

Small-Town Chronicles: Exploring Alice Munro's Intimate Worlds

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Abstract

This article explores the compelling tales found in Alice Munro's short stories, which offer a glimpse into the complex facets of small-town life. Munro's storytelling reveals the profound themes of life, tradition, and values that shape these intimate settings. From "The Progress of Love," where three women characters navigate the contrasts between city and small-town existence, to "Lichen," which explores the depths of father-daughter love, gardening, and the unwavering morality of small-town communities, Munro's storytelling reveals these intimate settings' profound themes. "Dear Life" highlights the ongoing significance of moral values and the affection for small-town residences embellished by the art of gardening, while "Circle of Prayer" introduces the readers to small-town burial customs and superstitions. By means of a careful examination, the article reveals the universal lessons concealed in these stories, providing an engrossing look into the world of small-town life as portrayed by one of the greatest writers of all time, Alice Munro.

Keywords: City vs. Small-town; Family relationships; Gardening; Small-town life; Tradition and values.

Introduction

Few writers in the enthralling field of literature can convey to readers the subtle nuances of small-town life with the elegance and depth that Alice Munro can. Munro has a long history of being a perceptive observer of people and the subtleties of living in close, intimate quarters. Her short stories are like windows into the heart of small-town life, vividly capturing its distinct features and difficulties. Munro's work is a tribute to her ability of narrative, from "The Progress of Love," which explores the relationship between city life and the peaceful simplicity of the small

town, to "Lichen," which depicts familial love, gardening, and the complications of faithfulness. The article also reveals many facets of life in these tight-knit communities as it delves into her collection of works, which includes "Circle of Prayer," which dissects the tapestry of small-town traditions in the context of funerals and superstitious beliefs, and "Dear Life," which highlights the importance of moral values and an enduring love for small-town houses, nurtured by the art of gardening. This article entitled, "Small-Town Chronicles: Exploring Alice Munro's Intimate Worlds," is revealing the deep themes and engrossing stories that shed light on the various aspects of small-town life.

About the Author

Alice Munro is appreciated as one of the finest short story writers in the whole world and has been pivotal in creating short-story writing reputable in Canada. Furthermore, she has been included in the 2010 *Times magazine's* "100 Most Influential people." Through her works, the Canadian geography can be appreciated. 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. 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.

Objective

The article examines the various facets of small-town life as they are portrayed in Alice Munro's short stories. By means of a targeted examination of significant literary pieces such as "The Progress of Love," "Lichen," "Circle of Prayer," and "Dear Life," the aim is to analyse the themes, personas, and stories that illuminate the distinct dynamics, customs, and principles inherent in small villages. By exploring these stories, readers will gain a better comprehension of the personal yet nuanced world that Munro expertly depicts, as well as the universal themes that resound throughout it.

Setting of the Short stories

The setting of Alice Munro's short stories is usually in rural Canada, and Munro gives more preference to the setting of her short stories that explores small-town life. In her short story collection, *Too Much Happiness* (2013), she states, "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" (Munro). She believes that in every individual's life, there is a connection between them and a place for certain reasons. She sets her short stories in small towns based on her connections with them: her birthplace Wingham, Ontario; the place where she was brought up, Huron County; and the place where she currently lives, Clinton, Ontario, Canada.

Small-town Dynamics and Social Contrasts

In the short story collection, *The Progress of Love* (1986), the title short story "The Progress of Love" revolves around three generations of women characters. Euphemia serves as the narrator who reminisces about the past of her mother and grandmother. All three women comprehend the circumstances of their lives and lead uncomplicated lives. Euphemia is intrigued by the story of her mother Marietta, who exemplified willpower and determination in her life. In contrast, Euphemia leaves home at the age of fifteen to lead an independent life. She works as a waitress and attends night classes for typing and accounting, which later lands her a job in a real estate office. Euphemia recounts the life of her mother and her simple way of living. Marietta has a sister named Beryl, and their childhoods diverge when their father remarries after 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. (TPL 7)

Marietta's decision to stay in Ramsay and lead a simple life is motivated by her desire for a peaceful existence and her disapproval of her father's actions. Like Kacey Musgraves, country music artist quotes, "I'm all about small towns, I think it's a great place to grow up" (Musgraves), which symbolizes Marietta's love for small-town life. Marietta is deeply disturbed by her father's remarriage following her mother's death and chooses to reside with a childless couple in Ramsay instead of accompanying him. Her sister Beryl, on the other hand, takes a more pragmatic approach to live a sophisticated city life, where she accepts the situation.

