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„The Short Stories of Alice Munro: An Exemplary Analysis of
the Collection *Too Much Happiness*“

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Declaration of Authenticity

I declare that I have authored this thesis independently and that I have not used any other than the declared sources and resources, which have been acknowledged in the bibliographic references. I have explicitly marked all material which has been quoted either literally or paraphrased from the used sources in references within the text.

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1 Introduction

In 2013 Alice Munro won the Nobel Prize for Literature praising her as “master of the contemporary short story” (A&E Television Networks). Alice Munro has been writing and publishing short stories from the 1950s until today and therefore been influenced by many different forms and styles of writing. She is considered to have had a significant impact on both the international and the Canadian contemporary short story (see Löschnigg, *Contemporary* 7). Categorisations of her writing style and narrative technique are abundant and sometimes contradictory. It is therefore the aim of this thesis to summarise characteristics of Alice Munro’s writing and analyse how these are reflected in the short story collection *Too Much Happiness*.

Alice Munro first collection of short stories *Dance of the Happy Shades* won the Governor General’s Award in 1968 and is considered to be the starting point of an aspiring career. Despite the appreciation her short stories received, writers were encouraged to publish novels, which was extremely difficult for Munro. She struggled for a long time with the form of the novel, before publishing *Lives of Girls and Women* in 1971. This book has initially been considered a novel, however, nowadays it is increasingly viewed as short story cycle (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 99-100). This ambiguity and the assumption of many critics that Alice Munro’s short stories have novelistic qualities leads to the first chapter of the thesis, which discusses short story theory and aims to place Alice Munro within the tradition of short story writing by outlining theoretical approaches to the short story and comparing those to some of Alice Munro’s short stories.

Alice Munro is not only a short story writer, she is also Canadian. Therefore, a brief chapter will be dedicated to her role within Canadian literature. There is a long tradition of short story writing in Canada, which is considered to be its “healthiest and most versatile literary genre” (Grady vi). The history of Canadian literature and culture will be discussed, as well as influential theories concerning Canadian literature. Furthermore, distinctive features of Canadian postmodernism, which works within the conventions of earlier writing styles will be presented. This chapter aims at a deeper understanding of the Canadian tradition Alice Munro is working in.

Alice Munro has been exposed to and influenced by many different writing styles throughout her career. There is dispute among critics which style of writing can be attributed to Alice Munro. Some critics argue that she is a regionalist writer, others that she is a realist writer

while another group of writers consider her to be a feminist, however, other critics categorise her work differently again. Therefore, it is important to summarise different characteristics of Munro's writing and outline the various writing styles, she is supposed to work within. Likewise, Alice Munro's narrative technique and recurring themes and motifs will be discussed.

Her publications are mainly short stories, with the exception of *Lives of Girls and Woman*, which has also been categorised as a short story cycle later. Critics have often concentrated their analysis on connected short stories, therefore, the focus of this thesis lies on short stories which are not obviously connected but were published in one collection. The relatively recent collection *Too Much Happiness*, which has been published in 2009, has been chosen for a closer examination, because the stories in the collection fulfil the above mentioned criteria. After summarising the plot, Munro's writing style, narrative technique and recurring themes and motifs will be analysed for all the stories. This aims at understanding whether her writing is consistent with the assessment of different critics and scholars, which has been discussed in the previous section. The analysis will illustrate the characteristics of the collection *Too Much Happiness* and show how they correspond with the theoretical framework established in the previous chapters, and whether there was a development in her writing in comparison to earlier works.

2 Alice Munro and the short story

Alice Munro is mostly known for her brilliant short stories, and also won the Nobel Prize for literature, being praised as “master of the contemporary short story” (A&E Television Networks) in 2013. However, although Munro generally writes short stories and the only novel she has ever written could likewise be categorised as connected stories (cf. May, *Brother* 239 and DeFalco, 378), various critics and scholars have characterised her stories as novelistic (cf. Toolan “Engagement” 223, May, *Brother* 236). This assumption leads to the central questions of this chapter: what is a short story and how can it be novelistic? And why are some of Alice Munro’s short stories considered novelistic?

