Significance of Seemingly Insignificant Details in the Stories of Alice Munro

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In an Interview with Graeme Gibson, Alice Munro makes a very interesting comment about her writing and the way in which she develops her characters. "But you see that I do not write about, I can't write about states of mind. I have to write about.....I can't have anybody in a room without describing all the furniture you know....I can't yet get into people or life without.....having all those other things around them.(Gibson 257)

These 'other' things that surround Munro's characters and contribute to their vivid portrayals develop into images that enrich the particular theme, the meaning, or in Munro's own world, 'the feeling' of the story. Munro's stories deal with the human condition, the complexity of life, caprices of human heart, moments which change the whole course of life for its characters and alter the reader's perspective altogether. Such subjects might need a very close examination of the individual's thoughts and motivations, their states of mind but Munro offers another method, more complex method of studying the human condition. She makes subtle use of details and descriptions which is very complicated. If I use the favourite verb of Munro-"seems to be", I would say that she 'seems to be' excited about 'the surface of life'. Like her own character, Del, she wants "every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark of walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together---radiant, everlasting". Munro attempts "to get it all down". This 'all' includes every little thing—be it the description of atmosphere,the surroundings, the manner of walking and talking of characters, their gestures, their clothes, their other possessions. These descriptions serve a narrative purpose; they may appear to be an unnecessary diversion that the reader wants to neglect in anticipation of what happens next or to get a privy into characters' minds, but the reader can neglect these details at a cost. At the end, the story might baffle the reader; it might sound confusing, but once re-read, many of the seemingly stray pieces of information gain significance that readers may not at first consciously detect. One such detail is description of the clothes worn by her characters or the comments made by the narrator on the clothes of characters.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate, with excerpts from few of her stories; how her description of the clothes and dresses of characters enriches and enlarges the reader's understanding of the story as a whole

and at the same time, understanding of Alice Munro's sensitive and intricate investigation of "the surface of life".

One of her early stories, *Walker Brothers Cowboy*, is narrated from the point of view of a child who cannot explore the states of mind; cannot speculate or judge the things. So, it is the guileless presentation of surface and ordinary things around the daughter that depicts the special mood and tension that exists in the Jordan family and a peek into the characters to understand the reason of this tension. Munro just details those things that the characters react to and against. Early in the story, young daughter describes the dress her mother is making for her:

> "She has to cut and match very cleverly and also make me stand and turn for endless fittings, sweaty, itching from the hot wool, ungrateful"(3).

The child reacts to her mother sensually, she rejects the texture, colours and discomfort the dress causes and transmits much of this dislike to her mother. Her mother is not a housewife in "loose beltless dresses torn under the arms"(6), but a lady, whose daughter is "her creation, wretched curls and flaunting hair bow, scrubbed knees and socks"(6), all that she does "not want to be"(6).

The mother wears a "good dress" to town when she goes shopping, one that is "navy blue with little flowers, sheer, worn over a navy blue slip" (6). The mother is given to social pretension and does not spare her daughter in her desire to appear smartly dressed, socially accepted woman. Mrs. Jordan is surrounded by the superficiality, revealed through her dress, her 'delicate condition' and her joyless response to life. On the other hand, the images surrounding Ben Jordan are light and happy: "white shirt, brilliant in the sunlight" (7), the jokes and songs he makes up for his children. This contrast is intuitively felt by the child and the reader. We see that Ben Jordan's gaiety is not shared by his wife but by Nora who, the child observes; wears a dress " flowered more lavishly than anything my mother owns, green and yellow on brown, some sort of floating sheer crepe, leaving her arms bare"(11). The riot of colors which Nora chooses contrasts the subdued, elegant costuming of Mrs. Jordan. This contrast in costuming along with some other images in the story reflects the contrast in both the personalities and also explains in whose company Mr. Jordan feels happier and thus what is the cause of all the tension at home.

In another story *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, the whole buying excursion of Johanna for the wedding dress gives us a hint of her personality. The story begins with what was once traditionally the most important expectation a fair young maiden has—marriage.

However, this woman is neither young (just under forty) nor fair--"No beauty queen, ever" (2), as the agent at the railway station thinks of her, The first description we have of her is that her "teeth are crowded together in the front of her mouth" (1) and that she is a woman "with a high, freckled forehead and a frizz of reddish hair" (1). There is something grotesque about the woman's physical appearance. And she is very well aware of all her deficiencies, she never has had high hopes for herself. When she goes into the Milady's store and looks at the elaborate evening dresses of dreamy colours, nice fabrics and delicate embroidery, she does not feel tempted and thinks that when she was younger, she could not have contemplated such "expectations", could not have had the "preposterous hope of transformation, and bliss" (6). When she has entered into the store, we see a mirror which reflects Munro's sense of proportion and distortion; the mirror

> "showed her in Mrs. Willet's high-quality but shapeless long coat, with a few inches of lumpy bare legs, above the ankle socks" (6).
>
> "They set the mirror there so you could get a proper notion of your deficiencies, right away, and then-they hoped-you would jump to the conclusion that you had to buy something to alter the picture." Again, Munro comments , "Such a transparenttrick that it would have made her walk out, if she had not come in determined, knowing what she had to get"(6).

