

*Not Real but True:*  
Evolution in Form and Theme  
in  
Alice Munro's  
Lives of Girls and Women, The Progress of Love, and Open Secrets

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**ABSTRACT**

*Not Real but True: Evolution in Form and Theme in Alice Munro's  
Lives of Girls and Women, The Progress of Love, and Open Secrets*

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Through the use of detailed textual analysis, this study explores the relationship between form and theme in Lives of Girls and Women, The Progress of Love and Open Secrets. A close reading of Munro's deceptively simple narrative style reveals a rich combination of formal techniques that has evolved to reflect the author's increasingly complex artistic vision. While the author consistently explores questions of female identity and the nature of reality, her focus is shown to widen from a close-up on one developing artistic consciousness to a cinematographic panning of various characters' attempts at making meaning from the world around them. This shift in focus is traced throughout the stories of all three collections, demonstrating movement from a reliance on what Munro refers to as a "single path" through a story, to an increasingly complex labyrinth in which characters' lives and visions intersect in unexpected and inexplicable ways. Munro's writing is shown to have evolved over time, most recently leading her to pursue a quest similar to that of Will in "The Jack Randa Hotel: "Perhaps it is my age--I am 56--that urges me to find connections" (172).

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## Introduction

The momentum for this project stems from my very personal appreciation for the fiction of Alice Munro, one obviously shared by generations of girls, women and men; since the 1950's, readers have discovered in her work connections with their own lives, and with the lives of those around them. This study, then, is in part an effort to pay tribute to a writer who has been contributing to Canadian Literature for nearly half a century. For so many of her readers, Munro's appeal is rooted in her open-ended exploration of ways of seeing and understanding reality. Perhaps the most striking feature uniting the author's numerous collections is to be found in her persistent avoidance of a solitary and unified vision. Instead, she offers a multitude of ways of seeing the world, briefly illuminating various characters' perspectives, and thereby drawing attention to the human process of subjectively constructing meaning to combat what is mysterious, troubling, and inexplicable in the lives presented by her fiction.

Over the course of time, the sense of the inexplicable nature of reality has become stronger in her work, as Munro increasingly takes her stories further from any sense of a tidy, ultimate conclusion. Likewise, over the decades of Munro's career, her representation of identity becomes more complex, implying a significant element of self-creation, as characters reshape their past into legends, often seeking to come to terms with the inevitable impact of family in forming one's sense of self in the world. This lifelong fascination with notions of reality and identity is particularly focused on the lives of women who are consistently in the foreground of Munro's work. Appropriately, Munro's original title for Lives of Girls and Women was Real Life, and that another of her collections is entitled Who Do You Think You Are?. In this study, I approach some of

Munro's collected fiction with the latter two titles firmly in mind, since the multi-faceted and often paradoxical portrayals of reality lie close to the heart of all of Munro's fiction.

In 1982, four years before Progress of Love was published, Alice Munro explained her craft in the following manner:

I like looking at people's lives over a number of years, without continuity. Like catching them in snapshots. And I like the way people relate, or don't relate to the people they were earlier...Something happens (in the gaps between the scenes) that you can't know about. And that the person themselves doesn't know about. I think this is why I'm not drawn to writing novels. Because I don't see that people develop and arrive somewhere. I just see people living in flashes. From time to time. And this is something you do become aware of as you go into middle age. Before that, you really haven't got enough time experience. But you meet people who were a certain kind of character ten years ago and they're someone completely different today. They may tell you a story of what their life was like ten years ago that is different from what you saw at the time. None of these stories will seem to connect. There are all these realities. The reality a person presents in the narrative we all tell about our own lives. And there's the reality that you observe in the person as a character in your life. And then there's God knows what else (Hancock, 89.)

Identity and reality, therefore, are not fixed concepts in Munro's fiction. In fact, she presents a myriad of realities as the 'lives of girls and women' are explored through the perspectives of other characters, and through various - and often contradictory - self-images. These identities may be maintained simultaneously, or discarded and transformed with the passage of time and the gaining of life experience. The reader is not provided with one objective reality, and emphasis is placed instead on inner, personal versions of the truth. Reality is (re)constructed from unreliable memory, creating a new individual truth or legend that may be of greater value. Stories within stories abound, as characters offer up their versions of reality: editing, revising, reshaping, retelling themselves and their lives to project or protect what they currently hold to be "true".

Over time, Munro's formal developments, including various narrative techniques, non-linear representations of time, and shifts towards more experimental, fragmented structures signal evolution in the way she presents these versions of what is "real". She moves from an exploration of one girl's growth in understanding of herself and her own way of seeing in Lives of Girls and Women to an examination in the later works of more tenuous realms where memories are unreliable, the past constructed, and, finally, where the truth can never be known in its entirety.

My rationale for selecting the primary texts for this study is quite simple: Lives of Girls and Women, The Progress of Love, and Open Secrets come from three different decades in Munro's work, and they will provide sufficient scope to explore how Munro's fiction has evolved in terms of both form and theme over the last twenty-five years. Published in 1971, Lives of Girls and Women seems particularly significant to a study of Munro's multi-layered realities because it is the first of her two collections of linked short stories subsequently labelled as *bildungsromane* and *künstlerromane*. Munro's portrayal of the growth of a writer provides useful parallels to the development of her own approach to fiction.

Explorations of self-identity define much of the process of adolescence, and Munro's early work, Lives of Girls and Women, is a collection of flashes from this stage of life. The narrator of these linked short stories-encapsulates the young Del's present realities within the retrospective knowledge of an older, more experienced Del. Within these chronological, but only loosely connected, stories of adolescence, Munro provides moments of personal significance from the protagonist's life, as Del tries out different

versions of the self in order to reject particular socially sanctioned roles. Her struggles are influenced by the realities, or ways of seeing, of those around her, as they, like Del, create personal legends in their own quests for meaning. Despite Munro's claims that in her fiction people do not develop and arrive somewhere, Del does arrive at early womanhood with the knowledge of her vocation as a writer. After confronting the roles suggested for her by the people of Jubilee, Del rejects as incompatible with her sense of identity some of the alternate realities chosen for her by others, and she passes into the adult world. Although story-telling and fiction play significant thematic roles throughout the collection, the epilogue provides particular insight into Del's artistic vision which in turn provides insight into that of Munro herself.

The Progress of Love received much critical acclaim and was awarded the Governor General's Literary Award in 1986. In this work, Munro makes significant modifications in form from Lives and Girls and Women, particularly in terms of narrative technique, and she expands her thematic concerns to reflect realities in the lives of characters beyond the struggles of adolescence which are presented in the earlier work. Although much of the same thematic material of the first text reappears in this collection, major alterations in Munro's narrative technique accommodate thematic shifts. Stories which portray artist figures like Del Jordan are still presented through a first-person narrative voice similar to that used in Lives. The majority of these stories, however, incorporate a partially omniscient third-person narrator who either follows the consciousness of the protagonist, or who travels from the consciousness of one character to another. Whereas the first category of third-person narrators places the reader in a

position similar to the narrator as both strive to understand a mysterious event, the second category reveals how all characters are involved in similar quests for meaning in their lives and in the world at large.

The title of Munro's latest collection, Open Secrets, aptly suggests how Munro constructs these stories by connecting various glimpses of the intimate realities of several characters. Despite the impossibility of predicting in which direction a living artist will next take her work, the inclusion of Munro's most recent collection allows this study to be as current as possible.

In a 1994 interview regarding Open Secrets, , Munro claims that her approach to writing fiction has changed:

I think I used often to write stories that were single paths and I knew, pretty well, what I wanted to happen, and the satisfaction was in making that happen...Maybe I don't do that anymore...The older I get , the more I see things as having more than one explanation. I see the content of life as many-layered. And in a way, nothing that happens really takes precedence over anything else that happens (Smith, 24).

These stories of this collection have a fragmented, distinctly non-linear form, including variations on the narrative techniques of The Progress of Love, that entwines various characters' perspectives over lengthy periods of time. Munro also incorporates letter fragments in sections of several of these stories, a technique perfectly suited to the telling of personally created versions of reality. As a result, each story becomes a composite picture of reality composed of interlocking destinies and individual ways of seeing. This complex form reflects Munro's thematic emphasis on connections binding together the various tiers that form reality, in which no one layer takes precedence over another. In the same interview in *Quill and Quire*, Munro provides additional hints for understanding the

technique: "It's almost a pulling the reader back and saying, no, this story isn't what you think it's about" (24). Holding only pieces of these puzzling layers of reality, the reader is left to connect fragments, aware that any possible truth regarding what is real may be nothing more than a strong suspicion.

Whereas little criticism of Open Secrets has yet been published, the amount of critical commentary of Munro's work over the last four decades is extensive, and several full-length volumes have appeared in recent years. In the introductory chapter of his Reader's Guide to Lives of Girls and Women, Neil K. Besner comments on the renewed critical focus on functions of language as a relational system emerging from the late sixties and early seventies in the form of the structuralist, post-structuralist and deconstructionist movements. "In Canada", he notes, "these shifts have been most noticeable in our departures from broadly thematic criticism, with its primary emphasis on defining what a literary text is 'about' - what meanings literature communicates - towards a closer consideration of *how* literature conveys meaning through language, narration, form, and style" (16).

By way of an introduction to the study at hand, what follows is a brief overview of the main branches of Munroian criticism. Besner provides a framework of eight categories for discussing the critical scholarship on Munro: initiation; regionalism; feminism; photography, fictional surfaces, and forms of realism; autobiographical fiction; texts and textuality; paradox, parallel, and double vision; and lastly, narration. Within his brief description of each category, he directs his readers to only two or three examples of each (25-31). By borrowing Besner's framework and extending it to include critics he has

omitted but who have contributed to the development of my own approach, I will provide a type of road map through the great volume of scholarly work on this renowned author.

The theme of initiation is significant to this study since adolescence is centered on the development of identity and various ways of seeing reality. Because Lives of Girls and Women and Who Do You Think You Are, Munro's two early collections of interconnected stories, both trace the development of an artistic young girl through adolescence, early critical attention naturally focused on these works as *bindungsromane* and *kunstlerromane*. Critics such as J. R. (Tim) Struthers and W. R. Martin were quick to point out James Joyce's influence on Munro, particularly the influence of A Portrait of the Artist of a Young Man and Ulysses (Besner, 26). John Moss (omitted from Besner's list) approaches Lives of Girls and Women from a similar perspective, discussing the growth of the artist in more general terms:

Del is going to be the writer that Alice Munro becomes. The assumption is implicit throughout that this is a portrait of the artist as a girl and young woman. What is being offered is the authentic version of all the phases passed through and things encountered that have gone into the making of one particular creative sensibility which now records them (60).

Since gender and place of origin play primordial roles in shaping our perspectives and identities, critical work addressing the significance of Munro's contribution in terms of regionalism, feminism, and autobiographical fiction are also relevant to the study at hand. Brandon Conron's "Munro's Wonderland" (not mentioned in Besner's overview) quotes Munro in the late seventies: "If I'm a regional writer, the region I'm writing about has many things in common with the American South...A closed rural society with a pretty homogeneous Scotch-Irish racial strain going slowly to decay" (110). Beverly

Rasporich's book Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in Fiction of Alice Munro (too recent to receive mention in Besner's study) devotes an entire chapter to Munro as regionalist. In it, Rasporich suggests that Munro "has a remarkable ability to poeticize a specific place, to sing its praises and hypnotic mysteries, as well as to invoke place as a maternal mythscape" (122). She draws attention to Munro's use of the reality of the Southern Ontario landscape which has led many critics to speak of "documentary realism," as Munro precisely establishes setting and reconstructs the reality with local language (124-125).

Whereas my particular exploration of Munro's portrayal of reality shows how characters construct subjective realities that function outside of chronological time, Rasporich concentrates on how Munro's use of landscape can appear to reflect and encompass the innermost feelings or evolving consciousness of the protagonist, so that "reality exists at another level beyond physical nature and...landscape is an apt metaphor of the mind's subjective odyssey" (131). Similarly, in tracing the use of setting through several of Munro's texts, she points out how Munro's urban settings reflect the interior lives of characters by focusing on interior space within buildings instead of landscape. Furthermore, she holds that Munro's use of the "British Columbia locale explored periodically, particularly in her third and fourth volumes, is a lived one...but it never achieves in a sustained way the resonance or poetry of her primary landscape of southwestern Ontario town and country. Its reality is a lesser one in Munro's imagination" (126).

As Rasporich's title suggests, she is working from a feminist critical perspective,

and she sets out her argument clearly: "Munro's art is informed by being female. Her folk art and her irony are natural expressions of her gender, her use of landscape and place are bound up with the female psyche, and fictional form and content develop in a variety of ways from writing the body" (167). She sees Munro's two collections of linked short stories as reflective to some degree of James Joyce's form, defined by French feminist critics as *l'écriture féminine*. While admitting that Munro is not writing in the radical, structurally subversive avant-garde of this movement, Rasporich nonetheless finds many coded allusions, and secret meanings in character names. Within her feminist critical perspective, Rasporich touches on the focal point of my particular study, the intersection between Munro's use of form and theme, when she notes that by the time The Progress of Love is written, the author's forms have become more fractured, including "sudden passages of displaced interior thought, dialogue, and self-talk...The narrative 'disordering' of her fiction is indicative of writing the body" (162-163).

Inherent in Munro's thematic interest in the personal construction of identity and reality is an awareness of the significant role played by gender in establishing who we think we are and how we see the world. Therefore, other feminist critics not included in Besner's brief listing offer useful perspectives. In her 1978 article "Hostility and Reconciliation: The Mother In English Canadian Fiction", for example, Lorna Irving refers to several of Munro's stories in which the mother/daughter relationship is pivotal: a narrator desires to objectify her memories of her mother in order to eradicate a sense of guilt; a daughter repeatedly relives her impotence and can therefore not advance in her struggle for autonomy; a daughter's hostile and guilty description of the mother coincides

with an aura of disgust surrounding the female body; and, finally, rites of passage become an attempt by the mother to force the daughter to conform (57-58).

Similarly, Nancy I. Bailey presents a Jungian interpretation of the masculine in "The Masculine Image in Lives of Girls and Women" in order to show these male images to be "sound demonstrations of the way the female consciousness interacts with the male at different levels of being" (120). A more recent article which focuses on gender is Marlene Goldman's "Penning in the Bodies: The Construction of Gendered Subjects in Alice Munro's *Boys and Girls*." This essay discusses how "the division of space facilitates two seemingly disparate systems of production: farming and the construction of gendered adults" (62).

Another extensive and recent feminist work on Munro is Magdalene Redekop's Mothers and Other Clowns, published in 1992. Redekop's interest in characters' storytelling, subjective perspectives, and personal events coincides in part with my exploration of Munro's treatment of fictional realities and identities. In her preface, Redekop proposes that Munro's fiction suggests reasons that might cause a woman to resort to storytelling and to believe in the authority of personal experience. She states that "Munro has no overt feminist agenda and yet no writer is more devastatingly effective at dismantling the operations of our patriarchal structures" (Redekop, xii). Within Munro's stories, Redekop finds an emerging aesthetic revolving around mother figures. Focusing on those characters who function as substitute mothers, Redekop explores what she perceives as the centrepiece of an attempt to build a relationship between compassion and irony. Just as Munro takes details from her own life and exaggerates or distorts them for

comic effect, so mother figures use humour to balance their roles of keepers and watchers. Finally, turning to Bronwen Wallace's "Women's Lives: Alice Munro", we discover that Wallace also focuses on the themes of gender and identity in Munro's works, including the mother/daughter relationship and the contradictory nature of maternal feelings, women's physical bodies, and male/female relationships in which women maintain various selves in the face of men's struggle to control or deny them (55-64).

Because my particular argument is centered on Munro's presentation of reality, Besner's critical category entitled "photography, fictional surfaces, and forms of realism" is particularly relevant here. Brandon Conron's 1978 article, mentioned previously in reference to regionalism, Besner's second category, falls easily within the boundaries of this category as well, since it reveals that journalist James Agee and photographer Walker Evans' publication *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1960) had a great influence on Munro's descriptive style. Conron writes:

This intense feeling for the exact texture of surfaces and the tone of responses makes far greater demands than any cinematographic technique can adequately meet. It requires a style more akin to what in contemporary painting is often called 'magic realism'...There is a kind of illusionary three dimensional aspect, a super realism or magical and mysterious suggestion of a soul beyond the objects depicted, which leaves the viewer participant with greater insights and an increased sensitivity to the world around (110).

The works of visual artists who incorporate this style, and for whom Munro has expressed appreciation, give special significance to each object in its relation to the rest of the picture. Munro's depiction of reality as juxtaposed moments of personal truths (to be discussed in the following chapter) involves a similar transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary.

