

## Narrative Ambiguity as an Aesthetic Device in Alice Munro's "The Love of a Good Woman"

*Mrs. Latifa BESSADET*

Maitre-Assistant "A"

Moulay Tahar University of Saida.

Department of English.

### Abstract

Probably, anyone who wants to shorten the way to the art of the contemporary short story may come back to the works of Alice Munro\* in writing this form. She is one of the finest short story-writers of our time. With her genius, she creatively binds the social and personal observations. This can be highly pictured in her large collection of short stories "*The Love of a Good Woman*"<sup>1</sup>. Mainly the first story, which holds the title of this collection, consists of some complex and suggestive factors that lie in a garden of forking paths in which the reader finds himself continuously confused. The use of paradox is among Munro's major aesthetic techniques in writing fiction. It highly contributes in the beauty of the narrative complexity in the story that invades the reader's thoughts and creates his constant expectations about what would be the real version of the story. The aim behind this paper is to mirror the beauty of the American short story through the creativity of a contemporary writer. Although literature is universal and suits any time and any place, but the fact that Munro writes in our time and share with us the same life may make all the difference.

*Key Words: contemporary American short story, aesthetics, narrative ambiguity, paradox.*

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\* Canadian short story writer and Nobel Prize winner. Born "Alice Ann Laidlaw" in 1931 (age 84).

<sup>1</sup> Munro's collection of short stories, won the Giller Prize in 1998.

## Introduction

Munro is one of Canada's most critically acclaimed contemporary authors. Often referred to, as a regional writer because her fiction frequently centers on the culture of rural Ontario. Her strong regional focus is one of the features of her fiction. In "*The Love of a Good Woman*" Munro recalls an annual event in her early life, the flooding of the Maitland River, which used to happen in Wingham, Ontario every spring. Therefore, it is not surprising that drowning is frequent in her fiction. As in "*The Love of a Good Woman*" Munro designs this drowning in a more mysterious way. The drowning of Mr. Willens, the town optometrist, in the flooded Peregrine River which may be seen as a suicide, an accident or rather a murder acted to look like an accident.

The story begins by a narrator who describes the lives of three children who once discovered a man's corpse drowned into the river. Munro keeps on trying to describe how the accident really happened, but still without giving any single cue of murder. Amazingly, and in a very careful way, she takes us to another story and entirely other characters keeping the same flow of events and without feeling the least of interruption, she introduces Enid's life-story, her weak father in the hospital and her unsatisfied mother who always complains about the nature of her daughter's job. Actually, this is what symbolizes Munro's cues in fiction; there is always something new, which is striking into the middle.

Enid is the strongest candidate for the role of a *good woman*, "... and here she was, here was Enid, working her life pretending it was not so. Trying to ease people, trying to be good, an angel of mercy." (*The Love of a Good Woman*: 52)<sup>2</sup> After her graduation from the nursing school, she became a practical nurse performing, as her disapproving mother put

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<sup>2</sup> Munro, A. (1998) *The love of a Good Woman*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc.

it, "miserable, backbreaking work in miserable primitive houses for next to no money". (43)

Throughout her career as a nurse, Enid had been so diligent and people loved her. Nevertheless, this time it was not the case. Enid hates Mrs. Quinn's body and its smell, "she disliked this particular body, all the particular signs of its disease. The smell of it and the discoloration..." (38) But how can we explain this behavior, does it show Enid's suspicion that did something bad in her past life that there is a secret behind her sickness? Alternatively, may be Enid has a certain feeling towards Rupert, Mrs. Quinn's husband, that pushes her to hate his wife.

In fact, Alice Munro as a short story writer has been well known for her use of paradox. Munro often uses the simple to get to the complex, exactly as she uses Del Jordon in "*Lives of Girls and Women*"<sup>3</sup>, an ordinary girl who explains what she hopes to achieve in writing a work of fiction about small-town life in Ontario. Del works hard to portray not only what is actually *real* about the town, but also what is meaningfully *true* and in order to do so she must capture the dull, ordinary simplicity of her neighbors' daily lives. She must reveal what is hidden and what is invisible. Paradox, on the other hand, offers Munro the genius whereby she imprisons our minds inside her thoughts by giving a whole series of contradictions. Therefore, if the reader does not find his person in one character, he may find it in another. Moreover, Munro suggests ideas that are beyond our line of vision. These ideas give the beauty of the story and if you miss one of them, it would be a big loss.

