

## “LOOK, YOU’RE NOT ALONE—THIS HAPPENS TO EVERYBODY”, ACCEPTANCE OF UNABASHED TRUTHS IN ALICE MUNRO’S STORIES

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### ABSTRACT

Awarded the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature for her work as "master of the contemporary short story", Alice Ann Munro is a Canadian author writing in English. Munro's win is a triumph for the genre of short fiction. Munro's tradition is different not only in the choice of genre but also in the choice of subject matter. Munro is interested in the domestic and all her stories are mainly set on a smaller canvas. Her characters are an ordinary young girl coping with her perplexed feelings, a frustrated married woman regretting her wrong choice, or realising her own limitations, an aspiring writer, a girl escaping from parental home and responsibilities; pondering over the mother daughter relationship, a woman escaping marriage, falling in love, in lust, sneaking around on spouses and enjoying it, telling sexual lies, doing shameful things out of irresistible desire, wallowing in the seamier and meaner and more vengeful undersides of human nature, the telling of erotic secrets and rejoicing in the fullness and variety of life. Such trivial and ordinary characters lead lives of extraordinary and enormous drama, driven by the great internal forces that drive all important experience: rage, love, jealousy, spite, grief. It's these propulsive, suffocating forces inside us that make moments of life so vivid and shocking, so wild and dramatic. But such forces are voiced not in a dramatic or extraordinary language, but a plain pared back language that is perfectly suited to the understated characters and the ordinary worlds which her characters inhabit. And this language is breathtaking, that cracks the landscape open, shocks and illuminates like a streak of lightning because through this, she tells; not only the stories of these characters but irrefutable truths of human nature very thoroughly, rather ruthlessly.

Alice Munro has always insisted not to subjugate her work to any theories. She says in an interview "I want people to enjoy my books, to think of them as related to their own lives in ways."(Asberg). This article endeavours to only recollect such honest diggings of human nature by Alice Munro where the reader can relate to the feelings of her characters and is forever changed after entering her world of strained human interactions, quiet desperation and irrefutable truths.

**KEYWORDS:** Truth, Honesty, Ugly Feelings, Actual, Shame, Embarrassment

### INTRODUCTION

In a lovely essay on art, sincerity and truth Louise Gluck writes that the task of the artist is truth, but that truth is not sincerity or honesty. Sincerity, she argues, is a sign of the already known, the comfortable actual: truth, on the other hand, is illuminating, an embodied vision or felt fact, a glimpse into the actual which takes us beyond what we already know, beyond honesty or sincerity. Adapting V. S. Naipul, Gluck offers the task of the artist as the "transformation of the actual to the true". To reach the true, as Gluck notes, the artist has to survey the actual, and then often to intervene, manage, lie and delete. What we are all left with then, is Henry James notion of the 'germ': that something which he thought essential

to the short story, more essential even than a notion of ‘story’ itself, that “essence” which the writing “illustrates”. This essence, this truth, this sharp unclouded gaze, the ability to strip away sincerity and unearth truth, however ugly and confronting, is the hallmark of the artist, of Alice Munro.

Alice Munro, in her stories is very much like a typical Munro woman of her stories, who in Margaret Atwood’s words is “given a choice between being a person who does good works but has inauthentic feelings and is numb at heart and being one who behaves badly but is true to what she really feels and is thus alive to herself, a Munro woman is likely to choose the latter.”

“Honesty, in Munro’s work, is not the best policy: it is not a policy at all, but an essential element, like air.”  
(Atwood)

An Alice Munro story has a particular feel — she deals with the most uncomfortable feelings in the most comfortable ways. She never shies away from any kind of emotions -be it jealousy, fear, selfishness, superiority, being jilted in love, the wilful desires, the wild passions, high aspirations, maternal guilt, remorse of a daughter, self delusions and recognitions, frustration of a married woman, the dilemmas of a perplexed heart and what not.