“Autobiography”, another central area of critical inquiry into the texts of Munro, is also pertinent to this particular study, since part of my focus involves how memory functions to allow characters to create, tell, and retell their own stories. Besner describes an evolution in criticism of this nature from the early reviews of Lives of Girls and Women, which focused merely on the extent to which the work is autobiographical, to more recent considerations “with *how* autobiographical form, material and impulse might be seen to be working” within the collection (28). In the September 1982 issue of The Canadian Forum, Munro herself responded to questions of the degree of autobiography in her work to date in an article entitled “What Is Real?”:

Yes, I use bits of what is real, in the sense of being really there and really happening, in the world, as most people see it, and I transform it into something that is really there and really happening, in my story. No, I am not concerned with using what is real to make any sort of record or prove any sort of point, and I am not concerned with any methods of selection but my own, which I can't fully explain (36).

If we turn to one of Besner’s sources, Robert Thacker’s 1988 article “So shocking a Verdict in Real Life’: Autobiography in Alice Munro's Stories,” we discover to what extent reviewers and critics have reveled in discussions of the parallels between Munro's life and those of her protagonists, particularly in regards to Lives of Girls and Women and Who Do You Think You Are?. Since The Progress of Love reflects Munro's return to Ontario, Thacker takes up the issue of autobiography in regard to this work in particular, aligning Munro's narrative focus on self-definition and its inherent uncertainties with recent theories of twentieth-century autobiography. Likewise, E. D. Blodgett's recent full-length Alice Munro explores the issue of autobiography in the opening chapter where he

concedes: "In reading Alice Munro, it is difficult not to suppose that the relationship between her life and the fiction she makes must be intimate and profound, and certainly the frequency of her denials concerning the character of that relationship urge one all the more to find some clue to the meaning of her fiction in her life" (1). Yet Blodgett cautions against a simplistic linking of her life and fiction, concluding that "it would be more profitable to consider Munro's awareness of her life as analogous to that of her fiction, each possessing a core, which is the fundamental matter they share" (2).

Blodgett's work is also relevant to a discussion of the existence and significance of Munro's oeuvre as a text. Drawing upon the vocabulary of Barthes and Derrida, he explores elements of the author's textuality, examining the ways in which the self becomes text, and falls apart in the process:

But as a text, and it is to this perception of the real that Munro seems inevitably to progress, the self becomes no other than what it is, returning, so to speak, to itself. Within all the play of signifiers of which a text and a self are composed, the finished narration acquires a kind of mark of destiny and perfection, some inescapable core. At least this appears as one of the ineluctable signs of Munro's mature work, in which the narrator gradually glides into the narration, and its arrangement into a certain disposition of parts becomes the narrator's as well, illuminating her at once as giver and receiver of the world remade. (Quoting Munro) "I write about where I am in life": or should we not say that she writes about where she is in the text that her life, finally, is? (10).

Heble's The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence, published four years after Besner's study, is also concerned with textuality and Munro's relationship to the conventions of realism. Heble includes all of Munro's collections except Open Secrets in his exploration of how Munro "subverts and self-consciously renders problematic the very conventions within which her fiction operates", thereby drawing

attention to the tension created between surface reality and her exploration of the limits of representation through language (3, 4). He sees Munro constructing an apparently knowable world, only to prove it unintelligible, so that her texts become examples and criticisms of fictional representation:

Drawing on a set of distinctions from linguistic theory, I shall refer to texts which have this potential or absent level of meaning - which manifests itself variously throughout Munro's fiction - as examples of 'paradigmatic discourse'... a domain of language use in which, as Jonathan Culler explains, 'the meaning of an item depends on the difference between it and other items which might have filled the same slot in a given sequence'...Paradigmatic discourse, therefore, operates by referring to a series of meanings which signify through their absence (5).

Finally, Heble contends that, as Munro brings textuality to the forefront in places where her writing declares its own inadequacy, the reader is faced with the paradox that the world presented as real has in fact been shown as the narrator's fictional construct (8,9). This statement is provocative in light of my second chapter, which treats Munro's implied conclusion that objective reality is ultimately unknowable; subjective constructs of human memory and fiction are in fact as close as we can hope to come.

Besner's two final categories of Munro criticism - paradox, parallel and double vision, and narration - are particularly relevant to the study at hand, since I will argue that Munro's use of narration supports her thematic paradox that multiple "true" versions of reality can somehow exist side by side. Besner notes that critics from early in Munro's career began drawing attention to various oppositions at play in her work, between words, characters' attitudes, descriptions of events, and even impressions of time. "This line of inquiry includes explorations of sets of oppositions between the resources of memory that

yield an apparently 'true' documentary realism, and the resources of invention and imagination that yield recreations that underline their own status as fictions shaped to reveal their own ambiguous truths" (26).

In "Structure and Detail in Lives of Girls and Women" (omitted by Besner), Rae McCarthy Macdonald explores such opposites in Munro's first three volumes. Within these collections, Macdonald finds tension resulting from a perceived split between those characters who are social survivors, and the dysfunctional characters from what she calls the "other country". In reference to Lives of Girls and Women, she explores the protagonist's efforts to determine her place in regards to these two worlds (199), a subject I will also touch upon in the following chapter.

More recently, both W. R. Martin and Ildikó de Papp Carrington have published book-length studies which focus on splits or layers in Munro's vision. If we consult Martin's study, Alice Munro: Paradox and Parallel, we discover that it follows from a close reading of several of Munro's collections and six of the stories from The Progress of Love. Throughout these works, Martin finds Munro's vision often divided between seemingly paradoxical truths resulting in a reversal of meaning in terms of what is considered "ordinary" and "extraordinary". He also explores the paradoxical process by which the characters become aware of both their own individuality and their solidarity with humanity. In Controlling the Uncontrollable, Carrington finds in Munro's work published between 1950 and 1988 a lack of permanence or control in the author's detailed surfaces as a result of recurring split metaphors and varying points of view. She holds that amidst the many paradoxes to be found in Munro's work, the most central is a repeated

effort to bring control to what is uncontrollable, or "to split in half to control a suddenly split world" (5). The varying points of view of characters will also be a focal point of my analysis of Munro's use of form and theme.

The category of Besner's framework that is perhaps most relevant in this context, however, is that of narration since I will argue that Munro's narrative voice provides a key to the author's evolution in her explorations of characters' relationships to reality. Besner hastens to point out the significance of examining how the stories are narrated because "(i)n Lives of Girls and Women as in most of Munro's fiction, the control of narration and point of view is crucial because Munro's narrators so often create a complex weave of the past recollected and reported, and the past as it shapes and inhabits the present" (28).

Within the sources suggested by Besner for this final category, several perspectives on Munro's narration emerge. Susan J. Warwick, for example, examines narration in Lives of Girls and Women and Who Do You Think You Are?, arguing that the juxtaposition of time levels in the latter creates a heightened sense of loss and expectation: "Our primary interest is in why and how what happened did happen, not in what will happen" (209).

In "Alice Munro and A Maze of Time", John Orange discusses movement through Munro's first five collections from more conventional, first-person narrative techniques to more complex and experimental forms of narration. He concludes that, over the course of Munro's writing, a cryptic, mysterious quality develops which suggests that complete understanding cannot be drawn from experience (83-87). In "'Clear Jelly': Alice Munro's Narrative Dialectics", Robert Thacker also focuses on the development of Munro's narrative techniques in her earliest uncollected stories to conclude that her

characteristic retrospective narration acts as the catalyst for much of her art (37).

Finally, in his preface to Alice Munro, E. D. Blodgett proposes an examination of several issues surrounding Munro's use of narrative and her movement from subject matter to discourse. He holds that Munro's artistic question is based upon if or how the world may be understood:

It is a question that asks, then, what the bases of the world are, how we know the way it is placed, whether its mysteries are within our ken. From such a moment, Munro's manner of telling a story becomes a discovery procedure, inviting the reader to attend upon how certain truths are reached...No small part of the problem is the role the observer plays, how reliable her memory is, how fair she is with her characters, what tricks time may play upon her perceptions" (6,7).

Furthermore, Blodgett notes that Munro revises her writing after her early stories in order to question whether a permanent static form of meaning can be reached: "Rather than see things neatly conjoining, we are more often struck by the improbability of such a thing happening (7)".

In essence, Blodgett sees three phases in her work: 1) from a highly directed narrator, where meaning is arbitrarily posited, 2) to that of a less reliable narrator, one aware of her fallibility, and finally 3) to texts in which everyone appears subordinate to discourse's destiny: "This would suggest that the vulnerability, which [Munro] requires for understanding, passes by analogy from the narrative voice to the author herself, suggesting, if only tautologically, that she is as much in the dark as her narrators" (12).

The current study intersects with several of Besner's categories of criticism, and particularly with that of narration. Like Blodgett, my focus is on Munro's portrayal of the elusive nature of reality, and of characters' subjective efforts to make meaning of

themselves and their world. The three texts I have chosen for this work provide adequate scope to explore the connections between the author's thematic and formal evolution. Lives of Girls and Women presents the paradoxical relationship between the "real" and the "true", whereas The Progress of Love allows us to compare Munro's various narrative choices which coincide with her explorations of the human quest for meaning. Open Secrets, finally, shows how Munro has shifted even further towards an understanding of the content of life as interwoven and multi-layered. I would argue that Munro's multi-faceted vision as it presents itself in the three selected collections demonstrates a movement away from any possibility of completely knowing an objective reality, if one may even be assumed to exist.

## Chapter 1

### **Not Real but True**

In her second book, Lives of Girls and Women (1971), we see Munro working out an early version of her approach to fiction. Del, the protagonist, is a young artist figure whom Munro takes from childhood to young adulthood, the point at which she creates her first novel. Significantly, reviewers of the book, struggling to define its genre, have labelled it as "autobiography", "memoir", and "novel" as well as the more obvious "collection of short stories" (Besner 35). The labels of autobiography and memoir point to the reason why Lives is so much more novelistic in form than the bulk of Munro's work: only in this collection does Munro present a sustained fictional exploration of her discovery of the craft of fiction. The collection takes the protagonist, Del Jordan, through the early stages of artistic development and culminates with her choice of writing as a vocation. The author has, in fact, revealed Del's emotional reality to be largely autobiographical even if only some of the incidents described in the book have their origins in real life (Ostachoff 61). Within this almost conventional *bildungsromane*, however, the author incorporates the more characteristic elements of her technique that come to dominate her later fiction: in a process she describes as catching her characters "in snapshots", the author juxtaposes brief flashes of her characters' multi-faceted realities and identities (Hancock 89).

Munro has often claimed that she does not, in fact, write novels because the sustained discipline of novel writing holds little appeal for her; she loses interest (Struthers 15). Nevertheless, she herself has labelled Lives an "episodic novel", and this work is the

closest she ever gets to writing in the novel genre. In keeping with conventional novelistic form, the over-all pattern of the work is chronological, leading the reader successively through the stages of Del Jordan's childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. The first section, "The Flats Roads", introduces us to Del, the child who has just completed Grade Three. The central episode of each of the following stories advances through Del's young life at sequential, if irregular, intervals with one exception: the central episode of the final section, entitled "Epilogue: The Photographer", takes place at an earlier moment than the story that precedes it in the text.

John Orange, in "Alice Munro and A Maze of Time", comments on the significance of this chronological presentation of events:

When remembered events are selected and placed in a linear sequence, the reader is encouraged to assume a cause / effect relationship among those events and to develop an understanding of the story by a process of logic which relates events to character development (85).

In this way, Munro's overall linear pattern reinforces a conventional, novelistic approach towards character development whereby a sequence of significant experiences in the protagonist's life, presented chronologically, can be seen as stages contributing to an end product. Such an approach to character sets Lives apart from the rest of Munro's work and appears to contrast with the author's own explanation of her craft in a 1982 interview with Geoff Hancock in which she states: "...I don't see that people develop and arrive somewhere. I just see people living in flashes. From time to time" (Hancock 89).

This quotation is significant in light of the thematic and formal importance the author repeatedly accords to memory. Throughout her fiction, Munro emphasizes how

memory makes meaning from life's myriad experiences, editing and transforming what appears most significant. Thus, the characters' perceptions of both themselves and the significance of their experiences in the world are really composites of "flashes", or brief illuminating moments of self-discovery or self-deception. Since individual perceptions of reality are only valid for a brief illuminating moment but may then be transformed into other, possibly contradictory but equally valid, points of view, the notion of chronological development loses its meaning. Munro's theme of individual reality as a composite of juxtaposed moments standing outside of chronological time is reinforced in her formal technique. Despite the overall chronological structure of Lives, within each section Munro uses various techniques to break away from a linear approach, juxtaposing various facets of identity and reality in a process designed to mimic the function of memory.

Within the larger chronological framework of Lives, the eight chapters operate almost independently with few transitions between them; they often focus on subordinate characters who rarely reappear in subsequent sections, and they tend to counteract the larger chronological pattern by shifting through time. In this way, Munro demonstrates her view of life as a composite of personally significant revelations that stand outside of a linear time frame by presenting the development of Del's artistic consciousness in discrete stages, separated by irregular time intervals and little or no transition (Carscallen 15). For instance, the first story of the collection, "The Flats Road", takes place on Del's father's farm and focuses on the character of "Uncle" Benny, who finds a wife through an advertisement in the newspaper. Munro provides no transition into the following section, "Heirs of the Living Body", where we are made aware only of the passage of an indefinite

period of time and a shift to a new setting, the house of Del's Great-Aunts at Jenkins' Bend. The absence of transition between sections allows them to be nearly self-contained and still coherent when read out of sequence.

Similarly, Munro writes against novelistic conventions by allowing various subordinate characters to move between the background and foreground of the work depending on their relative significance to Del in any given section. Because Uncle Benny stands out most in Del's memories of her early childhood, for example, he is the focus of the first section. In later stories, however, what is most significant to Del is her life in town; Uncle Benny's impact has diminished, so references to him are few. Likewise, Del's father is a significant figure in the first stories, but Munro reduces him to a very minor role later and concentrates on the relationship between Del and her mother. Munro explains this process in a 1973 interview with Graeme Gibson: "...the sections could almost stand as short stories...I write sort of on...a single string, a tension spring...That's the segment or the story. I don't write as perhaps, as some people say a true novelist does, manipulating a lot of strings" (258).

In addition to providing flashes of Del's life in discrete and largely unconnected sections, Munro also works against the over-all linear structure by shifting through time, particularly at the beginnings and endings of each section. The fourth section in the collection, "Age of Faith", takes place in Jubilee, where Del, now twelve-years old, and her mother have been living for two years. Yet the story begins with Del's recollections of her early years on the Flats Road: "When we lived in that house on the end of Flats Road, and before my mother knew how to drive a car, she and I used to walk to town; town

being Jubilee, a mile away" (77). In fact, the beginnings and endings often appear broken off into deliberate fragments that serve to detract from a sense of chronological order.

James Carscallen notes this aspect of Lives in The Other Country: Patterns in the Writing of Alice Munro: "The story proper and its larger circumstances thus make a temporal foreground and background so to speak, and the relation between these varies considerably" (15). Therefore, although the character of Del is in fact developed over the course of the work, Munro's arrangement of time creates the impression of a mosaic of images from childhood as opposed to stages of development that are necessarily causally related. Borrowing Munro's photograph metaphor, we might say that the snapshots are simply hung together.

In keeping with her juxtaposition of various distinct moments in the protagonist's life that culminate in a kind of mosaic of her reality, Munro presents all significant characters as composites, emphasizing the multifarious elements to each personality instead of a unified whole. She does not seek to dispense with any seeming contradictions between these facets of identity but simply offers them together. Munro incorporates the metaphor of the photograph while using this technique to describe Del's teacher:

Miss Farris in her velvet skating costume, her jaunty fur hat bobbing among the skaters, always marking her out, Miss Farris *con brio*, Miss Farris painting faces in the Council Chambers, Miss Farris floating face down, unprotesting, in the Wawanash River, six days before she was found. Though there is no plausible way of hanging those pictures together - if the last one is true then must it not alter the others? - they are going to have to stay together now (118).

Carscallen describes how Munro incorporates the same technique in her descriptions of the protagonist's identity throughout the collection:

Del Jordan the student is a certain kind of person at the end of primary school, starting to like boys by dreaming of one as a vague presence; she is a very different person as a teenage sex researcher in high school, and a different one again as a young woman in her graduating year attempting real emotional bonds... (15).

