

## *The Progress of Love: Enfolding the Magic of Everyday Dailiness*

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*The Progress of Love*, Munro's sixth collection of short-stories contains eleven independent stories. The stories of this collection continue Munro's exploration of the connections between 'reality' and 'fiction' — the way things are and the ways they might be interpreted. In tone and tenor, the stories move ahead of the earlier works: *Lives of Girls and Women* and *The Beggar Maid*. We find more frequent shifts in time and perspectives to 'unsettle' univocal interpretation of events. Multiple contradictory layers of meanings are carried through digressions that create the illusion of incompleteness and elude the possibility of any single fixed meaning. Narratives of the present interwoven with reminiscence consistently invoke past selves and past experiences. We find ourselves participating in the semblance of time layered. Coral Ann Howells calls this "emergence of story via digressions which generate new meanings and resonances."<sup>1</sup>In the process of their telling the probable meanings are disrupted, move through a maze and come to a state of indeterminacy.

The focus on man-woman relationship and the changes occurring with the passage of time concurrently reveal their interaction with the mundane realities of life and constitute the themes of these stories. The frequent shifts "allow room for the interplay of shifting multiple meanings and of multiple human interests."<sup>2</sup> Regardless of their sequence in the collection, the stories can be classified into three major categories on the basis of their narrative point of view. The stories — "The Progress of Love," "Jesse and Meribeth" and "Miles City, Montana" — have artist figures as their narrators like the first-person narrative of Del Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women*, try to understand the indefinable reality that surround them and, in the process, produce their own fictional versions of reality they found "true," if not "real." In the remaining stories of the collection, Munro dispenses away with first person narrative voice employing two variations of third person narration. While in the stories "The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink," "Fits," "Circle Prayer" and "Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux," Munro's 'not fully' omniscient third person narrators follow the consciousness of a main character in the story; the similar third-person narration in the stories "Lichen," "Eskimo," "A Queer Streak" and "White Dump" follow the consciousness of several characters shifting from one to another. The three stories I have chosen, "The Progress of Love," "Fits" and "Lichen" illustrate these three varieties of points of view.

The title story "The Progress of Love" is about the memories of a woman named Euphemia. She is a divorcee with two school-going children. When the story opens Euphemia called Phemie at home, gets a telephone call from her father conveying the news of her mother's death. This event takes her back to her childhood memories of her mother, "my mother's talk and stories."<sup>3</sup>The stories of the narrator's mother, like the stories of Munro herself, are "like a cloud you couldn't see through, or get to the end of" (13). One such story that the narrator still remembers is about her grandmother. Her mother always used to tell her of her own mother's suicide attempt as a result of her unhappy marriage. When Marietta, the narrator's mother woke up early one morning she found her mother "standing on an old chair...which she had pulled out to the middle of the barn floor...There was a shadow on her neck. The shadow was a rope, a noose on the end of a rope that hung down from a beam overhead". (10)For Marietta, it meant "that was what I always heard my mother say. That was end of it". (13) But Aunt Beryl's memories, sister of the narrator's mother, of the same event completely contradict her mother's

version. When Aunt Beryl comes from California to their house, the narrator as well as the readers are informed that the suicide was a joke played by their mother to provoke their father, nothing more than a 'game' spoiled by Beryl. Beryl says:

My eyes followed that rope up and up and I saw it was just hanging over the beam, just flung there — it wasn't tied at all! Marietta hadn't noticed that, the German lady hadn't noticed it. But I just spoke up and said, 'Mama, how are you going to manage to hang yourself without that rope tied around the beam?' (22)

Now the problem with the narrator as well as for the reader is how to reconcile this narrative tension born out of the inconsistency in the details and offers entirely opposite interpretations of the same event. The narrator herself self-reflexively meditates upon this problem: "Why shouldn't Beryl's version of the same event be different from my mother? Beryl was strange in every way — everything about her was slanted, seen from a new angle. It was my mother's version that held, for a time. It absorbed Beryl's story, closed over it. But Beryl's story didn't vanish; it stayed sealed off for years, but it wasn't gone" (23). The narrator here acknowledges that there is always something left of the past memories that are resonant, stored inside in some place of the mind mistaken and never satisfactory, always baffling. Phemie, like Munro seems to believe that truth is to be found "in connections that cannot be investigated but have to be relied on."<sup>23</sup> This highlights the notion that 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. What is true for Marietta is untrue for Beryl and there is always a possibility that the teller may have distorted the reality in her fictitious account. Which version to believe is entirely volitional, an urgency to invest the experience with specific imagery. The differing perceptions of the sisters, Beryl and Marietta may just not be posited as the writer's deliberately deployed ambiguity or indeterminacy, they rather urge the readers to get to know the motivations of such difference. Our stories and the way in which we tell them are not only *self-constitutive*, but also constitutive of our relations to others.