Marietta's small-town upbringing and desire for a quiet life in Ramsay further influence her decision to distance herself from her father's pursuit of wealth. On the other hand, Marietta's sister Beryl, who grew up in Cal-

ifornia and is accustomed to city life, has a different perspective. Despite their contrasting upbringings, Beryl visits Marietta in Netterfield County, where she experiences a simpler lifestyle and gains a better understanding of her sister's contentment with what she has.

In this short story, the contrasting personalities of Marietta and her sister Beryl has been highlighted. Marietta is characterized as a person who values family and love, that symbolizes small-town life's characteristics, while Beryl is portrayed as being obsessed with money and beauty, which is a part of sophisticated city life. Marietta's observation about Beryl's unique perspective on events emphasizes their differences, as she remarks, "Why shouldn't Beryl's version of the same event be different from my mother's? Beryl was strange in every way – everything about her was slanted, seen from a new angle" (TPL 22). Beryl's materialistic tendencies are demonstrated when she takes the family to a fancy hotel for dinner, which is not Marietta's style. Marietta reflects on the experience and describes it as "a huge, unsettling event," despite Beryl's intentions to make it a pleasurable experience (TPL 20). Marietta prefers homemade food and believes that eating outside is unhealthy, which is also considered as one of the qualities of small-town people, while preferring fancy restaurants are city peoples' type.

Marietta finds the idea of dining out in public unsettling, as expressed in the quote, "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" (TPL 20). For Marietta, having food served by a stranger in a crowded room is uncomfortable, as she prefers the familiarity of home-cooked meals and the intimacy of small-town life. Despite her discomfort, Marietta agrees to dine out because she wants to spend time with her sister Beryl, who had suggested the idea. Marietta respects Beryl's preference for dining out and goes along with it to bond with her sister after many years of separation.

Marietta's way of life in the small town is distinct from that of Beryl's. The environment holds considerable importance for Marietta, who is content with what she has and endeavours to make the most of it. Rural inhabitants tend to express their emotions and feelings in an authentic manner, which gives insight into their personalities and outlook. In the article *Emotions in Everyday life*, Debra Trampe, Jordi Quoidbach, and Maxime Taquet defines, "*provincial emotions*, that is, emotions that are strongly connected to several other emotions, but only of the *same valence*. For in-

stance, *love*, *gratitude*, *pride*, and *awe* are strongly connected to many other positive emotions but do not inhibit negative emotions." Likewise, people from provincial background express their positive emotions and feelings in a genuine way which chronicles their character and attitude.

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:

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. (blin 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. "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." (Singh 3)

However, "Lichen," the second short story from this collection, containing tales of damaged relationships. The title of the story has a dual meaning. One interpretation is the symbiotic relationship between a fungus and an algae, which mirrors the unhappy marriage between Stella and David. The second interpretation is a fruticose lichen, which describes a promiscuous young woman named Dina. Stella and David's marriage lasted for twenty-one years but ended eight years ago due to David's infidelity. He has a history of falling for other women and Stella was not his first wife. "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. (Micros 44)

Despite the estrangement between David and Stella, his yearly visits serve as a testament to his care for his former wife and her family. Like clockwork, David pays an annual visit to Stella's home, thoughtfully coinciding with her father's birthday: "Once every summer, he makes this visit, timing it as nearly as he can to Stella's father's birthday. He always brings the same present—a bottle of Scotch whiskey" (TPL 34). This gift of Scotch whiskey goes beyond tradition; it symbolizes camaraderie and is commonly enjoyed during celebratory moments, signifying the deep bond between the giver and the recipient. David's consistent choice of this gift reveals his strong desire for a positive relationship with Stella's father. In essence, the Scotch whiskey not only embodies camaraderie but also symbolizes the care and concern David holds for this familial connection.

