

An Introspective Narrator in Alice Munro's Select Short Stories

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Alice Munro

Courtesy: <http://hollywoodprogressive.com/alice-munro/>

Abstract

The paper exhibits the use of introspective narrators in the short stories of Alice Munro. Introspective is an examination of one's thoughts and feelings. It also a reflection of one's mental and emotional processes. The voices of introspective narrator belong to the author, narrator and character. As these voices merge together their thoughts and ideas are expressed freely. Alice Munro's short stories are exemplars of such narratives. A popular Canadian short story writer she is well known for her narrative skills. Her themes are packed with life and life writing. The paper particularly analyses the introspective narrator who express her emotions and feeling in the stories namely *Eyes, Voices, Nights and Dear Life*. In the four final pieces of her latest book – *Dear Life*, Alice Munro returns to the stories of her childhood that influenced her early writing, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) and *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) in particular. She intends to the tradition of legacy writing. Her works indicate the inextricability of life and writing, and the fluidity of self and other.

Keywords: Introspective narrator, Alice Munro, first-person narrative, voices.

Introspective Narrator

The word *introspective* means looking in to oneself. The dictionary meaning of introspective is “the act or process of looking in to oneself”. Thus an introspective narrators examines one's thoughts and feelings. In addition it is also an observation of one's mental

and emotional processes. Cambridge Dictionary defines introspective as “examining and considering your own, ideas, thoughts and feeling. Instead of talking to other people about them”. It also refers to the individual account of relationship among self-relevant events across time. It deals with the story of self that provides the individual with the sense of unity and purpose of life. Since story becomes the fundamental process of human life, the narrator plays a vital role in every story. Percy Lubbock, touched on the importance of the narrator when he stated, “The whole intricate question of method in the craft of fiction, I take to be governed by the question of the point-of-view-the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story. He tells it as he sees it, in the first place” (Lubbock, 2007).

Lubbock, specifically points out the power possessed by the first person narrator who allows the reader to enter his or her world. Most importantly, the narrator allows the reader to enter his or her mind, and it is through their introspective thoughts that the reader is given an up close and personal view of the important themes expressed in the stories. It is commonplace to have a story told by a narrator who is a completely separate entity from the author. It is essential to examine the introspective narrator to afford the reader with the general themes and notion of the stories.

Alice Munro

Margaret Atwood asserts that “Alice Munro! Now that’s writing!” She’s the kind of writer about whom it is often said-no matter how well-known she becomes-that she ought to be better known”(Atwood,4). Atwood states that Alice Munro is among the major writers of English fiction of our time. Alice Munro is an acclaimed Canadian short story writer who is well known for her supreme narrative skills. Munro was born in Wing ham, Ontario which is the large province of Canada that stretches from the Ottawa River to the western end of Lake Superior.

Alice Munro was born Alice Laidlaw, in the year1931. When she was eight year old, Canada entered the Second World War. After finishing her school, she began studying journalism and English. She attended the University of Western Ontario, in London. Her mother was a teacher and her father was a fox farmer. Her stories are set mainly in the 30s to 80s, in the time of ancestral memory. She is acclaimed as the most prominent Canadian feminist writer. She is often called the regional writer because her fiction frequently centers on the social and culture life of rural Ontario Canada, which appeared in her stories renamed Jubilee or Han ratty. Carol Shields agrees: “I’m an enormous fan of Alice Munro’s, her use of language is very sophisticated, but I can always hear, underlying the sentence and its rhythms, that rural Ontario sound.”(10). She began publishing in various magazines from 1950's. Munro is primarily known for her short stories. Her first collection includes, *Dance of The Happy Shades* published in (1968), other collection are *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974), *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), *The Moon Of Jupiter* (1982), *The Progress of Love* (1986), *Friend of My Youth* (1990), *Open Secrets* (1994), *The Love of Good Women* (1988), *Run Away* (2004), *The View from Castle Rock* (2006), *Too Much Happiness* (2009) and *Dear Life* (2012). Munro became the first Canadian to win The Nobel Prize for literature in 2013. She also won the Governor-General Award thrice, two Griller prizes in 1998 & 2004 respectively and the Man Booker International Prize for life time achievement in 2009.

Catherine Sheldrick Ross states that the stories of Alice Munro “presenting ordinary life so that it appears luminous, invested with a kind of magic. Perhaps more than anyone