It shows how determined she is, despite of knowing about her misfit in a certain situation, she does not budge andfeels that she shall get something of her choice that fits her and even if not, she shall not go back empty handed. When she goes to Ken, all her romantic notions get shattered but determined as she is, she takes charge of the whole situation and turns everything in her favour by getting married to him.

She also seems to be well prepared for everything; she comes to the shop having "rehearsed" her request for the green dress in the window. She has worn "clean underwear and put fresh talcum powder under her arms"(7), as she knows that she has to try on different dresses, this reminds us of an event having occurred in the story earlier and one that shall happen later. When the ticket agent asks if someone is coming to meet her, she does not hesitate, but says "Yes", although she has no knowledge that this is true. She seems so certain about the future. Later, when she reaches at Ken's place, we see how soon she manages and takes control of things.

Here, in the store we are treated to the salesgirl's eye for detail on fashion. But throughout, we are treated to Alice Munro's flawless eye for detail.

> "It feels as light as silk, but it wears like iron. You can see it's lined throughout, lovely silk-and-rayon lining. You won't find it bagging in the seat and going out of shape the way the cheap suits do. Look at the velvet cuffs and collar and the little velvet buttons on the sleeve" (7).

Johanna tries this green suit that exposes her physical figure. Once again we know that she is clearly aware of her own imperfections and is a realist. She knows that the problem isn't the outfit, the reason why something looks off is—"her neck and her face and her hair and her big hands and thick legs" (8). She has no illusions about herself, calling herself a "sow's ear" regardless of the "silk purse" dress she tries on. Later in the story, we read that she knows that she cannot take anybody in, if she had been the salesgirl in the same store, she could not have attracted any customer as she cannot "entice" anyone. When she had left her previous employers, no one in the family shed any tears for her, so, just as she got the right dress, or say, the person who showed little affection to her, though in the forged letters, she decided to seize the opportunity. Johanna is not just a naïve spinster who ridiculously changes her life because of some fake letters written as a cruel joke by two nasty teenage girls. She recognizes Ken's limits, but realizes that she can make the most of it and that by nurturing him she might in turn achieve her unspoken goal of gaining significance and of having a family. She is both a romantic and a realist.

Eventually, the salesgirl provides her with an alternative; she has sized her up (literally and metaphorically) and created a space for the new Johanna to inhabit.

> "A brown wool dress, lined, with a full skirt gracefully gathered three-quarter sleeves and a plain round neckline. About as plain as you could get, except for a narrow gold belt" (8). This plain prize is exactly what she gets-Ken as a husband. "At least the skirt was a more decent length and the fabric made a noble swirl around her legs"(8). She looked in the glass. "this time she didn't look as if she'd been stuck into the garment for a joke" (8).

Since we know that the crucial events of the story are created by a "joke" that two young women play on Johanna, we have here the first intimation of the theme of a joke that has motivated Johanna's

expectations; ultimately it is the joke that fuels her desires and gets her into a marriage with Ken, but she makes the marriage a perfect fit, just like the fit of this brown dress.

Apart from this, the specific observations that the station master has made of Johanna are also rooted in clothes to some extent. When he looks at her, she is in her long drab coat, clunky laced up shoes, ankle socks, and not stockings, she neither has a hat nor the gloves; to him, she looks like a "plainclothes nun" (5) and the new "brown wool dress" she buys is also "as plain as you could get", affirming the likely look of such a nun. She finally serves Ken just like a nun when she finds him deadly sick and she has already served Mrs. Willets for twelve years like a nun.

In the story *Red Dress*, we feel a tension in the relationship of mother and daughter and that is sometimes revealed through the description of dresses. The narrator says, "I had worn these clothes…when I was unaware of the world's opinion. Now grown wiser, I wished for dresses like those my friend Lonnie had, bought at Beale's store." Now that the daughter has grown up, she resents being a dummy to her mother; she wants to overcome the influence of her mother by saying that earlier she enjoyed wearing what her mother made for her, but now she is a young girl, having her own choices and is affected by how the world sees her.

Again in the same story, awareness of womanhood and female sexuality is described through another red dress "it was too grown-up looking… I saw how my breasts in their new stiff brasserie, jutted out surprisingly with mature authority, under the childish frills of the collar".

