



## ALICE MUNRO: FUSION OF REGIONALISM AND REALISM

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Article Received: 06/07/2022

Article Accepted: 02/08/2022

Published online:12/08/2022

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.10.3.135](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.10.3.135)

### Abstract

The term “Regionalism” often used in literature for denoting a particular region with its certain specific features either to establish close attachment with that particular place or to explore realities or both through the picturesque presentation of regional landscape. Literature by employing regional features lays importance to the setting, speech and social structure and custom of that particular locality. Its purpose is not only to explore local colour but to concentrate on important condition that affect the temperament of the characters and their ways of thinking, feeling and interacting. Regional effects pervade literature and become effective tools in bringing literature near to reality. In fact, realism and regionalism co-exist together. Canadian short-stories mostly revolves round the particular region depicting individual character with essence of human values, love, sex embellishing through the painted picture of landscape. Alice Munro’s fictions grow on fertile soil of regionalism. Her fiction gets its vitality partially from regional landscape as most of her stories are set in Huron County, and partially from her sense of narrator as the intelligence through which the world is articulated. “Wingham”, the birth place of Munro, gets representation in her fictional map as Jublee, Dalgelish, Harranty. Different landscape delineated in her fiction unfolds her reality of experience. South Antorio Gothic, a subgenre of Canadian literature written in strong realistic style brings out the Gothic depiction in haunted setting Ontario. In fact, Munro succeeds in juxtaposing both the elements of realism and regionalism together in her fiction.

**Keywords:** Short Story, Regionalism, Realism, Huron County, Rural Southwest Ontario, Wingham, Dagelesh, Tuppertown, Southern Ontario Gothic, Wawanash.

“Regionalism” in literary perspective refers to the unifying principles of a corpus of literary text having specific territory or place which encapsulates some certain features of that specific region. Defining “regionalism” in literature, Campbell writes: “Fiction and poetry that focuses on the characters, dialect, customs, topography and other

features particular to a specific region”. (Campbell) However, the term “regionalism”, in literary context, more or less, stands for a picturesque presentation of regional landscape with its own specific features. Such picturesque presentation of a specific region in writings are

either to show close attachment with that specific place or to explore realities or both.

In his most famous novella ; "Daisy Miller: A Study": Henry James employing realism and regionalism together writes ; "Realism overlaps regionalism in many ways. It is literary depiction of life how it is lived. Realist digress from the plot by introducing into the depths of its characters in order to capture the essence of real life in real time. Realist writers attack social mores and tradition." (Regionalism and Realism.:[saw.lib.lehigh.edu](http://saw.lib.lehigh.edu)>view)

The regional literature generally gives importance to the setting, speech, and social structure and customs of a particular locality. Its focus is confined not only to explore local colour but it also concentrates on important conditions that affect the temperament of the characters and their ways of thinking, feeling and interacting.

David M Jordan in "New world Regionalism: Literature in Americas "writes ; ..... there is no doubt that regionalism stems from a deep personal involvement with a particular place, a lived experience that is not available to the casual observer".(Jordon, 9)

How regional effects pervade literature and become effective tools in bringing literature near to reality can be perceived through this observation of Northrop Frye, a reputed Canadian literary critic: "Regional literature in a more precise sense is tied to the conventions of realism because it attempts to distinguish accurately the features of a clearly definable region, either rural or closely linked to the land. In its fullest achievement such regional literature, as the works of Thomas Hardy and William Faulkner show, is not synonymous with surface detail and pedestrian style but with profound exploration of the shaping influence of particular regions on individual lives ". Frye further, focusing on the development of regionalism in the perspective of Canadian literature, stresses on the importance of regions to the creative imagination, when he argues: "what affects the writer's imagination ..... is an environment rather than a nation. Regionalism and literary maturity seem to grow together". (Frye; Essay on Canadian culture)

Canadian short-stories are mostly based on one particular region portraying individual character with essence of human value, love, sex, beautifying through painted picture of landscape as it seems in Alice Munro's short-stories.

Alice Munro, a prominent Canadian literary figure, was born on 10 July 1931, in Ontario, the South West of Canada. Her dexterity in short-story writing, won her acclaim for being "the master of the contemporary short-story ( noble prize. org ) Such commendation she received on her Noble Award felicitation for literature in 2013 and became the first Canadian to have such glorious achievement. Besides Noble Prize she got other prestigious literary awards too, and got recognition both national and international for her splendid contribution to literature. Her first recognized collection of short-stories came into literary circle in 1968, followed by her other famous works such as "Lives of Girls and Women ", "Too Much Happiness ", Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage", "Dear Life", etc. Her stories frequently appeared in New Yorker; Atlantic Monthly; Parish Review and in other well read magazines.

