

ENGL 3060 Modern and Contemporary Literature

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February 27, 2003**Alice Munro****"An Ounce of Cure"**

As the old saying goes, "hindsight is twenty-twenty": In nearly all circumstances of life, we will emerge from daily events as smarter and more successful individuals than we were before. After all, isn't history built on foundations which have proven to take into account past failures and mishaps? Similarly, didn't Germany for instance learn from its pre-WWII mistakes and become a respected "western" nation? Before reaching this level of success, however, human kind seems prone to attracting hardships and devastation from which it must learn its lessons and apply to society. Alice Munro addresses this tragic trait of human life within her short story "An Ounce of Cure". The protagonist, a typical young teenaged girl, finds herself at odds with her surroundings, emotions and inner conflicts, all of which are slowly devastating her self-confidence. Although in the end all goes well, her heartbreaking experience invokes empathy in ourselves as readers because we have all been through similar situations and have had to deal with equally difficult decisions. Furthermore, how many times have we all thought, "If only I knew then what I know now" ? Munro puts this thought and wisdom into perspective by describing the hardships of her story's protagonist. In a sense, the girl stands for the stereotypical teenager who has difficulties accepting the hardships of life and must come to terms with growing up. Not only does she struggle with love and popularity within school, but she must also deal with her growing independence – an

issue which we as readers have not less been spared. The events which furthermore cast this light of a typical teenager on her include her naïveté towards alcohol as well as the constant inner conflicts she has with her parents.

Yet, although the girl harmonizes with our general image of teens and youth, Munro nevertheless displays her protagonist as a unique individual who struggles with issues specific to her circumstances. Not only must she conquer the general task of growing up, but she must also learn to deal with her mother's lack of expectations. As Munro describes, the girl's youth is characterized by her mother's expressions "of brooding and fascinated despair, as if [the mother] could not possibly expect, did not ask, that it should go with [her daughter] as it did with other girls; the dreamed-of spoils of daughters – orchids, nice boys, diamond rings – would be borne home in due course by the daughters of her friends, but not by [her own daughter]" (364). This lack of expectation is among the many building blocks which contribute towards the protagonist's main conflict and seemingly tragic life. Although the girl displays ignorance towards her mother (354) typical during teenage development, she is further disappointed by her mother's inability to understand and feel sympathy for what she is experiencing. The mother displays this ignorance when she coldly responds to the news that her daughter broke up with her first true boy friend: "Well so much the better for that. I never saw a boy so stuck on himself" (365). Further, instead of trying to understand her daughter, the mother takes this insensitivity to the extreme when she denounces her daughter's mishaps in public: "she told them that although I seemed to do well enough at school I was extremely backward – or perhaps eccentric – in my emotional development" (370). Further, the conflict within Munro's story encompasses not only the mother's high expectations but also the daughter's fear of not meeting these standards against which the mother wants to measure her. This becomes evident by her plea to Mr. Berryman not to discuss the night's issues with her parents: "Oh, no, Mr. Berryman I beg of you, my mother is a terribly nervous person I don't know what the shock might do to her. I will go down on my knees to you if you like but *you must not phone my mother*" (369).

Munro uses the setting in the story not only to emphasize the girl's conflicts but also to lend the story texture and a "power of association"(393) - George Woodcock attributes this to Munro's wish on one hand to reduce symbolism but on the other to

produce a re-creatable atmosphere which the readers can pick up and apply to their own lives. Catherine Sheldrick Ross similarly recognizes that Munro aims at creating "a [story] of recognition" (392) where the reader can say: "yes, that is how life is" (392). The girl's description of her tightly knit and rigorously religious community thus allows the reader to picture the town and further understand the girl's grievances. Although we may have never experienced such constrained circumstances in which she lives, we can nonetheless empathize and re-produce what she feels. Not only does she feel misunderstood by her parents and society but she also feels encapsulated in an environment where she cannot express her emotions. She thus tells us that "at home the life of the emotions [...] always seemed to get buried under the piles of mending to be done, the ironing, the children's jigsaw puzzles and rock collections" (366). The only place she feels free to express her emotions is at the Berrymans. Her employer not only provides her with this opportunity to set her feelings free, but also represents the excitement which she is seeking. According to the girl, the Berrymans lived on the "fringes of [...] society" (365) who had moved to town but seemed to have many friends in exciting and big cities. It is this promise of new and exotic experiences which she wants to get to know and which plays a large part in her experiment with Mr. Berryman's rye and scotch.