Caring and familial love play a pivotal role in small town communities. Stella's profound love for her father is evident as she goes to great lengths to ensure his well-being. At the age of ninety-three and completely blind, Stella had to make the difficult decision of placing him in a nursing home. However, she doesn't let this diminish her devotion, visiting him frequently and always respecting his emotions. Fortunately, Stella's father accepts this situation with grace and understanding. On his birthday, David's presence brings immense joy to Stella's father, prompting her to comment, "Daddy was so pleased to see you, David. A man just means more, for Daddy" (TPL 52).

David lives a life of wealth, in contrast to Stella who leads a humbler life, yet she remains a strong woman. Stella enjoys gardening, with a garden containing both vegetables and "a jungle of wild blackberry bushes" (TPL 32). She takes things in stride, and David is often complimented on her behalf: "A charming wife, a wonderful person at parties, she has such a funny way of looking at things. Sometimes she was a riot. Your wife's a riot" (TPL 53). The reason for their divorce is David's lack of interest in marital relationships. The title "Lichen" itself refers to the marriage between Stella and David, which is akin to the symbiotic relationship between fungus and algae, with one producing more than the other. David is also unstable due to his inconsistent affection, but Stella does not blame him, rather she understands his nature:

Love is strange, it does strange things. David is actually a sensitive person— he's a vulnerable person. Love can make you mean. If you feel dependent on somebody, then you can be mean to them. I understand that in David, says Stella. (TPL 44)

Stella is accommodating and understanding, and even after their divorce, they are still able to share their feelings and thoughts with ease. David trusts Stella to keep his secrets, and sharing with her makes him feel lighter. David has a girlfriend named Catharine and also harbours a secret crush on Dina. Although he doesn't want to discuss his secret feelings with Catharine, he feels comfortable confiding in Stella. As the narrator describes it, "All his ordinary and extraordinary life—even some things it was unlikely she knew about—seemed stored up in her" (TPL 54). Desires are a natural part of human life and can provide hope and motivation. Stella's desire is for gardening, her father's desire is for cars, and David's desire is for women.

Munro focuses on the plight of women in a male-oriented social setup in which women suffer more both directly and indirectly owing to the relationship crisis that is the consequence of a discard in the interpersonal relationship between a man and a woman who are well into their middle and old age, "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)

Even in this story, Munro has employed nature as an active symbolic setting which aesthetically appeals and adds poignancy to the harsh reality of life and its myriad composites of social, familial, and man-woman interactions. Landscape triggers moments of recognition when clarity of insight is mitigated with irony, grotesquery, or even, sometimes, humiliation. All three play to various degrees, complicit as they are with the aesthetic covenants governing the appreciation of landscape, to probe the political and poetic implications of the feminization of the land, which has been one of the constants of Canadian painting and literature since their inception. (Omhovere 82)

The third short story in the collection, "Circle of Prayer," uses its title to symbolize the act of praying in a group and the importance of community living, akin to hand-holding. This story delves into the lives of innocent people residing in a provincial area near a hillside who hold firm beliefs in the transformative power of prayer circles to restore normalcy to their lives. The narrative takes an intense turn in its opening scene, where Trudy impulsively hurls a jug at her daughter, Robin, before questioning her about the disappearance of her grandmother's cherished necklace with a startled exclamation, "Your grandmother's necklace. Why did you do that? Are you insane?" (TPL 255). Despite the evident fear in her initial appearance, Robin's nonchalant demeanor gradually emerges, making

Trudy's distress all the more poignant, especially considering the sentimental value attached to the necklace, as it was a keepsake from Robin's grandmother.

