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## The Significance and Impact of a 'House' in Alice Munro's *The Shining Houses*

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### Abstract:

This paper analyzes the importance and impact of a 'house' in the lives of the characters of Alice Munro's short story "The Shining Houses". The house depicts one's belonging to a space which one creates. An individual's memories and sentiments are attached to the dwelling where one resides for decades. The paper discusses the influence of a house in context to Gaston Bachelard's proposed theory related to 'space' and 'house' in his book *The Poetics of Space*. There is an analysis of Alice Munro's representation of this space through her characters and her understanding of the childhood space which she had lived. Therefore, an attempt has been made to discuss the significance of the house as a space in its 'concrete' and 'abstract' forms.

**Keywords:** house, space, memories.

Alice Munro, the Nobel Prize winner, is internationally acclaimed for her extensive contribution to short story. Alice Munro's short stories, published over the decades, are among the most popular in the English language. Munro has received various national and international awards and honours for being "the master of the contemporary short-story". The paper will analyse the story "The Shining Houses" from the volume *The Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), in the context of the theory of the house as proposed by Gaston Bachelard in his book *The Poetics of Space*. Munro portrays a contrast between people who reside in urban areas and are unconcerned about the dwellings of the people of the rural areas who still believe in retaining traditional old houses and preserving the natural environment.

Munro discusses her art of writing stories; and how she uses the metaphor of the house to indicate the complex, multilayered structure of a story. Munro states:

A story is not like a road to follow ... It's more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room

and corridors relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from these windows.

As Munro portrays the similarities between the story and the house, she emphasises how an individual enters and explores the complex aspects of the house and the story, and discovers many hidden aspects and perspectives which reveal new meanings to him/her.

In the story "The Shining Houses", Mary the protagonist is preparing to go for a birthday party, on her way she stops at Mrs Fullerton's house. Mary is in a dilemma whether to support Mrs Fullerton who has been living in her house for over four decades or sign the petition at the party for the demolition of her house as it does not harmonize with the new contemporary houses. Mrs Fullerton's house is portrayed as being antiquated, wild and has a sense of mystery to it; on the contrary, the younger generation as represented by Carl and Steve are in favour of the modern, linear and structured houses. The story comprises of the conflict that Mary faces as she belongs to both the worlds, she sympathizes with Mrs Fullerton's and also want development for her family and the community. This confusion of Mary is represented through the metaphor of a house and its importance and impact on our lives.

A house provides an individual with a sense of stability both emotionally and personally. It is a space of self-discovery where one finds psychological refuge from the burdens of the outside world of competition and artificiality. There are memories and emotions attached to one's childhood house, a place which sheltered one's daydreams and imaginations and provides them with a sense of contentment. The new generation as depicted by Carl and Steve does not understand the needs of the older generation and their attachment to their houses. Carl and Steve treat Mrs Fullerton's demands as unwanted and consider their modern requirement and urban dwelling as of utmost importance.

For Mrs Fullerton, a house evokes various emotions and a sense of belonging to her domestic space, where she day-dreams and finds repose from the external world of responsibility and liability. Mary Douglas in her article "The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space" states the value that a house holds for an individual, it is not just a physical entity but has memories and emotions attached to it, "So a home is not only a space, it also has some structure in time; and because it is for people who are living in that time and space it has aesthetic and moral dimensions" (289). The shining houses in the story symbolically represent the structured, urban and contemporary lives of people who are devoid of feelings and sympathies for the older generation as portrayed by the guests present at the birthday party.

Munro tries to explore the relationship between the economic and social development of the society and its effects on the social environment. She also emphasizes the importance of a house in the lives of its characters. Gro Harlem Brundtland in his *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: "Our Common Future."* argues: "But the 'environment' is where we live; and "development" is what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode.

The two are inseparable.” Brundtland in his report mentions that urban development should not take place at the cost of the environment. Both are sides of the same coin, therefore there should be an amalgamation of both for a better growth of individuals. Mary faces a dilemma whether to support Mrs Fullerton or the new generation who want to get rid of Mrs Fullerton’s house.

There is a sense of belonging to one’s house as it recalls one’s lived memories and experiences to which one feels connected. Saunders and Williams write, “Precisely because the home touches so centrally on our personal lives, any attempt to develop a dispassionate social scientific analysis inevitably stimulates emotional and deeply fierce argument and disagreement.” Mary, the protagonist of the story, is friends with Mrs Fullerton and feels connected to her. Mrs Fullerton had been living in an old-fashioned house which looks like a rundown farm, a house which is declining. She is content to live in her house away from her neighbours as she feels that she can survive living independently on her own without the assistance of others. On the contrary, the guests at the party long to have a secured future for their children, where they were provided with all the essential amenities around them like shopping malls, proper lanes and a well-structured house with proper surroundings. Mrs Fullerton’s house is a misfit among the newly built houses in the locality. They want to have a more orderly, sophisticated and civilized life as opposed to the raw, rural and uncivilized life of the older generation.