She cracks off the veneer and exposes the chaos of desire and insight and self-pity that is our common human challenge. After reading such expositions of heart, every reader feels like ‘O! This is exactly what and how we feel at times, but these are the feelings for which we reprimand our consciousness and try to suppress it in the bed of our heart’s ocean and Munro seems to excavate this dangerous treasure, a priceless ruby, a heart’s desire from there.

In the story *Peace of Utrecht* , Munro very unabashedly deals with the selfish feelings of the narrator, a young mother Helen who returns home for a visit with her older sister Maddy, brought on by their mother’s death, some months before when it was colder outside. Helen did not attend the funeral; there was a blizzard, though likely she would not have attended anyway, and likely Maddy was more content with her absence. But when the warmer weather arrived, Helen packed up her two young children and travelled to Jubilee.

But even this prolonged visit, planned, when it is comfortable for the narrator to make it, this re-union of the sisters, is not a success. As Helen, in the remarkable first paragraph of the story says

“I have been home now for three weeks and it has not been a success. Maddy and I, though we speak cheerfully of our enjoyment of so long and intimate a visit, will be relieved when it is over. Silences disturb us. We laugh immoderately. I am afraid — very likely we are both afraid — that when the moment comes to say goodbye, unless we are very quick to kiss, and fervently mockingly squeeze each other’s shoulders, we will have to look straight into the desert that is between us and acknowledge that we are not merely indifferent; at heart we reject each other, and as for that past we make so much of sharing we do not really share it at all, each of us keeping it jealously to herself, thinking privately that the other has turned alien, and forfeited her claim.

Despite pleasantries, Helen senses between herself and Maddy a “desert” in which they “reject each other.” How devastatingly clear these feelings are, like sun in our eyes or a broken window pane slicing open our skin.”

With the stories we hear in between the explanation of how the sisters became estranged is there.

Years earlier their mother had contracted a disease and the two sisters struggled to take care of someone they no longer felt they knew. Helen also reports that they “took away all emotion from our dealings with [their ill mother], as you might take away meat from a prisoner to weaken him, ‘till he dies.”

Maddy, being the older sister, struck a deal with Helen. Helen would give Maddy four years to go to college; then Maddy would return so Helen could go for four years to college. Good as her word, Maddy returned, and Helen went off to the “holiday world of school,” and she hated coming back to the “dim world of continuing disaster, of home.” Where “anarchy” was the norm, and where the girls isolated their mother so as to escape the horror of being publicly associated with her.

And Helen never came back. Instead, she got married and went away. Maddy has been caring for their mother, essentially alone, for ten years. Maddy has had no life, and Helen, naturally, feels guilty:

“All I can think about that, all I have ever been able to think, to comfort me, is that she may have been able and may even have chosen to live without time and in perfect imaginary freedom as children do, the future untampered with, all choices always possible.”

Even this guilt is a wilfully self-deluding thought: at least Maddy has the pleasure of still having her own life before her.

In a confessional mode, Munro reveals the guilt, but unlike an immature writer, Munro never blames anyone. Her vision does not work that way. Everyone seems to have their own failings in this story. She allows everyone their own story, and it also allows her mother her own heroism. It’s the situation more than anything that is the prison.

Munro’s striking ambivalence toward her mother—embarrassment, shame, and later, guilt—surfaces whenever a teenage daughter struggles with a mother who is disfigured, ill, or dying from a degenerative disease. This uncontrollable trembling also appears in *The Ottawa Valley* where Munro writes: “the problem, the only problem, is my mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get . . . To describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to get rid, of her; and it did not work, for she looms too close, just as she always did.”

Almost similar feelings are there in the brilliant title story of the collection *Dear Life* when she remembers a time “when I was at the stage of hating a good many things she said”. Everyone must go through this stage with their parents, but the final, unflinching revelation of dear life, shows the everlasting regret that can follow a failure of empathy inside a family. Ms. Munro writes,

“I did not go home for my mother’s last illness or for her funeral. I had two small children and nobody in Vancouver to leave them with. We could barely have afforded the trip, and my husband had a contempt for formal behaviour, but why blame it on him? I felt the same. We say of some things that they can’t be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves. But we do — we do it all the time.”

