

ISSN: 0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

BI-MONTHLY REFEREED AND INDEXED, OPEN ACCESS E-JOURNAL

The Criterion



October 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-5

5th Year of Open Access



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Munro's *Boys and Girls*: A Portrayal of the Lives of Girls and Women**Khushbu Trehan**Research Scholar,
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Now, what specifically defines the situation of woman is that she- a free and autonomous being like all human creatures- nevertheless discovers and chooses herself in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other. They propose to turn her into an object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is for ever to be transcended by another consciousness which is essential and sovereign. The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject- which always posits itself as essential- and the demands of a situation which constitutes her as inessential.

- Beauvoir (1984)

Alice Munro is a well-regarded living short-story writer in Canada. Munro's honest aspiration got the encouragement on 10 October 2013, at the age of 82, when she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature with the Swedish Academy cited her as the "Master of the Contemporary Short Story". In Canada, she has won the Governor General's Award, the Giller Prize, the Trillium Book Award, and the Libris Award.

Although in the last forty years, the short story has been characterized as a too little recognized and fading literary form yet Alice Munro's creative talent has continued to go her own way. This has made a publicity-shy writer one of the most highly praised writers of the last half of the twentieth century who has worked a long way towards the neglected short form and earned Canada more international recognition. Spanning almost 45 years, Munro has written phenomenal 14 short story collections in which the moral dramas faced by every woman have always been the center of her stories.

Alice Munro was born in 1931 and grew up in Whingham, a small rural town in southwestern Ontario (Canada), on a farm to a family of poor farmers under the conditions of deprivation and hardships. Munro's childhood was at times lonely and isolated, it was on the whole a delightful one:

'I thought my life was interesting. There was always a great sense of adventure... we lived outside the whole social structure because we didn't live in the town and we didn't live in the country. We lived in this kind of little ghetto where all the bootleggers and prostitutes and hangers-on lived. Those were the people I knew. It was a community of outcasts. I had that feeling about myself...I didn't belong to any

nice middle class so I got to know more types of kids. It didn't seem bleak to me at the time. It seemed full of interest.'

Consequently, the settings that Alice Munro creates in her fiction are bound largely by the landscape of Southwestern Ontario and by the people who inhabit that landscape. Chronologically progressed through situations and experiences in her own life, Munro's small-town fictional milieu depicts the struggle for a socially acceptable existence that results in strained relationships and moral conflicts.

Munro finds the extraordinary within the ordinary and consistently produced work that explores human relationships through ordinary everyday events. She tries to transform an ordinary common situation into something that is mysterious in a very remarkable way. Her primary preoccupation is the monotony of various human relationships and their failures. She focuses on the themes like family relationships, love, marriage and the social relationships depicting an acute sensitivity to the tenderness, compromises, commitments, betrayal and snatched passions.

The recurrent and very personal theme of Munro's short stories is the dilemmas of the adolescent girls coming to terms with family and a small town. She artistically portrays women's predicament in relation to her parents, family, social and professional life. Her fiction addresses the problems of women of all the age like teenage girls, adolescent girls, middle aged and of elderly. Her prime importance is to depict the experience of a woman in different roles as daughter, sister, lover, wife, mother, etc. with a color of realism. Munro's fiction is fascinated with the failings of love and complexities of female sexuality which are largely responsible for the psychological and emotional crises of women. She has an obsession to write about the frustrations and compulsions of relationships and the refusal faced by women in social and professional life bound by narrow definitions of womanhood making her stories appear from a feminist approach.

Munro's first published book- *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) is a collection of fifteen stories such as Walker Brother Cowboy, The Shining Houses, Images, Thanks for the Ride, The Office, An Ounce of Cure, The Time of Death, Day of the Butterfly, Boys and Girls, Post Card, Red Dress-1946, Sunday Afternoon, A Trip to the Coast, The Peace of Utrecht and *Dance of the Happy Shades*. She was awarded the Governor General's Literary Award- Canada's highest literary prize in 1969 for this collection of short stories.

Munro narrates the real life situations of girls and women in this first collection of stories. The collection of stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* reflects woman's point of view concerning her surroundings and man-woman relationships.