Small-town people cherish and hold dear mementos that remind them of their loved ones, much like Trudy, who values her mother's necklace in loving memory of her. Trudy's daughter, Robin, placed her grandmother's necklace in the casket of her departed friend. However, overwhelmed by emotions for their beloved friend Tracy Lee, the girls managed to sing a funeral song with their sweet voices. The song poignantly reflects their grief and loss, as they sing, "Now, while the blossom still clings to the vine, / I'll taste your strawberries, I'll drink your sweet wine" (TPL 263). As part of a ritual, the girls walk past the coffin and place their belongings inside. Robin also takes part by tenderly depositing her necklace in the casket. The family does not intervene, as they see this act as a genuine gesture of love and affection toward their departed friend.

As Trudy discovers that Robin has placed her grandmother's necklace in the coffin of Tracy Lee, she realizes that her daughter does not understand the true value of the necklace. As Oscar Wilde eloquently stated in his work *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing" (Wilde). For Trudy, the necklace holds great emotional significance because it belonged to her mother. Trudy is already dealing with deep sadness due to her husband Dan living with another woman, intensifying her emotions regarding the necklace. She desperately wants it back and confides in her friend Janet while they make roses out of pink Kleenex. Janet suggests that Trudy pray, stating, "Well. There is one thing you could do; I don't hardly know how to mention it. Pray" (TPL 268).

This episode also underscores the profound sense of devotion and care shared between the characters. It highlights Robin's willingness to part with her cherished necklace, while Trudy struggles to come to terms with this decision. Further, through the character of Janet, Munro introduces the superstitious beliefs prevalent among small-town people. Janet elucidates the tradition of the "Circle of Prayer," where a group of individuals pray for someone who confides their worries to a stranger, with the understanding that it must remain confidential. Trudy remains skeptical of this tradition, especially concerning the recovery of the necklace she threw into the coffin. Janet, however, reminds Trudy of the biblical phrase, "Ask, and it shall be given," encouraging her to voice her desires. Janet asserts, "It's not up to you to say that. You don't determine what's possible or im-

possible. You simply 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" (TPL 269). Despite her initial reservations, Trudy ultimately decides to follow Janet's advice.

Trudy believes in the tradition followed by Janet to retrieve her mother's necklace, even though she does not pray directly to God. In his work *A Philosophy of Boredom*, Lars Fr. H. Svendsen states, "Traditions bring continuity to one's existence, but this sort of continuity is precisely what has been increasingly lost throughout modernity" (Svendsen), highlighting the importance of traditions in maintaining relationships. Each family has its own unique traditions that strengthen relationships, such as dining together, praying together, or singing together. Although it is unclear whether Trudy ultimately retrieves the necklace, the story emphasizes her desire to preserve the memories, the relationship with her deceased mother and daughter, and also their traditions.

Munro is an observant compassionate and understanding individual who pens stories in which she not only portrays the pain and suffering involved in human relationships across various social institutions, but she also, in her own simplest and straightforward way, informs the reader to face life with courage and fortitude. The clarity of her message to her readers become increasingly clear in her later stories when compared to her earlier ones, "What Munro wants us to understand is that life has its own challenges and one has to accept of as a part of life. Munro takes up another aspect of women's sensibility in her fiction when she takes up the issue of deserted women left alone to fend their way in life, [as presented in] "Circle of prayer"." (Mandal & Kumar 170)

From the short story collection *Dear Life* (2012), the title short story, "Dear Life," introduces the protagonist, an unnamed narrator, who shares her life story and familial relationships in a small town near Ontario. Munro's unique talent for vividly portraying small-town life and her deep emotional insight into her characters, particularly the protagonist, is evident from the very beginning.

