

REGIONALIZATION IN ALICE MUNRO'S DANCE OF THE HAPPY SHADES

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Abstract

The term Regionalization is used to describe the attachment of a writer to a particular place. The regional literature underlines the setting and social structure of a particular place. The term views tension between the regional and the national i.e. the rural and the urban. Regionalism as a prevalent term has played a significant role in displaying the customs of a particular locality, its characters and their way of thinking. Munro's stories are often set in a small - town milieu where the struggle for a socially acceptable existence results in strained relationships and moral conflicts-problems that stem from general differences and colliding life ambitions. Spanning almost 45 years, 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. In this paper, the researcher aims at exploring the elements and aspects of regionalization in the works of Canadian short story writer- Alice Munro.

Key Words: *Canadian Literature, Short Story, Alice Munro, Rural Settings, Nobel Laureate 2013, Dance of the Happy Shades.*

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Canadian Literature has always remained regional in its impulses and origins. Born and brought up in Canada, Munro is a regional author writing about small-town settings. The creation of a regional place in Munro's fictional world is a vehicle for sympathetic bonding between the reader and the writer's fictional regional world. Alice Munro- Canada's renowned living short story writer won Nobel Prize in Literature on 10th October 2013, at the age of 82. The prominent writer Munro has cemented her reputation as one of the world's greatest short stories tellers with this triumph. She has consistently produced work in which we can observe regional impulse and social observation with an approach of finding an extraordinary within the ordinary life of people. In her short stories, Munro tries to transform the ordinary life into something that is mysterious.

Alice was born in 1931 and grew up in Wingham, a small rural town in southwestern Ontario (Canada), on a farm to a family of poor farmers. She grew up in the heavily Scottish-Irish farming community near the Great Lakes that border the United States and Canada. The family lived on the outskirts of town where all the bootleggers and prostitutes and hangers-on lived. Alice lived in the small town Wingham which was not far from Lake Huron. The river flowed past the foot of the Laidlaw property on its way from Wingham to Lake Huron at Goderich. This river was called Meneseteung before being renamed Maitland. This river took on a legendary quality for Alice as she grew up. This landscape, as perceived in childhood and recreated in adult memory, forms the imaginative foundation of Munro's short stories and makes her a Regional writer.

Alice recollects that she grew under the conditions of deprivation and hardship and her 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.'

Munro's Regional literature is tied to the conventions of realism because it attempts to distinguish accurately the features of a clearly definable rural region. In its fullest achievement such regional literature deals with profound exploration of the shaping influence of particular regions on individual lives.

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Her first published book was *Dance of the Happy Shades* in 1968 at 37. Munro was awarded the Governor General's Award- Canada's highest literary prize in 1969, for this collection of short stories. The stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* are set in a deceptively calm small town of Southern Ontario involving small-town people and their sufferings. The book has fifteen stories — "Walker Brothers 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", "Postcard", "Red Dress — 1946", "Sunday Afternoon", "A Trip to the Coast", "The Peace of Utrecht" and "Dance of the Happy Shades".

The stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* depict the experiences of a young narrator and bring out the narrator's awareness of life in Huron County in the 1930s and 1940s with a touch of autobiographical elements. This tells the reader what it is to grow up and come of age in a small town. According to Munro's depiction, people have no privacy at all in the small towns. In story after story, she demonstrates how in small towns, people know everything about everyone, even the hairline faults.

The first story in this collection entitled "Walker Brothers Cowboy" is set in rural Ontario, close to the Great Lakes (A fictional Tuppertown, a port town on Lake Huron), in the late 1930s. The story begins with a narrator describing a walk that she takes with her father looking at Lake Huron, and he tells her how the Great Lakes came to be:

'And then the ice went back, shrank back towards the North Pole where it came from, and left its fingers of ice in the deep places it had gorged, and ice turned to lakes and there they were today. They were new, as time went. I try to see that plain before me, dinosaurs walking on it, but I am not able to even imagine the shore of the Lake when the Indians were there, before Tuppertown. The tiny share we have of time appalls me, though my father seems to regard it with tranquility. Even my father, who sometimes seems to me to have been at home in the world as long as it has lasted, has really lived on this earth only a little longer than I have, in terms of all the time there has been to live in. He has not known a time, any more than I, when automobiles and electric lights did not at least exist. He was not alive when this century started. I will be barely alive — old, old — when it ends. I do not like to think of it. I wish the Lake to be always just a lake, with the safe-swimming floats marking it, and the breakwater and the lights of Tuppertown.'

"The Shining Houses" is the second story in Alice Munro's first short story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*. In this story, we meet an elderly neighbor, living in an old country house that is now surrounded by new suburban developments. The small, older town is modernizing with wealthy new houses and subdivisions. The setting of Mrs. Fullerton's house, the farm-like, untidy, historical looking house, represents the past. The new "Shiny houses" and the people wanting to get rid of Mrs. Fullerton represent the modernization of our society, how rapidly things are changing. This story is about one the older generation and its values coming in to take over to the younger generation. The central character, Mary, is part of the new generation. The story begins with the central character, Mary (part of the new generation) sitting on the steps of Mrs. Fullerton's house to pay for the eggs Mrs. Fullerton (the older generation) sells her. Mary likes to hear stories, particularly those that show how multi-faceted the past is.