Plenty has been written about the short story, to find a definition for it and to distinguish it from the novel. As will become apparent in the following chapter, scholars struggle to find one universal definition for short stories; but as Susan Lohafer has put it, “[...] they are strangely indescribable” (“Cognitive” 301). Nevertheless, in the following chapter some light will be shed on the genre of the short story.

2.1 Defining the short story

In his article “Reality in the Modern Short Story” Charles E. May identifies “three major stylistic shifts” that have had a profound influence on short fiction:

the humanizing of the allegorical romance in the Renaissance, the high point of which are the novellas of Boccaccio; the psychologizing of the supernatural legend by the romantics in the early nineteenth century, best represented by the tales of Poe; and the lyricizing of the slice-of-life story by the realists in the early twentieth century, most clearly exemplified in the stories of Chekhov (May, “Reality”).

Beginning with Poe’s theories, the problems scholars have in defining the short story will be outlined, as well as the discordance among short story theorists. The chapter will conclude with descriptions of the modern, postmodern and postcolonial short story form. However, the hardest question will be: where in the framework can Alice Munro’s stories be placed?

Most scholars trace the origin of short story theory back to Edgar Allan Poe (see Winther et al 136)¹, Charles E. May even points out that “[...] it is impossible to talk about the nature of the short story without considering Poe’s ideas” (May, *NSST*, Preface xi). The most important feature of the short story that Poe states is the “unity of effect or impression” (Poe, 60) which, according to Poe, can only be achieved if a story can “be completed in one sitting” (Poe, 60). What had started with Poe’s review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* was taken over by

¹ This can also be seen in the two most influential studies on short fiction *New Short Story Theory* and *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, where the scholars repeatedly refer to Poe’s ideas.

many other scholars and soon became prescriptive. Brander Matthews is one example of essentialism² (see Winther et al 137). What he writes about the short story seems almost idealistic:

[T]he Short-story has limitless possibilities: it may be as realistic as the most prosaic novel, or as fantastic as the most ethereal romance. [...] Whatever its form, it should have symmetry of design. If it have also wit or humour, pathos or poetry, and especially a distinct and unmistakable flavour of individuality, so much the better. But the chief requisites are compression, originality, ingenuity, and now and again a touch of fantasy. (Matthews 77)

Although Matthews attributes to the short story “limitless possibilities” (77) in its content, his definition of the form of the short story does not allow for any individuality. Following Poe he states that the “Short-story is the single effect, complete and self-contained” (73) and insists vigorously on compression (74). With his consolidation of Poe’s theory, his genre definition soon became prescriptive and gave rise to a multitude of well-made formula stories in America (see Winther et al 137).

Another one of Poe’s followers was Éjxenbaum, who likewise “characterized short stories as highly concentrated toward their conclusions” (Hesse 91). Éjxenbaum points to the significance of the ending in the short story by remarking that it “amasses its whole weight *toward the ending*” (81) and finally concludes that “[t]he short story [...] gravitates expressively toward maximal unexpectedness of a finale concentrating around itself all that has preceded (82). Therefore, end-directedness has been viewed as one of the short story’s main distinguishing features (see Hesse 91).

However, not only essentialist theorists considered the ending of a short story significant. Friedman stresses “the *imminence* of the end, [...] its relative closeness to the beginning” (Friedman 26) as a differentiating factor and Lohafer identifies “the nearness of the end” (“Preclosure” 249) as a distinctive feature of the short story.

Nevertheless, it became evident that short stories could not be defined so easily. There were new influences on the short story, for example realism, which introduced

[...] more loosely plotted, slice-of-life stories, characterized by what John Gerlach has termed indirect form. Modernism brought non-linear and open-ended stories, as in the case of Katherine Anne Porter, or the elliptical stories of Hemingway, where the

² Winther et al have categorised those definitions which stress qualities like “a single event, a moment of revelation (Winther et al 137)” as essentialist, explaining that “[b]efore 1980 definitions [of the short story] were as a rule essentialist (Winther et al 137).”

importance of plot and event is seriously downplayed. It became clear that the Poe-Matthews genre definition could not accommodate these new forms (Winther 137).

