

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

14 Years of Open Access

Vol. 14 Issue-II April 2023

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

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**ISSN 2278-9529**

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
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## Registers of (Affect)ions: A Study of Alice Munro's "Nettles"

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Article History: Submitted-04/04/2023, Revised-23/04/2023, Accepted-24/04/2023, Published-30/04/2023.

### **Abstract:**

The theoretical postulations of the notion of Affect congregate around the endeavour to answer a basic but quite contentious question – how do we *feel* the world? The simplistic notion of affect may be understood as the physiological and biological basis for apprehending human emotions and feelings. The notion of affect preserves the interrelationships between ideas, objects and values. The range of implications of affect is quite extensive, given the imposing nature of the pathways of interactions between ideas and objects. The concept of affect preserves the correlations between ideas, objects and intrinsic values. In this backdrop, this paper proposes to explore the function of affects characterizing the corporeal intimacy between the primary characters of Alice Munro's short story "Nettles", compiled in her tenth short story collection *Hateship Friendship Courtship Loveship Marriage* (2001). This paper will further explore the affective physiological drives of the human body as the ultimate truth of all human emotions.

**Keywords: Affect theory, body, intensities, Alice Munro, landforms, surfaces, depths.**

The notion of Affect has divergent biological, physiological, psychological and philosophical critical vocabularies and pathways of understanding. The methodological modes of comprehending how one feels the world is intricately linked to the discernment of the ways of being in the world. Everything depends upon affect. The interdisciplinary nature of theorizations of American psychologist and personality theorist Silvan Solomon Tomkins (1911 - 1991) had initiated a gamut of scholarly deliberations upon affect theory within the disciplines of humanities and social sciences. He enumerated a total of nine affects across the four volumes of his book *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1962 – 1963 and 1991 – 1992),

where he established affects as hyphenated word – pairs. These word – pairs would unify the least and the most comprehensive articulation of a particular affect. He advanced six affects with negative implications: Shame – Humiliation, Distress – Anguish, Distress – Disgust, Fear – Terror, Anger – Rage, Anger – Dismissal. Tomkins had apprehended the significance of one neutral affect, which he conceptualized as Surprise – Startle. The final two affects, elaborated as Enjoyment – Joy and Interest – Excitement were implicitly positive. The conceptualization of these affects was built upon the notion of the production of an extensive range of emotions from the combination of limited affects. His formulations were followed by substantial scholarly investigations in the interdisciplinary field of affects. Significant research was conducted by scholars like Brian Massumi (1956 - ), Lauren Gail Berlant (1957 - 2021), Kathleen Stewart (1958 - ), Lawrence Grossberg (1947 - ), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1950 - 2009), Adam J. Frank, Patricia Ticineto Clough (1945 - ), Elspeth Probyn (1958 - ), Ben Highmore (1961 - ), Melissa Gregg, Gregory J. Seigworth (1961 -) and Sara Ahmed (1969 - ). It bears mentioning that the theories of affect are usually asocial, since they preclude any influence of the theorizations of socio – cultural processes.

Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth have cogently enumerated upon the concept of affect in their co – edited book *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010). They commence their discussion by observing that:

Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation *as well as* the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities. That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, non – human, part – body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves. (1)

This crucial observation buttresses the fact that affects, in comparison to other biological drives, are more generalised, more free and much more complex. They do not exhibit any constraints in terms of the duration or the range of objects they primarily inhabit. Affect is constitutive of human experiences and human responses in general. It bears mentioning that the nature of such responses, and not the stimuli, has inherent affective qualities. The true impact of affect lies in its capability to be affected by earnest force – encounters between surfaces and/of bodies. Affects may also be perceived to evolve from the median space between the capability to act upon and the consequent responses emanating from such vigorous resonances. This notion builds upon the fact that affects do not exist in

vacuum; they develop from a flux of positionalities, which are in dynamic resonances with other surfaces of this physical world. Affects are usually interwoven with other affects, as well as things, sensations, ideas, relations, activities, ambitions of people and people themselves. Another observation of Tomkins becomes pertinent here; he contends that:

There is literally no kind of object which has not historically been linked to one or another of the affects. Positive affects has been invested in pain and every kind of human misery, and negative affect has been experienced as a consequence of pleasure and every kind of triumph of the human spirit . . . the same mechanisms enable people to invest any and every aspect of existence with the magic of excitement and joy or with the dread of fear or shame and distress. (54)

Thus, affects are usually quite ambient by nature and atmospheric in their range of entanglements, since they are broadly circulated throughout the environment. At this juncture, it becomes imperative to explore Alice Munro's short story "Nettles" in this context.