Within the title story, the narrator reveals her awareness that identity is to some degree a creative process on the part of the individual: "A year ago, we (Naomi and Del) had liked to imagine ourselves victims of passion; now we were established as onlookers, or at most cold and gleeful experimenters" (123). Although the two girls adopt many of the same roles in early adolescence, later glimpses of the increasing distance between them demonstrate how they later choose to carve out different roles for themselves: "Naomi came out of her illness fifteen pounds lighter, with a whole new outlook on life. Her forthrightness was gone with her chunky figure. Her language was purified. Her daring had collapsed" (144). Naomi sets her sights on finding a husband, a destiny which Del rejects without yet having defined another goal: "I was amazed and intimidated by her [Naomi] as her boring and preoccupied new self. It seemed as if she had got miles ahead of me. Where she was going I did not want to go, but it looked as if *she* wanted to; things were progressing for her. Could the same be said for me?" (152). Much of Munro's early work is based on a young, female protagonist, presumably because adolescence involves such dramatic shifts in terms of individual perception of identity and reality.

Munro places great significance on the writer's capacity for observation; consequently, Del must develop the roles of both observer and participant in life in order to move towards her chosen destiny as artist figure. In the interview with Graeme Gibson, Munro explains her vision of the writer as observer:

I'm very, very excited by what you might call the surface of life, and it must be that this seems to me meaningful in a way I can't analyze or describe...it's just things about people, the way they look, the way they sound, the way things smell, the way everything is that you go through every day... It seems to me very important to be able to get at the exact tone or texture of how things are (241).

Throughout the book, Munro presents moments that both define and mimic the growth of Del's heightened capacity for observation and self-reflection. Her particular way of seeing emerges as a result of both her quest to understand the society around her and her self-conscious awareness that she is distanced from it. Although Del cannot resist actively seeking new knowledge from the encyclopedia in "Princess Ida", for example, she observes the reaction of the townspeople when she demonstrates the talent for memorization: "I saw that to some people, maybe to most people, knowledge was just oddity; it stuck out like warts" (55).

E. D. Blodgett describes Del, the watcher, as she protects herself from others' expectations and censure by detaching herself from society: "Indeed self-possession appears possible only when one is primarily a subject for oneself, as opposed to being a subject for another" (56). In order to protect herself from a society to which she does not belong, Del nurtures the detached role of observer, watching the world and transforming it: "I would go to the deep mirror in the built-in sideboard and look at the reflection of the room...By getting them into a certain spot in the mirror I could make my mother and Fern Dogherty pull out like rubber bands, all wavering and hysterical, and I could make my own face droop disastrously down one side as if I had had a stroke" (59-60). Near the end of the collection, Del temporarily loses her ability to remain detached when her life becomes emotionally linked to that of Garnet French, her first lover. She copes with the eventual

loss of this relationship, however, by recovering the role as observer: "I turned around, went back into the hall to look in the dim mirror at my twisted wet face. Without diminishment of pain I observed myself; I was amazed to think that the person suffering was me, for it was not me at all; I was watching" (200).

Interspersed with accumulating flashes of Del's identity as observer, Munro hangs pictures of Del as the hearty participant in life. When Del seeks to gain the approval of Mr. Chamberlain in the title story of the collection, she does not hesitate to implicate herself in the affairs of the boarder, Fern, by searching her bedroom at Mr. Chamberlain's request. She is even prepared to take part in Mr. Chamberlain's sexual advances towards her, only to find that he in fact requires a spectator and not a participant. Thrust back into her role of observer, Del watches Mr. Chamberlain masturbate, referring to the act as a "performance" (142). At the end of this section, however, Del makes clear that she will not limit herself uniquely to the role of observer, nor to the roles of the girls and women around her. Instead, she chooses to experience life with the freedom she feels is given to men, rejecting the advice commonly given to women:

...advice that assumed being female made you damageable, that a certain amount of carefulness and solemn fuss and self-protection were called for, whereas men were supposed to be able to go out and take on all kinds of experiences and shuck off what they didn't want and come back proud. Without even thinking about it, I had decided to do the same (147).

In addition to offering glimpses of the various facets that contribute to and define the protagonist's identity at various moments, Munro also works against standard chronological character development through her choice of narrative technique. The first-person narrator allows Munro to intermingle various perspectives of the young Del with

the insightful voice of an older Del at an unidentified point in the future with great insight into her younger self. John Moss describes the narrative perspective of Lives in the following way:

The Del who remembers and relates is not the same person at a different point in time, but another person who includes the known and unknown complexities of the younger Del within her, and whose unconsciousness and inner life have continuity that is impossible for her ongoing conscious self. Munro does not simply tell a story from a particular perspective in time but includes the experience of the intervening years implicitly in the tones and attitudes of the narrating voice; and sometimes briefly intrudes as if from another reality, creating dimensional resonance like the echoes of memory within the reader's mind...Munro transcends time through point of view in brilliant flashes (56).

From the first page of the collection, the narrator allows us access to the perceptions of both the naive child and the more experienced adult. In "The Flats Road", for instance, the simple and unquestioning child's perspective is inherent in quotations such as "(Uncle Benny) was not our uncle, or anybody's" and "Though he never turned around he knew if we put a foot in the water" (1). Juxtaposed with this childlike point of view is the insight of the adult narrator when Uncle Benny orders the children off "his" riverbank: "It was not his. Right here, where he usually fished, it was ours. But we never thought of that" (1). Thus, "the narrative gives the reader a sense of being admitted into the experience of an imaginative child, and yet manages to convey the insight of an adult" (Martin 59).

While bringing together the voices of the younger and older identities of Del, Munro's first-person narrator also allows the author to juxtapose many characters' realities or ways of seeing. The story is told through the eyes of a young girl with acute powers of observation: the insight she gains is not ordered and evaluated by an omniscient narrator but presented, instead, as another series of Munroian snapshots. Because the narrative

voice is not omniscient, none of the flashes of realities appears to be granted more validity than the next. Instead, Munro orders experience by placing side by side various versions of the world as they are captured through Del's observations. Evidence of this layering of realities can be seen at the beginning of the epilogue when Del ponders the town's tendency to describe two suicides by drowning in different ways despite the lack of witnesses to either event. When referring to her former teacher, Miss Farris, "People always said she *threw herself into it*", while Marion Sherriff reportedly "*walked into it...the difference must have come from the difference in the women themselves, Miss Farris being impulsive and dramatic in all she did, and Marion Sherriff reportedly deliberate and take-your-time*" (202).

The townspeople are therefore involved in a creative undertaking not unlike the author's: both are using stories to order experience. Munro has described this process: "...it may be a way of getting on top of experience; this is different from one's experience of the things in the world, the experience with other people and with oneself, which can be, which is so confusing and humiliating and difficult and by dealing with it in this way...I think it's a way of getting control" (Gibson 245). We can see evidence of the townspeople involved in a similar process as they invent versions of reality to try and order mysterious and unsettling events like Miss Farris's suicide:

Some people who were excited by the thoughts of marvelous silent crimes happening in the night always believed it was murder. Others out of kindness or fearfulness held it to be an accident. Those who believed it was suicide, and most people, finally, did, were not so anxious to talk about it, and why should they be?... It was a mystery presented without explanation and without hope of explanation, in all insolence, like a clear blue sky (118).

With "The Flats Roads", the author begins her collection by exploring how her characters use personal legends to cope with life's confusing and troubling events. After Uncle Benny's new wife, Madeleine, runs away with her daughter, Benny reveals that she abuses the child. Evidence suggests that this is true: "Touched or cuddled, she submitted warily, her body giving off little tremors of dismay, her heart beating hard like the heart of a bird if you capture it in your hand...(Benny's) hand covered the bruises on her legs" (16). When Uncle Benny proves incapable of presenting his accusations to the authorities in order to rescue the child, Del's mother must accept that, with Madeleine's disappearance, she no longer has any chance of helping the child. In order to diffuse feelings of guilt and uneasiness, Del's family resorts to story-telling to remake Madeleine into an innocuous figure: "Uncle Benny could have made up the beatings, my mother said at last, and took that for comfort; how was he to be trusted? Madeleine herself was like something he might have made up. We remembered her like a story, and having nothing else to give we gave her our strange, belated, heartless applause" (23). Because each character creates her own particular version of the past, none of these stories can be entirely objective; instead, they offer individuals' subjective recreations of events. Munro does not work towards a synthesis of the different versions of stories that characters tell but instead presents them in juxtaposition, hung side by side; these different ways of seeing, influenced by the passage of time or the perspective of the story-teller, may appear to contradict one another.

In the section entitled "Princess Ida", Munro provides two examples of this process of displaying opposing realities when Uncle Bill, Ada's long-lost brother,

reappears to announce that he is dying of cancer. In the first instance, Ada's story of her brother as a child is juxtaposed with Del's perception of him in the present. Before meeting Uncle Benny, Del's image of her Uncle is constructed from her mother's story-telling: "scenes from the past were liable to pop up any time, like lantern slides, against the cluttered fabric of the present" (62). When Uncle Bill appears to be a benign old man, Del is unprepared for this new version of reality: "This was the thing, the indigestible fact. This Uncle Bill was my mother's brother, the terrible, fat boy, so gifted in cruelty, so cunning, quick, fiendish, so much to be feared. I kept looking at him, trying to pull that boy out of the yellowish man. But I could not find him there" (74). The proximity of the two versions of reality occurs without synthesis to reveal the subjective nature of memory and perception.

In the same story, Munro depicts Ada and Bill's conflicting versions of their childhood. Ada's stories present her mother as a crazed religious fanatic: "she would find her mother on her knees, bent down on the bed, praying. Far more clearly than her mother's face she could picture now that bent back, narrow shouldered in some gray or tan sweater over a dirty kimono or housedress, the back of the head with the thin hair pulled tight from the middle parting, the scalp unhealthily white" (63). Conversely, Bill's story of childhood presents their mother as a woman in touch with the mysteries of life, watching over a cocoon all winter, and practically orchestrating the symbolic-emergence of the butterfly on Easter morning. These two conflicting versions of reality are left hanging side by side; Munro's purpose is not to achieve synthesis of the two contradictory memories but simply to present them as part of the complex mosaic that is life.

Munro applies the same technique when she draws attention to the paradoxical realities of various characters' conventional and unconventional ways of seeing, thereby allowing her protagonist to explore the subjective boundary between the two. Various eccentrics are paraded along the Flats Road, none of whom demonstrates a way of seeing that could be described as orthodox. We meet Mitch Plim, the cripple, his house-coated wife, the idiot Frank Hall, and Irene Pollox who "would chase children on the road and hang over her gate crowing and flapping like a drunken rooster" (6). Yet Munro does not commit these oddities to a subordinate position: these glimpses of alternate ways of seeing are presented alongside the reality of Del's parents as integral parts of the fictional whole she is creating. Lorraine M. York compares the juxtaposition of realities in Munro's fictions to the photos of Diane Arbus: "the grotesque makes its appearance in Munro's stories in order to make us reform our Gestalt - our conceptions of what is 'odd' and 'normal'" (52).

In "Heirs of the Living Body", Munro again places conventional and unconventional ways of seeing in a contiguous relationship. Because of her role as observer, Del pays great attention to the realities her Great-Aunts present through their own tellings of personal legends: "Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace told stories. It did not seem as if they were telling them to me, to entertain me, but as they would have told them anyway, for their own pleasure, even if they had been alone" (28). The Aunts represent the old, conventional order in Jubilee, a world in which out-spokenness and ambition are viewed as character flaws: "Not that they were against ability. They acknowledged it in their own family, our family. But it seemed the thing to do was to keep it more or less a

secret. Ambition was what they were alarmed by, for to be ambitious was to court failure and to risk making a fool of oneself" (32).

Del's mother, who prides herself on speaking out in public and following her various ambitions, occupies a very different reality than that of the Aunts. In Ada's house, the Aunts cease their story-telling, becoming "sulky, sly, elderly, eager to take offense" (30). Although the two factions seem incapable of accommodating one another, Del succeeds in entering both realities: "I too with some slight pang of disloyalty exchanged my mother's world of serious skeptical questions, endless but somehow disregarded housework, lumps in the mashed potatoes, and unsettling ideas, for theirs of work and gaiety, comfort and order, intricate formality" (31).

We can see Munro engaged in the dismantling of labels of conventional and unconventional ways of seeing when the relationship of Ada and the Aunts is compared to that of Ada and Uncle Benny. In "The Flats Road", Ada appears in a different role than the eccentric one to which the Aunts relegate her; instead Ada's world is the conventional, logical one when compared with Uncle Benny's. When he embarks on a hare-brained scheme to find a mail-order bride, Ada's response is pragmatic: "Take her to a doctor, have a medical examination" (11). It is Ada who attempts the task of preparing Benny's shack for his new wife's arrival, and, once Madeleine runs away, Ada offers the practical solution of reporting the woman to the police for child abuse. Throughout this section, Del's parents are rooted to a logical and pragmatic reality: "they were connected, and this connection was plain as a fence, it was between us and Uncle Benny, us and the Flats Road, it would stay between us and anything" (22).

Glimpses of Uncle Benny's way of seeing, however, reveal that it does not function according to rules of logic like cause and effect. Instead, his reality revolves around superstitions, get-rich-quick schemes, and leaps of faith. Through Uncle Benny's stories, Del gains access to this alternate world view:

To his way of thinking the river and the bush and the whole of Grenoch Swamp more or less belonged to him, because he knew them, better than anybody else did. He claimed he was the only person who had been right through the swamp, not just made little trips around the edges. He said there was a quicksand hole in there that would take down a two-ton truck like a bite of breakfast....He said there were holes in the Wawanash river that were twenty feet deep in the middle of summer. He said he could take us to them, but he never did.

He was prepared to take offense at a glimmer of doubt (1-2).

Del's experience of Uncle Benny's alternate world is reinforced when she greedily reads his newspaper which contains different information from the sort in her parents' papers.

Benny's 'news', of the National Inquirer variety, fuels Del's imagination with descriptions of outlandish events until she approaches her parents' house, where logic overrides such imaginative possibilities:

But the nearer I got to our house the more the vision faded. Why was it that the plain back wall of home, the pale chipped brick, the cement platform outside the kitchen door, washtubs hanging on nails, the pump, the lilac bush with brown-spotted leaves, should make it seem doubtful that a woman would really send her husband's torso, wrapped in Christmas paper, by mail to his girl friend in South Carolina? (4-5).

Del has access to Benny's world, where it is possible to order a wife from an advertisement in the newspaper, but impossible to read a map to get about in Toronto. In fact, it is nine-year-old Del who writes on Benny's behalf to the address in the classified section, inadvertently upsetting him by extending his address to the universe, but omitting Heaven. Benny's gift is his ability to communicate through his personal legends, making

Del and her family understand his way of seeing:

So lying alongside our world was Uncle Benny's world like a troubling distorted reflection, the same but never at all the same. In that world people could go down in quicksand, be vanquished by ghosts or terrible ordinary cities; luck and wickedness were gigantic and unpredictable; nothing was deserved, anything might happen; defeats were met with crazy satisfaction. It was his triumph, that he couldn't know about, to make us see (22).

Although Munro presents flashes of many characters who, like Uncle Benny, use story-telling to order their unique ways of seeing, her focus rests on the protagonist: Del is the only one who will eventually convert experiences into works of fiction, thereby offering insight into Munro's apprenticeship to the craft of writing. Like the other characters, however, Del begins by converting her experiences into oral stories. When she finds her blood on the ground the morning after her first sexual experience, she needs to relate the discovery:

I had to mention it to somebody. I said to my mother, "There's blood on the ground at the side of the house."

"Blood?"

"I saw a cat there yesterday tearing a bird apart. It was a big striped tom, I don't know where it came from... You should come and look at it" (189).

The protagonist's use of story-telling in this instance involves her in a process very similar to that of both the author and the collection's many story-tellers, whereby "(writing) may be a way of getting on top of experience...a way of getting control" (Gibson 245). For Del, too, story-telling seems to provide some relief from the confusion of the world. In the title story, for instance, Del resists her initial impulse to tell Naomi of Mr. Chamberlain's first sexual advances, for fear that by organizing the experience into

words, some of its excitement would be lost: "we would turn it into a joke, and hope for scandal, and make up schemes to entrap him, and that was not what I wanted" (134).

Nevertheless, once Mr. Chamberlain leaves town and Del is prepared to order her confusing memories by telling Naomi, she discovers her confidante is no longer receptive. Instead, Munro presents the image of a new Naomi who has abandoned the role as sexual onlooker, in favour of that of female victim. Because Naomi no longer wants to talk about sex, Del cannot relate her tale: "So I had not the relief of making what Mr. Chamberlain had done into a funny, though horrifying, story. I did not know what to do with it" (144).

However, Del's story-telling surpasses the process in which other characters engage; from the beginning of the collection, Munro presents flashes of the protagonist that reveal her fascination with words themselves. Although Del is only nine years old in the opening story, she is already attempting sophisticated descriptions to organize the world or, more specifically in this section, Uncle Benny's place within it. When asked to demonstrate her writing capacities, she prints: "*Mr Benjamin Thomas Poole, The Flats Road, Jubilee, Wawanash County, Ontario, Canada, North America, The Western Hemisphere, The World, The Solar System, The Universe*" (9).