Marion Shoard in her essay “Edgelands” states that “town and country may show us the surface of life with which we feel comfortable, but the interface shows us its broiling depths. If people were encouraged to understand this world more, they might feel less alienated and puzzled by the circumstances of their lives” (142). Mrs Fullerton’s house has been portrayed as being wild, barbaric and which has a sense of mystery attached to it. Mary wanted an interface between the two worlds, an amalgamation of Mrs Fullerton’s world and the younger generation. Mary was inclined to talk to Mrs Fullerton and share her experiences, as she felt that her generation was mundane and monotonous and lacked the experiences which Mrs Fullerton had.

Mrs Fullerton had been living alone in the same house for forty years, therefore, had numerous memories related to the house. She shared with Mary how her first husband was buried in the same house, and her children were raised here. She told Mary the memories attached to her husband in this house, how he used to help her pluck cherries in the backyard and other moments they had experienced in the house. Mrs Fullerton refused to leave the house when told by her sons as she was deeply attached to the house where she had lived for most of her life, shared memories and space which are an integral part of her soul. Therefore it was difficult for her to leave her house and move out to an apartment. Mrs Fullerton says, “My boys wanted me to sell them and go and live in rooms”. She jokingly continues, “Husbands may come and go, but a place you’ve lived fifty years is something else” (21). Mrs Fullerton started sharing with Mary her lived experiences, the memories of her husband that were situated in and around the house.

Different places in the house have different meanings and emotions attached to it. The cherished moments lived by Mrs Fullerton, and her emotions give a sense of existence to her life. Bachelard comments: "Of course, thanks to the house, a great many of our memories are housed, and if the house is a bit elaborate if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more delineated" (8). The house is capable of holding memories and images related to one's sense of belonging to the place. For Mrs Fullerton, this enclosed space of the house provides shelter; commitment and a place where she can come back to after facing the burdens of life. Thus, the house shelters her from the tumults of life, it is one place where she can come back to, to find repose and comfort, and it shields her from the dangers of the outside world of competition and struggle.

Munro portrays a conflict between the new generations who prefer to live in an apartment, contrary to the older generation who preferred the farm life. Mrs Fullerton resists the change of society and keeps confined to her own house with her animals, barn, etc. After Mary had left Mrs Fullerton's house, she thought that she was stepping into a world of structure, a systematic world of order and fixed rules. Mary thought, "as if she were passing through barricades. The house and its surroundings were so self-sufficient, with their complicated and seemingly unalterable layout of vegetables and flower beds, apple and cherry trees, wired chicken-run, berry patch and wooden walks, woodpile...." (22). Mrs Fullerton's house was an embodiment of disorder, clumsiness but which has a sense of completeness in its wild appearance. Mary compares the new shining houses with Mrs Fullerton's house. The new houses are all linear, white, and monotonous and identically put together in rows, as opposed to Mrs Fullerton's house which was antique and had an aesthetic appeal attached to it. The new houses were luxurious, with all the necessary amenities required for the comfortable and better life, but were devoid of the charm of Mrs Fullerton's farm which had wild but lively atmosphere. Mary states, "The houses were frail at first, skeletons of new wood standing up in the dusk of the cold spring days" (23). Munro in her choice of words portrays the new houses as being symbolic of skeletons, as they are devoid of feelings and compassion, and are just a mere structure of wood. The new generation as portrayed by Carl and Steve wanted to bring down Mrs Fullerton's house and were in favour of destroying the natural habitat to build modern houses.

According to Bachelard in his analysis of the house, as it is one's first abode, he states: "For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word. If we look at it intimately, the humblest dwelling has beauty" (4). For Mrs Fullerton, the house had a sense of belonging; it is a place of attachment and a dwelling of various lived emotions and memories. Guests at the birthday party were discussing how to get rid of Mrs Fullerton's house, as it was spoiling the symmetry and the beauty of the place. Mrs Fullerton's house was not in sync with the other houses that were built in the lane; it had a sense of being mystical and supernatural, it appeared as, "dark, enclosed, expressing something like savagery in their disorder and the steep, unmatched angles of roofs and lean-tos" (24). The guests at the party were ashamed of the house and its appearance because it was old, different,

traditional, and unkempt. Steve and Carl contacted the municipal officials regarding the house and received the information that the house was built on the land allowance and therefore to get the house demolished they collectively had to sign a petition against the house.