It is not only the narrator's mother who strives to capture the elusive and indefinable reality through the process of selection and mediation in order to emerge from the confusion of her parent's troubled married life but also the narrator who wants to come to terms with her broken relationship by constructing her own make-believe world of reality. Years later while showing her old house to her male friend Bob Marks, Phemie narrates a particular incident from her childhood. She tells about her mother who in this house burned the money she received in inheritance before her father's eyes: "And my father, standing by, seems not just to be permitting her to do this but to be protecting her" (30). Her father did not stop her and Phemie sees that as a kind of love. When Marks says that some people would consider it lunacy, Phemie remembers, 'that had been Beryl's opinion, exactly' (26). But as the story proceeds, another version of the same event is presented that contradicts Phemie's version. In a conversation with Beryl, her mother had herself confessed "he wasn't there. Nobody was there". (29) Phemie's version upholds Munro's belief that the reality is always mediated through the narrator's subjective perceptions and desires that shape her understanding of a situation and sometimes attributing details that were not there but which one firmly believes in. Phemie is divorced and sees in the marriage of her parents a strong binding love which allows them a lot of space to act out their innermost yearnings. Phemie says:

How hard it is for me to believe that I made that up. It seems so much the truth it is the truth; it's what I believe about them. I haven't stopped believing it. But I have stopped

telling that story... I didn't stop just because it wasn't, strictly speaking, true. I stopped because I saw that I had to give up expecting people to see it the way I did (30).

The excess of memories scrambled and disarranged by imagination leaves a lot unaccounted and unknowable. In drawing the mosaic of the mind, Munro delineates the structures of imagination, how real episodes are sometimes rearranged by our unconscious in the pattern of believing or sensing as credible. The psychological need to set one's story in familiar terms however cannot be resisted. The point of view of characters - Beryl, Marietta and Phemie evocatively behold the vicissitudes of man-woman relationship and in Phemie's musing at the end some kind of thesis seems inscribed — some values of the old marriages which endure and survive: "Moments of kindness and reconciliation are worth having, even if the parting has come sooner or later. I wonder if those moments aren't valued, and deliberately gone after, in the setups some people like myself have now, than they were in those old marriages, where love and grudges could be growing underground, so confused and stubborn, it must have seemed they had forever" (30-31). Thoughts emerging in the consciousness of Phemie, divorced and a single mother musing over the binding love of her parents- a reality or make belief world gives her the strength to live alone through the materialistic world savaged by selfish interest drowning compassion and endurance from modern day relationships. Munro's fictive storytelling 'disengages standard conditions of assertions, it invites imaginative rather than belief-based involvement, it creates worlds and characters, and it encourages participation, not a concern for correspondence with the facts.'<sup>4</sup> The reading experience is like living moments so natural and common that as readers we draw from our lived experiences 'filling in' to satisfy curiosity to understand the motivations or logic behind the reasoning of fictive characters here it is Phemie. The next story "Fits" reminds us of many sensational reports of violent murders appearing in newspapers. The tone of the story in its poker-faced detachment relates an event of murder-suicide of an old childless couple, Nora and Walter Weeble, in their house at Gilmore:

The two people who died were in their early sixties. They were both tall and well built, and carried a few pounds of extra weight. He was gray-haired, with a square, rather flat face. A broad nose kept him from looking perfectly dignified and handsome. Her hair was blonde, a silvery blonde that does not strike you as artificial anymore— though you know it is not natural— because so many women of that age have acquired it.<sup>5</sup>

This couple was not a native of Gilmore. They had lived in Hamilton where Mr. Weeble was an accountant and Mrs. Weeble, a teacher. They came to this town because a relative of theirs used to live here and it was cheap to get a house here. In fact, they had no acquaintance in the town except the narrator, Robert Kuiper, and his family as they were neighbours. Just a few days before this unprecedented event, they had returned from a trip to Mexico and had dined with the Kuiper family. The whole conundrum of the story lies in Robert's attempt to understand the discrepancies and deceptions of inconsistent and varying accounts of this violent and inexplicable murder-suicide mystery and, in the process, the narrator shifts his attention away from the event to re-examine his personal life with wife Peg and her two children, Clayton and Kevin.