In "Heirs of the Living Body", the author demonstrates young Del's fascination with the way words sound. Upon hearing Aunt Elspeth use the word "tomb" to describe the storeroom, Del remarks, "I loved the sound of that word...I did not know exactly what it was, or had got it mixed up with womb, and I saw us inside some sort of hollow marble egg, filled with blue light, that did not need to get in from outside" (45). As Del ages, she

comes to recognize her appreciation for language: "that was my secret pleasure--poetic flow of words, archaic expressions" (130). In the "many created worlds" of the library, she finds great happiness but must hide this pleasure from the townspeople who lack her appreciation: "reading books was something like chewing gum, a habit to be abandoned when the seriousness and satisfactions of adult life took over" (99). In secret, Del begins writing her own poems, and by the last section of the book, when she has finished high school and tired of the library's contents, she chooses her destiny as a writer: "I saw that the only thing to do with my life was to write a novel" (203).

In the last section of the collection, Munro juxtaposes these flashes of Del's literary perspective and the sensual, illiterate perspective of Del's first lover, Garnet French. Del compares his way of seeing to that of animals who live in "the world without names" (184). Appropriately, when Del first has dinner with his family, no one is introduced, and relationships between family members are not made clear. When Garnet dines at Del's house, her mother's efforts at conversation end in disaster: "Any attempt at this kind of general conversation, any attempt to make him think in this way, to theorize, make systems, brought a blank, very slightly offended, and superior look into his face. He hated people using big words, talking about things outside their lives. He hated people trying to tie things together" (183). When Del is with Garnet, she hides her attachment to language: "Nothing that could be said by us would bring us together; words were our enemies. What we knew about each other was only going to be confused by them" (183). Del temporarily abandons her own world to be with Garnet: "The person who could study was in fact already lost, locked away. I could not have made sense of any book, put one

word after another, with Garnet in the room. It was all I could do to read the words on a billboard, when we were driving" (184).

Yet after this brief excursion into Garnet's reality, Del returns to her old self: "my old devious, ironic, isolated self" (199). Regaining her world of words in order to cope with the pain of severing her relationship with Garnet, she resorts to poetry, quoting Tennyson's "Mariana": "*He cometh not, she said*" (200). Finally, it is with the printed words of the classified section that Del begins to plan for her future: "I made myself understand what I was reading, and after some time I felt a mild, sensible gratitude for these printed words" (200).

In creating a protagonist who shares her compulsion for trying to make sense of life through words, Munro involves Del in a process very similar to the one which motivates the author herself to write: "the external world, the sights and sounds and smells--I can't stand to let go without some effort at this, at capturing them in words...I suppose I just experience things finally when I do get them into words. So writing is part of my experience" (Gibson 243-244). Like her creator, Del eventually becomes fascinated with the recording of the details of the external world, but as a young woman, she cannot yet appreciate attempts like that of Uncle Craig, who devoted years to writing a history of Wawanash County: "I didn't want Uncle Craig's manuscript put back with the things I had written. It seemed so dead to me, so heavy and dull and useless, that I thought it might deaden my things too and bring me bad luck" (52).

With the passage of time, however, Del becomes aware of the similarities between their two literary endeavours: "It did not occur to me then that one day I would be so

greedy for Jubilee. Voracious and misguided as Uncle Craig out at Jenkins' Bend, writing his history, I would want to write things down. I would try to make lists...Names of the streets and the pattern they lay in" (210). The content of Uncle Craig's manuscript illustrates a similar passion:

...it was daily newspaper clippings, letters, containing descriptions of the weather, an account of a runaway horse, lists of those present at funerals, a great accumulation of the most ordinary facts, which it was his business to get in order. Everything had to go into his history, to make it the whole history of Wawanash County. He would not leave anything out (27).

Just as Munro is compelled to write by the desire to control and shape the details of the real world, so Del desires to be all-inclusive in her art: "The hope of accuracy we bring to such tasks is crazy, heart-breaking. And no list could hold what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together--radiant, everlasting" (210).

In Lives of Girls and Women, therefore, Munro uses fiction to explore the writer's struggle to organize pieces of lived reality into fictional representations that capture what is significant: "the exact tone or texture of how things are" (Gibson 241). Linda Lamont-Stewart discusses Munro's ironic awareness of how, for the writer, fiction cannot fully capture reality but is still able to provide some sense of control over the chaos of the world: "The writer accepts that reality is undefinable and strives simply to capture its texture through the selection and ordering of realistic detail. By presenting a coherent, artistic vision of chaos, the writer transforms disorder into order, thereby asserting a measure of control over the distressing confusion of his world" (120). Just as so many of

the collection's characters tell stories to control the chaos of life, so Munro and Del are compelled to write.

In the last section of the collection, Del is in the process of working out the relationship between the external world and the one she has created in her novel:

For this novel I had changed Jubilee, too, or picked out some features of it and ignored others. It became an older, darker, more decaying town...The season was always the height of summer--white, brutal heat, dogs lying as if dead on the sidewalks, waves of air shuddering, jellylike, over the empty highway. But how, then--for niggling considerations of fact would pop up, occasionally, to worry me--how then was there going to be enough water in the Wawanash River? Instead of moving, head bowed, moonlight-naked, acquiescent, into its depths, Caroline would have to lie down on her face as if she was drowning herself in the bathtub (205-206).

Although momentarily troubled about the relationship between objective reality and fiction, Del still concedes that her creation has successfully integrated what is meaningful from the real world: "The main thing was that it seemed true to me, not real but true, as if I had discovered, not made up, such people and such a story, as if that town was lying close behind the one I walked through every day" (206). Like all the story-tellers in the collection, Del finds her personal grain of truth in this transformation of events although it does not directly reflect an objective reality.

Despite Del's belief that she has successfully disposed of the problem of what to do with reality in her fiction, however, the central event of this final story demonstrates the impossibility of her task: the non-fictional world intrudes on Del's fictional creation when the actual Bobby Sheriff, whom Del has transformed for literary purposes, returns home from the asylum. Although Del had given Bobby's sister Marion the new name of Caroline in the novel, Bobby's appearance causes her to ask "what happened...to Marion? Not to

Caroline. *What happened to Marion?* What happened to Bobby Sherriff when he had to stop baking cakes and go back to the asylum? Such questions persist, in spite of novels. It is a shock, when you have dealt so cunningly, powerfully, with reality, to come back and find it still there" (209).

For Del, Bobby's final gesture is a clue to understanding the relationship between the many apparently conflicting versions of realities found in life, if only she could decode its significance: "...he rose on his toes like a dancer, like a plump ballerina. This action, accompanied by his delicate smile...seemed also to have a concise meaning, a stylized meaning--to be a letter, or a whole word, in an alphabet I did not know" (211). With time, Del comes to interpret Bobby's gesture as a clue to the complexity of the multi-faceted nature of identity and reality: "People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable--deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" (210). Of course, it is this very complexity that Munro attempts to capture through her characteristic juxtaposition of the narrator's collection of personally significant "snapshots" from her life.

In *Lives of Girls and Women*, Munro adopts a form that lies between that of the novel and that of the short story as she works out an early version of her approach to fiction, presenting a somewhat autobiographical exploration of the development of artistic vision. Despite the fact that the novelistic elements of this collection set it apart from much of her later work, Munro does incorporate several elements of her more characteristic technique of working in "flashes", thereby offsetting more conventional techniques of development in which characters "develop and arrive somewhere" (Hancock

89). Del Jordan's discovery of the craft of writing provides parallels with and insights into Munro's own process: both are fascinated by words and realistic details, both use fiction as a measure of control over the world and experience, and both strive to capture and transform reality through fiction. Furthermore, through her first-person narrative technique, Munro hangs together a myriad of flashes of identity and reality in order to create a mosaic filled with all the apparent contradictions of "Real Life", Munro's original title for the collection (Besner 15). Even at this early stage in her writing career, the laws governing the Munrovian universe are in place, as subjective interpretations of truth take precedence over any notion of an objective reality.

In her sixth collection, published in 1986 and entitled The Progress of Love, Munro has long abandoned the form of the "episodic novel" that she experimented with in Lives of Girls and Women fifteen years earlier in favour of independent short stories. However, her thematic interest in female lives persists; particular stories even attest to a reworking of particular events described in the earlier work. In "Jesse and Meribeth", for example, Munro reworks material from "Lives of Girls and Women", while "The Progress of Love" appears to be a second attempt at the themes found in "Princess Ida". However, by adopting the genre of the short story to reexplore the relationship between the real and the true, and fiction and reality, Munro transforms her thematic concerns and makes them new. In the following chapter, I will examine how Munro scrupulously molds the form of each story, in order to create innovative connections between narrative voice and theme.

## Chapter 2

### **Wooring Distant Parts of the Self**

In the stories of her sixth collection, The Progress of Love, Munro incorporates many of the same themes found in her earlier work as she continues exploring the lives of girls and, increasingly as the author herself ages, the lives of women. Within the 1986 collection, however, Munro's form has altered significantly, particularly in terms of her use of narrative technique. Whereas in Lives of Girls and Women, Munro relied upon a retrospective first-person narrator throughout, the latter collection includes three distinct types of narration depending in broad terms on the thematic material the stories contain. In those stories with the closest thematic links to Lives of Girls and Women, Munro has maintained a similar narrative strategy; all three first-person narrators are artist figures who, like Del Jordan, transform their experiences into personal anecdotes containing elements of what is "not real but true." In the majority of the stories of The Progress of Love, however, Munro has abandoned the first-person voice in favour of two variations of narration in the third-person. In the four stories presented through a third person narrator who follows the consciousness of the main character, the themes all revolve around a mysterious circumstance or event. The partially omniscient narrative technique places the reader in a position similar to that of the protagonist, since both must endeavour to understand this mysterious part of reality with limited information. Finally, in each of the four remaining stories, Munro does not focus exclusively on one individual's search for understanding and meaning but instead uses a "travelling" third-person narrator to reveal how all characters are implicated in this process which, as these stories suggest, is perhaps

the ultimate human pursuit.

Although Munro demonstrates considerable variety in the narrative techniques of The Progress of Love, she still relies on first-person narration in those stories which, like Lives of Girls and Women, feature an artist figure as protagonist. These artists seem propelled to create by the same impulse which drives Munro. Linda Lamont-Stewart's summary of Munro's motivation for writing, mentioned in the previous chapter, aptly describes this process:

...as both Blaise and Munro point out, the design we perceive in life is as much the product of our imagination as of objective reality. The writing of fiction is in part a defensive tactic: the writer's ironic awareness of the artificiality of fictional reality affords some protection in a disorderly world. The writer accepts that reality is undefinable...By presenting a coherent artistic vision of chaos, the writer transforms disorder into order, thereby asserting a measure of control over the distressing confusion of his world (120).

By adopting a narrative strategy that allows these artists to speak for themselves, Munro further examines the creative process within her fiction. The central characters of "Jesse and Meribeth," "The Progress of Love," and "Miles City, Montana", like Del Jordan in Lives of Girls and Women and Munro herself, create personal versions from reality that are "not real but true" in an effort to come to terms with confusing events. These artist figures also share Munro's understanding that reality is undefinable; their personally constructed versions of events are in some ways artificial and do not completely capture reality. Nevertheless, when Del creates her first novel, she is struck by the feeling that it contains some degree of truth, in spite of being largely fictional. Likewise, all three of the artist figures in The Progress of Love grapple with reality and create a personal version of reality that is "true", if not "real".

Munro re-explores this central theme from Lives of Girls and Women at various moments in "Jesse and Meribeth", the plot of which is similar to that of the title story of her earlier work. The story opens with the protagonist, Jessie, who remembers telling Marybeth that in the war parachutes were made of the silk from milkweed pods. She then reveals: "That wasn't true, but I believed it" (163). Similarly, near the middle of the story, the protagonist describes an encounter with an old woman who claims to have had a three-year affair with Robert Browning. When the woman refuses to qualify the remark, the narrator concludes that "the affair she conducted in her imagination was so serious and strenuous that she forbade herself to describe it as imaginary" (178). In the main plot, Jessie, a young artist figure, who like Del transforms a male acquaintance into an imaginary lover, involves herself in a similar process whereby fiction takes on the appearance of truth: "What about the real Mr. Cryderman? Did all this make me tremble when I heard him at the door, lie in wait for him, hope for a sign? Not in the least. When he began to play his role in my imagination, he faded in reality" (179).

Ultimately, both Del and Jessie attest to Munro's belief that fiction creates only the illusion of control over reality; in Del's words, "It is a shock, when you have dealt so cunningly, powerfully with reality, to come back and find it there" (209). In "Jesse and Meribeth", the protagonist at first believes that her fantasy is coming true when Mr. Cryderman actually makes a sexual advance: "I am seeing the power of my own lies, my own fantasy. I am a person capable of wizardry but helpless. There is nothing to do but submit, submit to the consequences" (183). She quickly realizes, however, that her fantasy has left some elements unaccounted for: "I do know one thing, and that is that the

lovelorn declarations, the delicate pleas and moonings often voiced by Mr. Cryderman in my imagination, are going to have no place on the agenda" (183). In retrospect, like Del, Jessie ultimately acknowledges the fact that her personal fiction has not successfully dealt with reality; she concludes that only when very young could she believe totally "in the power of my own lies, my own fantasy" (183). At the story's conclusion, the narrator suggests that her youthful belief that through her fictional creations she can transform herself and escape consequences will be short lived: "I didn't see that I was the same one, embracing, repudiating. I thought I could turn myself inside out, over and over again, and tumble through the world scot free" (188).

In the title story of The Progress of Love, also a first-person narrative, Munro again reworks thematic material from Lives of Girls and Women, specifically the "Princess Ida" section, and reexamines the question of truth's role in fiction. Whereas Del Jordan confronts two conflicting stories of what her grandmother was like, the first told by her mother and the second revealed by her Uncle, the protagonist of "The Progress of Love" must grapple with the contradiction she discovers between stories from her mother's and her aunt's point of view. The mother recounts a painful memory in which she discovers her own mother attempting suicide as a result of her unhappy marriage, while Aunt Beryl's version describes the event as nothing more than a childish hoax to get attention.

The story, which details Phemie's struggle to reconcile the inconsistencies between these two versions, is also the story of an artist figure, since Phemie creates from these stories her own personal legend of the "not real but true". While showing her childhood home to her lover, she tells a story of how her father allowed her mother to burn the

inheritance she had received from her own much hated father. Yet the story reveals that this event which the narrator remembers so clearly could not have happened: "My father did not stand in the kitchen watching my mother feed the money into the flames... Why, then, do I see the scene so clearly, just as I described it to Bob Marks (and to others--he was not the first)?" (29). Despite knowing that her memory is not literally real, Phemie continues to believe it since the scene has valuable personal "truth", encapsulating as it does her view of her parents' close relationship: "How hard it is for me to believe that I made that up. It seems so much the truth it is the truth; it's what I believe about them. I haven't stopped believing it" (30).

However, Phemie must acknowledge, like Munro, that her fiction has not provided a completely satisfactory version of events, since reality is undefinable, and, in Del's words, "Such questions persist in spite of novels" (209). Although the scene that Phemie creates between her parents has meaning for her, she cannot make other people interpret it with the same significance: "But I have stopped telling that story. I never told it to anyone again after telling it to Bob Marks. I don't think so. I didn't stop just because it wasn't, strictly speaking, true. I stopped because I saw that I had to give up expecting people to see it the way I did" (30).

The final story told from the point of view of an artist figure is "Miles City, Montana". Early in this work, Munro broaches the theme of the creation of personal truths that stand apart from reality: the protagonist, a writer, begins by recounting the childhood memory of a neighbour boy's funeral, only to question the validity of her own story:

His face was turned in to my father's chest, but I could see a nostril, an ear, plugged up with greenish mud.

I don't think so. I don't think I really saw all this...I must have heard someone talking about that and imagined that I saw it (84).

After telling of her own daughter's brush with death by drowning, and her role in saving the child quite by chance, the narrator asserts her own "not real but true" version of the accountability of parents in the death of their own children:

[Parents] gave consent to the death of children and to my death not by anything they said or thought but by the very fact that they had made children--they had made me. They had made me and for that reason my death--however grieved they were, however they carried on--would seem to them anything but impossible or unnatural. This was a fact, and even then, I knew they were not to blame.

But I did blame them (103).

Once again, the artist figure has created a version of events that is a product of both her own imagination and objective reality: a combination which may be at once "not real" (that parents are to blame for their children's death) but which is to some degree "true" ("But I did blame them" (103).).

