

Literature Of Ontario: A Study On Alice Munro's Dear Life

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Abstract

Canadian literature, in general, consists of two mainstreams, French and English writings. French writings in Canada often describe Quebec and English writings in Canada often describe Ontario. The Nobel Laureate Alice Munro paints the rural Ontario in most of her works. They are very regional and often becoming the colourful threads of a national dream. She was once called as a regional writer for her regional descriptions. Reading her in deep, a reader can understand the supreme universal themes. She gives clear picture of landscape, environment and climatic condition in her works. She focuses more on places than on human characters. Her works frequently centres on the culture of rural Ontario, Canada. The descriptions of those regional elements spring from the joys and sorrows of the local people and their longings to bring about healthy changes. The layers of Munro's works are simultaneously the old and the new and the regional and the national. Hence, Alice Munro's short story Collection Dear Life can be called as "Literature of Ontario."

Keywords: Ontario, regional, landscape and geographical elements.

Introduction

Canadian literature has been known for its presentation of weather and landscape of Canada. The impending dangers from nature have been the major themes of Canadian literature for a long time. In the late twentieth century, with other contemporary writer, Alice Munro has been able to bring about a tremendous change in Canadian literature. Rukmini Bhaya Nair says in her Review of *Dear Life* by Alice Munro

God Ganesha wins an important race against his brother Karthikeya by simply walking at a calm and leisurely pace around his parents while Karthikeya, more literal-minded, races frantically around the globe. Ganesha's insight, applauded by the gods, is that his parents are the world. In Munro's short fiction, I'd content that family, childhood and local ties play much the same role. She does not need the vast terrain of the novel; her short stories cover the same ground as wisely and wittily. And now, like Ganesha, Munro too has won a big prize. (8)

This excellent comparison connects Munro's work with the story of Lord Ganesha who won the race simply by walking around his parents rather than travelling around the whole world. Likewise, depicting her region in her works, Munro won the universal award. She never talks about the whole world but only about her world, Ontario which now creates universal effects after Munro getting the Nobel Prize.

Munro is the first to elevate Canadian Literature to the world stage with some of the great twentieth century Canadian authors including Margaret Laurence, Gabrielle Roy and Carol Shields. During the post-war decades, only a handful of books of any literary merit were published each year in Canada, and Canadian literature was viewed as an appendage to British and American writing. Much of what was produced dealt with extremely typical Canadian such as the outdoors and animals, or events in Canadian history. Munro is a Canadian author writing in English. She began writing as a teenager, publishing her first story, *The Dimensions of a Shadow*, in 1950 while studying English and journalism at the University of Western Ontario under a two-year scholarship. Munro's highly acclaimed first collection of stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, won the Governor General's Award, Canada's highest literary prize.

Munro's works have been described as having revolutionized the architecture of short stories, especially in its tendency to move forward and backward in time. On the 10th of October, 2013, Munro was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, cited as a "master of the contemporary short story." She is the first Canadian and the 13th woman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. Munro's writing has established her as Chekov of Canada. *Dear Life* is a short story collection published in 2012 by McClelland and Stewart. The book was to have been promoted in part by a reading at Toronto's International Festival of Authors, although the appearance was cancelled due to health concerns. According to Rukmini Bhaya Nair in *Review of Dear Life by Alice Munro*, "The stories in *Dear Life*, as in her other collections, consist in this sense of statements about unstated emotions (Amundsen), in descriptions of lives that change radically without changing at all (Gravel) and accounts of small-town locations that reveal big-time dislocations (Haven)" (8).

Having been called as regional writer, her deep universal themes are to be understood in wide and bright view. Though she could reach the mass after being awarded Nobel Prize, her works show undeniable elevated ideas. As a work of art implies a few ideas about the nature of human beings, the relationship of human beings to each other or to the universe, Munro's works mean to be universal.

Munro has been able to erase borderline between the regional and the national, the personal and the universal. Jameela Begum says in the introduction to *Canadian Literature: Perspective*, "In the 1970s and 80s a major shift in emphasis swept the land when women writers in large numbers began to be accepted. While Margaret Laurence immortalized the Manawaka world of her fiction, in Alice Munro's writings Western Ontario took on definite contours" (iv).