In *Something I've been Meaning to Tell You*, Et "had set up in the dressmaking business. She had a long narrow room in the Square……where she did all her fitting, sewing, cutting, and pressing"(62). We see that in her real life also, she uses every stuff like material; she fits Char and Arthur in her conceived design. Very early in the story, when we get to know of the means of Et's livelihood, we notice that "She has had a couple of promises of jackets needing letting out" (50). She alters and makes do, this is an exact parallel to the way she leads her life. In the end, she does not have a husband of her own, but she makes do with Char's. Et is a dressmaker and Char is the wearer of the dresses. Char gets everything new and served up to her on a plate-everything except happiness while Et makes do with others' things and achieves her own happiness.

In *Gravel*, a woman's decision to leave her husband for a man, Neal, whom she meets in the local theatrical group, is signalled by a telltale alteration in her fashion sense: "She'd begun to dress like an actress too, in shawls and long skirts and dangling necklaces. She'd let her hair go wild

and stopped wearing makeup". Such changes, which reflect the belated influence of the era's "liberating styles" on conventional southern Ontario, seem rebellious if we see the heroine's situation.

Munro uses clothing as a way to convey realities that her characters face. For the women in Munro's Runaway, clothing is used to convey complex realities that lie underneath. Carla is shown to be intricate and complex.The initial introduction to Carla through clothing is deceptively simple: "Carla wore a wide-brimmed old Australian felt hat, every time she went outside, and tucked her long thick braid down her shirt". The neat and "tucked" manner of her clothing belies the challenges she feels in her marriage and in her life. The use of clothing in these descriptions is symbolic of the life that Carla leads. It is one with the outward appearance of contented domesticity, reflective of a dutiful wife who does not want to create controversy for fear of disrupting her husband's business. However, inside like the clothes, there is something else that lingers, the frustration and loneliness. Again, when Carla tries to escape, something "doesn't fit right" about it. This is accentuated when she confesses to Sylvia about the troubles in her marriage and is offered a way out. Sylvia advises Carla not to go home and rather wear the clothes in Sylvia's house. Even though Carla protests that Sylvia is "ten times skinnier" than she, Carla wears Sylvia's clothes: The disjointed appearance of the clothes is reflective of how Carla is not really ever able to escape, reflective of a world in which she, like the clothes, does not fit. In Carla's case, clothing is the symbol for an emotional condition that is out of balance.

In *Passion* Grace is reflective of Carla's inability to "fit" within the contours of her life. Grace finds herself unable to escape the "old confusions and obligations" that plague her, hanging over her like the clothes that did not fit Carla. In the exposition of Grace's characterization, it becomes clear that she is at odds with the world around her. She is a working class girl, a waitress, who yearns for something more. The economic condition in which she lives prevents her from fully recognizing and achieving the wealth. Grace understands the world that Maury comes from is one of wealth and privilege, reflective of opportunities that Grace would like to experience. So when she meets him, she dresses up according to his class, his world. Grace's own subjective sense of "passion" within her identity collides with the material reality that envelops her. For Grace, this is evoked when Munro describes how she looks on her first date with Maury: "Grace was wearing a dark-blue ballerina skirt, a white blouse, through whose eyelet frills the upper curve of her breasts was visible and a wide rose-colored elasticized belt". Clothing is used to highlight a sense of "pert" and "style." Yet, this is the diametric opposite of her reality. There

was a discrepancy, no doubt, between the way she presented herself and the way she wanted to be judged. But nothing about her was actually dainty or pert or polished, in the style of the time. A bit ragged around the edges, in fact; giving herself Gypsy airs, with the "very cheapest silver-painted bangles, and the long, wild-looking, curly dark hair that she had to put into a snood when she waited on tables". Clothing covers only the grit and grime of waiting tables, of her "strong Ottawa valley accent," and a world of economic challenge. She has actually nothing but disdain for girls of that economic class. Grace uses clothing to cover her reality, one that is the embodiment of the collision between desire and reality.

In each of these settings, clothing is the means through which a protagonist's complexity is conveyed. It is reflective of something more than apparel. Munro uses clothing as a portal into the psychological nuances of her characters' sense of identity. The plot in Munro's stories is nothing more than five-six paraphrased sentences, but reading her stories thus is a great injustice to the story as well to the reader himself. There is so much more going on in the descriptions; she just seems to glory in surfaces and textures, but there is a kind of "magic about everything.....a feeling about the intensity of what is there".To feel this magic and get the deep meaning and feeling of the story, her stories demand a lot of attention, or sometimes, a re-reading and once the overall design is known, the details, in Poe's words "break out in all directions like stars, and throw quadruple brilliance over the narrative" and achieve "a gestalt like completeness in the representation of life" (Franzen).

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