This final sentence of the book underscores Munro's trademark lack of sentimentality and presents the absolute truth of human nature. Her ability to go there, to really go there, surpasses the vast majority of writers.

Shame, embarrassment and guilt are driving forces for the characters in her stories. And why does this emotion touch such a raw nerve in readers? Not surprisingly, it’s because we can relate. Everyone has something to be ashamed of.

No exceptions. If anyone claims they have nothing to be ashamed of, they are in denial. Shame is simply part of the human condition. Alice Munro knew this very well and she is able to shamelessly deal with this shame and chronicle the failure of her heroines.

As Belle, the main character in *Train* says about a painful memory: “now I have got a real understanding of it and it was nobody's fault....it is just the mistakes of humanity.”

These mistakes of humanity fill Munro's pages. Alice Munro sends her female characters into the world armed with a desire for escape — sometimes through the rewards of higher education, or, say, the security of a good marriage. But her female characters are not always good. They are often derailed by errant and powerful female desire. The battle for authenticity is waged most significantly in the field of sex. A peerless storyteller, she traffics in unflinching truths, expressed in subtly vivid ways. Her heroines often indulge in sexual skirmishes and with the naked honesty they talk about the pleasure of the moment rather than repenting on them and even after having realised their foolishness about it.

In the story *Passion*, Grace who is committed to Maury, but gets attracted to his elder step brother Neil in the very first meeting and even goes with him for a long drive, describes her feelings thus

“describing this passage, this change in her life, later on, Grace might say—she did say—that it was as if a gate had clanged shut behind her. But at the time there was no clang—acquiescence simply rippled through her, and the rights of those left behind were smoothly cancelled out.”

“Grace and Neil did not talk, of course. As she remembers it, you would have had to scream to be heard. And what she remembers is, to tell the truth, hardly distinguishable from her idea, her fantasies at that time, of what sex should be like. The fortuitous meeting, the muted but powerful signals, the nearly silent flight in which she herself figured more or less as a captive. An airy surrender; her flesh nothing now but a stream of desire.”

Becoming a victim of the flesh, she forgets all about the rights and dignity of others just as in the story *Amundsen* when Mary intervenes in Dr. Fox and Vivien's dinner together and starts showing up her performance; the doctor snubs her very badly. Vivien feels that “he had been brutal. It shocked me that he had been so brutal. To one so much in need”, but still she is overwhelmed by his charm and feels that “but he had done it for me, in a way..... This thought flattered me”; “my stock had risen. Whatever else I was, at least I might turn out to be a woman with a man.”

Later, in the same story, when they are on their way to the wedding place, Vivien feels, “right now, I believe I would lie down for him in any bog or mucky hole or feel my spine crushed against any roadside rock, should he require an upright encounter. I know, too, that I must keep these feelings to myself.”

But Alice Munro can never keep these feelings away from readers.

Munro never seems concerned with creating “likable” characters. Rather, Munro's people are complicated and surprising and human, capable of both kindness and cruelty. The emotional directness and honesty of every one of Munro's narrators, is chilling and unnerving, but also comforting and deeply exciting. Munro never shies from giving voice to the evil and discreet desires of her heroines. In the story *Material*, the narrator remembers an incident with her ex-husband, Hugo, whom she almost hates as is suggested by her language. Hugo deliberately, in order to sleep, turns off the pump that keeps the basement from flooding. As a result, a tenant named Dottie wakes up to a knee-deep flood in her basement apartment. The previous night, when Hugo turned off the pump, the wife knew it. She calls him a “moral idiot” for what he

did — but she herself decided she did not have to stand up for Dotty (who had by now become her friend) by going down to turn off the pump. She devotes a long paragraph to the ins and outs of her thinking that night, but finally, she decides, despite her friendship, she doesn’t have to turn the pump back on,

“Instead, I said to myself that I did not know how the pump worked, I did not know where to turn it on. I said to myself that I was afraid of Hugo. I entertained the possibility that Hugo might be right, nothing would happen. But I wanted something to happen. I wanted Hugo to crash.” (92)

Look what Munro does. “I wanted Hugo to crash”. Though the reader here is about to thwart the unconditional sympathy with the narrator which she gained till now, but cannot help to identify himself or relate to such feelings.

