

# The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

## The Invisible Bond of Father and Daughter in the Works of Alice Munro

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### Abstract

Alice Munro's talents lie in her ability to present stories that successfully appear real, and not fictionalized. Although she is better known for representing her female protagonists and their struggle to identify themselves in society, she also takes her readers back to the ordinary lives of the people in western Ontario where the author herself spent her entire childhood. Her short stories often deal with the sad conditions that many of her protagonists face in dealing with their relationship with their families, husbands and wives, friends and sometimes, strangers. Lisa Dickler Awano praises Munro saying, "... she has a firm grasp on the complicated interplay between our will, our desires, and the outside forces over which we have almost no control... There's happiness, tragedy, and everything in between, and any worldview that insists on one thing over the others is deficient or fragmentary. Mystery and surprise are crucial ingredients of every single story, and Munro is a master of the mystery that resides in the human heart... In Munro's short stories you don't know what's going to happen to people- just as in life." The paper entitled "The Invisible bond of father and daughter in the works of Alice Munro" will analyze in detail the bond that is shared between the father and his daughter that is not visualized by many. The paper will highlight the complicated lives that the family goes through, which has been closely observed and narrated by the young narrator.

**Keywords-** Hardships, Misfortunes, Relationships, Patience, Poverty

I put all this material together over the years, and almost without my noticing what was happening, it began to shape itself, here and there, into something like stories. Some of the characters gave themselves to me in their own words, others rose out of their situations. Their words and my words, a curious re-creation of lives, in a given setting that was as truthful as our nation of the past can ever be.

Alice Munro, Foreword; *The View from Castle Rock*

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## Introduction

From an early career in writing, to winning the 2013 Nobel Prize for Literature, Alice Munro has come a long way. Critics and readers believe that the definite closeness and relationship between fiction and reality stays at the core of most Canadian writers. Munro's oeuvre makes her one of the one of the most accomplished among contemporary short story writers. In many of her short stories, we find the presence of that intense experience of her women characters, where at one point they appear as if they are caught in an intricate web of puzzles, yet they refuse to surrender to their fate. They always try to find solutions to their problems, however unsuccessful those solutions may be. Though in majority of her short stories, we find that women are her central characters, Munro does not back away from including male characters. Her male protagonists are often not disclosed. They appear in her stories, but their figures are not always visible. They may not be the narrators, but their presence is not discarded by her. Her stories often speak about the relationship between mothers and daughters, however, this article will examine few short stories to analyse the relationship between fathers and daughters in her works. The father-daughter relationships in her short stories are fictionalized, but also autobiographical to an extent.

Alice Munro's first collection of short stories *Walker Brothers Cowboy* (Dance of the Happy Shades) takes the readers to the young narrator's discovery of the two sides of her father's youth, and how as a father at present he has to put up with poverty. The narrator here recalls the times when the family was financially stable saying:

My father raised silver foxes and sold their pelts to the people who make them into capes and coats and muffs. 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. (4)

She goes on to narrate how times have changed since then, through her young eyes:

My father has a job, selling for Walker Brothers. This is a firm that sells almost entirely in the country, the back country. Sunshine, Boylesbridge, Turnaround – that is all his territory. Not Dungannon where we used to live, Dungannon is too near town and my mother is grateful for that. He sells cough medicine, iron tonic, corn plasters, laxatives, pills for female disorders, mouth wash, shampoo, liniment, salves, lemon and orange and raspberry concentrate for making refreshing drinks, vanilla, food colouring, black and green tea, ginger, cloves and other spices, rat poison... (3, 4)

Even after he went through failure, the narrator's father displays stoicism and never reveals his struggles in taking care of his family. The narrator's mother is not a very healthy person too, yet she manages every household chore on her own. She never bothers any family member for help and

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gracefully accepts the family's fate. Seeing that his wife needs rest, the narrator's father offers to take the children with him while delivering some sold items. As he was driving, the narrator notices that he was happy as he sang all along the way. Soon, they reach one of their destinations and the narrator's father gets down and goes out of the car. To the young narrator's mind, her father's job seems fun, little realizing that he has to put up with a lot of humiliations to support his family. As he knocks on the door of one house, nobody answers. As he bends down to open his suitcase, suddenly one window opens and a splash of water hits him. The narrator realizes that it was not water, but urine. At first, the children thought it was a joke but the father warns the children not to disclose the incident to their mother as she "isn't liable to see the joke" (10). But the narrator realizes that it was never easy for her father as he had to face occasions and situations worse than this daily. Magdalene Redekop notes that,