Although Poe's analysis continues to be seized upon by scholars for their own theories about the short story, it grew apparent that it was time for a new definition when people realised "that short stories would not always behave the way Poe and his followers thought they should" (Winther et al 136). However, it seemed impossible to define features applicable to all short stories. Regardless, there were still many authors who continuously used essentialist definitions, such as Frank O'Connor, Charles E. May or Nadine Gordimer, to name a few (see Winther 137-138). However, there are also non-essentialist definitions of the short story. Mary Louise Pratt was one of the first to argue against essentialist notions of the genre of the short story, considering genre to be historical (Winther et al 140).

There are also many scholars, essentialist and non-essentialist, who refer to the novel as a point of distinction (e.g. Pratt, Matthews, Éjxenbaum and many more). Brander Matthews, for example, stresses that "[t]he Short-story is the single effect, complete and self-contained, while the Novel is of necessity broken into a series of episodes" (Matthews 73).

In an attempt to define the short story Mary Louise Pratt not only contrasts the short story and the novel, but also suggests some propositions. The main points of her article "The Long and the Short of It" will be outlined in the following section; however, some of her assumptions need to be contradicted. By doing so, a clearer picture of the short story can be formed.

Pratt refers to the short story and the novel as having an asymmetrical relationship. She further specifies this by pointing out that "[t]heir relation is not one of contrasting equivalents in a system (separate but equal), but a hierarchical one with the novel on top and the short story dependent" (Pratt 96). She argues that this dependence is both "conceptual" and "historical", i.e. the shortness of the short story can only be seen in relation to the novel and the novel has been the more distinguished form of the two (Pratt 96). However, since Pratt wrote this, some time has passed and sentiments have changed. As Winther et al state it: "In terms of artistic and aesthetic viability the position of the short story is firmly secured by now [...]; the little brother stigma seems more and more to be a thing of the past." (Winther et al 136). This is certainly true, especially when one considers that a short story writer such as Alice Munro has recently won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2013 (Nobelprize.org).

Pratt's first proposition says: "*The novel tells a life, the short story tells a fragment of a life*" (99). However, Pasco makes something entirely different of the short story's brevity. He argues that it is its biggest challenge and claims that a short story writer "[...] must overcome

the restraints of limited length and communicate not a segment, a tattered fragment, but a world” (Pasco, “On Defining” 127).

Comparing these two statements it is impossible to deny that some truth lies in both of them. Although a short story probably only “tells [one] fragment of life” (Pratt 99) it is still possible to convey much more by selecting special and significant moments in life. What is more, despite being longer, the novel does not necessarily cover the whole span of a life. Therefore, Pasco’s statement seems to be much more applicable than Pratt’s. When one considers Alice Munro’s short story “Too Much Happiness” for example, it is quite clear that it is possible to tell a whole life by giving very important fragments. Although the reader only accompanies the protagonist for a few days, the last days of her life, it is possible to get an insight into her whole life.

Pratt’s second proposition “*The short story deals with a single thing, the novel with many things*” (101) is shared to some degree by other scholars³, yet it should not be considered as an absolute. Pasco formulates his assessment of the short story more tentatively by arguing that

[...] the short story is usually single- rather than multivalent. Both Doppelgänger and subplot do occur, though in nowhere near the frequency of longer fiction. There is indeed a marked tendency toward unity. [...] The plurality which serves in the case of the novel to emphasize, nuance, or countervail runs the risk of appearing redundant and distracting, if not disruptive, in the short story. (Pasco, “On Defining” 124-125)

When we compare Pratt’s and Pasco’s statements about the short story, it becomes clear that Pratt formulates her statement as an absolute, mirroring essentialist genre descriptions, whereas Pasco indicates a tendency. Moreover, Pratt’s proposition might refer to content and form of the short story, while Pasco only discusses the form of the short story. It seems counterproductive to express yet another definition of the short story as an absolute, though it might have been intended to counter Brander Matthews’ assertion of the short story’s “limitless possibilities” (77) and may be meant as distinction from earlier essentialist views.