Alice Munro received exuberant appreciation from critics for her splendid art of writing and their commendations mostly concentrate on her; "remarkable powers of observation, her unflinching ear for speech of all kinds, and her capacity for the kind of wit which is unsentimental without deserting compassion ". (Tausky)

She has often been charged of being a regional writer because many of her stories are set in rural Ontario of South west Canada. Even, her stories too, often focus on characters who live in rural Ontario, exploring their lives and culture. Her remarkable ability to poeticize a specific place, to sing its praise and hypnotic mysteries as well as to invoke place as a maternal myths cape. Her dexterity in creating a fictional female world by expanding her character's inner lives into place, and by manipulating place as feminist enquiry is significant. Munro's admiration for regional American writers such as Flannery O' Connor, Carson Mc Culler, and Eudora Welty is for their commonality in

transforming the mundane ordinary world into something unsettling and mysterious and most of them are strongly rooted in a particular region. Eudora Welty interprets limited settings in Mississippi and Flannery O Connor and Carson McCullers recreate daily life of small-town Georgia. Munro's affection is with rural Southwest Ontario. Her inspiration springs from the Ontario landscape. This, she very frankly admits in an interview with Mari Sainsby in early 1970s; "If I'm a regional writer, the region I'm writing about has many things in common with American south... [It is] Rural Ontario. A closed rural society with a pretty homogenous Scotch-Irish racial strain going slowly to decay".(Sainsby; British Columbia Library, Quarterly)

Munro's fiction gets its strength partially from its having regional focus as most of her stories are set in Huron County, Ontario and partially from her sense of narrator as the intelligence through which the world is articulated. Munro's settings are high artistic achievement in the sense that it emits the source of her vision and the poetics of her prose. It also establishes the dictum that the place is the psyche's fortress. A subjective landscape, a region and often metaphor, of a female mind and body, Wawanash County, and its places unfolds in the work of Munro. It is the landscape and the county of so many forms and variations—In "Dance of Happy Shades", country abounds with childhood panorama, in "Who Do You Think You Are?" adolescent gothic romance pervades the environment and in "The Moons of Jupiter" it unveils shifting middle-aged boundaries; while in "The Progress of Love, dying fertility is alluded to. Rasporich in "Dance of Sexes" writes; "Beneath the surface, in Munro's fiction, place is a cloaked subterranean, mythical and psychological female, region. On another level, place is hard reality, the "proving ground" of dramatic action of female experience and feminist events".( Rasporich,122)

Many of Munro's collection of stories are based on the core conception of such rural society, for example - "Dance of Happy Shades", "Lives of Girls and Women", and "Who do you think you are".

Refuting the charge of being the regional writer, Munro, in an interview with Wachtel,

clarifies: "I do not like to be described as a regional writer....I'm annoyed sometimes when people think I write about a sort of idyllic life or a sort of pastoral, because I'm seen as someone who writes about a small town in the country". (Queen's Quarterly Web ) She further says: "It almost seems to be by accident that I write about those people, because I know their houses, and I know certain things about their lives ". (Queen's Quarterly Web).

Munro was born in a lower middle class and her place of upbringing was surrounded by socially marginalized people so obviously, she has experienced the struggle and hardship of those socially marginalized people living in a confined area from close quarter. Her feelings get expression in her stories. Her self-realization regarding her early years makes her feel to be an outcaste and outsider, as she admits in an interview with Allan Twigg; "There was always a great sense of adventure.... we lived outside the whole social structure because we did not live in town and we did not live in the country. We lived in this kind of ghetto where all the bootleggers and prostitutes and hangers-on lived ". Munro's settings of her fiction, her art of characterization and surroundings of her stories attempts to animate herself. In many of her semi-autobiographical stories she depicts the home, garden, hospitals, libraries even roads and other places which have been a part of her life and her experiences at those places. Depicting the "Huron county" as a real or an imaginary place she says, "It means something to me that no other country can—no matter how importantly historically that other country may be, how 'beautiful', how lovely and interesting. I am intoxicated by this particular landscape. I speak the language".( Alan Twigg. ABC Bookworld,2009)

"Wingham", the birth place of Munro, gets representation in her fictional map as Jubilee, Dalgelish, and Harranty. Ross comments on Munro's skill, "munro's art is a picturesque presentation of the Huron landscape where "she sees a whole geology and archaeology of meaning ". ( Ross,26)

Munro very keenly observed the behavior of her neighbors and her perception related to their

attitude and the language used by them assisted her in fabricating the plots and characters of her stories. Her close observations of her surroundings helped her define the settings of her stories. Bertrand Westphal, discussing 'Geocriticism' in his book "Real and Fictional Space", states that the depiction of 'Geography' in a story reveals hidden meaning in a text, as the place reveals the motives and intentions of character; "the literary text therefore becomes a generator, I believe that this characteristic of the fictional logos reveal the meaning of hidden realities, exposing the folds of reality..." (Westphal: Geocriticism)