The globally feted Canadian short story writer Alice Munro has been deified for her ingenious explorations of the complicacies of the human heart through her short stories. She has been known to persistently scrutinize the vulnerabilities of sentient beings and the depths of their emotional lacuna, which they conceal so adroitly. In a number of her stories, she posits the vulnerable landscapes and embattled natural environments as sites of affective entanglements between them and sentient human beings. These human beings identify with these particular landscapes through the emotional amplitudes of their intertwined existences. Munro's insistent explorations of the contours of the human hearts open up affective spaces inhabited by the expressions of grief, bereavement and traumatic losses. The entanglement of feelings and affects articulate the profound intimacy of the human beings with their environment. The young unnamed narrator of the story "Nettles" is quite discerning of the affective range of emotional intricacies of her heart. Her adolescent Thoreauvian temperament invests the commonplace features of farm life in her town with a distinctly romantic magic. In this context, an observation of Kathleen Stewart becomes pertinent, where she maintains that:

The ordinary throws itself together out of forms, flows, powers, pleasures, encounters, distractions, drudgery, denials, practical solutions, shape – shifting forms of violence,

daydreams, and opportunities lost or found. Or it falters, fails. But either way we feel it. (29)

Her alarm at coming across the savage horse carcasses hung unceremoniously from the brutish hooks is suffused with astonishment at the barbarity of it all. Her amazement at the blood – soaked sites of execution of farm animals was matched only by her wonderment at the affective rhythmicity of the trees on the farms. The vigour of her youthful temperament can be propitiously explained by Tomkins' declaration that the base of affect may not require any material referent. He opines that, "It is enjoyable to enjoy. It is exciting to be excited. It is terrorizing to be terrorized and angering to be angered. Affect is self – validating with or without any further referent" (3:404). The narrator considered the natural world to be her closest confidante, where the emotional vibrancy of her temperament was safely ensconced within the dignified sombreness of her natural surroundings. She could gauge that the tangible excitement within her was palpable in the restrained dignity of the landforms enveloping her. Her powerful emotions and impressionable affective registers indicate her dynamic immersion in the persistent rhythms of the natural world.

Since affect expresses itself through the force of encounters between two surfaces, the rhythm of such forces resonates at the narrator's bodily sensations of exhilaration at the intangible entity of the highway bridge near her town. Her bewilderment at observing the pathways of bubbles along the beams of light peeping between the cement pilings of the bridge validated her own sense of affective engrossment in the complex design of the natural expanse. In this regard, another pronouncement by Tomkins becomes noteworthy, where he posits that, "Any affect may have any object. This is the basic source of complexity of human motivation and behaviour" (1:347). Her anticipation of the thrill of sensual intimacy with Mike McCallum sent rapturous waves of desire through her adolescent body. One is reminded of Tomkins' notion of sexuality in this regard, which he posits as "the drive in which the affective component plays the largest role", since it is the only affect "in which the activation of the drive even without consummation has a rewarding rather than a punishing quality" (60). However, Munro has presented the character of Mike as bearing a rather practical view of his immediate natural surroundings. Unlike the young narrator, young Mike's emotional states of mind did not vibrate with the rhythmic vitality of the natural world. Nor did he seem to exult in the anticipation of a magical sensory touch with the young narrator. It bears mentioning that the idea of affect creates distinctive pathways of interactions and numerous planes of experiences that create individualized human beings.

Such beings can be distinguished from other sentient people, whose affective registers may bear different emotional intensities. Differing affects compel different human beings to perceive and respond in varied ways. It becomes pertinent to appraise the notion of affect as a measure of bodily capacity.