In the *Dance of the Happy Shades* Munro investigates various gender roles assigned to women by the male dominated-patriarchal world. Each story in the Munro's collection of *Dance of the Happy Shades* seems to share a common theme that is the struggle of women for human freedom and equality.

'*Boys and Girls*' is phenomenal short story in Munro's *Dance of the happy shades* portraying problems in the lives of girls and women. The story deals with the theme of

female role in society revealing that the male dominated-patriarchal world has a fixed definition of what a girl and a boy is.

The narrator of the story is a young female character (Unnamed). The protagonist, although a girl by birth, has behaviors and ways of thinking that the society considered to be “boyish”. She is also considered to be the “son of the family”, helping her father with all kinds of jobs on a fox farm.

‘he had fitted a tin drum on a wheelbarrow, for bringing water down to the pen. This was my job in summer, when the foxes had to have water twice a day. Between nine and ten o’clock in the morning, and again after supper, I filled the drum at the pump and trundled it down through the barnyard to the pens, where I parked it, and filled my watering can and went along the streets. Laird came too, with his little cream and green gardening can, filled too full and knocking against his legs and slopping water on his canvas shoes. I had the real watering can, my father’s, though I could only carry it three-quarters full.’

‘Besides carrying water I helped my father when he cut the long grass, and the lamb’s quarter and flowering money-musk, that grew between the pens. He cut with the scythe and I raked into piles.

All this work is an everyday part of life to the narrator. She takes great pride in helping her father with the outdoor chores and considers the father figure as an ideal. She becomes enthusiastic and glows red with pleasure when her father introduces her as his “hired man”.

‘My father did not talk to me unless it was about job we were doing.

‘Nevertheless I worked willingly under his eyes, and with a feeling of pride.’

‘One time a feed salesman came down into the pens to talk to him and my father said, “like to have you meet my new hired man.” I turned away and raked furiously, red in the face with pleasure.’

Laird, the girl's brother, is very young in the beginning of the story unaware about the world. One day the children’s mother said something to her husband that made the girl’s entire nature furiously protested showing gender differences pertaining in the society.

I wheeled the tank up to the barn, where it was kept, and I heard my mother saying, “Wait till Laird gets a little bigger, then you’ll have a real help.”

The protagonist girl narrator mostly has the feelings of dislike and distrust for her mother because she feels that her mother could force her into the same role of monotonous work inside the house that the mother does and obviously despised of herself. Munro

articulates the psychic frustrations and compulsions of being a girl in male dominated culture.

‘it was an odd thing to see my mother down at the barn. She did not often come out of the house unless it was to do something- hang out the wash or dig potatoes in the garden. She looked out of the place, with her lumpy legs, not touched by the sun, her apron still on and damp across the stomach from the supper dishes. Her hair was tied up in a kerchief, wisps of it falling down. She would tie her hair up like this in the morning, saying she did not have time to do it properly, and it would stay tied up all day. It was true, too; she really did not have time. These days our porch was piled with baskets of peaches and grapes and pears, bought in town, and onions and tomatoes and cucumbers grown at home, all waiting to be made into jelly and jam and preserves, pickles and chilli sauce.

Alice Munro presents the oppressive situation of Canadian women as an underdog who works the whole day without any recognition in the family and the society.

My mother was too tired and preoccupied to talk to me, she had no heart to tell about the Normal School Graduation Dance; sweat trickled over her face and she was always counting her breath, pointing at jars, dumping cups of sugar.

The unnamed girl narrator revolts against the traditions and conventions of Canadian male dominated society who seeks freedom from the house work. She refuses to be diminished like her mother and desires to have a status in the society unlike her mother.

It seemed to me that work in the house was endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing; work done out of doors, and in my father’s service, was ritualistically important.

Munro depicts the clash between her ideas and those of her mother. The story reveals the agony of the innocent girl child which is largely due to bondage under male culture which results in disobedience to be freed from house hold chores.

I was given jobs to do and I would sit at the table peeling peaches that had been soaked in the hot water, or cutting up onions, my eyes smarting and streaming. As soon as I was done I ran out of the house, trying to get out of earshot before my mother thought of what she wanted me to do next. I hated the hot dark kitchen in summer, the green blinds and the flypapers, the same old oilcloth table and wavy mirror and bumpy linoleum.