Although Munro continues to allow her artist figures to speak in the first-person about the versions of personal truth they create from events in the external world, she has modified her technique in "Miles City, Montana" and "The Progress of Love", the two stories with older protagonists. Only "Jesse and Meribeth" contains a retrospective first-person narrator similar to that used in Lives of Girls and Women, and one who reflects on the past from an undefined point in the future, without providing scenes from later periods of the protagonist's life. Jessie is also the only protagonist who is as young as Del; unlike the other stories, Munro does not introduce older versions of these protagonists as characters in the work because she limits her thematic concerns to the exploration of the

early development of the adolescent artist figure. Yet the retrospective narrative voice does permit Jessie to interject from the future to inform the reader of information that the limited perspective of her younger self could not yet know: "I felt such changes then--from fifteen to seventeen, from seventeen to nineteen--that it didn't occur to me how much I had been myself, all along" (187-188).

In the two other first-person narratives of the 1986 collection, Munro has shifted her thematic focus from the young artist figure to the older artist who, with the passage of time, develops a more profound "not real but true" interpretation of particular remembered events. Munro has altered her form in consequence; both "The Progress of Love" and "Miles City, Montana" introduce older and younger versions of the narrating protagonist as characters in the work. At the beginning of the latter story, for example, the protagonist is a child attending the funeral of a neighbourhood boy: "I stood in a row of children, each of us holding a narcissus" (86); in the following section, the narrator is an adult woman: "Twenty years or so later, in 1961, my husband, Andrew, and I got a brand-new car, our first" (87). The story also makes a brief reference to the future moment at which the narrator writes the story: "I haven't seen Andrew for years, don't know if he is still thin, has gone completely gray, insists on lettuce, tells the truth, or is hearty and disappointed" (92).

Because the majority of the stories of the 1986 collection are created around older protagonists and their memories, Munro must incorporate a form that allows her to move rapidly through time. Throughout most of the book, and particularly in these two stories, Munro abandons the over-all chronological pattern found in Lives of Girls and Women in

order to travel freely through time, presenting non-sequential flashes from various points in the characters' lives. These dramatic shifts permit Munro to explore her interest in "the way people relate, or don't relate, to the people they were earlier" (Hancock, 89). Instead of a chronological pattern, the author uses associative links to move among the various flashes from the past and the present. Although these links may at first appear arbitrary, they often mimic the action of the human mind which, through memory, can instantly bring the past into the present. The title story of the collection, for example, opens with Phemie's memory of her mother's death. On the following page, she recounts her mother's past, then skips to a brief description of her own childhood house. In the next paragraph, the narrator again leaps through time to begin: "When my father was very old..."(5). Time shifts function in a similar way in "Miles City, Montana", for instance, where the central event, the near drowning of the protagonist's three-year-old daughter, is framed within a flashback to the narrator's childhood when she did in fact attend the funeral of a child who had drowned. The narrator makes several other shifts through time; for example, near the centre of the story she recounts a third memory of near drownings when, as a young woman, she worked on her father's farm to save his turkeys from a flood.

Munro's associative links bridge isolated moments in time, demonstrating the process by which the protagonists of these particular stories reexamine their lives and create personal versions of reality. Similarly, Munro's use of first-person narration links form and theme by allowing these artist figures to refer directly to their creative process. The most powerful example of this relationship is found in "Miles City, Montana", the protagonist of which is the only one to declare herself to be a writer. She refers to the

craft of writing as "a sort of wooing of different parts of myself" (88), a phrase which aptly describes Munro's use of associative links which leap through time to various moments in her characters' lives.

The artist figure of this story also addresses the conflicts existing between her role as a writer and that of wife and mother, tensions which the story suggests ultimately bring about the collapse of the protagonist's marriage : "In my own house, I seemed to be often looking for a place to hide--sometimes from the children but more often from the jobs to be done and the phone ringing and the sociability of the neighborhood...I lived in a state of siege, always losing just what I wanted to hold on to" (88). Munro herself has discussed this conflict in similar terms during an interview with Graeme Gibson: "(writing) is a way of observing life that is not, that perhaps doesn't work well with one's role as a woman. The detachment of the writer, the withdrawal is not what is traditionally expected of a woman, particularly in the man-woman relationship" (250). Similarly, the protagonist describes writers as observers when the narrator states that only while travelling could she momentarily unite her conflicting roles:

I could be talking to Andrew, talking to the children and looking at whatever they wanted me to look at...and all the time those bits and pieces would be flying together inside me. The essential composition could be achieved. This made me hopeful and lighthearted. It was being a watcher that did it. A watcher, not a keeper (88).

Ultimately, the two roles are shown in this instance to be irreconcilable; halfway through the story, the narrator interjects, "I haven't seen Andrew for years" (92).

Although the protagonist of "The Progress of Love" does not declare herself to be an artist, Munro has nevertheless created strong parallels between the form and theme of

this story: when Phemie describes how she compiled her memories of the conflicting stories about her grandmother's attempted suicide, she is mirroring Munro's non-chronological layering of various memory flashes which combine to create the story:

It was my mother's version that held, for a time. It absorbed Beryl's story, closed over it. But Beryl's story didn't vanish; it stayed sealed off for years, but it wasn't gone. It was like the knowledge of that hotel and dining room. I knew about it now, though I didn't think of it as a place to go back to...But I knew it was there. (23)

Munro similarly connects form and theme in Phemie's description of the wall in her childhood home when she returns to it after many years and digs for a shard of the old wallpaper she and her mother had hung for Aunt Beryl's visit. Both the story and the wall have many layers from different periods of time that can be peeled back to reveal others:

I noticed that they hadn't quite finished peeling the wallpaper away before making this painting. In the corner, there was some paper left that matched the paper on the other walls--a modernistic design of intersecting pink and gray and mauve bubbles...The paper underneath hadn't been stripped off when this new paper went on. I could see an edge of it, the cornflowers on a white ground (27).

In the remaining stories of The Progress of Love, Munro shifts her thematic focus away from the artist figure who creates a personal interpretation of events and towards protagonists who search for but do not arrive at such a response to the complexity of the world around them. Her form changes in consequence, as she abandons the first-person voice in favour of two broad categories of third-person narration: the first which concentrates on one specific consciousness, and the second which travels amongst various characters. The stories belonging to the first group include "The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink", "Circle of Prayer", "Fits", and "Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux".

The story that provides the best transition between the collection's first and third-person narratives is "The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink", since Sam, the protagonist, is to some degree a failed artist figure because his attempts to construct a satisfactory personal interpretation of past events are unsuccessful. In the central event of the story, the adolescent Sam and his cousin Edgar establish an odd relationship with the maid in their boarding house. Halfway through the work, it is revealed that in the fifty intervening years before his return visit to this town, Sam has repeatedly tried to tell the story of what took place, yet he has never created a satisfactory conclusion to the tale. He describes, for instance, how the maid Callie would dress as a boy in order to break into the skating rink:

Why did others not manage the same trick, Sam might be asked on those occasions, years and years later, when he chose to tell the story...Sam's wife once asked, 'How did you persuade her?' Callie--what was in it for Callie, who never owned a pair of skates?

'Callie's life was work,' Sam said. 'So anything that wasn't work--that was a thrill for her.' But he wondered--how *did* they persuade her? (141).

He always ends his tale by describing the moment when Callie, outwitting the boys by uncovering their plans of escape, appears in their train car destined for Toronto. Yet he cannot continue past that moment; unlike the collection's first-person narrators, he has not arrived at a satisfactory personal interpretation to explain what happened next: "That is the thing that can never be understood--why Edgar spoke up the first night in Toronto and said that he and Callie were going to be married" (160).

In these third-person stories, the narrators follow protagonists who attempt to understand an enigmatic circumstance or relationship in their lives. Since the mysteries are

clearly rooted in the characters' past, and each story progresses only by repeatedly flashing backwards from the present, Munro's form is aptly suited to her themes. Like the writer in "Miles City, Montana", these third-person narrators take over the task of "wooing distant parts" of the protagonists, repeatedly back-tracking to past events. In essence, the stories function by rolling back layers of recent time to examine the origins of the mysteries which are embedded in the past, much as Colin sees his life rolled back in the final scene of "Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux": "with all the jumble of his life, and other people's lives in this town, rolled back, just like a photograph split and rolled back, so it shows what was underneath all along" (81-82).

In "The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink", for instance, the story likewise progresses by moving backwards; Munro frames the story's central event, Sam's adolescent experiences with Edgar and Callie, within scenes of his return visit to the town fifty years later. "Circle of Prayer" also flashes backwards from the present situation between Trudy and her daughter to various significant moments in the protagonist's relationship with her ex-husband, while "Fits" intersperses flashbacks of Robert's past with his current efforts to work backwards along the chain of events following the recent murder/suicide of his neighbours. Similarly, in "Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux", Colin is confounded by the erratic behaviour of his brother Ross, but the origins of the strange relationship between the two can only be understood in light of an experience that took place in adolescence, when Colin temporarily believes he has killed Ross.

Unlike Munro's artist figures who narrate their own stories, however, these characters do not create personal truths that put matters somewhat to rest. As a result,

the stories do not provide the same sense of resolution; they begin and end with a mystery that remains largely unsolved. However, just as Colin imagines the jumble of his life "split and rolled back, so it shows what was underneath" (81-82), so Munro's form permits these narrators to follow their protagonists backwards through time to a climactic experience in which they gain a flash of insight or perspective that they did not have before. However, the significance of this flash is still open to interpretation by the protagonist and the reader, much like the moment at the end of Lives of Girls and Women when Bobby Sherriff pirouettes in front of Del: "This action, accompanied by his delicate smile, appeared to be a joke not shared with me so much as displayed for me, and it seemed also to have a concise meaning, a stylized meaning--to be a letter, or a whole word, in an alphabet I did not know" ( 211).

In "Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink", for instance, Sam must struggle to understand the strange moment of power that he experiences with his cousin Edgar and Callie, the maid from their boarding house, when the three find themselves together on the train bound for Toronto. Although the boys are fleeing from Callie, who they fear may be carrying Edgar's child, they are strangely happy to discover her on the train, and the moment becomes infused with meaning: "At the moment he saw power--Callie's power, when she wouldn't be left behind--generously distributed to all of them. The moment was flooded--with power, it seemed, and with possibility. But this was just happiness. It was really just happiness" (156-157). At the story's conclusion, Munro returns to this moment without providing a definitive explanation of its significance. Instead, fifty years after the fact, Sam is still grappling with the questions it raises:

The moment of happiness he shared with them remained in his mind, but he never knew what to make of it. Do such moments really mean, as they seem to, that we have a life of happiness with which we only occasionally, knowingly, intersect? Do they shed such light before and after that all that has happened to us in our lives--or that we've made happen--can be dismissed? (160).

In "Circle of Prayer", Munro again takes the story backwards through time to offer several flashes from the past. These scenes culminate in a significant moment containing an enigmatic clue to the puzzling aspects of life explored by Trudy, the protagonist. The story delves into the subject of individuals' rituals for dealing with loss, including the Circle of Prayer that the protagonist learns about from her friend Janet. One person initiates the circle by telephoning another member and asking him to pray about a particular problem. The second member calls a third, and so forth until the circle is complete. The story has a similar pattern, circling around various characters' gestures for coping with loss including Trudy's daughter's funeral ritual, her ex-husband's test of love, Janet's prayers, and, finally, Trudy's own extraordinary moments of unusual clarity about her life.

Near the story's conclusion, the narrator describes these two intense moments which Trudy experiences at pivotal times in her life: her honeymoon and her separation from her husband:

...it seems she stood outside her own body...She stood outside her own happiness in a tide of sadness. And the opposite thing happened the morning Dan left. Then she stood outside her own unhappiness in a tide of what seemed unreasonably like love. But it was the same thing, really, when you got outside. What are those times that stand out, clear patches in your life--what do they have to do with it? They aren't exactly promises. Breathing spaces. Is that all? (273).

However, once again, the culminating moment of this story does not completely resolve

the issues the protagonist is exploring; it offers questions without clearly providing the answers. The protagonist does not completely come to terms with the significance of ritual, although she receives a clue. Similarly, the final scene of this story provides Trudy with comfort without resolution, when she asks one of her patients in the Home for Mentally Handicapped Adults about his strategies for coping:

"Kelvin, do you pray?...like for anything specific?..."

'If I was smart enough to know what to pray for,' he says, 'then I wouldn't have to'.

He smiles at her, with some oblique notion of conspiracy, offering his half-way joke. It's not meant as comfort, particularly. Yet it radiates--what he said, the way he said it, just the fact that he's there again, radiates, expands the way some silliness can, when you're very tired. In this way, when she was young, and high, a person or a moment could become a lily floating on the cloudy river water, perfect and familiar (273-274).

In "Fits", the third-person narrator follows Robert's attempt to retrace the events surrounding the violent and inexplicable murder/suicide of his neighbours, the Weebles. Robert is also seeking to understand an inconsistency in his wife's description of the murder scene: she claims to have stepped over a foot to investigate the bedroom, while the story reveals near its conclusion that, according to the town constable, the body part in question was in fact Mr. Weebles' head. Although Robert does not succeed in solving the mystery of why Peg tells this lie, or why Mr. Weeble has committed this atrocious act, he too has a significant moment of vision that provides some clues. As he approaches a snow covered junk-yard in the dark, he cannot perceive what the odd shapes are:

They did not look like anything, except perhaps a bit like armed giants half collapsed, frozen in combat, or like the jumbled towers of a crazy small-scale city ...He kept waiting for an explanation, and not getting one, until he was very close. He was so close he could almost have touched one of these monstrosities before he saw that they were just old cars (130-131).

Since Robert feels the need to get very close to what appears extraordinary before he can see the shapes for what they really are, this moment provides some explanation for why Peg permits herself to walk over a human head for a better view of the corpses, as if to convince herself of their reality. Robert's discovery in the junkyard also serves to mirror his larger quest for understanding of the murder/suicide next door which provides the impetus for the entire story. The only insight reached in regards to this event, however, is that acts like Mr. Weeble's, when examined closely, are in fact commonplace, as Peg's son suggests when Robert compares the murder to an earthquake: "Earthquakes and volcanoes aren't freaks...If you want to call that a fit, you'd have to call it a periodic fit. Such as people have, married people have" (126).

In "Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux", Munro first presents the oddly protective role that Colin adopts towards his adult brother, Ross, before flashing back to an incident in the boys' adolescence, when Colin believes he has accidentally shot and killed his brother. In the culminating moment of this story, Colin flees the scene of the shooting where he believes Ross is bleeding to death, perches on the top of an abandoned bridge, and receives a flash of insight: "...all the jumble of his life, and other people's lives in this town, rolled back, just like a photograph split and rolled back, so it shows what was underneath all along. Nothing" (81-82). After this brief instance when Colin sees life devoid of all meaning now that he has killed his brother, he discovers Ross is not dead and devotes the rest of life to protecting his brother from future harm. This culminating moment illuminates the reasons for the brothers' strange relationship as adults, yet Munro leaves

the mystery of Ross's erratic behaviour unexplained; Colin can only guess that Ross is moving "farther along the way that Ross was going" (60).

Because the protagonists of these particular stories are not artist figures and cannot create and articulate their own satisfactory explanations for the mysteries that present themselves, Munro incorporates third-person narrators who mediate, articulating the stories for them. However, these stories still clearly focus on characters' subjective interpretations of reality. Each one moves backwards and forwards through several layers of time to culminate in a cryptic experience that allows the central character to gain new insight in her pursuit of greater understanding of events in her life. Just as Munro's first-person narratives draw attention to the subjective nature of the artists' fictional interpretations, so her focus remains on the subjective and often incomplete view of reality that these protagonists are obliged to work from as they attempt to solve the mysteries.

Although the first-person narrators invent personally satisfying versions of events that are "not real but true", these artist figures are also aware of the shortcomings of their creations, as when Phemie must stop telling her story about her parents, since she cannot make people perceive it the way she wants them to. In the third-person narratives which follow one consciousness, Munro chooses other techniques that emphasize the subjective nature of any attempt to interpret reality. By focusing sharply on one character, the third-person narrator aligns the reader with the protagonist since both must seek to understand the mysterious nature of the events from a similar position of limited knowledge. Then, by occasionally permitting the narrative voice to break from this convention and provide information the character does not have, Munro enhances the readers' understanding of

events at the protagonist's expense by pointing to the subjective nature of their interpretations as well as the fallibility of human memory.

For example, although "Fits" reads much like a detective novel in which the reader finds herself in the same position as the protagonist, the narrator provides occasional reminders that Robert's version of events is not completely accurate: "(This, in fact, was Robert's explanation to himself. She didn't say all that, but he forgot she didn't...)" (112-113). In this way, the third-person narrator causes the reader to be more critical by drawing attention to the potential for error on the part of the protagonist. Furthermore, Munro draws attention to the inaccuracy of all attempts to interpret events by providing the various extraordinary explanations the townspeople find to help them come to terms with the murder in their midst:

Robert listened to all these explanations but did not believe any of them. Loss of money, cancer, Alzheimer's disease. Equally plausible, these seemed to him, equally hollow and useless. What happened was that he believed each of them for about five minutes, no longer. If he could have believed one of them, hung on to it, it would have been as if something had taken its claws out of his chest and permitted him to breathe(119-120).