It was Peg Kupier, who first found the dead bodies of the couple in their house when she went there to deliver eggs. She does not scream, she does not run to tell others and she does not phone her husband. She simply goes to the sheriff and reports what she found. Then she goes to work without bothering to share the news of this unfortunate event with her co-workers. The third-person narrator focuses on the consciousness of Robert who hears the story "first from the constable's report, then from Peg's" (111). The inconsistencies in facts about the murder scene in

the accounts of both person troubles his consciousness and he unsuccessfully attempts to uncover the motive behind it. While Peg claims that she has seen Mr. Weeble's leg with the foot in its shoe when she approached the bedroom, the constable's report contradicts her version by revealing that it was not his leg but left of Mr. Weeble's head blown off by the shotgun as he triggered his head off after killing his wife. Robert is in dilemma whether to confront Peg about this 'one discrepancy, one detail, one lie' (130). Robert thinks:

Not a leg. Not the indicative leg, whole and decent in its trousers, the shod foot. That was not what anybody turning at the top of the stairs would see and would have to step over, step through, in order to go into the bedroom and look at the rest of what was there (131).

Although Robert does not succeed in solving the mystery of why Peg tells this lie, or why Mr. Weeble has committed this atrocious act, he too has a significant moment of vision that provides some clues. As he approaches a snow covered junkyard in the dark, he cannot perceive what the odd shapes are:

A congestion of shapes, with black holes in them... They did not look like anything he knew. They did not look like anything, except perhaps a bit like armed giants half collapsed, frozen in combat, or like the jumbled towers of a crazy small-scale city... He kept waiting for explanation, and not getting one, until he was very close. He was so close he could almost have touched one of these monstrosities before he saw that they were just old cars and even a school bus that had been pushed in under the trees and left (130-31).

This vision that Robert thinks he must tell Peg "how close he had to get before he saw that what amazed him and bewildered him so was nothing but old wrecks" (131) has a metaphoric function in the story as it draws the reader's attention to the fact that often subjective interpretations of the events carry incomplete and limited view of reality. The metaphor 'black holes' suggests the elusive and mysterious nature of events that require inside-out and close inspection to reach up to possibly valid interpretations. Regarding the significance of the vision at junkyard and metaphors used in this section, Howell suggests:

This is the one piece of promising-looking figurative language in the story and it functions as a kind of epiphany; or it could have been so in a modernist short story, an image for the lie at the centre of Peg's version or for the elusiveness of meaning in the murder-suicide. However Munro does not tell it as epiphany, focusing meaning; instead she does the opposite... These heaps have very little if any meaning in literal sense, but they are presented as a jumble of signifiers whose appearance is usually deceptive. On closer examination Robert sees that the mysterious glittering monstrosities in the snow are only old cars and that the black holes are their gutted insides.<sup>6</sup>

Since Robert feels the need to get very close to what appears extraordinary before he can see the shapes for what they really are, this moment provides some explanation for why Peg permits herself to walk over a human head for a better view of their reality. Robert's discovery in the junkyard also serves to mirror his larger quest for understanding of the murder/suicide next door which provides the impetus for the entire story. The only insight reached in regards to this event, however, is that acts like Mr. Weeble's when examined closely, is in fact commonplace, as Peg's son suggests when Robert compares the murder to an earthquake: "Earthquakes and volcanoes aren't freaks... If you want to call that a fit, you'd have to call it a periodic fit. Such as people have, married people have" (126). Munro leaves a lot to be inferred in rendering a story of this kind. The snippet of conversation between Peg and her son, Clayton, makes Robert as well as the reader draw some idea about the violent past of Peg's earlier marriage:

“When you and Dad used to have those fights?” Clayton said. “Remember, after we first moved to town? When he would be home? Over by the car wash? When you used to have those fights, you know what I used to think? I used to think one of you was going to come and kill me with a knife” (126).

The relationship of marriage is fraught with the possibility of intense violent emotions that may at times lead to murderous rage. Perhaps this story is a kind of revelation how domestic violence can turn appalling. Also it offers many insights on human psychology. Peg while relating the scenario of the crime misses out noticing the blown out head of Mr. Weeble near the entrance, deliberately or not we never know. But if she genuinely did not see the sodden piece of flesh, it may be inferred that her mind is incapable of registering such gruesome details. Peg’s selective viewing can be attributed to her unconscious which in an attempt to protect her from the upsurge of violent memories curbs her consciousness to perceive the event overall. Only when the story is appraised from a psychodynamic perspective, it becomes fathomable.

The next story “Lichen” shows a gradual maturity and sophistication in the fiction of Munro which presents the story from both male as well as female point of view. Generally the stories of Munro privilege female experiences and perceptions but in this story she probes into male psychology and displays a consummate understanding of masculine behavioural pattern. The narrative opens with the point of view of David who has come to visit his ex-wife with his girlfriend Catherine. Describing Stella to Catherine, David says “Look what’s happened to Stella. She’s turned into a troll.”<sup>7</sup> He thinks that Stella’s being careless about her ‘looks’ is not without a purpose — she is one of the “Man-haters” (33). He says:

It isn’t just an acceptance of natural deterioration — oh, no, it’s much more. Stella would always dramatize. But it isn’t just Stella. There’s the sort of woman who has to come bursting out of the female envelope at this age, flaunting fat or an indecent scrawniness, sprouting warts and facial hair, refusing to cover pasty veined legs, almost gleeful about it, as if this was what she’d wanted to do all along (33).