The various interdisciplinary conceptualizations of affect generally resist any simplistic categorizations, since the notion of affect builds upon the notions of thresholds, where the intensities of connections between two bodies are most conspicuous. Since affect is expressed through the minuscule forces of intensities of a body, a clarification as to the nature of this body becomes imperative. The substance of such a body, which is not confined to the human body, is according to Kathleen Stewart, constitutive of “layers of sensory impact” (1024), whereby the forces of such intensities traverse the rhythmic range of the illimitable intensities. These palpable forces of intensities wash over the surfaces of the bodies to delineate the rhythms and contours of both. The connection between affect and touch indicates the centrality of sexual desire to all forms of human contact. In the story “Nettles”, Munro presents the human skin as an affective causality of sensory intimacy, which sends waves of palpable intensities coursing through the bodies of the adolescents as well as appraises the restrained sombreness of their palliated interaction in their adulthood. Munro has sought to demonstrate that the human skin and sensory touch unveil covert anticipations, pains and vulnerabilities about their own selves. In this regard, the notions of skin and affect may be conceptualized as occupying differing scales of intensities, by which they always aim to transform intangible but palpable networks of forces between the surfaces of bodies. A declaration from Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey assumes significance here. They observe that: “[s]kin opens our bodies to other bodies: through touch, the separation of self and other is undermined in the very intimacy or proximity of the encounter” (5 - 6). They proceed to opine that the skin is a “surface, encounter and site, in which more than one body is always implicated” (14). In this manner, the skin and affect serve as documents of lived experiences of any palpable forces of encounters; these palpable forces wash over all surfaces of bodies linked by their reciprocations. The surfaces of the skin are never impassive, since it remains quite vulnerable to affectability itself.

In his book *Logic of Sense*, Gilles Deleuze argues that the sensory touch first results from a ‘measureless pulsation’ (150-151) and then proceeds to discern a bodily state of affairs. This is evident from the diffident personality of the narrator in her adulthood, when she returns to Uxbridge, Ontario, in 1979 after the dissolution of her marriage. Her

perceptible electrifying passion for the sacrosanct vitality of the natural surroundings had metamorphosed into a subdued acknowledgement of the bleakness shrouding her sense. The narrator ponders over the lack of captivating magic irradiating from these landforms, since she surmises that:

The country we were driving through meant nothing to me. The hills were a series of green bumps, some with cows. There were low concrete bridges over weed – choked streams. Hay was harvested in a new way, rolled up and left in the fields. (171)

The solemn indifference towards the natural world turns out to be a somewhat equivalent transmutation of human desire. The affect of the trauma of a broken marriage washes over the entire skin of the narrator and spills over into the landforms and the surface of the natural environments. This same affect enshrouds the entire demeanour of the now adult Mike, when he reveals the death of his son. The narrator perceives an immeasurable depth of unlocalisable and senseless pain, which had engulfed his personality. The economised form of sensory intimacy and physical contact through the skin of both the adult narrator and Mike establishes a dialectical binary of surfaces and depths. The interlinked concepts of surfaces and depths retain relevance only when they are examined in relation to each other. The paradox between the surfaces and depths lies in the fact that the depths tend to drown the surfaces before it actually surfaces. The body surface coexists with the depths only after the depths have produced it.

The adult narrator now retrospectively gauges the uninhibited raucousness of her adolescent fantasies and proceeds for a more restrained intimacy with the adult Mike. She can perceive a distinct feeling of shame overpowering the depths of her fractured self, which she perceives through the contradictory affective registers embedded in her conflicted feelings for the adult Mike. She ponders that:

Such escapades could never have been considered, with anybody for whom I felt any fondness or respect – only with people who disgusted me, as those randy abhorrent itches disgusted me with myself. In my feelings for Mike the localised demon was transferred into a diffuse excitement and tenderness spread everywhere under the skin, a pleasure of the eyes and ears and a tingling contentment, in the presence of the other person. (164 - 165)

Their brief kiss near the meadows lining the golf course is dramatized by the heavy downpour, which had initially compelled them to seek cover near the nettles flourishing in the waste meadows. However, the transmutation of the nature of intimacy between them is complete when the superficial contact of the skin reveals their deepest vulnerabilities of tragic loss and bereavement (the narrator's marital estrangement and the death of Mike's son). The skin surfaces, thus, embody intense grief which is fathomless for both of them. Neither of them is able to gauge the depths of tragic loss of the other, whose affective intensity remains unexpressed. This pained revelation of shared affective bereavement functions as an epiphanic moment for the adult narrator. She is able to recalibrate the true import of intimacy in her adulthood. The adult narrator is finally apprised of her mistake of seeking love through the expression of sexual intimacy. Her realization that her empathic solidarity and compassion could "provide a reassuring sense of human padding around his solitude" (180) helps her to find purpose in life again. She is able to surreptitiously appreciate the sacrosanct dynamism of her quiescent natural surroundings.

Thus, the previous discussion attempts to establish that the notion of affect depends upon the body's capacity for becoming receptive to the co – ordinating rhythms and emotional amplitudes of the material world. The affective registers enable the world of affect to encapsulate varying intensities of force – encounters between surfaces of bodies, which characterize a range of powerful human emotions and intimate connections.

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