Munro's prose reveal the ambiguities of life and her style usually puts the fantastic next to the ordinary with each undercutting the other in ways that simply and effortlessly

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<sup>3</sup> Munro's only novel and her second book after "Dance of the Happy Shades" in 1971.

evoke life. In this context, Catherine Sheldrick Ross\* states, “the stories of Alice Munro present ordinary experiences so that they appear extraordinary, invested with a kind of magic”.<sup>4</sup>

Paradox in “*The Love of a Good Woman*” lies on the mixture between love and hatred. Although they are, two extremes but they are tightly linked and serve as very important factors in the story, the same as they do in our daily life. The paradox of love and hatred is not a merely fictional item that Munro has used; it is a real-life contradiction that we all experience. Indeed, it has been a case study for so many researchers in the field of psychoanalysis.

In his book “*Instincts and their Vicissitudes*”<sup>5</sup>, Sigmund Freud\* talks about hatred and its affection in society. He states that hatred reflects largely the external world, which means that if someone has deep hate toward one of his friends or family, this is going to reflect his relations with others in his environment: “At the very beginning it seems the external world, objects, and what is hatred are identical” (136). Freud asserts that “hate, as a relation to objects, is older than love” (139) and he originates it to the ego’s self-preservation instincts rather than sexual instincts. Hatred can be bound together with the latter to become *sadism*.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, it can be deduced that “hatred is a kind of self-preservation, to the extent of destroying the others, while loving in a way... of making the other exist” (136). This

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\* Professor and Dean of the School of Library and Information Studies University of Western Ontario.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Sheldrick Ross, (July 2002). “Too Many Things: Reading Alice Munro’s *The Love of a Good Woman*”, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 71(3), pp. 786-810.

<sup>5</sup> Freud, S. (1915) *Instincts and their Vicissitudes*. London: Hogarth Press Limited.

\* The founder of psychoanalysis, (1856-1939)

<sup>6</sup> The enjoyment or pleasure as a result of the others’ suffering.

opposition, therefore, is highly involved in the two women characters Enid and Mrs. Quinn. Enid is the person who is always trying to supply Rupert and his daughters with love and hope, while Mrs. Quinn represents the bad-mother and the indifferent housekeeper who is destroying not only herself but also every single sign of hope around her. Still this is not evident, because with Munro's ambiguous characters, no one could know who the lover is or who the hater is.

Freud also writes about the purified pleasure ego, which places the characteristics of pleasure above all others, he states: "love is originally narcissistic, then passes over on to objects which have been incorporated into the extended ego, and expresses the motor efforts of the ego towards these objects as sources of pleasure".(138)

Albert Singer\*, on the other hand, credits Freud with the insight that all human attributes (including sex) are in some way developmental, when he says that "the most that Freud could infer from his scenario of human development in the idea that a great deal of adult sexuality includes trace of affective occurrences that belong to the individual's earlier life".<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, Enid has been sent to the Quinn's as "*an angel of mercy*" (52) not only to nurse Jeanette with medicines but Rupert with love as well and even to nurse the two little daughters with some interest that they usually miss from their mom. Just after we feel that there is a strong love between Enid and Rupert, we discover that Enid used to insult him when they were together at school. As if Munro wants to make us feel that, this may be the reason behind Rupert being a murderer. While we are following Jeanette's narrative we find out that her husband Rupert is the murderer of her lover Mr. Willens. Just before the end of the story we get the

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\* Australian Philosopher born in 1946 (age 69), he is one of the best-known modern philosophers and the most controversial.

<sup>7</sup> Singer, P. (1975) *Animal Liberation*. New York: Harpers Collins Publishers Inc.,

impression that the murder is nothing but lies that Jeanette creates to keep Enid away from her husband. Later, at the end of the story we simply resume our suspicious about the existence of the murder by Rupert's disappearance from the scene.

### Conclusion

Munro expresses feelings that evoke responses from any sensitive reader, but are at the same time explorations and discoveries of the writer's own emotion as a woman. Undoubtedly, it is her exquisite aesthetic use of paradox that enables her to get the complex through the simple and to reach what is unpredictable. Hence, it is Enid, the ordinary woman, who leads us beyond the boundaries of the title and makes us discover how love is fighting to survive in a world full of hatred.

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