on approach to constructing shelters for the animals. In contrast, the mother harbours a disdain for illegal activities, urging her daughter to distance herself from families associated with such behaviour. Munro's narrative subtly explores the interconnected lives of the characters, revealing how their relationships with animals and nature serve as markers of their identity within the framework of small-town values.

Alice Munro's short stories are appreciated for their meticulous depiction of everyday life and subtle emphasis on environmental themes. Although not overtly political or environmental, her narratives often reflect the dynamics between humans and nature, promoting sustainable living practices. This aligns with Haixia Zhang's observation, "Under

her pen, the life of the city, community, and family is full of stress and tension in a peace-looking way. The meaningful narration underlying her story embodies ecological colour to novels” (Zhang 70). Munro’s contribution to Canadian literary history, therefore, lies in how she intertwines ecological concerns within the fabric of human experiences in small-town settings.

For example, in “Turkey Season,” Munro showcases the interplay between labor and seasonal cycles within a turkey slaughterhouse. While the story focuses on worker relationships, the setting evokes human exploitation of natural resources. The mechanistic operation of the farm underscores a disconnection from nature, revealing the consequences of prioritising efficiency over ecological balance. This subtle critique of unsustainable practices demonstrates how Munro weaves environmental themes into her narratives. Similarly, in “Labor Day Dinner,” Munro underscores sustainability through rural life, highlighting human encroachment on natural areas and its gradual yet lasting effects.

In “Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd,” the protagonists reflect on environmental changes brought by industrialisation, embodying themes of generational responsibility and the tangible impacts of environmental degradation. Through “The Progress of Love,” Munro metaphorically depicts the interdependence between humans and nature, suggesting that just as individuals cannot revert to their past, the damage inflicted on the environment is irreversible. This interwoven exploration of nature and human emotion mirrors the nuanced ecological perspective.

Moreover, stories like “Lichen,” “Miles City, Montana,” and “The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink” use nature as an allegorical tool to explore human experiences and their vulnerabilities. In “Circle of Prayer,” Munro juxtaposes mortality and resilience with environmental concerns, while “Passion” and “Runaway” depict the intricate connections between human emotions and nature, urging harmonious coexistence.

In the context of literary analysis, the transactional model of aesthetic reading can provide insights into Munro's work. By engaging with the stories imaginatively, readers reconstruct the world of the narrative and empathise with characters, allowing them to perceive the embedded environmental themes. This model emphasises the reader's unique interpretive strategies, highlighting how Munro's formal and stylistic elements create a multifaceted literary experience. Thus, the transactional model facilitates a holistic analysis of Munro's stories, acknowledging the intricate interplay between human experiences and the natural world.