Narrator’s father always recognizes her role in the family as a “son” more than a “daughter”. On the contrary, the mother wants her daughter to behave like what the society expects a girl to do.

‘And then I can use her more in the house,’ I heard my mother say. She had a dead-quiet, regretful way of talking about me that always made me uneasy. ‘I just get my back turned and she runs off. It’s not like I had a girl in the family at all.’

The young girl got another chance to hear quite a few alarming things related to girls and feel a social pressure associated with the word *girl* when the children’s grandmother stayed with the family for a few weeks. Munro has presented a very tender real picture of an innocent girl’s circumstances in life and her efforts in rediscovering of self and inventing a new identity.

“Girls don’t slam doors like that.” “Girls keep their knees together when they sit down.”

Munro’s protagonist is presented as a highly sensitive young girl with a certain capacity to question the social codes. Unlike her mother, she tries to achieve a role in life that fits her expectations. The innocent young girl wanted to find answers to these conventions but the unexpected worst response that the narrator heard was-

“That’s none of the girls’ business.”

When the protagonist turned eleven in the winters, she is trained to obey the patriarchal dogma and eventually, her fantasies underwent a considerable change.

‘The word girl had formerly seemed to me innocent and unburdened, like the word child; now it appeared that it was no such thing. A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become.’

Munro hints that the seemingly masculine girl fails to fight the social pressure and gradually accepts herself as a passive object turning into a sensitive young lady.

"I had not thought about it very often since, but sometimes when I was busy, working at school, or standing in front of the mirror combing my hair and wondering if I would be pretty when I grew up, the whole scene would flash into my mind."

Alice Munro is one of the greatest short story writers alive who leaves no doubt in the reader’s mind about the substantial changes that had occurred in the narrator’s internal world. The girl who earlier had courageous and bold dreams started making her part of bedroom fancy and decorative.

“I arranged myself tightly under the covers and went on with one of the stories I was telling myself from night to night. These stories were about myself, when I had grown a little older; they took place in a

world that was recognizably mine, yet one that presented opportunities for courage, boldness and self-sacrifice, as mine never did. I rescued people from a bombed building.'

More importantly, the plot of her bedtime stories had also significantly transformed. This time, the girl is romantically attracted to her class mate or her male teacher. The imaginary story also concerned with what the girl looked like—what dress did she wear and how long her hair was. All these evidences prove that the tomboyish girl surrendered herself to the definition of what a girl should be.

'A story might start off in the old way, with a spectacular danger, a fire or wild animals, and for a while the girl might rescue people; then things would change around, and instead, somebody would rescuing me. It may be a boy from our class at school, or even Mr. Campbell, our teacher, who tickled girls under the arms.'

Boys and girls is one of the Munro's breathtaking stories that depict an intricate web of relationships. Her miraculous mastery of the short fiction makes the story unforgettable.

Munro's childhood experiences in the small town have taught her to unfold the dilemmas and hardships of women in the form of stories. The author has artistically portrayed the lives of girls and women in the short story *Boys and Girls* in the *Dance of the Happy Shades*. *Boys and Girls* is a classical coming of age tale in which the young narrator girl worked on jobs that are usually carried out by sons in a normal family. The tomboyish narrator girl is courageous, physically strong, adventurous, and highly imaginative in the beginning of the story. Despite of her young age, she works on the fox farm with her father and performs the tasks which involve hard physical labor. But as the story progresses and she turns eleven, the reality of the adulthood becomes closer to her and we observe subtle changes in the behavior of innocent girl to what the society defines as a "girl's".

Mining the dark silences of provincial Canadian life, Munro shines in her short story where the subject matter is classic Munro: secrets, love, betrayal, and the stuff of ordinary lives. The narrator dislikes household chores and disobeys her mother showing a natural revolt against age-old repressive norms of society put forth by men. The author has beautifully portrayed the transition of seemingly masculine girl into a sensitive young lady.

Widely recognized as one of the greatest short story writers, Alice Munro consistently focuses on social and personal divisions. Munro's inquisitive character (girl narrator) gradually begins to inquire the basic assumptions under which they live but she is not allowed to even ask subject-related questions. In a nutshell, Munro has beautifully portrayed the lives of girls and women with the experiences and events in the short story *Boys and Girls*, a gender-role related title in the anthology *Dance of the Happy Shades*.

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