Munro is known for her excellent narrative style which is of giving more importance to character over plot. She is often compared with Anton Chekhov (1860-1940), the great Russian short-story writer, for her narrative style and is considered as Canadian 'Chekhov'. In her stories plots are given secondary importance and the thing which pervades her writings is the "epiphanic moment, the sudden enlightenment, the concise, subtle, revelatory detail". (Garan, 2008) Her dexterity in narrative art, well-knit plotting with documentary quality and her selection of locations in stories bring her fiction to realism. The cocktail of these characteristics in her writings astonished readers and made them feel as if all the happenings in the stories are related to their own lives. The settings of many of her stories starts from "Wingham" Ontario and mostly concentrate surrounding it, though, it also includes British Columbia, Ireland, Scotland, Central Europe and even Australia. For instance she, in her anthology "The Moons of Jupiter", has given new expansiveness to places. Many of her stories, "Connection", "The Turkey Season", "Accidents", "Labor Day Dinner", "Visitors", "Hard-Luck Stories", include obvious, local, familiar Ontario settings but "Dulse" is located in New Brunswick and "Bardon Bus" partly in Australia; the overall impression of the volume is that of an author and her characters moving out and beyond old borders and boundaries, beyond province, nation, and as the title of the anthology itself suggests the world itself. The most beautiful stories here are those that return us to the idiosyncratic world of Munro—rural Western Ontario and the town she often calls Dalgelish.

However, her presentation of different landscapes relate her to the reality of experience. For example, in her well-known story "Dear Life" how Munro tries to manifest her reminiscence of childhood through the portrayal of regional landscape; when the narrator of the story affirms: "I lived when I was young at the end of the long road or a road that seemed long to me". (Dear Life; 299) Here, obviously, the repetition of the word 'road' serves to emphasize the author's closeness with the place of her childhood.

The description of the opening paragraph of the story "Dear Life" presents the reality of situation and this picturesque presentation is created by Munro through the incorporation of regional landscape and the psychological insight of her character together. Here, as the narrator—little girl—describes; "..... two bridges over the Maitland River: one narrow iron bridge where cars sometimes got into trouble over which one should pull off and wait for the other, and a wooden walkway which occasionally had a plank missing, so that you could look right down into the bright, hurrying water. I liked that, but somebody always came and replaced the plank eventually". (Dear Life, 299) Murphy writes about the sources from where Munro gets inspiration for her story; "to an extraordinary extent, the raw material of Munro's work comes from her own life, a fact she readily admits". (Murphy, 41)

"Walker Brother Cowboy", a remarkable story, embodies the infused picture of realism and regional landscape. This story is from Munro's first anthology of Short Stories "The Dance of Happy Shades" (1968) in which Munro delineates precarious condition of a family living in small town "Ontario", a specific region which often comes in Munro's stories, when Canada was under the effect of great depression of 1931. The story is narrated in the first person narrative voice and the narrator—an unnamed preadolescent girl—unfolds her sufferings which she undergoes along with her family and thus presents a picture of community in which she lives. The precarious condition of the family is due to the cumulative effects of economic breakdown and the narrator very realistically depicts her family's financial trouble through her utterance:

"Up until last winter we had our own business, a fox farm..... Prices fell, my father hung on hoping they would get better next year, and they fell again, and he hung on one more year and one more and finally it was not possible to hang on any more, we owed everything to the feed company".(Munro: Selected Stories, 5)

Much of the story, however, is set in backcountry surrounding the town 'Tuppertown'. This region is also under the effect of impoverishment. The land which the narrator describes as "scorched", seems to offer little sustenance to the people who work in it. As the narrator marks, "The men, if they are working in the fields, are not in any fields that we can see". (Munro: Selected Stories, 7-8) Through narrator's remark Munro presents the reality of poverty-ridden society of a particular region.

One particular subgenre of Canadian literature is Southern Ontario Gothic. This subgenre is generally written in a strong realistic style, describing the typical small-town protestant life of the region, and often includes themes of moral hypocrisy. By the 1960s in Canadian fiction a new approach of writing came into vogue for exposing previously silenced ex-centric voices. In this regard postmodern attribution can't be denied as its interest in the ex-centric, female, gay, and numerous ethnic voices are inscribed in literary book. Munro's protagonists in her short- stories are all defined by differences in class,, gender, ethnic group, race and sexual preference. The other most discussed theme is the setting of Munro's stories in which characters move. The effect of the place on the characters changes their destiny that results into unexpected incidents and situations. Katrin Berndt in her article, "The Ordinary Terrors of Survival: Alice Munro and the Canadian Gothic"states Munro's use of the traditional Gothic motif. Munro's portrayal of Gothic is depicted in haunted setting Ontario and about her writing Berndt writes ; "Munro's writing combines the Canadian motif of survival with the concealed ambitions and passions that threaten her characters in a physical as well as metaphysical sense".(Katrin, Web-2018)

Concluding the study we find that Alice Munro in her stories splendidly sketched out the everyday experiences of life with the help of regional landscape and juxtaposed the both with artistic beauty. In this regard Canadian critic George Woodcock's opinion about Munro's writings are remarkable ; "Munro offers the portrait of a distinctively Canadian society and does it in a distinctively Canadian way. Her sense of the interplay of setting and tradition is impeccable".(Woodcock)

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