In fact Munro seems to voice the discomfiture felt by men about those women whose body language and behavioural pattern do not register any visible consciousness of male presence or the desire to “look good”, to be beheld as attractive. David’s view of Stella cannot be taken as statements of facts. A woman gaining autonomy herself, unfettering herself from the compulsions of looking good and desirable induces insecurity in men.

Stella is living her own life. Being separated from David for eight years she has come to terms with her single status. She has developed a strong rapport and bonding with the neighbours and she often distributes to them homemade jams from the berries of her garden. She is also a member of the historical society, play-reading group, a church choir, the winemakers’ club, and an informal group in which the members entertain one another weekly at dinner parties. She has also started writing and informs David and Catherine that she is writing an article on the old lighthouse for the historical society. Alone in the solitariness of the house, Stella leads “a busy and sometimes chaotic life” (35) and is happy even without a man in her life.

Stella is one of Munro’s mature female characters who have gracefully come to terms with their advancing age but David is yet to overcome his muddled up sexual instincts and is “still caught on the sea-saw of immature fantasies and frenetic philandering, elaborately prolonging his youth with games involving a factiously furtive prurience.”<sup>8</sup> He attempts to hide his ageing, tilting his head back so that Stella could not notice that he is dyeing his hair. Bragging about his romantic relationships to Stella he wants to prove his sexual prowess and potency. In fact the advancing age is making him insecure and unlike Stella he is yet to come to



terms with his ageing. In a relationship with Catherine, yet he is courting a new woman whose naked snapshot he shows to Stella. The nakedness of Dina is very exciting and titillating to David but Stella views it very differently. When David first displays the naked snapshot, Stella views the pubic hair of Dina as lichen or moss on a rock. It appears to her like “the dark pelt of an animal, with the head and tail and feet chopped off. Dark silky pelt of some unlucky rodent” (42). Munro employs very unfamiliar images to describe the unusual ways the characters perceive an object or a situation. In investing animal imagery to the human genitals she invokes grotesque visual. To women, female nakedness generally speaking evokes appalling sexualized female vulnerability; as Stella sees it as a bruised wounded rodent.

For Stella, David is a “big bad boy” (49) still locked in his adolescence, his school boy longing to draw the attention of girls remains incurable. In fact she has become a kind of mother-figure to David and completely understands him. Stella still holds a formidable influence over him and he still confides all his secrets to her. She knows almost everything about him and can sense the motives behind his actions. David muses:

This white-haired woman walking beside him through the nursing home dragged so much of weight with her—a weight not just of his sexual secrets but of his middle-of-the-night speculations about God, his psychosomatic chest pains, his digestive sensitivity, his escape plans, which once included her and involved Africa and Indonesia. All his ordinary and extraordinary life—even some things it was unlikely she knew about—seemed stored up in her. He could never feel any lightness, any secret and victorious expansion, with a woman who knew so much. She was bloated with all she knew (54).

Coming out of the nursing home after visiting Stella’s father, David embraces Stella. But he is embarrassed when a young girl passes them. An expression of slight discomfort appears on his face and Stella reads his emotions very easily, comforting him saying, “Never mind, David. I could be your sister. You could be comforting your sister. Older sister” (54). Munro invests in David a persona which is divided in multiple selves and one might see in it an endeavour to rewrite the traditional male text that presented women as immature, vulnerable and delusional depending on male-figure for stability. In this story, the women character, Stella, is portrayed as stable, self-possessed and mature and it is David who is presented as insecure, frivolous, fickle and phony. Running after much younger girls, he lacks the emotional maturity and stability that Stella has achieved.

Munro’s quest narratives record the intense struggle of female characters to rediscover themselves — to cast-off images and clichés that invested meaning to their journeys or personhood. We encounter them willing to drive and push themselves to the extremities of situations that ironically do not end up in conventional epiphany but in greater insight into the many more opaque dimensions of human existence crystallized in suprarational or magical suggestion — as if the narrator character like the author Munro is gifted with the uncanny vision and imagery. Most of these narratives are renderings of solitary female characters despite a semblance of a society around them. In this sense their narratives yield an amazingly rich world of female introspection, phantasmagoria traversing into esoteric and exotic. We must consider them as counterpointing the stories of male writers that present male characters as questers, having the privilege of thinking, judging or observing too deeply that gives meaning to the elusive moments of experiences.

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