The protagonist is born in the 1930s and grows up in a middle-class family that can afford a country lifestyle. However, she feels that the environment and the small-town school are inadequate for her education, and she yearns to attend a town school. Despite her father's financial instability, he diligently pays town taxes to ensure that she can attend the town school. Initially, the protagonist feels out of place in her new school and believes

that she lacks knowledge compared to the other students. Nevertheless, she discovers joy in her life in the town:

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)

After starting at a new school, the protagonist befriends a girl named Diane and enjoys visiting Diane's grandmother who treats them equally. However, they often arrive home late due to the protagonist's admiration of the houses they pass on their way home. One house in particular on a small hill, near Waitey streets, catches her attention, where a one-armed veteran of the first world war lives with his wife and some sheep. Although not a typical small town, the place possesses small town qualities.

One of the downsides of life in a small town where everyone knows each other is the prevalence of moral judgment. In such a close-knit community, moral policing tends to become a prominent characteristic. For example, the narrator regularly visits Diane's grandmother, which doesn't sit well with the narrator's own mother. The mother's disapproval is evident when she purposefully ignores Diane's grandmother's friendly wave and instead honks the car horn to call the narrator back.

The mother's reluctance to have the narrator associate with Diane stems from the fact that Diane's mother died from a disease associated with prostitution. This tragic event leads to resentment within the narrator toward their own mother. This pattern of judgment and gossip is not uncommon in small towns, where illegal activities and those involved in them tend to be the subject of relentless scrutiny. In light of this, the narrator's mother firmly advises the narrator to steer clear of Diane, reflecting the prevailing tendency in small-town communities to distance themselves from individuals connected to controversial circumstances.

Munro explores the significance of animals in her short stories, which is a characteristic of small-town life. The narrator's father is keen on raising cows and horses, and he has constructed their enclosures and shelters himself, as the narrator describes, "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 302). Additionally, he has a twelve-acre grassland beneath twelve elm trees, which the narrator assists him in main-

taining by providing water to the animals and cleaning their shelters. The narrator takes pleasure in these tasks. The narrator's home is an old one, situated by the riverbank and surrounded by trees.

Munro employs the characters of the narrator, father, and mother to illustrate the traits of small-town residents. The narrator demonstrates an affinity for nature and animals, deriving enjoyment from caring for and feeding them. Meanwhile, the father undertakes the responsibility of tending to the animals, even constructing their shelters himself. Conversely, the mother exhibits a disdain for illicit behaviours, cautioning her daughter to steer clear of such families.

Alice Munro has made a great contribution to Canadian literary history because of her writing about her own town and nation in a style of realism and the achievements she has gotten in short-story writing. Under her pen, the life of the city, community and family is full of stress and tension in a piece-looking way. The meaningful narration underlying her story embodies ecological colour to novels. (Zhang)

Conclusion

The exploration of Alice Munro's small-town tales immerses readers in the rich tapestry of her narratives. Munro's storytelling allows us to traverse the delicate balance of life in these close-knit communities, where the tension between city and small-town life, the complexities of familial bonds, the weight of tradition, and the significance of moral values are skilfully woven into her prose.

Through the lens of "The Progress of Love," the clash and coexistence of city and small-town existence are witnessed through the eyes of three women, each representing a different facet of this dichotomy. In "Lichen," the profound love shared between a father and daughter, the daughter's passion for gardening to find her peace of mind, and the stark unacceptability of extramarital affairs within the small-town context are explored with poignant clarity. "Circle of Prayer" unveils the enduring traditions and superstitious beliefs that shape small-town funerals, offering a glimpse into the heart of these communities. Finally, "Dear Life" reminds us of the enduring love for small-town houses, nurtured by the art of gardening and fortified by the importance of moral values.

In the end, Munro's short stories serve as windows into a world both intimate and complex, where the seemingly ordinary conceals layers of depth

and meaning. Through her nuanced narratives, she not only celebrates the idiosyncrasies of small-town life but also underscores the universal truths that connect us all. It is a testament to her storytelling prowess that her tales, while rooted in a specific time and place, continue to resonate with readers around the world. To conclude this journey through these stories, readers are left with a deep appreciation for the enduring power of Munro's words and her ability to bring small-town life to life on the page.

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