'Mary and Danny walked down the road that had been called, in Mrs. Fullerton's time, Wicks Road, but was now marked on the maps of the subdivision as Heather Drive. The name of the subdivision was Garden Place, and its streets were named for flowers. On either side of the road the earth was raw; the ditches were running full. Planks were laid across the open ditches, planks approached the doors of the newest houses.'

"*Images*" is the third story in Alice Munro's first short story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades* with a rural setting.

'We went across a field that had plowed the previous fall. There was a little snow lying in the furrows but it was not real snow, it was a thin crust like frosted glass that I could shatter my heels. The field went downhill slowly, down to the river flats. The fence was down in some places from the weight of the snow, we could step over it.'

"*Thanks for the Ride*" is the fourth story in Alice Munro's first short story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades* in which Munro has introduced this rundown town.

'You see that judgment on the faces of people looking out of windows, sitting on front steps in some little towns; so deeply, deeply uncaring they are, as if they had sources of disillusionment which they would keep, with some satisfaction, in the dark.'

"*The Office*" is the fifth story in Alice Munro's first short story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades* which deals with a woman who is torn between the traditional female role concept and her profession as an independent writer. The story reveals the narrator's dissatisfactory situation at home, where she feels cramped by being just a mother and housewife. But she wants to emancipate herself as a writer by renting an office of her own. Finally, she gives up her office and her dream of independence.

'At certain times, perhaps on long spring evenings, still rainy and sad, with the cold bulbs in bloom and a light too mild for promise drifting over the sea, I have opened the windows and felt the house shrink back into wood and plaster.'

"*An Ounce of Cure*" is the sixth story in Alice Munro's first short story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades* in which a fifteen-year-old girl betrayed by her first boyfriend.

'A street light shone obliquely on the windowpane, making a rectangle of thin dusty gold, in which the shadows of bare branches moved, caught in the huge sweet winds of spring, it was a mild black night when the last snow was melting.'

"*The Time of Death*" is the seventh story in Alice Munro's first short story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*. It is a phenomenal short story apparently based on a real death that took place in Wingham, Munro's hometown, in 1939 (an autobiographical element). This story also took place in a small town, in the poorer section.

"*Boy and Girls*" is the ninth story in Alice Munro's first short story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*. This story is a classic coming of age tale set in the 1940s, on a fox farm outside of Jubilee, a rural area only twenty miles away from the county jail. The unnamed narrator

describing her father and his work depicts the growing up in a harsh environment of a slaughter farm in a rural area.

'My father was a fox farmer. That is, he raised silver foxes, in pens: and in the fall and early winter, when their fur was prime, he killed them and skinned them and sold their pelts to the Hudson's Bay Company or the Montreal Fur Traders'.

'Against a background of cold blue sky and black pine forests and treacherous northern rivers, plumed adventurers planted the flags of England or of France; magnificent savages bent their backs to the portage.'

"*Sunday Afternoon*" is the twelfth story in Alice Munro's first short story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Munro has narrated the humiliating experience of the protagonist, Alva, a poor country-high school girl, working for a rich family (The Gannetts) as a summer servant maid in their affluent suburban home. Alva leads a mechanical life with ill-fitting clothes and living among discarded furniture. Munro has beautifully portrayed the painful contrast between the protagonist and the Gannett's teenage daughters. The story describes a conflict between urban culture and rural culture with the idea that the rural characters are morally superior.

In the middle of the story, Alva writes a letter to her family, which shows how lonely she feels in the affluent suburban home:

'Don't worry about me being lonesome and downtrodden and all that maid sort of thing. I wouldn't let anybody get away with anything like that. Besides I'm not a maid really, it's just for the summer. I don't feel lonesome, why should I? I just observe and am interested. Mother, of course I can't eat with them. Don't be ridiculous. It's not the same thing as a hired girl at all. Also I prefer to eat alone.'

"The Peace of Utrecht" is the fourteenth story in Alice Munro's first short story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*. The story is set in Jubilee, in Canada and depicts a mother-daughter relationship. This heart touching story with rural setting in Jubilee portrays two sisters who struggle with the death of their gothic mother with Parkinson's Disease.

'The rhythm of life in Jubilee is primitively seasonal. Deaths occur in the winter; marriages are celebrated in the summer. There is a good reason for this; the winters are long and full of hardship and the old and weak cannot always get through them.'

In the end, I can say that Alice Munro- the most critically acclaimed Canadian contemporary writer has excellently revealed her mastery of the cultural and vocal tones of a region in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Her strong regional focus is one of the features of stories and it is truly appealing for the Canadian readers to focus upon Munro's usage of specifically Canadian small-town settings and times in a very simple way.

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