Later in the same story, many years later, when she is remarried to Gabriel and she reads a very good story by Hugo that has Dotty at its centre, the narrator wants to write a pleasant letter to Hugo. She admits to herself that Hugo is truly gifted, is shocked to find that the story speaks the truth, gets to the narrative. She owes him that “acknowledgment” for “having not believed he would be a writer.”(95) When she sits down to write, however, she lapses back into the old ranty language:

“This is not enough, Hugo. You may think it is, but it isn’t. You are mistaken, Hugo.”(95)

Once again, she reverts to her same feelings, this time not only about Hugo, but also about Gabriel and says “In their limited and precarious ways they both have authority. They are not at the mercy. Or think they are not. I can’t blame them, for making whatever arrangements they can make.”(95)

And she admits: “I do blame them. I envy and despise.”(95)

Munro seems to have gotten hold of our own darkest feelings about the people in our lives and transformed them, gloriously, into art.

The main character in *Wenlock Edge* says about herself at the beginning of this brilliant story: “I had a mean tongue. But I meant no harm. Or hardly any harm.” What a narrative hook, dropped so casually. A character who hints that harm is coming. This young college girl ends up stripping for an elderly, extremely wealthy stranger who sits at the other end of a long, formal table. She is asked to read poetry. She does it because she feels dared to do so, because of a “pride or some shaky recklessness.” She gets undressed and gets a dressing down, all because of her ungovernable desire. A desire to know what will unfold. And she learns, and continues learning.

Such stories by Alice Munro are real treat for those who like their fiction to be unashamedly true in tone, allowing her to demonstrate her incisive understanding of human nature and to offer entertaining meditations.

As for Lorna, the heroine of *Post and Beam*, she marries a mathematics professor and leaves her childhood world behind; when her cousin Polly, who is also bent on escape, arrives for a visit, she is silently annoyed: “it seemed that in the years since Lorna got married Polly had stayed still,” Munro writes. “Lorna had passed her by. And now Lorna had the children in the back seat to take care of and to love, and it was unseemly for a person of Polly’s age to come clawing for her share.”

Although the author does not shirk from depicting such moments of selfish superiority, although she clearly delineates her characters’ pettiness, anger and self-delusions, there is nothing the least bit judgmental about her stories. In

most cases the reader is invited to sympathize with the characters, to experience their hopes and grudges as they do, so nimbly does Munro capture their passing moods and states of mind.

In another story *The Beggar Maid*, Rose, an intelligent poor girl gets engaged to rich Patrick about whom she has very ambiguous feelings of love and dislike, of pity and vanity. Being a scholar and intellectual girl, she feels herself superior to him and keeps reconsidering her choice but feels pity for Patrick. So many times she wants to “turn Patrick down” but she cannot do so, saying that “It was not the amount of money but the amount of love he offered that she could not ignore” (134). So many times she emphasises that she is not attached to Patrick for mercenary reasons, yet she likes being envied for getting engaged to the heir to a mercantile empire. She describes her pleasure in this way

“Girls she hardly knew stopped and asked to see her ring, admired it, wished her happiness. When she went back to Hanratty for a weekend, alone this time, thank god, she met the dentist’s wife on the main street.

‘Oh rose, isn’t it wonderful! When are you coming back again? We’re going to give a tea for you, the ladies in town all want to give a tea for you!’

