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## AN EXAMINATION OF THE NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN ALICE MUNRO'S SELECT SHORT STORIES

S.RAMYA<sup>1</sup>, Dr. V. BHUVANESWARI<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>M.Phil Scholar, Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University, Vellore. [ramyamurthi26@gmail.com](mailto:ramyamurthi26@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Associate professor, Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University, Vellore. [vbhuvanewari@vit.ac.in](mailto:vbhuvanewari@vit.ac.in)



### ABSTRACT

The present paper examines the art of narrative technique used by the Nobel Prize winner, Alice Munro. She has been recognized for reworking personal matters in her stories and it exhibit a framework between her life and her fiction. *Dear Life* is Alice Munro's latest autobiography in her career. The Paper discusses 'The eye', 'Night', 'Voice', and 'Dear Life' the last four pieces in the collection titled 'Dear Life'. Munro is a skilled writer whose quality lies in her capacity to display the surface of regular day to day existence with both concern and unyielding exactness. The key features of narrative techniques are plot, setting, character and style which were used by the writer in her stories. Munro's attitude seems to be changed with the publication of *Dear Life*. In these four pieces Alice Munro uses the first-person narrative and these stories build to form a radiant, indelible portrait of the ordinary life of Alice Munro.

**Keywords:** Narrative techniques, Dear Life, First person Narrative.

**Abbreviations:** DL – Dear Life.

### Introduction

A short story is a fictional work of prose that is shorter in length than a novel. Edgar Allan Poe in his essay 'The Philosophy of Composition' states that a short story should be read in one sitting, anywhere from a half hour or two hours (Poe). A short story has a beginning, middle and a memorable end and it usually contains fewer characters and settings. Such stories are intended to be easy and suitable pieces of writing that can be read quickly unlike novels.

Plot, character, and setting are some of the elements of short stories which lead to an effective narrative. Narratives can also be an account of illusory events that follow a plot structure which includes introduction or exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution or end. This

structure is sometimes known as the 'plot pyramid' or 'story arc'. Thus narrative plays a significant role which can be defined as a report of relative events. Narrative sometimes is used as a synonym of short stories which helps to express our thoughts, ideas and emotions.

Every one of us has perused or heard numerous stories. They might be comedy, tragedy or tragic-comedy. The fundamental components of a short story comprise of plot, characterization, the narrative technique, topic, tone, dialect, setting, and atmosphere. The short story in Canada was truly created in the late nineteenth century. Making a moderate beginning in the 1830s, it got flourished in the mid-nineteenth century when daily papers and magazines gave a fillip to its production. Some of the important contemporary short story writers are

Margaret Eleanor Atwood, Margaret Lawrence, Ken Mitchell, Alice Munro and others. So the range and variety in Canadian short story is also limitless.

Alice Munro is a prominent Canadian writer who brings an effective art of narrative in her short stories. Her stories investigate human complexities in an uncomplicated prose style. Narrative is the focal movement of the characters of Munro's fiction. Her fundamental subject is humiliation and grief, sexual perversity, terminal illness and fatal accidents but her memoirs are the best. She is often called as a territorial writer since her fiction focus on the way of life of rustic Ontario Canada, which she renamed as Jubilee or Han ratty in her stories.

Alice Munro started publishing in different magazines from the 1950s. Some of her works are, *Dances of Happy Shades* (1968), *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), *Something I've been meaning to tell you* (1974), *Who do you think you are?* (1978), *The Moon of Jupiter* (1982), *Open Secrets* (1994), *The love of Good Women* (1988), *Run away* (2004), *The View of Castle Rock* (2006), *Too Much of Happiness* (2009), and *Dear Life* (2012). Though she grew up in a very traditional community, she thinks practically. She is known for her tuned short stories which are characterized by clarity and realism.

#### **Concept of Narrative Technique**

Storytelling is a fundamental part of human nature. Man is the only individual who tells story. It started with oral conventions as myths, legends, tales, accounts, and so forth. The term 'Narratology' was used by Tzvetan Todorov in 1969. As Barry states "Narratology is the study of how narratives make meaning, and what the basic mechanisms and procedures are which are common to all acts of storytelling" (Barry). It not only interprets the individual story but also attempts to study the nature of story by itself.

The Narrative is an art of storytelling. It aids to express our thoughts, feelings, experiences, and observations. The story teller tells a story in an artistic manner. Story might be used as an equivalent word for narrative, to allude to the arrangement of occasions depicted in a story. Homer's 'Iliad and Odyssey', Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales' and Spencer's 'Faerie Queene' are famous examples for extensive use of narratives.

A narrative is kind of technique by itself which tie up characters, setting, time. Narrative techniques purposely used by an author to write a story efficiently. Novels, short stories, poems, and essays are considered as the types of narrative. Even though, the form of the writing changes but the function of storytelling remains the same. Gerald Prince defines it as "the study of form functioning of narrative" (Prince). He further adds that the term narratology may be new but not the discipline. It is a binding force of human entity. As Barry states "narrative, then, is not the reading and interpretation of individual stories but an attempt to study the nature of 'story' itself as a concept and cultural practice" (Barry).