In her third proposition Pratt argues that “[t]he short story is a sample, the novel is the whole hog” (Pratt 102). Although Pratt immediately explains that “[t]his proposition refers to the tendency of short stories to present themselves [...] as samples or examples of some larger general category” (102), the impression that this statement seems to diminish the importance of the short story stays. Pasco, although he basically expresses the same meaning, points into

³ e.g. May and Ferguson have argued along those lines regarding Chekhov’s stories or epiphany

a completely different direction by arguing that the short story generalises much more than the novel, and therefore, refers beyond the text (“On Defining” 125). In this respect, when Cortázar likens the short story to a photograph and the novel to a film, (246-247) the description seems fitting. He argues that “[a] story is meaningful when it ruptures its own limits with that explosion of spiritual energy which suddenly illuminates something far beyond that small and sometimes sordid anecdote which is being told” (Cortázar 247).

Although Pasco’s and Cortázar’s assertions stress two different qualities of the short story, they both reach the same conclusion. Even Pratt acknowledges the fact that the short story refers to “some larger general category” (102), but with her diction she continually undermines the short story’s importance.

Pratt’s fourth proposition says: “*The novel is a whole text, the short story is not.*” (Pratt 103). It cannot be denied that one short story does not take up a whole book, although phrasing it the way Pratt does seems inappropriate. Why should the short story not be a whole text, just because it does not stretch to the length of a book? It seems as if she simply wanted to add one more point to the list, making the short story seem less significant. Nadine Gordimer manages to express the integrity of a short story, besides its shortness, in the following metaphor:

Short-story writers see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of – the present moment. Ideally, they have learned to do without explanation of what went before, and what happens beyond this point. [...] A discrete moment of truth is aimed at – not the moment of truth, because the short story doesn’t deal in cumulatives (Gordimer 264-265).

As one can see, Gordimer conveys a similar meaning with the quote above, however, she does not deny the short story’s completeness.

As a fifth point Pratt comments on “*Subject matter*” (104). She argues that “[j]ust as it is used for formal experimentation, the short story is often the genre used to introduce new (and possibly stigmatized) subject matters into the literary arena” (Pratt 104). This point is certainly made by other scholars concerned with the genre of the short story as well. For instance, Gordimer argues that “[...] the short story always has been more flexible and open to experiment than the novel” (Gordimer 264). However, she most likely refers to the content of the short story as she points out immediately after this statement that “[s]hort-story writers always have been subject at the same time to both a stricter technical discipline and a wider freedom than the novelist” (Gordimer 264). May draws a similar distinction by pointing out that “[t]he novel exists to reaffirm the world of “everyday” reality; the short story exists to

“defamiliarize” the everyday” (May, “Nature” 133). Consequently, the short story’s reality defamiliarises everyday reality for May (“Nature” 133), which means for him that the short story does not necessarily present new themes, but manages to show us the everyday from a new perspective.

The reality the short story presents us with is the reality of those sub-universes of the supernatural and the fable which exists within the so-called “real” world of sense perception and conceptual abstraction. It presents moments in which we become aware of anxiety, loneliness, dread, concern, and thus find the safe, secure and systematic life we usually lead disrupted and momentarily destroyed. The short story is the most adequate form to confront us with reality as we perceive it in our most profound moments. (May, “Nature” 142)

The sixth point Pratt makes is

Orality [which] is another consistent trend in the short story, ranging from the incorporation of oral-colloquial speech forms in the language of narration [...], through instances where an oral narrative is embedded in the story [...], to instances where the whole text takes the form of represented speech, often first person narration in an oral setting [...] (Pratt 107).

Although she argues that orality is not exclusive to the short story, she maintains that it is not such a persistent trend in the novel as in the short story. (Pratt 107). Pratt claims that the short story’s oral form is an important cause for the continuing growth and success of the short story in the Third World, where she claims it to be “taken much more seriously as an art form than it is elsewhere” (Pratt 108). Adrian Hunter likewise states that the short story was “embedded in oral culture” even in a printed form, “until the end of the nineteenth century” (*Cambridge* 1).

Pratt associates the short story and the novel with different narrative traditions with her seventh proposition. By referring to Éjxenbaum she concludes “that the novel has its origins in history and travel, the short story in anecdote and folklore” (Pratt 108). This distinction of origin is shared by many scholars because numerous writers built “on the traditions of oral folk culture” (Hunter *Cambridge* 8). Charles E. May goes even further by stating: “the novel is primarily a social and public form, the short story is mythic and spiritual. While the novel is primarily structured on a conceptual and philosophic framework, the short story is intuitive and lyrical.” (“Nature” 133). It is worth noting however, that this argument is very similar to the one above, because the narrative traditions Pratt associates the short story with are oral forms, therefore those two propositions seem to be related.