The third-person narrator of "The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink" can be seen to function in a similar way, drawing the reader's attention to the fact that the protagonist's perspective is a limited one tainted by the fallibility of memory: "The Orange Street Skating Rink, *in Sam's memory*, is a long, dark, ramshackle shed" (139), "That persuading Sam does remember, and it was accomplished by dares, which makes him think the skating-rink adventure must have been managed the same way" (145); and, finally, "Something very important is missing from Sam's memory of that morning--blood" (145)

(Emphasis added). Once again, by focusing on the protagonist's potential for error, Munro's narrative technique distances the reader, thereby reinforcing the author's recurring theme: each individual's perception of reality remains subjective and incomplete.

The structure of the final four third-person narratives of this collection serves to heighten Munro's thematic emphasis on this process of mediation; instead of simply signaling the errors of interpretation and memory of one particular character, the narrative voices of these remaining stories travel from one consciousness to another. Through this technique, Munro draws attention to the subjective nature of all human efforts at interpretation of reality by juxtaposing several characters' responses to the same events. In this way, not only artist figures but, in fact, everyone seems to be involved in creating the realities in which they want to believe.

In "Lichen", for example, the narrator alternates between the perspectives of David and his ex-wife, Stella. The story opens from David's point of view: "'Look what's happened to Stella,' says David, fuming. 'She's turned into a troll.'...David thinks that Stella has done this on purpose. It isn't just an acceptance of natural deterioration--oh, no, it's much more" (32-33). Other sections of the story are narrated from Stella's point of view, allowing this character to act as a foil to David and the other characters by pointing out their blatant and often childish efforts to remake reality in various ways: "His voice when he talks about this girl seems to Stella particularly artificial. But who is she to say, with David, what is artificial and what is not? This special voice of his is rather high-pitched, monotonous, insistent, with a deliberate, cruel sweetness. Whom does he want to be cruel to--Stella, Catherine, the girl, himself?" (42). Likewise, the narrator provides

commentary on David's girlfriend's drug-altered state, also from Stella's apparently more objective viewpoint: "Stella wonders where this new voice of Catherine's comes from, this pert and rather foolish and flirtatious voice...Several layers of wispy apology, tentative flattery, fearfulness, or hopefulness have simply blown away in this brisk chemical breeze" (44). Again from Stella's perspective, the narrator shows that her father is involved in a similar process: "He's reached the stage where that's his big recreation--fixing up the past so anything he wishes had happened did happen" (52).

In the story's concluding paragraphs, however, Munro overturns the reader's confidence in the objectivity of Stella's interpretations as well. The story transforms expectations just as the photograph of David's latest conquest has been transformed by sunlight: the image of the girl's naked body has faded beyond recognition. Stella recalls that when David first showed her the picture, she announced that the black mound between the legs looked like lichen. Now that the picture has faded, she realizes that her statement appears truer than before, but at the same time she reveals her own capacity for self-deception:

She remembers what she said when she first saw it...she said it looked like lichen. But she knew what it was at once. It seems to her now that she knew what it was even when David put his hand to his pocket. She felt the old cavity opening up in her. But she held on. She said, "Lichen"(55).

In "Eskimo", Munro adapts her narrative technique to reexamine this theme of how individuals subjectively interpret events in their lives. In this story, the narrator travels back and forth between the conscious and subconscious minds of Mary Jo, offering two conflicting interpretations that originate within the protagonist, one that the character

wishes to embrace and one that she refuses to admit. The opening scene draws attention to the fallibility of Mary Jo's perspective when she encounters a dark-haired girl on the airplane to Tahiti and imagines her to be an exotic foreigner, only to discover that she is an Eskimo: a fellow Canadian. Mary Jo then observes the girl running her tongue over the face of her older male travelling companion: "There is no trace of compulsion. The girl is in earnest; she is in a trance of devotion..A ritual that takes every bit of her concentration and her self but in which her self is lost. It could go on forever" (204). This passage clearly parallels an earlier description of Mary Jo's lengthy affair with her married boss ("He baffles her, and compels her. She loves this man with a baffled, cautious, permanent love)" (203). Although the scene causes Mary Jo to feel a general malaise, she refuses to acknowledge the similarities between the Eskimo girl's submissive role and her own.

By allowing the narrator to follow the protagonist's thoughts into sleep, Munro explores Mary Jo's vague but growing awareness that she suffers from a blind devotion similar to the Eskimo girl's. In the dream, the Eskimo collapses on the bathroom floor, and a woman speaks to Mary Jo: "'You'll get a chance to choose your own'...and Mary Jo thinks this means your own punishment" (206). Later the woman reappears to ask a question in Dr. Streeter's office: "'The court is in the garden?' This may mean that Mary Jo is being accused of something, and that there is a court being conducted in the garden" (207). The reader, who like the protagonist must try to determine the significance of the cryptic images in the dream, is nevertheless made aware of the parallels between the Eskimo and Mary Jo's relationships. Yet when Mary Jo awakes, she cannot fully remember or accept the glimpse of the new interpretation of reality that she was forming

in her sleep: "She can't get back through the various curtains of the dream to the clear part, in the ladies' room, when the cold water was streaming down their faces and she-- Mary Jo--was telling the girl how she could save herself. She can't get back there" (207).

In the last two stories involving Munro's travelling narrators, "White Dump" and "A Queer Streak", the author's technique lends a mythic quality to the works; for the first time, the focus of the narrative spans several generations, and the various characters' quests for understanding do not read like personal vignettes but, instead, as part of the ultimate human pursuit as successive generations create different legends from the same events by interpreting the past in the light of their own particular context. "White Dump", for example, is divided into three sections: in the first, the narrator follows Denise, in the second, her grandmother, Sophie, and in the third, her mother, Isabel. Although all three perspectives relate events from Denise's father's fortieth birthday, each one presents a very different picture of her own view of reality; the reader is never entirely sure whose story is being told, or which of the three perspectives contains the most objectivity, since Munro's narrative technique does not grant final authority to any one of the protagonists.

Through her use of many voices, Munro relays the events of Laurence's fortieth birthday, as well as three different relationships to Laurence himself, taking the theme beyond the origins of Isabel's first affair beginning on her husband's fortieth birthday and leading to the breakdown of her marriage. Instead, as the story moves through these three women's perspectives of that day, it becomes apparent that Munro's theme is a larger one: the protagonists not only provide personal interpretations of the day's events, but all three are also involved in personal attempts to change reality in order to free themselves from

particular restraints. Moving through time via characters' memories, the narrator reveals that the adult Denise opposes her father's authority by working in a women's shelter, the child Sophie plays social benefactor to the poor neighbourhood children, and on her husband's fortieth birthday, Isabel begins moving out of the role as the family's keeper. Each woman is embroiled in power struggles with Laurence, and each battles to free herself from particular roles.

As Isabel's comment about her extra-marital affairs reveals, these attempts at changing reality are not entirely successful: "In spite of her reading, her fantasies, the confidences of certain friends, she couldn't believe that people sent and got such messages every day, and acted on them, making their perilous plans, moving into illicit territory (which would turn out to be shockingly like, and unlike, home)" (307). Instead, like the white candy that Isabel remembers collecting from the garbage pile outside the biscuit factory as a child, the universal quest to escape from our present reality by creating a new one remains an illusory goal: "...It was something about the White Dump--that there was so much and it was so white and shiny. It was like a kid's dream--the most wonderful promising thing you could ever see" (306).

Finally, in the novella, "A Queer Streak", Munro's travelling narrator again spans generations, allowing successive interpreters to cast events in their own light. Munro neatly links form and theme since, as the title suggests, the story revolves around an inexplicable queer streak which travels, like the narrative voice, through generations, focusing on various members of the protagonist's family. In the first half of the story, "*Anonymous Letters*", the narrator follows Violet through the events of the first half of her

life. This section begins with stories about the central character's parents, particularly the mother with the queer name of Aunt Ivie, the first woman in the family to be afflicted by the queer streak:

It did seem as if ordinary family life had been turned upside down at their place. At other farms, it would usually be the children you would see first as you came up the lane--children playing, or doing some chore. The mother would be hidden in the house. Here it was Aunt Ivie you would see, hilling up the potatoes or just prowling around the yard or the chicken run, wearing rubber boots and a man's felt hat and a dingy assortment of sweaters, skirt, droopy slip and apron, and wrinkled, spattered stockings. It was Violet who ruled the house...(212-213).

When Violet returns home to investigate the anonymous threatening letters her father has been receiving, she suspects her mother may be to blame: "One thing this told Violet that she was glad of. Aunt Ivie could have had nothing to do with it. Aunt Ivie had been shut up in her room all night. Not that Violet really thought that her mother was spiteful enough or crazy enough to do such a thing. But she knew what people said" (224). However, the queer streak appears to have begun afflicting someone else by this point; Violet learns that her adolescent sister, Dawn Rose, is responsible for the letters.

In the latter section of the book, entitled "*Possession*", the narrative focus shifts to Dawn Rose's son, Dane, in order to recount the last part of Violet's life when she herself begins to be possessed by the queer streak, fighting against hallucinations filled with people and things from her past: "Nothing in her wanted to be overtaken by a helpless and distracted, dull and stubborn old woman, with a memory or imagination out of control, bulging at random through the present scene" (244). From Dane's perspective, we learn how Violet used to mold the queer streak in her parents into funny anecdotes to amuse her nephew: "Violet told him stories about her own childhood on the farm, with his mother

and the other sister, who lived out in Edmonton now, and their mother and father, whom she called "characters." Everybody was a character in those stories; everything was shaped to be funny" (236-237). When Violet's great-niece appears and is told the story about Dawn Rose's anonymous letters, she reinterprets the queer streak in her own feminist terms, as an "*classic story of anti-patriarchal rage...nothing but centuries of Frustration and Oppression*" (248) .

Munro's travelling narrator in "A Queer Streak" can move through time and from character to character in a manner similar to that of the queer streak itself, allowing the reader to watch characters age and to compare versions of the legends they create around the odd behaviour of various family members. The theme, that each generation must reinterpret the significance of past events in the light of its own particular context, is thereby heightened by Munro's narrative technique. And, as in all of her third-person narrations, the emphasis remains on the ultimately mysterious facets of reality; the queer streak remains a mystery, its significance emerging only from the subjective interpretation of various characters in their individual contexts.

The Progress of Love, therefore, demonstrates considerable evolution for Munro in terms of her use of form, particularly the variety and sophistication of the narrative strategies she employs. While many of her underlying thematic concerns have not changed since the publishing of Lives of Girls and Women, in this collection she has returned to the genre of the short story, expanding its boundaries with her intricate links between form, particularly through narrative voice, and theme. She has not abandoned her exploration of the connections between reality and fiction or the "real" and the "true"; instead, in this

collection, she uses various narrative strategies to explore how human interpretation and memory function creatively in all of our attempts to understand the world around us.

### Chapter 3

#### **Truth's Wounding Complexity**

In the preceding chapter, I examined how Munro's choice of narrative techniques serves to reinforce her thematic exploration of the subjective nature of each individual's understanding of reality. In Open Secrets, her most recent collection, the author shifts her focus somewhat to examine the connections between reality's many layers, as explained in an August 1994 interview with Stephen Smith published in Quill and Quire:

The older I get, the more I see things as having more than one explanation. I see the content of life as being many-layered. And in a way, nothing that happens really takes precedence over anything else that happens...If I write a story in which it seems I'm trying to find out who committed a murder, and then I seem to keep circling back from this, it's almost a pulling the reader back and saying, no, this story isn't what you think it's about (24).

Munro's specific thematic focus on connection between various characters and their possible destinies is reinforced within the stories' forms in two ways: first, through her choice of narrative techniques, and, second, through her use of interconnected segments of text that highlight these thematic links. In the first four stories to be discussed, Munro explores the connections between two characters' destinies; in each, a third-person narrator connects us with the consciousness of the protagonist who incites or observes a change in the course of fate. In the second category of stories, Munro explores connections between each protagonist's actual destiny and an alternative fate that very nearly came to be. The multiple pathways that fate might have taken are reinforced by the multiple points of view provided in part by the inclusion of epistolary fragments. Furthermore, in all eight of the stories, Munro also reinforces her vision of reality as an

interconnected mosaic by providing links between each story's many subsections, and between the stories themselves. Therefore, although at first glance Munro's form may appear to be a somewhat arbitrary layering of moments from several points of view, the various perspectives and segments of each story connect to form a unified structure, just as the collection's over-riding theme explores reality as a composite of characters' interconnected interpretations and destinies.

Although these stories were all published individually before the collection was compiled, Munro's links between the stories serve to reinforce the theme of connection in the over-all framework of the book. An early review in Maclean's points specifically to the geographical and genealogical connections between them:

Munro's new book is more focused on the history of Huron County itself than any previous works. The richly layered stories move back and forth in time, sometimes spanning more than 100 years in the area's early settlement when Scottish, Irish, and English immigrants homesteaded the harsh terrain... Two generations of the Doud family and the fortunes of their piano factory recur throughout the book, creating a marvellous sense of momentous change and the passage of time ("The Incomparable Story-Teller" 49).

"A Wilderness Station", for instance, begins in 1851, in the early days of the settlement of Carstairs. By 1917, the year in which "Carried Away" (the collection's first story) begins, Munro presents Carstairs as a full-fledged town, and she introduces its most prominent business family, the Douds. A brief reference is made to Arthur Doud's twelve-year-old daughter, Bea, who will become a central character in the collection's final story, "Vandals". Similarly, the Doud family connects to "Spaceships Have Landed", in which Bea's younger brother Billy plays a significant role. "Real Life" also takes place in the town of Carstairs where the influence of the Doud family is felt again: Arthur Doud's

wife, the protagonist of "Carried Away", is one of the town ladies to snub Millicent because she is only a farmer's wife. Munro playfully connects the Douds and their piano factory once more in the collection's title story, when former piano tuner, Mr. Siddicup, becomes involved in a disappearance. Even the two stories that take place primarily in distant locations are firmly rooted in this area of Ontario: the protagonist of "The Jack Randa Hotel" lives in the nearby town of Walley before taking the trip to Australia where the story's central events unfold, and the narrator of "The Albanian Virgin" often allows her thoughts to escape Victoria and return to her abandoned husband and lover in southern Ontario.

Munro has carefully selected the narrative strategies she incorporates to reinforce the theme of connection between the many layers contributing to the composite picture of reality created in each story. In the first four stories to be discussed - "A Real Life", "Spaceships Have Landed", "Open Secrets" and "The Albanian Virgin" - Munro explores the connections between two central characters who break away from their present realities; to emphasize these linked twists of fate, the third-person narrator only provides access to the consciousness of the character who has privileged information. In "A Real Life" and "Spaceships Have Landed", it is this particular character who acts as the catalyst for the change in the course of destiny, while in "Open Secrets" and "The Albanian Virgin", the narrator follows the character who takes on the role of the observant artist figure interpreting this change.

In "A Real Life", whose title brings to mind Munro's recurring interest in decentering notions of reality, the third-person narrator follows the consciousness of

Millicent, neighbour and friend to the protagonist, since it is Millicent who is ultimately responsible for instigating Dorrie's disconnection from life in Carstairs. When Dorrie is presented with the opportunity to break away from her rugged life as a poor, aging and solitary woman by marrying an exotic Australian rancher, it is Millicent who forces Dorrie to leave, claiming that she has sold Dorrie's rented house, and declaring, "Marriage takes you out of yourself and gives you a real life" (75). However, at the story's end, it is unclear which lifestyle is more meaningful, as Millicent appears to have taken over Dorrie's original destiny, living the life of a solitary old widow in touch with the rhythm of the seasons.

Just as the narrator of "A Real Life" follows the consciousness of Millicent, the catalyst in reversing Dorrie's fate, so the third-person narrator of "Spaceships Have Landed" follows Rhea, who alters several lives when she breaks away from her possible destiny as the wife of Billy Doud. Munro executes a reversal in the destinies of the two main characters in this story as well, since Rhea's odd childhood friend, Eunie, will ultimately assume the place that Rhea forfeits by refusing to become the next Mrs. Doud.

In "Open Secrets" and "The Albanian Virgin", Munro continues to explore connections between destinies through the intersection of two central characters' lives. In these instances, however, Munro has altered her form somewhat to tell the stories through the consciousness of an artist figure: instead of providing a third-person narrator who darts among scenes and observes the actions of characters and the thoughts of one consciousness, the narrator of these two stories does not deviate from the consciousness of the protagonist, who acts as the observant artist figure and, in the case of "The

"Albanian Virgin", actually narrates the story in the first person. In this manner, the form adds layers in Munro's story-telling process, since the reader must interpret the protagonist's interpretation of the various stories other characters tell her.