Mary, on the contrary, was supportive of Mrs Fullerton living in that house; she told everybody that the latter had been living in that very house for over four decades now and it was immoral to throw someone out of her own house for selfish reasons, she wanted to preserve the archives of the past generation. She felt sympathetic towards Mrs Fullerton, as she was the only one in the party who personally knew her. Everyone present in the party was double-faced as on the one hand they desperately wanted to tear down Mrs Fullerton's house, but on the contrary, they were justifying and rationalizing their actions. Carl said: "She's been here forty years, now we're here", "So it goes. And whether you realize it or not, just standing there that house is bringing down the resale value of every house on this street. I'm in the business, I know" (27). Gaston Bachelard describes the house and its value for the people who inhabit them, a house is not just a concrete building of walls but has many emotions which are linked to it, this space of the house is imbibed by the people who live there. He says, "In this dynamic rivalry between house and universe, we are far removed from any reference to simple geometrical forms. A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space" (47). Munro relates the traits that belong to the modern world, where people have become insensitive and unconcerned towards the past generation and only think about their benefits. The new generation forgets the sense of attachment that an individual has towards his/her house. Mary refused to be a part of the collective group who all agreed to sign the petition to bring down Mrs Fullerton's house, as she appreciated the original farm, untidy, historical looking which represents the past. Mary replied: "I don't think we have the right. We haven't the right" (28).

Mary in the story faces the conflict of whether she should sign the petition against Mrs Fullerton, signing it would go against her self-respect, integrity and the community as a whole. The new shining houses represent a contemporary and modernization of our society, by being individualistic and selfish towards the older generation. Mary was caught between two worlds, one looking forward to their future and the other who wanted to preserve history. She thinks, "That they were right for themselves, for whatever it was they had to be. And Mrs Fullerton was old; she had dead eyes, nothing could touch her" (29). The darkness which was situated with Mrs Fullerton's house depicts the barbaric and wild space of the house as well as her ageing self.

Peter Somerville in his article "Homelessness and the Meaning of Home: Rooflessness or Rootlessness?" explains the various factors that constitute the meaning of a house, he emphasises different feelings that a house evokes in an individual's life. He states, "Home can be argued to have at least six or seven dimensions of meaning, identified by the 'key signifiers' of shelter, hearth, heart, privacy, roots, abode and (possibly) paradise." He continues, "Each of these signifiers can be explicated regarding its wider symbolic meaning (its 'general connotation'), its evocation of a specific sense of security, and its characteristic mode of relating to oneself and

others" (532). Munro has presented change by portraying the contrast between the houses, the younger generation wants to change with the advancement of modernization which is represented in their choice of contemporary and urban houses, but the older generation wants to remain stuck in the past as portrayed by Mrs Fullerton by her infatuation with her farm property, which eventually makes the younger generation hostile towards, the older generation. Somerville argues,

Home is not just a matter of feelings and lived experience but also of cognition and intellectual construction: people may have a sense of home even though they have no experience or memory of it. . . . We cannot know what home 'really' is outside of these ideological structures (530).

In his article, he mentions the meaning of a house and the emotions that it evokes and the feeling of homelessness when faced by an individual. The feeling of homelessness that leads to instability and vulnerability in one's life, it relates to an individual experiencing misery, suffering and a loss of identity. Somerville states, "Both home and homelessness have been found to be essentially ideological constructs, involving compounds of cognitive and emotive meaning, and embracing within their meaning complex and variable distinctions between ideality and reality" (537). Mary, the protagonist, empathises with Mrs Fullerton's condition and relates to the feeling and the consequences of being homeless, therefore she objects to the signing of the petition. Munro in her stories emphasises the importance of a house, as it gives a sense of protection, shelter, roots and place of mind. The absence of a house hampers the psychological, emotional and intellectual well-being of an individual.

The question which arises here is that the title of the story "The Shining Houses" symbolically represents which house? Mrs Fullerton's house which was an exception amongst newly built houses or the regular monotonous houses which had shiny exterior and were contemporary in their outlook. Munro emphasises that initially the physical aspect of the house is considered important, but eventually, the memories that are lived in it with the loved one have become crucial. Carl and Steve viewed Mrs Fullerton's house as a hurdle in the development of the society. Therefore they overlooked the importance which it held for her and thus, persuaded everyone to sign the petition for the demolition of the house. The responsibility of this generation should be to accommodate with the past generation, there should be an advancement of technology and commercialization, but it should not hamper the already existing environment and the people who are accustomed to the rural lifestyle.

Mary is in a state of dilemma; she thinks that Mrs Fullerton has the right to retain and live in her own house, on the contrary, she also has a sense of belonging to the new generation and believes that. She contemplates, "But these are people who win, and they are good people; they want homes for their children, they help each other when there is trouble, they plan a community—saying that word as if they found a modern and well-proportioned magic in it, and in no

possibility anywhere of a mistake” (29). The need of the hour should be to consider both, the development of people and environment protection as equal concerns, not neglecting one for the other. Munro has presented the importance of a house through the portrayal of ‘The Shining Houses’, the different meanings that it connotes for different people and devoid of this shelter leads to a sense of alienation, placelessness and vulnerability.

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