Pratt calls her eighth point “*Craft versus art*” and argues that “[o]ne of the most intriguing aspects of the short story’s generic status is the widespread tendency for it to be viewed as a (skill-based) craft rather than a (creativity-based) art” (Pratt 109). However, not all short story theorists view it this way; Pasco argues that the short story “must [...] be an *artistic fiction*” [emphasis added] (“On Defining” 121). Ferguson also sees it that way, as can be seen in the following quote:

What has made the modern short story seem distinct from the novel, in addition to the different distribution and proportion of narrative elements, is finally a matter of prestige. Given the emphasis on its status as a work of art and the insistence by many turn-of-the-century writers on stylistic elegance (a sure sign of “high” art!), the story began to be read more intensively.”(227)

Most scholars refer to the short story as art, especially as high art. What Pratt most likely means with her proposition are the “well-made formula stories” (Winther et al 137) that were based on the “Poe Matthews concept of short fiction” (Winther et al 137). However, soon other forms like “non-linear and open-ended stories” became more important (see Winther et al 137). Therefore, it could be concluded that the short story used to be seen as more skill-based, especially when we keep in mind that Elizabeth Bowen debates how young the short story as we know it today is: according to her it was only born in the 20th century (256).

Although Mary-Louise Pratt tries to leave essentialist definitions behind, her approach to define the short story by contrasting it to the novel does not seem sufficient. What she says about the short story often diminishes the importance of the short story. Furthermore, in many of her propositions she restates essentialist views, though she does not put them as absolutes, which distinguishes her approach from true essentialism.

In another non-essentialist approach Norman Friedman argues against deductive reasoning and explains that essentialist definitions are still strong because critics want to fit the stories into the pre-existing categories, mostly derived from Poe, instead of an inductive approach where a great number of stories is collected and analysed and only then defined. He suggests this new approach, however, without providing a widespread analysis to arrive at an inductive definition himself (Winther et al 140-141 and Friedman 30-31). Nonetheless, he argues for a non-essential, moderate approach by arguing that “[p]erhaps there is no inherent difference, other than the external factor of length, between the short story, the novella, and the novel. Or perhaps, more fruitfully, the differences have to be seen as a matter of degree rather than of kind” (Friedmann 18). Furthermore, he doubts the existence of

any such thing as the short story more specific than “a short fictional narrative in prose.” Within that definition we cannot logically or empirically rule out actions of any kind or size, any techniques, or any end effects. We can only begin with the fact of brevity and explore its possible causes (Friedman 29).

Wright, who is discussed in greater detail below, has not broken fully with essentialist views, however, he, like Friedman, insists on differences of degree, which is less restricting than earlier essentialist ideas (Winther et al 141).

In the 1980s and 1990s a new approach to short story theory emerged. “[T]heorists stopped asking, “What is a short story?” and began wondering, “What does a short story do?” [...] brevity – now became its behavioural signature” (Winther 142). Pasco identifies brevity as the basis for the distinguishing features of the short story:

The necessity of remaining within a constricted span forces writers to exploit language to the fullest, to generalize, to stress significant details rather than to treat exhaustively, to imply rather than explicate, to elide rather than repeat, to make silence talk. The result is noticeable intensity” (Pasco, “The Short”).

Likewise, Hunter Brown stresses the brevity of short stories as a positive point by pointing out that

[...] short stories, like most novels, offer us the possibility of sequential narrative structure, but like lyric poems and other short works, they also afford opportunities to seize upon verbatim and nonsequential relationships of equivalence or contrast, because brevity makes it easier for readers to process locally and to organize texts as configurations in terms of minimal units (Hunter Brown 245).