Despite added complications in these two double plots, Munro's use of a unifying consciousness allows the stories to flow smoothly, becoming the "personal truth" of an observant artist figure. In "Open Secrets", for instance, the third-person narrator follows the consciousness of Maureen, who witnesses various characters' interpretations of events surrounding a teenager's disappearance and finally receives her own shocking vision of the missing girl's fate. "The Albanian Virgin" is also told from the perspective of an artist figure, since the entire story can be considered the personal interpretation of the first-person narrator, a graduate student of literature who runs a bookstore.

Ann Hulbert draws attention to the thematic importance of connections in Open Secrets: "Her characters--like their author--are forever trying to find some pattern, however tenuous, in the choices and accidents, the continuities and rebellions of their lives". She continues: "In Carstairs--more joltingly than in its predecessors Jubilee, Hanratty, Dalgleish--Munro is preoccupied with disconnections and unpredictable, implausible reconnections between then and now, between here in town and there beyond it...More than a relativist muddle, there is a sense of miracle in the transformations that have taken place" (59). Munro's exploration of interconnected destinies is reinforced by each story's basic structure which is constructed from subdivided segments of text separated by Roman numerals, asterisks, or several blank lines. Each of these fragments of text, a glimpse of reality that contributes to the composite structure, is linked to the

others to reinforce the thematic emphasis on connection. In "A Real Life" and "Spaceships Have Landed", for example, the author accentuates her exploration of the uncanny connections and reversals of fortune among her characters by moving back and forth between segments exploring two particular directions that events in the protagonists' lives might have taken.

The text of "A Real Life" is divided into six sections which serve to connect form and theme by alternating between Dorrie's two possible destinies, that of the impoverished and that of the rich wife. In the first part, Munro offers Millicent's version of her own and Dorrie's past life leading up to the fateful dinner when they meet the strange Australian who will eventually become Dorrie's husband. The second section takes Dorrie forward toward the new destiny Mr. Wilkie offers, as the women's difficulties in fitting Dorrie's wedding dress match Millicent's efforts to force Dorrie into her new, "real" life. In the third section, Dorrie retreats to her old life, refusing to marry until Millicent threatens to throw her out of her rented house. The fourth section returns to the possibilities of Dorrie's new life, as she dutifully walks to her wedding, while in the fifth, Munro moves to the future, when Dorrie can reconnect with her old life only through the mail. In the final section, Munro reconnects with a destiny not unlike Dorrie's original life, but in this instance it is Millicent who is solitary and who watches the change in seasons. Although Millicent still insists she created for Dorrie "real happiness" in forcing her from this rural existence, the fact that she has allowed Dorrie's old shack to stand as a testimony to this lifestyle implies some doubt.

In "Spaceships Have Landed", Munro similarly connects the two protagonists by

alternating sections leading to Rhea's defection from Carstairs' society with those leading to Eunie's acceptance within it. Part One of the story contains five subsections involving Rhea's relationship with both Eunie and Billy Doud. The opening sentence draws parallels between Eunie and Rhea on the evening that will alter their destinies: "On the night of Eunie Morgan's disappearance, Rhea was sitting in the bootlegger's house in Carstairs--Monk's--a bare, narrow wooden house, soiled halfway up the walls by the periodic flooding of the river. Billy Doud had brought her" (226). Munro offers only the first half of the events at Monk's leading to Rhea's defection from her present life before cutting without warning to a second section describing Eunie's experiences the same evening. The first sentence of this section again links the evening's events for the two girls, since "Eunie Morgan's house was the third one past Monk's" (232). This segment describes the reaction of Eunie's parents who wake to find that their daughter, like Rhea, is not where she should be; Eunie has gone missing.

In section three, Munro reinforces the connections between the two characters by flashing back to a distant summer when, as children, Rhea and Eunie's lives had also been linked. They spent their days together and disconnected from their present reality by becoming "The Two Toms": "One whole summer, Eunie and Rhea played together, but they never had thought of their activity as play. Playing was what they called it to satisfy other people. It was the most serious part of their lives. What they did the rest of the time seemed frivolous, forgettable. When they cut from Eunie's yard down to the river bank, they become different people" (235). In the fourth section, Munro both disconnects characters, describing how Rhea grows apart from Eunie in their teenage years, and

reconnects others: the section ends with Rhea's realization of a strange connection between Eunie and Billy: "People close to the bottom, like Eunie Morgan, or right at the top, like Billy Doud, showed a similar carelessness, a blunted understanding" (239). Lastly, section five describes Rhea's socially advantageous connection as Billy's girlfriend, yet at the end, the narrator warns that this connection is an uneasy one; "She was lucky: Billy Doud had chosen her...But at a time like this, she could feel cut off and bewildered, as if she had lost something instead of gaining it. As if she had suffered a banishment. From what?" (244).

In the two sections of Part Two, Munro continues to parallel the fates of Rhea and Eunie: in the first, Rhea disconnects from her present reality as Billy's girlfriend when she agrees to go outside of Monk's house with Billy's best friend, Wayne; while in the second, she sees a dishevelled Eunie returning home from a similar defection from everyday life (Eunie will later claim to have spent the night in the company of aliens). Part Three again joins the two girls' fates: section one describes Rhea's movement towards Wayne, when she insists he come and offer an explanation for the previous evening, while in section two, Eunie arrives home only to find Billy Doud in her kitchen. The final section solidifies through marriage the connections between Eunie and Billy, and Rhea and Wayne, moving into the future to describe the links that remain in place between the two couples who are now growing old. On Rhea and Wayne's return visit, it is the landscape of the town itself that has changed from the Carstairs the four remember, just as time has erased almost all traces of the possible unions that might have occurred had Rhea not chosen the fate she did:

The river houses all gone. The Morgans' house, the Monks' house - everything gone of that first mistaken settlement...A spacious parkland, a shorn and civilized riverbank - nothing left but a few of the same old trees standing around, their leaves still green but weighed down by a diffuse, golden moisture that is in the air on this September afternoon not many years before the end of the century (259).

Munro again uses a sub-divided structure to connect form and theme in "Open Secrets" and "The Albanian Virgin". As these plots examine the interconnected destinies of the two central characters, the author frequently reinforces her theme by alternating the sections of text that focus on each individual; one character's story does not advance before its counterpart in the life of the other. In the title story, for example, Maureen Stephens gains insight into the disappearance of a teenager, Heather Bell, because of parallels she discovers between herself, the missing girl, and Marian, one of the last people to see Heather alive. Munro first emphasizes these connections by alternating the various sections of text in which characters provide Maureen with information about the girls' disappearance while on a CGIT hike with those describing Maureen's own associated memories of similar hikes when she was a girl..

In the first section of Part One, for instance, Maureen learns of Heather's disappearance through the rumours reported by her maid, Frances. In the second section, the narrator relates Maureen's own memories of hiking, years before, under the guidance of the same CGIT leader, Mary Johnstone. In section three, the narrator provides the rest of Frances's version of events on the day of the hike, while section four flashes back to Maureen's memories: "She remembered how noisy she had been then. A shrieker, a dare-taker...*I dare you to run away*. Was it possible? There are times when girls are inspired, when they want the risks to go on and on" (139). Maureen's memories connect her with

Heather and provide insight into what may have happened: "She could imagine vanishing. But of course you didn't vanish, and there was always the other person on a path to intersect yours and his head was full of plans for you even before you met" (140). Similarly, Munro reinforces the connections between Heather and Maureen's lives in Part One by joining these sections together with fragments of verse about Heather's disappearance. The poem in turn connects with the end of part two when Frances tells Maureen, "There is a poem already made up and written down...I've got it here typed out" (156).

In the seven sections of Part Two, Maureen gains additional insight into Heather's disappearance when she acknowledges particular connections between herself and Marian Hubbert, a link which is emphasized by Munro's use of similar names. When Marian and her husband appear at the house to seek legal advice from Lawyer Stephens in connection with Heather's disappearance, Maureen recognizes her immediately: "It was Marian Hubbert...She was a husky woman of about Maureen's age - they had been in high school together, though a year or two apart" (141-142). As the visitor begins to explain her situation, Maureen cannot help noticing further similarities between them: "Like many country women and Carstairs women, too, she referred to her husband as he--it was spoken with a special emphasis--rather than calling him by his name. Maureen had caught herself doing it a few times, but had corrected the habit without anybody's having to point it out to her" (144-145).

The third and fourth sections make concrete the connections Munro is drawing between the lives of the two women, and more particularly between their husbands. In

section three, Maureen watches the couple sitting on a little wall after leaving her house, Marian's hat in her husband's lap:

He stroked that hat made of horrible brown feathers as if he were pacifying a little scared hen.

But Marian stopped him. She said something to him, she clamped a hand down on his. The way a mother might interrupt the carrying-on of a simple-minded child--with a burst of abhorrence, a moment's break in her tired-out love (153-154).

The fourth section then describes Maureen's husband's sexual attack, which becomes linked in Maureen's mind to Marian's husband's fondling of the hat: "And right through her husband's rampage, she thought of fingers moving in the feathers, the wife's hand laid on top of the husband's pressing down" (156). Likewise, the inclusion of another stanza of Heather's poem immediately after this section connects her disappearance to an act of sexual aggression:

*So of Heather Bell we will sing our song,  
As we will till our day is done.  
In forest green she was taken from the scene  
Though her life had barely begun (156).*

The next two sections continue the process of connecting the two couples.

Section five describes Maureen's vision of Marian punishing her repentant husband by burning his hand:

She sees one of those thick-fingered hands that pressed into her tablecloth and that had worked among the feathers, and it is pressed down, unresistingly, but by somebody else's will--it is pressed down on the open burner of the stove where she is stirring the custard in the double boiler, and held there just for a second or two...In silence this is done, and by agreement--a brief and barbaric and necessary act (158).

Maureen's husband is similarly repentant in the following section which flashes back to the

scene following his sexual outburst; he is now tidied up and his attitude is apologetic: "She opens the front door for him and he says, 'Thank you,' in his stiff, quaintly repentant way" (159). The last line reconnects with the previous section and the other couple: "They've gone, there's nobody sitting on the wall now" (159). Lastly, the final section leaps to the future, where Maureen's memory of her vision continues to connect her new life in a second marriage, with the ongoing mystery of Heather's disappearance: "In kitchens hundreds and thousands of miles away, she'll watch the soft skin form on the back of a wooden spoon and her memory will twitch, but it will not quite reveal to her this moment when she seems to be looking into an open secret, something not startling until you think of trying to tell it" (160).

"The Albanian Virgin" also parallels two destinies, making connections between the first-person narrator and Charlotte, an eccentric character who wanders into the narrator's newly opened bookstore in Victoria. The story is further complicated by the fact that the plot unfolds both their present realities and adventures from their pasts; both women have made choices dramatically altering the path of their destinies. Munro investigates these ruptures with the past as well as the present coincidental connection between the two women before they disconnect again. The author once more reinforces the theme of reality as a series of fleeting connections between characters by layering sections of text, each alternating between the two women's stories, between their pasts and their present.

The most obvious connection between the two women is that both take on the role of the artist figure; the story as a whole represents the narrator's personal interpretation of

events, but within it she provides verbatim Charlotte's tale about "Lottar", a story which the old woman claims to be making up. Although the story is ostensibly a first-person narrative revealing the personal truth of the narrating artist figure, the first two sections begin in the third person and relate the misadventures of a young North American woman in the 1920s who finds herself kidnapped by a remote tribe in Albania. Only in section three does the reader discover who is relaying the tale, when the first-person narrator makes her first direct address: "I heard this story in the old St. Joseph's Hospital in Victoria from Charlotte, who was the sort of friend I had in my early days there. My friendships there seemed both intimate and uncertain. I never knew why people told me things, or what they meant me to believe" (85).

In the fourth and fifth sections, Munro provides another layer of story-telling as the narrator listens to Charlotte tell the tale of Lottar who in turn hears the legends of the Albanian tribe. The reader, like the narrator, must use the connections between these stories to assemble the whole picture, while resisting red herrings like Charlotte's original claim to be creating fiction. Imbedded in the text may be a warning to this effect, when the Albanian tribeswomen warn of the *oras*: "the *oras* are the devils that come out at night and flash false lights to bewilder travellers. You must crouch down and cover your head, else they will lead you over a cliff" (91). Similarly, stories provide a link between Charlotte, her husband Gjurdhi, and the narrator in the sixth section which describes Gjurdhi's visit to the narrator's bookstore where he shows her books connecting back to Charlotte's tale: "They were travel books, some of them, old, and not so beautiful, either, with their dim, grainy photos. *A Trek Through the Black Peaks. High Albania. Secret*

*Lands of Southern Europe*" (95). After Gjurdhi shows her a wooden crucifix resembling the one Lottar sees on the neck of the Franciscan priest in Charlotte's tale, this section ends abruptly, and the plot then reconnects with Albania in two brief sections. Here, Lottar's life with the tribe likewise ends without warning as the Priest convinces her to escape back to civilization to avoid being sold into marriage with a Muslim.

In the second last section of Part One, Munro links Lottar's departure to the narrator's move to British Columbia; back in the bookstore, the narrator starts relating her own escape from a marriage in Ontario. Parallels emerge between her story and that of Charlotte's character; just as Lottar took refuge in the life of the tribe, so the narrator escapes into the sanctuary of the bookshop: "But are there other people who open a shop with the hope of being sheltered there, among such things as they most value...Shops, to these people, are what a cabin in the woods might be to someone else--a refuge and a justification" (107). Similarly, the narrator proclaims in this section that "it seemed I would be happy to talk to people day after day and never learn their names", just as Lottar lives alongside the Franciscan without learning his name: "She called for him now, as she was leaving. She had no name to call, so she called, 'Xoti! Xoti! Xoti,' which means 'leader' or 'master' in the language of the Ghegs" (128).

The second part of the novella repeats the pattern of the first, since just as Part One opened with events leading to Lottar's brief connection with the Albanian tribe, the first two sections of Part Two describe the events leading to the narrator's new reality in Victoria, namely the affair that breaks up her marriage, and her meeting with Charlotte and Gjurdhi in her new store. In the third section of Part One, Charlotte begins to tell her

story; section three of Part Two describes a dinner at Charlotte and Gjurdhi's, where the narrator longs to tell her own history: "I was surprised at how eager I found myself, at last, to tell my story...I was looking forward to telling the truth, or some of it, in all its wounding complexity, to a person who would not be surprised or outraged by it" (120-121). Finally, the thematic focus of this story, representative of the entire collection, is best expressed in one of the final sections of Part Two; the narrator's description of her connection with her Ontario lover represents the relationships between all of the characters, and it is accentuated by Munro's use of separate but interconnected sections of text: "We become distant, close--distant, close--over and over again" (127).

Towards the story's conclusion, the sections become shorter, as Munro reconnects the various flashes, only to let them fly apart again at the very end. In a flash back to Charlotte's story, the old woman moves closer to the narrator by confessing that her "fiction" is actually from life, thereby reversing the typical Munroian artist's interpretation which contains the "not real but true." The following section then completely detaches the two, as the first-person narrator describes how Charlotte and Gjurdhi sever all connections with her life, vanishing on the following day just as Lottar vanished from her tribe, and the narrator herself vanished from her life in Ontario. Munro's thematic emphasis on the importance of finding connections is best articulated in this section:

The change in the apartment building seemed to have some message for me. It was about vanishing--I knew that Charlotte and Gjurdhi had not actually vanished --they were somewhere, living or dead. But for me they had vanished...I felt as if I could as easily walk another way, just any way at all. My connection was in danger--that was all. Sometimes our connection is frayed, it is in danger, it seems almost lost. Views and streets deny knowledge of us, the air grows thin. Wouldn't we rather have a destiny to submit to, then, something that claims us, anything, instead of such flimsy choices, arbitrary days? (126-127).

Ultimately, the narrator succeeds in reconnecting not only ostensibly through the narration of the brief connection between her life and Charlotte's, but also by reuniting with her old lover who reappears at the story's conclusion. Through this reunion, Munro also reconnects the fate of the two female characters by concluding the story with a tiny section containing the last line of Charlotte's story: "She called him and called him, and when the boat came into the harbor at Trieste he was waiting on the dock" (128).

Although the collection's four remaining stories all culminate in a reunion with a significant person from the protagonists' pasts, Munro's theme is no longer focused on connections between two central characters. Instead, the stories belonging to this second category, "The Jack Randa Hotel", "A Wilderness Station", "Vandals" and "Carried Away", explore the connections between the protagonists' actual destiny and another that might have been realized but for a twist of fate. Using epistolary sections, which allow numerous characters to voice their own personal interpretations, Munro reinforces her vision of reality as a composite structure of "not real but true" perspectives as well as near-misses with alternate outcomes. In keeping with Munro's thematic emphasis on connections, however, the two categories of stories are linked by more than the Southern Ontario settings they often share; although the stories of the first group do not contain passages from letters, Munro has included in all of them significant references to letters, as characters repeatedly rely on the written word to make connections with others.