This woman had never spoken to rose, never given any sign before of knowing who she was. Paths were opening now, barriers were softening. And Rose- oh, this was the worst, this was the shame of it- rose, instead of cutting the dentist’s wife, was blushing and skittishly flashing her diamond and saying yes, that would be a lovely idea.”(144)

There is an almost embarrassing honesty about this description.

Marriage in Munro’s stories is frequently dealt as something ambivalent: a reminder of the folly of impulsive, youthful choices; an impediment to self-realization. And she writes about such feelings with the refreshing honesty, clarity and insight of a person comfortable with herself even in times of discomfort and confusion. She is a writer whose narrators, though they may be confused, are at the same time aware of themselves as a self, with all that entails – the longing, the happiness, the sadness, the melancholy, the family, the heart, the mind. It is easy to pick out examples of this: there are many, many stories. Look how one of her character thinks about marriage in *Miles city, Montana*.

“I had violent contradictions. Sometimes the very sound of his footsteps seemed to me tyrannical, the set of his mouth smug and mean, his hard, straight body a barrier interposed—quite consciously, even dutifully, and with a nasty pleasure in its masculine authority—between me and whatever joy or lightness I could get in life. Then, with not much warning, he became my good friend and most essential companion. I felt the sweetness of his light bones and serious ideas, the vulnerability of his love, which I imagined to be purer and more straightforward than my own. I could be greatly moved by an inflexibility, a harsh propriety, that at other times I scorned. I would think how humble he was, really, taking on such a ready-made role of husband, father, breadwinner, and how I myself in comparison was really a secret monster of egotism. Not so secret, either—not from him.”(267)

There’s self-knowledge and self-deception. There is an intimacy shared, in a way that does not require judgement so much as understanding as she peels back her character to reveal the beating of a strong heart.

Again in the story *Post and Beam*, what Lorna feels about her husband is that “she did not love him enough. She would say she loved him, and mean it to a certain extent, and she wanted to be loved by him, but there was a little hum of hate running along beside her love, nearly all the time.”

She describes how a woman's mad passion for a man she has known her entire life can mutate into a “tidy pilot flame, attentive, wifely.” she describes how a woman's impulsive afternoon tryst with a stranger can become a treasured fantasy, hoarded away as a secret antidote to her humdrum life. And she describes how tired a woman can grow of her husband's noisy ideological passions, “sick of argument and conviction,” weary of “the never-letting-up” of his striving personality.

It is not surprising for any married woman to have such feelings at times. She seems savage in describing them, but at the same time she is the most tender, the most honest and the most perceptive.

There are hundreds of such examples where Munro has dared in a quiet, steady way, to go places of deep honesty, where she has told the truth completely. She goes wherever she wants, and we go with her. The authority she brings to the page is just lovely.

Munro describes ordinary people, regular events and common thoughts, but it is the way she describes them that make her a true psychological writer. She has her own brand of psychological realism. Her characters do not suffer any epic falls from grace, and are not disillusioned over the unattainability of the ideal. Her characters are very ordinary girls and women who are armed with powerful desires and passions and whose life can feel suitably epic examined under Munro’s scope. They have the potential for grand drama and tragedy. They brim with passion and often-unfounded hope, and they tend to pour all of those emotions into whatever is sitting right in front of them. She’s simply bearing witness to the human experience, reporting from the front lines .She probes deeper, knocks down walls. Her stories may not be the one similar to all girls and women spanning geographical boundaries but her probings, definitely are the same. In another interview, Lisa Dickler said that “I feel your stories tell us, ‘Look, you’re not alone—this happens to everybody.’” And Alice Munro replied, “I hope so. I hope it doesn’t happen to everybody, but I hope they tell that.”

Emerson once wrote that “to believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your own private heart is true for all men—that is genius.” Alice Munro too has this uncanny faith in what she sees in her heart’s mind and an uncanny ability to convey the truths she spies there to us. In so doing, in believing in the universality of her vision, we the reader are led to better understand our own vision in this act of momentary transcendence and feel that “Look, you are not alone- this happens to everybody.”

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