In her story, one can see more description of place than human characters. It is obvious in her narration that a reader will be able to get clear picture about the landscape, environment, her house, street weather condition besides characterization. After the first ten stories in her book *Dear Life*, Munro has inserted a single paragraph to give more information on "Finale". "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 (255)". Munro publicly announced that this would be her last book and it is home to four rare, autobiographical stories. Munro's explanation for including these in a finale to the volume is quite worth quoting in full. Munro's short stories are just as close a mirror of her life as those in her finale. Almost all the stories she has ever written are not quite stories and are autobiographical in feeling. The same characters and scenes are played out in different ways in her work until they seem so much a part of everyday life that the reader can't actually distinguish the factual from the fictional and the freakish from the sane.

Alice Munro is often called the regional writer because her works frequently centre on the culture of rural Ontario, Canada. In an interview she herself said that she lived outside the whole structure because she did not live in the town and she did not live in the county. She lived in this kind of little ghetto where all the bootleggers and prostitutes and hangers lived on. Those were the people she had known. It was a community of outcasts and estranged. These childhood locale and experiences related to it reflect in her prominent works.

The regional elements spring from the joys and aches of the local people and their yearning to bring about healthy changes. The layers of Munro's work can be considered as a well balanced mixture of the old and the new and the regional and the national. Her vital life experiences both as a person and artist signify her movement away from the regional and upward to the national. Alice Munro, like Margaret Lawrence, Rudie Wiebe and Jack Hodgins, has specialized herself in writing about places where their roots were. From such a realistic regional plank she moves on to national and even universal preoccupation. Munro's sense of place was a deep one. Through her extremely sensitive character, the complete spectrum of Canadian themes, kinship, the struggle between nature and human beings, and the numerous adjustments that man must make to deal with the distinctive climatic fluctuations have been emphasized in a deep psychological strain. The South Western Ontario region, with its occasionally inundated Wawanash River and its rising population of men and women engaged in

perpetual struggle, promotes the blending of regional and national narratives because the stories produced are mostly Canadian or, in a broader sense, human. Her autobiographical stories are virtually miniature autobiographies of a Canadian. Munro's symbolic and enduring use of the Southern Ontario terrain, as seen in "Lives of Dance," a short story from *Dear Life* with a variety of characters relating to it, throws into relief a variegated texture woven with the realistic strands of regionalism and the brilliant strands of a national dream.

In the short story "Eye," from *Dear Life*, Munro describes how her mother's behaviour troubles her and she says about the character Sadie, a celebrity. In her town, there is a radio station where Sadie plays guitar and sings songs. The people who listen to Toronto station broadcasting never like her songs much. But the people on the farms like the local station songs and the kind of songs Sadie sings, such songs about loneliness and grief.

Most of the farms in our part of the country had been cleared and settled around a hundred and fifty years ago, and you could look out from almost any farmhouse and see another farmhouse only a few fields away. Yet the songs the farmers wanted were all about lone cowhands, the lure and disappointment of far-off places, the bitter crimes that led to criminals dying with their mothers' names on their lips, or God's. (259)

In the beginning of the short story "Night," she has given the condition of the road during snow storm and how drastic physical events cause during that time. Rather than explaining her pain and suffering, she explains the path, transportation, weather condition and atmosphere of the hospital.

When I was young, there seemed to be never a childbirth, or a burst appendix, or any other drastic physical event that did not occur simultaneously with a snowstorm. The roads would be closed, there was no question of digging out a car anyway, and some horses had to be hitched up to make their way into town to the hospital. It was just lucky that there were horses still around. (DL 271)

In the short story "Night," one of the short stories from *Dear Life* Munro also pictures her school days. She says about her joyful days in the school. When she went

back to school, she enjoyed being excused from physical training. Then she begins to describe the place in the night time. There were no street lights. This shows the condition of her village which was far from town. As she gives more importance to the description of her village, she says that there were many trees like beech tree, elm tree, oak tree and maple tree. She is also proud in saying that the front and back side lawns were easy to negotiate which give some town side respectability. She is very conscious in explaining the landscape of her village. The description of the village is related to nothing but the rural Ontario.