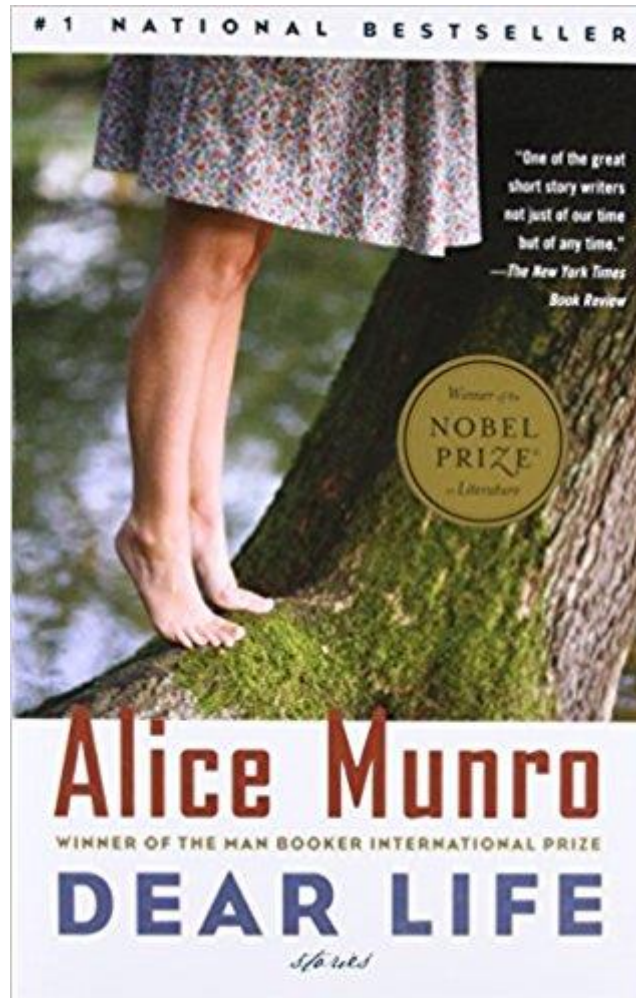
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else, Munro is responsible for making short-story writing respectable in Canada” (Ross, 10). Munro is a gifted short story writer whose strength lies in her ability to present the texture of everyday life with both compassion and unyielding precision. Munro’s subjects are interplay of men, women and children. As she claimed before, “Some of the stories are closer to my own life than others are, but not one of them is as close as people seem to think” (Moons of Jupiter, introduction xiii).



Introspective Narrator in *Dear Life*

Dear Life (DL), which was published in the year 2012, is a spectacular collection of fourteen short stories. After the tenth stories in a paragraph titled ‘Finale’ she states that the last four stories were oddly autobiography “The final four works in this book are not quite stories. They form a separate unit, one that is autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact. I believe they are the first and last-and the closest-things I have to say about my own life” DL (255). The four stories focus on the perspective of first person narrator. Through the technique of first person narrative we come to read the mind of the Munro’s character namely Sadie in *The Eye*, the young narrator(Alice) in *Night*, a notable prostitute in *Voice* and Mrs. Netterfield in *Dear Life*.

The Eye tells the story of a five-year old girl who is confronted with what seems to her to be a sudden appearance of younger siblings, a baby boy and, a year later, a baby girl. Munro expertly captures the anxiety of the child on one hand, when she suddenly begins to receive less attention than

before and, on the other she becomes subject to aggressive socialization at home. The first turning point in the girl's life comes with the discovery of the dissociation of her feelings when her brother was born.

She expresses, "It was with my brother's coming, though, and the endless carrying on about how he was some sort of present for me, that I began to accept how largely my mother's notions about me might differ from my own" (DL 258). she feels in secured and the sibling jealous make her feel different. The story also focuses on the general theme of mother and daughter relationship. The triangulation of mother daughter relationship begins with the arrival of Sadie. Sadie is the central character in the story, who possibly creates her own world by sing song on the radio. Meanwhile, the introspective narrator reveals the character of Sadie that she is so confident and energetic. She claims "She was full of energy and confidence, happy to talk about herself" (DL 259). The importance of self-identity has long been a theme in literature. Sadie is one such character who was super keen about her self-identity. Her inner voice states "there's is nothing in this world to be scared of, just look for yourself" (DL 262).

The next story *Night* as it stands for darkness set during the time of war. At the narrator's age of eight, Canada entered the Second World War. Even though the protagonist was not directly affected by the military conflict, the reference to it intensifies the sense of gloom and oppression, and the fear of death. The narrator explains the struggle of sleepless nights due to appendix. She says "When the pain in my side struck, therefore, it had to do so at about eleven o'clock at night, and a blizzard" (DL 271). Because of the way she used to tease and enrage her young sister Catherine, her relationship was always unsettled.

In *I was not myself* (DL 267), the protagonist feels emotionally that her life changes gradually because of her sickness and she cannot sleep at night. Her father puts an end to the problem, of the young narrator. These climatic exchanges between father and daughter have a significant role. The first- person narrative technique is used here, at the end the narrator discovers that "Night" is symbol of darkness with altered the state of consciousness.

Voice is the plot that describes about the rituals of going to dances. It was distracted by the notable prostitute. The narrator asserts that "I would surely have seen her sometime, though not in that orange dress. And I would not have used the word prostitute. Bad woman, more likely" (DL 292). Once the narrator mother notices the prostitute she decided to leave and requests her daughter to collect her coat from a bedroom.

In *voice* the theme of death is not specified in straight forward manner but it also share some motifs as such. The theme of voice can be loneliness which is portrayed through the narrator's voice. "I, too, was worthy of love (DL298). The narrator who implicates herself with the lives of other by sharing their emotions and experience are explained by the introspective narration. "Such kindness. That anybody could be so kind" (DL 297) implies the rejection of her life from her mother, teacher and classmate.

In *Dear Life* the final piece is the '*Finale*' gives a brief account of various events, places, hopes and disappointments. Here the narrator recollects the varied perceptions that life offers "her way to school, her acquaintance with a prostitute's daughter, her mother's ambition to play golf, and her parents' shared hope for success in the fur industry, her own attempt to see country life in the idealized manner of Lucy Maud Montgomery's novels and the history of the house in which they

lived” (DL 307). In the end the narrator is left with no choice rather she should accept what she cannot change ‘in her old age”.

Conclusion

Alice Munro’s stories are strong, emotional, and often ambiguous. It also includes character reminiscences. The narrator has advanced from a story teller to one who connected to the reader by allowing the readers to see the story through their own eyes, experiences, and emotions. Through the first- person narrator the reader can identify themselves with Munro’s character. The four stories use the similar technique and examine the introspective narrator.

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