Finally, as John Metcalf points out, Munro succeeds at showing how the girl deals with her troubles by "changing from a participant to an observer" (394). Once her "circumstances become hopelessly messy, when nothing is going right for her" (394) she gives up fighting and observes her problems. Thus, the narrator discusses her difficulties as a young girl from the viewpoint of someone who has learned from the past – someone who has received that "ounce of cure" and is able to analyze life simply because they have experienced it and opened themselves up to learning from their mistakes.

"Prue" and "Miles City, Montana"

"Life is what you make of it" – or better yet: life is the reflection of beliefs and a creation of interpretation and invention. Munro gives evidence of this within two of her short stories: "Prue" and "Miles City, Montana". In both cases, she creates complex individuals whose nonetheless straightforward actions allow the reader to discover not only the tribulations of life but also to identify the various interpretations of our existence.

Munro illuminates her characters' differing mindsets and interpretations of life by implementing distinctive narration styles. Within "*Prue*", the third person, omniscient narrator describes not only the protagonist's life but also manages to display the characteristics of the individual. Among others, the reader gets to know Prue as a woman "whom it is hard to grant [...] maturity, maternity, real troubles" (372), who enjoys parties and views sex as a "wholesome, slightly silly indulgence, like dancing and nice dinners" (372). However, Munro does not offer intimate details of Prue's emotions or feelings. Nor does she explain why Prue acts the way she does. The narrator thus merely scrapes the surface of the protagonist's life and interaction with Gordon without giving specifics regarding her decisions. Although this may irritate the type of reader who attempts to find meaning within a literal sense, Munro provides us with the opportunity to interpret and infer Prue's attitude towards life by means of her actions. As a consequence, we may attribute Prue's loose relationship with Gordon to her unwillingness to bind herself to certain situations in life. Her characterization as a "flighty daughter [who] neglects to answer [her children's] letters" (372) thus gives an indication that Prue wants her life to consist of few constants which could jeopardize her independence. While Munro gives many clues to Prue's wish to be self-sufficient, she nonetheless hints at her protagonist's subconscious attachment and attraction towards Gordon. Thus, an important indication of this emotional connection to her lover becomes apparent when she takes one of Gordon's cufflinks. "She drops it into the pocket of her jacket. Taking one is not a real theft. It could be a reminder, an intimate prank, a piece of nonsense" (374). Prue refutes that the cufflink symbolizes her love and need for Gordon but her action nonetheless indicates that she is unconsciously in search of a connection or attachment in life.

In contrast to the main figure in "*Prue*", Munro displays the protagonist in "*Miles City, Montana*" from within a different setting. Here, she uses first person narration to guide the reader on a family trip from Washington to Montana – all along entrusting the reader with insight into the emotions and feelings of the protagonist. While we do not become familiar with Prue's emotions and thus cannot interpret her convictions of life with certainty, the narrator in the second story allows us to create a closely defined image of her character and convictions. Among others, not only do we learn of her conflicting feelings towards her husband, Andrew, but more importantly we learn of her intimate conflict of being trapped within a society which demands of her a certain grade of conformity: as a woman, she is trapped with predestined responsibilities and must live up to society's expectations. As a result, she seems "to be often looking for a place to hide" (378) from the obligations and monotony of her household life. This explains her rising spirits once the family departs from their home. She describes to the reader that "on trips there was no difficulty. [She] could be talking to Andrew, talking to the children and looking at whatever they wanted me to look at – a pig on a sign, a pony in a field, a Volkswagen on a revolving stand – and pouring lemonade into plastic cups, and all the time those bits and pieces would be flying together inside me" (378). Her real work and pleasure as she describes thus consists of being able to pursue other interests and the "wooing of distant parts of [herself]" (378).

The narrator's description of both the family trip and the mother's loved ones, as well as the detailed recount of her feelings and emotions contributes towards creating a textual identity which allows the reader to better identify and understand the narrator's plight. In contrast to this, Prue remains an individual whose thoughts and emotions the narrator seldomly shares. As a result and because of the unrestricted narration in "*Miles City, Montana*" the reader is offered a more complete perspective of the protagonist than he/she is presented with in "*Prue*". Nonetheless, both women not only offer views of how we can live our lives, but also convey valuable experiences of life, marriage and happiness in general. Thus, among the things that we as readers can learn from Prue and the mother are, that we must choose our paths through life wisely. If we choose either of life's extremes: unyielding independence or selfless dedication, we will likely end up

wishing for a chance to begin our lives anew in order to find a compromise between both poles.