The east side of our house and the west side looked on two different world, or so it seemed to me. The east side was the town side, . . . To the west, the long curve of the river and the fields and the trees and the sunsets had nothing to interrupt them. Nothing to do with people, in my mind, or to do with ordinary life, ever. (278)

In these lines she openly said that nothing to do with people in her mind. Then she continued to explain about what rely on her eye sight during the night walk. The birds began to stir and sing as if each of them had thought of it separately, up there in the trees. They woke far earlier, but soon after those earliest starting songs, there got to be little whitening in the sky. When she hated in her night walk she look towards town just to inhale the sanity of it. Anne Enright says in her "Familiarity of Surprise: Review of Dear Life by Alice Munro," "Munro was writing about what it was like to be a woman in rural Ontario, and that this was territory they knew something about. Because rural Ontario was not just a flat place with farmers and small towns; it was a set of ideas about itself, and these ideas could be owned and disputed and placed in the balance" (36).

Dear Life describes the house where Munro lived in when she was growing-up in Wingham, Ontario. Her mother was a school teacher and her father was a poultry farmer. This has been presented as memories not as story. She says that that was not only a story but a life. She notes signalling the pathways, names and coincidences in the short stories. There is a wooden walkway which occasionally has a plank missing, so that one can look right down into the running water. She likes that very much but somebody always come and replace the plank eventually.

Then there is a slight hollow, a couple of rickety houses that gets flooded every spring, but the people who live there use to live there anyway. There is another bridge over the mill which is narrow but deep enough to drown a person. Then she begins to explain the road. The road is divided into two. One part of it is going south up a hill and over the river again to become a genuine highway and the other jogging around the old fairgrounds to turn west. Munro says,

I LIVED when I was young at the end of a long road, or a road that seemed long to me. Back behind me, as I walked home from primary school, and then from high school, was the real town with its activity and its sidewalks and its streetlights for after dark. Marking the end of the town were two bridges over the Maitland River: one narrow iron bridge, where cars sometimes got into trouble over which one should pull off and wait for the other, and a wooden walkway which occasionally had a plank missing, so that you could look right down into the bright, hurrying water. (DL 299)

In one of the short stories in *Dear Life*, "Gravel" which is set in the 1970s, a gravel pit becomes the site of the small town family's reckoning. A mother leaves her husband to live in a trailer with a local actor, Neal and brings her two daughters. She is in full make up like another actress. Her daughter observes her activities. Michael Lapointe says,

Such changes, which reflect the belated influence of the era's "liberating styles" on conventional southern Ontario, at first seem like puerile, but harmless, rebellion. But when the narrator's sister casts herself inexplicably into the water of the gravel pit and drowns, we see terminal narcissism. Neal's attitude typifies the dangerous *laissez-faire* of liberation. (19)

Munro's symbolic and persistent use of the Southern Ontario landscape as seen in *Dear Life* with a variety of people etched to it throw into relief a varied texture woven with the realistic strands of regionalism and vibrant strands of a national dream. In "Haven," a short story in *Dear Life*, one cannot see much description about Ontario as in the other stories. Anyhow, she never forgets

to give little description about the churches and the Toronto musicians.

Reading "Haven," one of the short stories from *Dear Life*, a reader cannot see much description about Ontario as in the other stories. Anyhow she gives a handful of descriptions related to the churches and the Toronto musicians. Likewise in "Pride", another short story from *Dear Life*, much about Ontario is not available but Munro says about Ontario which has been changed in the fifties, sixties and seventies by different people moving there. During those years, there were several changes in their town. New shopping malls were built. People used to go to Mexico or the West Indies resulted into bringing new diseases. Several new buildings were built with an elevator and places for parking vehicles. She also records the sufferings of Canadians after the Second World War. It is registered by Munro in "Pride"

Ships lost at sea and then, most dreadfully, a civilian boat, a ferry, sunk between Canada and New foundland, that close to our own shores. That night I could not sleep and walked the streets of the town. I had to think of the people gone to the bottom of the sea. Old women, nearly old women like my mother, hanging on their knitting. Some kid bothered by a toothache. Other people who had spent their last half hour before drowning of seasickness. (139)

Her stories are so unencumbered by clichés and they speak with such clarity and truthfulness. It is often assumed that Munro's *Dear Life* is largely geographical. The fact that she chooses to set many of her tales in her hometown only fuels these assumptions further. The regional elements that are sprung from the day to day sufferings, moments of joy and their yearning to bring about healthy changes. Alice Munro's imaginative rendezvous with rural South Western Ontario is effectively seen in *Dear Life*. In her works, too much of regional realities often become the colourful threads of a national dream.

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