In "A Real Life", for example, Dorrie meets her future husband only once before their wedding because their courtship is conducted entirely through letters. Once Millicent bullies her into going through with the marriage, Dorrie's only remaining connection with

her friend is through letters; "'I have grown as fat as the Queen of Tonga,' wrote Dorrie from Australia, some years on" (78). Similarly, in "Spaceships Have Landed", it is through her father's letters that Rhea maintains the strange bond with her childhood friend who claimed to be kidnapped by aliens: "'Who knows what really happened?' Rhea's father said, in a letter he wrote to Calgary. 'One sure thing is, Eunie Morgan never made a cent out of it.'" (258).

"Open Secrets" also draws attention to letters: "Maureen sat down on the hassock near (her husband) to write shorthand. His name for her, in the office, had been the Jewel, because she was intelligent and dependable, in fact quite able to draw up documents and write letters on her own" (138). While mailing her husband's letters, Maureen first hears rumours of the fate of the missing adolescent, and the story concludes with a reference to letters to the editor written by the CGIT leader as she attempts to clear her name of blame. Lastly, in "The Albanian Virgin", Charlotte's disappearance in Albania is possible only because she has severed the usual connections a young girl would maintain even while travelling: she is not writing regularly to anyone. Although the narrator originally keeps ties to her past by sending letters to both her husband and lover, she also severs such connections when the former writes asking for a divorce and the latter is no longer "Known at This Address" (121).

Munro expands her exploration of written connections among characters in the four remaining stories of this collection; the epistolary sections are particularly important in bringing about a reunion between each protagonist and a significant character from her past. However, unlike the stories of the first category, Munro limits her focus primarily to

events in the life of one protagonist who discovers in her present connections to past moments when the course of her life took her in a completely different direction. In Stephen Smith's 1994 interview, Munro addresses how this theme reflects a development in her approach to writing fiction: "I think I used often to write stories that were single paths and I knew, pretty well, what I wanted to happen, and the satisfaction was in making that happen...Maybe I don't do that anymore" (24).

Munro's preference for multiple paths is reflected in all four of these stories. In "The Jack Randa Hotel", for example, Gail must decide whether or not to pursue her destiny by following a former lover to Australia. In "Vandals", Bea and Liza offer very different interpretations on the life of Ladner, whom the former remembers as her lover and whom the latter recalls as a pedophile. "Carried Away" examines two possible destinies for Louisa and culminates in an intriguing reconnection with a former boyfriend who is supposed to be dead. Finally, "A Wilderness Station" explores how the various interpretations of Simon Herron's mysterious death affect the destiny of his wife.

To reinforce her emphasis on the interconnected paths open to the characters at given points in their lives, Munro incorporates a form that is multi-layered, providing additional points of view through the use of epistolary sections. In these epistolary fragments, for example, Munro allows characters to reveal first-hand their "not real but true" interpretations by taking on the role of the artist figure who expresses a personal version of reality. "The Jack Randa Hotel", for example, is told partially by a third-person narrator who has access to the consciousness of Gail, the protagonist, while epistolary sections allow Munro to provide another character's own personal interpretation as well;

when Gail steals a letter from Will's mailbox, marked "Return to Sender, Died Sept. 13", she learns that he is also seeking connections in his life: "*Dear Ms. Thornaby,...I used to think this family-tracing business was the silliest, most boring thing imaginable but now that I find myself doing it, I discover there is a strange excitement about it. Perhaps it is my age--I am 56--that urges me to find connections*" (172). When Gail hides behind the persona she creates of Ms. Thornaby and corresponds with Will, she too communicates her personal interpretation of events:

*You do not say whether your busy energetic young wife was to be part of this familial friendship. I am surprised you feel the need for other contacts. It seems I am always reading or hearing on the media about these 'May-December' relationships and how invigorating they are and how happily the men are settling down to domesticity and parenthood. (No mention of the "trial runs" with women closer to their own age or mention of how those women are settling down to their lives of loneliness!) (177-178).*

Epistolary sections in "Carried Away" permit the characters' own young voices to express first hand their personal truths, giving these glimpses from the past an immediacy that exceeds what Munro could have achieved through memory flashbacks. Because letters allow the correspondents to express themselves from a safe distance, Jack presents his true feelings without regard for his real engagement to another woman: "*I am not trying to worry you or get your sympathy either but just explain how the idea I won't ever see Carstairs again makes me think I can say anything I want. I guess it's like being sick with a fever. So I will say I love you*" (11). The use of letters to describe the relationship that develops by correspondence also foreshadows the fact that Jack and Louisa will never meet face to face.

Similarly, by introducing the voice of Bea Doud in an epistolary section at the

beginning of "Vandals", Munro creates another dimension in her portrait of Ladner, since Bea's personal interpretation of him is so different from that created by Liza in later sections of the story. Furthermore, Bea's letter allows Munro to add an additional layer from Bea's subconscious through her recounting of a dream. She recalls taking part in a ceremony to collect bones, presumably those of the recently deceased Ladner, when someone asks "Did you get the little girl?" (263). Although Bea writes that the question confused her, and she wonders if it refers instead to Liza's little brother who died, the dream connects to the story's latter sections and suggests that at some level, Bea has knowledge of the darker aspect to Ladner's life that robbed Liza of her childhood.

However, it is in "A Wilderness Station" that Munro fully exploits the epistolary form in order to involve the reader in constructing the story's composite structure of personal accounts. The sequence of letters and a newspaper article oblige the reader to follow connections between these various perspectives which span more than a hundred years. The letters reveal moments of events affecting the life of Annie McKillop, as her destiny is directed by the somewhat arbitrary decisions of others when she falls under their care. Therefore, these letters parallel Munro's exploration of life as a series of interconnected flashes, a perspective shared by one of the story's correspondents: "*This world is a wilderness, in which we may indeed get our station changed, but the move will be out of one wilderness station unto another*" (204). In the same way, Munro's epistolary form allows for the inclusion of numerous first-person accounts or personal interpretations, each contributing some truth and some falsehood to the final composition of reality which is the whole story.

Munro connects these various first-person accounts by dividing them into four parts and linking each one to Simon Herron and his death in the early days of the community of Carstairs when he was homesteading with his wife, Annie, and brother George. It is through various letters that interpretations of this incident are offered, with profound ramifications for the life of Annie. Part One, for instance, is a letter from the Matron of the House of Industry, recommending Annie as a wife for Simon. The second part begins with George's published memoir, dated sixty years after Simon's death, and offers the story's first version of this incident: "We were chopping down a tree where Simon wanted, and in some way, I cannot say how, a branch of it came crashing down where we didn't expect. We just heard the little branches cracking where it fell and looked up to see it and it hit Simon on the head and killed him instantly" (195).

Alternate explanations follow; in the next letter, the Reverend in Carstairs writes to the Clerk of the Walley Gaol, explaining a similar version of events, and that Annie has become unbalanced and is heading towards the jail: "A branch was loosed while chipping a tree and fell upon the elder brother so as to cause instant death" (198). The Clerk's reply offers yet another explanation from Annie's point of view: "(Simon) became enraged and promised her a beating when he was more at leisure to do it. He then turned his back on her, being seated on a log, and she picked up a rock and threw it at him, hitting him on the head so that he fell down unconscious, and in fact dead...This is her tale, and I do not believe it for a minute" (200-201).

Part Three again reconnects with Simon's death, since it offers another interpretation from Annie's perspective in a letter she writes to her friend Sadie: "The

blood and wet where the snow had melted off him was on the floor under his head and shoulders so I wanted to turn him over and clean it up...So (George) came and helped me and we got him turned over, he was laying face down. And then I saw, I saw where the axe had cut" (209). Similarly, although the fourth part consists of a letter written a hundred years later by Christina Mullen to describe her meeting with a notable politician, it also reconnects with the death of Simon; the politician is George's grandson, and Annie becomes the sewing woman for Christina's family after spending time in jail: "Why were you in jail, we asked her, and she would say, 'I told a fib!'...About being married herself, she sometimes said she had been and sometimes not...Then she said a bear killed her husband, in the woods, and my grandfather (the jail's Clerk) had killed the bear, and wrapped her in his skins and taken her home from the Gaol" (217-218). Part Four reconnects with Part One when Christina drives Old Annie to visit George Herron, where his grandson informs them that "his grandfather had been quite well and his mind quite clear--he had even written a piece for the paper about his early days here--but then he had got sick" (221).

Finally, in the story's concluding passages, Munro articulates a scenario reflecting her vision of life as "many-layered", where "nothing that happens really takes precedence over anything else that happens...it's almost a pulling the reader back and saying, no, this story isn't what you think it's about" (Smith 24). As Christina's letter describes the afternoon car rides that she offers to George Herron's relatives in the Stanley Steamer, another layer of the story unfolds without words: Annie reconnects with her brother-in-law, but the reader never learns what transpires between them: "I asked old Annie if Mr.

Herron could understand her when she talked to him, and she said, 'Enough'" (225).

In "Vandals" and "Carried Away", Munro delivers her most complex narrative structure, incorporating additional points of view through the combined use of epistolary sections, and those offered by a third person narrator who wanders from one consciousness to another. Similarly, she complicates matters in terms of theme, since these stories also culminate in a reconnection between the protagonist and a character from her past, but in this case these secondary characters are in fact dead.

Munro reinforces her thematic emphasis on the connections between characters' possible destinies as well as the composite nature of reality by telling these stories in flashes from the perspective of a variety of characters who have played significant roles in the protagonists' lives. In "Vandals", for instance, Munro presents Part One from Bea's point of view, first through a letter in which she attempts to reconnect with Liza, who as a child lived next door to Bea and Ladner, and later through a third-person narrator who relates Bea's personal interpretation of this man. Part Two, which recounts Liza's return to Bea and Ladner's house as an adult, is entirely delivered from the third-person narrator who now follows Liza's husband, Warren. From his perspective, Munro can provide the facts of events that transpire as Liza thoroughly vandalizes the house, but the reader, like Warren, is denied access to her motivation: "Warren sat down beside her. 'So what did they do?' he said. 'What did they do that made you so mad?'... When she hung up the phone, she came and got him. 'It was her,' she said. 'I already told you what she did to me. She sent me to college!' That started them both laughing" (283).

In Part Three, the story flashes back to the time when Liza was a little girl living

across from Bea and Ladner, and at this point, the narrator follows her consciousness, offering a perspective whose understanding is limited by youth and innocence. However, this section does communicate to the reader the knowledge that Warren is denied in Part Two:

When Ladner grabbed Liza and squashed himself against her, she had a sense of danger deep inside him, a mechanical sputtering, as if he would exhaust himself in one jab of light...He lay so heavy and useless that Liza and even Kenny felt for a moment that it was a transgression to look at him. He had to pull his voice out of his groaning innards to tell them they were bad...Bea could spread safety, if she wanted to. Surely she could. All that is needed is for her to turn herself into a different sort of woman, a hard-and-fast, draw-the-line sort, clean-sweeping, energetic, intolerant. *None of that. Not allowed. Be good* (292-293).

The final interpretation of reality that Munro attaches to this story's mosaic describes Warren and Liza's exit from the house they have just destroyed. Munro reconnects with the earlier sections when the narrator returns to follow Warren's sense of uneasiness about the place as they are leaving: "He only wanted to get home. It wasn't much after three o'clock, but you could feel the darkness collecting, rising above the trees, like smoke coming off the snow" (294).

By shifting the reader's attention frequently among several characters' points of view in "Carried Away", Munro uses the same combination of epistolary sections and a wandering third-person narrator to emphasize connections between the various possible destinies that contribute to the composite structure of reality. Part One, entitled "Letters", includes epistolary fragments between Jack Agnew and Louisa during the First World War, a connection which will link the protagonist to the other men destined to play significant roles in her life. Jack mentions having seen Louisa at work in the Library and

tells her the types of books he likes to read. In the second part, "Spanish Flu", the third-person narrator focuses on Jim Frarey, a book-seller, as he listens to Louisa's story of her relationship with Jack, including the note she recently discovered on her desk: "*I was engaged before I went overseas*" (18). The title of this section connects back to Part One, since Louisa begins telling her story to Jim to explain why she kept the library open during the epidemic; she had read in the paper that any day now, Jack would be returning to Carstairs from the war. In Part Three, "Accidents", the death of Jack Agnew links Louisa to her future husband, Arthur Doud, and is therefore told through his perspective. It is Arthur, Jack's boss at the factory, who places Jack's decapitated head back on his shoulders after the accident in the piano factory and who returns Jack's library books to Louisa.

Lastly, the narrator follows Louisa herself in the fourth part, entitled "Tolpuddle Martyrs", after a group of men who were transported to Canada over a hundred years ago for administering illegal oaths. Munro reconnects this section with section one: another world war is now in progress, and Louisa is reminded of Jack, the man who "illegally" swore that he loved her despite being engaged to someone else, when she sees his name on the list of speakers at a ceremony in honour of the "Tolpuddle Martyrs". When Louisa is approached at the bus station by a man who, like Jack, has a wife named Grace and a daughter named Lillian, she realizes only after his departure that despite the coincidences, the man is not Jack Agnew but Jim Frarey. In this instance, Louisa's momentary "not real but true" belief in Jack's existence is sustained by the real although coincidental connections between the lives of Jack and Jim. Likewise, Munro reconnects Part Four

back to Part One with the inclusion of a final section describing Louisa's arrival in Carstairs where she decides on the spur of the moment to apply to work as the town librarian, believing in "the swift decision, the unforeseen intervention, the uniqueness of her fate" (51).

Munro's most recent collection, therefore, contains innovations in form which serve to reinforce the shifts that have taken place in her thematic concerns. Throughout the work, Munro's theme of reality as a composite structure of interconnected destinies is reinforced by her multi-layered form. In the first category of stories discussed, one central character interprets events through alternating sections of text that explore the interconnected destinies of the two central characters. In the stories of the second category, Munro examines possible destinies for each protagonist through multiple points of view provided by letters and wandering third-person narrators. Similarly, the connections she weaves between the various subdivisions in the stories serve to emphasize the author's view of the composite nature of reality. In Munro's most recent collection, therefore, her form is composed of an eclectic assortment of narrative pieces in order to express an increasingly complex vision: "I think I used often to write stories that were single paths and I knew, pretty well, what I wanted to happen, and the satisfaction was in making that happen...Maybe I don't do that anymore" (Smith 24). Most recently, Munro's satisfaction appears to stem from seeking out the connections between the many pathways running through her vision of reality.

## Conclusion

Within Munro's deceptively simple narrative style can be found a rich combination of techniques as the form evolves to encompass an increasingly complex artistic vision. While consistently reflecting an interest in female identity and the nature of reality, Munro's focus has widened from a close-up on one developing artistic consciousness to a cinematographic panning of various characters' attempts at making meaning. Finally, her most recent work provides insight into the interconnected nature of the universal human quest to derive significance from experience. Lives of Girls and Women, Munro's fictional representation of the artistic development of a young woman, mirrors the author's own development as a writer. The young protagonist shares with her creator a compulsion for using language to capture what is significant from experience; Del's efforts to understand the relationship between truth and reality in fiction provide insight into Munro's own technique. Even at this early stage in her career, Munro shies away from conventions of linear character development in favour of a mosaic of various characters' interpretations of reality, emphasizing the significance of each subjective version of truth.

Munro continues her exploration of the relationship between truth and reality in the first-person narratives of The Progress of Love. This collection, however, includes a greater variety of narrative strategies than Lives of Girls and Women, permitting Munro to examine in greater depth the roles of interpretation and memory in understanding the world. Third-person narrators either bring the reader along on a quest to understand a mysterious part of reality through one character's perspective, or travel among various characters to demonstrate how we are all implicated in this process of constructing meaning from experience. The travelling third-person

narrators of The Progress of Love illustrate movement in Munro's writing toward an emphasis on the commonality of all characters' efforts to understand the world.

Open Secrets contains even greater thematic and formal complexity as Munro creates a multi-layered form incorporating many points of view, notably through the use of epistolary fragments. Throughout this collection, Munro weaves a series of connections as each story, constructed from interlocking segments of text, is linked to the others. These formal techniques reinforce Munro's thematic presentation of reality as a web of interconnected destinies and personal interpretations of the world.

Therefore, Munro has moved from the reliance on what she refers to as a "single path" through a story, to an increasingly complex labyrinth in which characters' lives and visions intersect in unexpected and inexplicable ways. Munro's writing has evolved over time, most recently leading her to pursue a quest similar to that of Will in "The Jack Randa Hotel": "Perhaps it is my age--I am 56--that urges me to find connections" (172).

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