#### **Analysis of Dear Life**

*Dear Life* is the latest work of Alice Munro that was published in 2012 and it is a collection of fourteen stories. The last four stories specifically *The Eye, Night, Voices and Dear Life* are taken for analysis. Munro is a skilled writer whose quality lies in her capacity to display the surface of regular day to day existence with both concern and unyielding exactness. The key features of narrative techniques are plot, setting, character and style which were used by the writer in her stories.

Munro's attitude seems to be changed with the publication of *Dear Life*. It is supposed to be the last book in her career and the author also revisits her wounds in the 'finale' or autobiographical sections. In the preceding note she writes "The final four works in this book are not quite stories. They form a separate unit, one that is autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact. I believe that they are the first and the last -and closest- things I have to say about my life" (DL 255).

These final four stories pieces comprise first-person narrative, starting from five years old and ending when she is about thirteen. The setting is her hometown Ontario, which she describes her house as covered with bricks and faces back on the village "It faced west across slightly down sloping fields to the hidden curve where the river made what was called the Big Bend" (DL 307-308). Munro speaks about her childhood in the part of wing ham known, as lower town and her difficult relationship with her parents. It also traces to her early writing

"Dance of Happy Shades" and "Lives of Girls and Women."

*The Eyes* recount the life of a five-year-old girl who is confronted with sudden appearance of younger siblings, a baby boy and a year later, a baby girl. Their presence becomes subject to aggressive socialization at home. Alice and her life is abruptly changed by the entry of infant. Munro states that "When I was five years old my parents all of sudden produced a baby boy, which my mother said was what I had always wanted. Where she got this idea I did not know. She did quite elaborating on it, all fictions but hard to counter... Then a year later a baby girl appeared" (DL 257). The entry of her siblings changes her association with her mom. As a child she wonders about the intricacies of life changing reality. For instance she could not understand how people change when Saddie, the house maid dies "I believed it easily, the way you might believe and in fact remember that you once had another set of teeth, now vanished" (DL 270).

*Night* is set during the time of war. It accounts Alice's sleeping disorder, bad dream and sleepless night in the house. The sister, whom Munro for some reason calls Catherine in *Dear Life*, reappears for a brief moment in *Night*. The author admits that due to the significant age difference, she did not have much in common with her younger sister. The girls shared one room, yet they probably did not share many interests. Alice mentions some pleasures she had with Catherine, like storytelling or dressing up, but at the same time she asserts: "I don't mean to say that I was entirely in control of her, or even that our lives were constantly intertwined. She had her own friends, her own games" (DL 274). Thus, there is no doubt that Alice in the story loved her little sister. When she starts to be afflicted by murderous thoughts at night, she is truly terrified: "The thought was there and hanging in my mind. The thought that I could strangle my little sister, who was asleep in the bunk below me and whom I loved more than anybody in the world" (DL 277). The narrator discovers the states of consciousness with her own narrative art.

*Voices* accounts Alice's experience at a neighbourhood party moreover it describes the ritual enjoyment of dances. Alice was often ashamed

of her mother and the sophisticated behaviour, which the young girl found inappropriate at that time. The country life had taught her by then that standing out is never appreciated, especially if you are a woman. She thinks "What ever she said, it did not sound quite right" (DL 290). Since Munro was too young to remember the incident, she wonders about her mother's inner thoughts and action, thinking that might transform a mere life in to a story. Later the party is ruined by the presence of a neighborhood whore, whom Alice could not tolerate. She feels "I might of have known that she was a notable prostitute. I would surely have been seen her some time, though not in that orange dress. And I would not have used the word prostitute. Bad women, more likely" (DL 292). In these stories she recalls her past childhood memories. She associates herself with the lives of others, sharing their emotion in the limited space.

The final piece in the 'finale' has the same title as the whole book *Dear Life*. It presents a rambling account of various events, places, hopes and disappointment. She recounts her way to school, her acquaintance with prostitute's daughter and the history of the house in which they have lived. "Sometime my mother and I talked, mostly about her younger days" (DL 310). Finally *Dear Life* is an account of on a farm, growing up in Wing ham and her relationship with her parents, especially after her mother is diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. She feels the loss of her mother. "But the person I would really have liked to talk to then was my mother, who was no longer available" (DL 318). The reader is given a glimpse in to the life of the author herself. Munro's mother presented in 'Dear Life' bears a close resemblance to author's earlier fictional female character.

All the four stories strike the reader's heart with the author's disclosure of long-concealed feeling. More over it also represents the past and future life of Alice Munro's to form a radiant, indelible portrait of ordinary life. Bloom's states that "Munro blurs the line between the objective and subjective, and between the small and large, in order to discover what, if anything, will suffice for a more abundant life (Bloom 2009) .

**Conclusion**

All the protagonists of Alice Munro's stories are modern, educated and independent women, between the ages of thirty to thirty five. At the end they emerge more confident, control and significantly helpful. Her plot is relatively basic and simply told in a simple language. She likes using small town setting where even the minor events and minor characters hold higher significance. In most of her stories the protagonists are all women. The minor character in the novel suffers in silence and accepts the fact without any response. Her writings mainly focus on the lives of women and their problems in particular. The effect of realism is very strong in her stories. Her use of one word title focuses the narrative perspective of each story on an image that makes the reader to understand the story.

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