The absence of the mother looms large in the ...collection, but what is equally noteworthy is the comforting and solid presence of the father. His playful reproductions, his good manners, and his humility offer an alternative to grandiose quests. Instead of reaffirming the robust, individual male ego, his little acts of compassion and of failed understanding begin "the progress of love". (49)

Alice Munro makes her readers sympathize with her characters. Munro is successful in using incidents and events to touch upon the minds of readers evoking feelings of compassion for the characters, leaving the impact lingering on in the readers' minds. In another short story that was believed to be autobiographical, Munro shares an almost similar incident where the narrator observes the painful consequences that her family has to face. *Dear Life* (Dear Life) is believed to be the author's autobiography where she narrates her family's story. In the story, the narrator's mother is suffering from Parkinson's diseases and the narrator does not for how long her mother can hold on. The narrator in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (Dance of the Happy Shades) and *Dear Life* (Dear Life) are two young girls who witness the hardships and misfortunes of their families at a tender age. As Munro recalls her past, her father

... had got into the fur business just a little too late. The success he'd hoped for would have been more likely back in the mid-twenties, when furs were newly popular and people had money. But he had not got started then. Still, we survived, right up to and through the war, and even at the end of the war there must have been an encouraging flurry, because that was the summer my father fixed up the house, adding a layer of brown paint over the traditional redbrick. (307)

Though the narrator's family business never improved, her father kept trying

... he pelted all the foxes, then the mink, and got what shockingly little money he could for them, then he worked by day pulling down the sheds where that enterprise had been born and

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died, before heading off to take the five-o'clock watch in the foundry. He would not come home until around midnight. (308)

In the above two stories, the fathers of both the narrators suffer almost the same fate. Their wives were not physically healthy, they were the sole bread earners who had to provide financially for their families. The young narrator in *Walker Brothers Cowboy* (Dance of the Happy Shades) witnesses many sufferings that her father had to endure, yet she sees another side of him when he reaches home, never without a happy face, concealing all the humiliations of the day. She recalls the incident when he met his former lover and how he cherished those moments meeting her. The narrator knows that she was a part of his past before he met his wife but she was glad that meeting her had amused him for a while, helping him forget the hardships that he faced in the present. She was able to see the glow in her father's face when they were returning back home.

So my father drives and my brother watches the road for our rabbits and I feel my father's life flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine. (18)

Munro, in *Walker Brothers Cowboy* (Dance of the Happy Shades) reveals to the readers the silent bond that exists between a father and a daughter, one that is not quite open, yet close but subdued, unlike the mother-daughter relationships. Although never the protagonist, he is always the hero in her stories. The stories revolve around his life and his memories of his life. For a short moment of time, the narrator tells how she could see the glow in his face, but as they approach home, she can feel and see his sadness returning as he once again faces the harsh reality of the present.

The story in *Dear Life* (Dear Life) takes a little turn when the narrator's father gets a job at the foundry. According to the narrator, he likes working there as he has some friends whose lives too are similar to his, with "an extra burden added to their lives." In fact, he liked working there enough to agree to a job of being a night watchman. It was not that he did not like going home, but deep inside, it only saddened him more to see his wife getting worse and there was little he could do to help because he was too poor. It did look like he wanted to get away from the house as often as possible, but he could barely endure the pain of watching the sufferings of his family. To him, it was best to divert himself by going early to work, concentrate in it while he's there, and at night continue as a watchman. The narrator believes,

... he was glad to get away, even to do this hard and risky work. To get out of the house and into the company of other men who had their own problems but made the best of things (309)

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Munro, in the above two stories allows the readers to witness the bond between the fathers and daughters. She never clearly reveals nor blatantly displays the relationships but leaves for the readers to discover on their own. Munro merges the two stories- one that is fiction and the other, autobiographical, resulting in the father figure's portrayal as the hero. While the fathers may not always be the central figures in the events she so vividly describes, they deeply affect the flow of the stories. Patricia Reis rightly says:

Despite the changes occurring in gender roles, fathers are still experienced by daughters as a symbolic link to the outside world. It is well understood, both objectively and subjectively that a daughter's relationship to her father can make or break her feeling of self-esteem and self-confidence, her understanding of herself as a woman, her belief in herself and her own authority as she enters into the world. (11)

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