Pasco argues that definitions of the short story proved inapt, as there are so many different kinds of stories. The characteristics defined for the short story only lasted as long as a generation of writers; every generation had their own characteristics. This is his reason to argue that the short story’s only definite characteristic is brevity (see Pasco “The Short”). However, tied to the shortness are certain features, since authors cannot go into great detail describing the background of a story; therefore, it is often not explicitly stated and consequently left to the readers own background knowledge (see Pasco “The Short”). Brevity also calls for a “tendency toward unity, however fragmented, demented or depressive that unity may be and is in much postmodern work” (Pasco “The Short”).

Defining the short story has proven to be quite difficult. Volumes have been written about short story theory trying to define the short story; however, there is still no consensus between scholars, no universal definition. Some scholars try to find their roots in Edgar Allan Poe’s writings, some wish to define the short story in contrast to the novel, others will not go as far

as to provide a definition at all. One fascinating example is Allan H. Pasco, who writes in his article “On Defining Short Stories”: “the following definition might be advanced: a short story is a *short, literary prose fiction*” (118). Pasco argues for his definition by pointing out that those are the only relatively fixed points of a short story; as trivial or short as this definition may appear, it also seems to be the most appropriate attempt to define the short story. As every story is unique, it is hard to find one universal definition that fits all short stories.

Suzanne C. Ferguson tries to explain the dilemma of defining the short story by summarising the most basic points of discussion about the short story.

Short stories are defined in terms of unity (Poe, Brander Matthews, and others), techniques of plot compression (A. L. Bader, Norman Friedman, L. A. G. Strong), change or revelation of character (Theodore Stroud), subject (Frank O'Connor), tone (Gordimer), “lyricism” (Moravia), but there is no single characteristic or cluster of characteristics that the critics agree absolutely distinguishes the short story from other fictions. [...] A structuralist conception of fiction tends to confirm the suspicion that there may be no rational way to distinguish “short story” from other narratives in the same mimetic code: all stories, short and long, have certain required properties of narrativity – characters, place, events, a “beginning, middle, and an end,” and coherence among the parts (Ferguson 218-219).

It is difficult to find one universal definition, especially as there is some truth to all of the above mentioned schools of thought; however, all of those were probably only valid temporarily, because every generation of writers has tried something new.

Wright, although having problems with the concept of genre itself, formulates his definition in tendencies to describe the short story.

- 1) The short story tends to be between five hundred words long and the length of Joyce’s “The Dead”
- 2) It tends to deal with character and action in its fictional world [...]
- 3) This action tends to be externally simple, with few developed episodes and no subplots or secondary lines of action. [...] “Externally simple” is a relative term, referring here to the jointedness of the action; [...] [he] call[s] this simplicity “external” to avoid ruling out internal complexity, which is subtlety, for subtlety is one of the great tendencies of the modern short story. [...]
- 4) the short story [...] tends to be more strongly unified than other short prose narrative forms. Unified here is a relative term; I mean that the parts tend to function in multiple and economical ways, that there is a minimum of waste and arbitrariness. If one objects to the notion of unity, one could call this quality intensity (Wright 51).

Intensity is also manifest in 5) the preference in short stories for plots of small magnitude, plots of discovery, static of disclosure plots, Joycean epiphanies, and the like, as well as in

6) the tendency, especially in modern stories, to leave significant things to inference. Intensity is also evident in the affiliation that critics have noted between the short story and the lyric, as well as the emphasis on metaphor and symbolism (Wright 52).

After his defining of the short story as “a cluster of conventions” (53) Wright still admits that there can never be “a definition [that] is satisfactory to all” (52).

As can be seen throughout this chapter, scholars simply do not agree on anything about the short story, except its shortness. However, seeing how sentiments have changed over time certainly tells us that this is a hotly debated topic. It is undoubtedly difficult to find a genre definition for the short story, maybe even impossible, however, Wright’s tendencies agree most with my own understanding of the short story. It is simply most plausible to argue in tendencies, when talking about such a diverse topic as the short story, rather than to use fixed categories or definitions. Undeniably, finding a definition has become increasingly challenging and as Winter et al have already pointed out,

“[...] the proliferation of excellent short stories has made things more difficult rather than easier for critics with an interest in definitions. Already during the nineteenth century it became clear that short stories would not always behave the way Poe and his followers thought they should. Certainly, with the advent of Modernism, not to speak of Postmodernism, the definitional plot has thickened even more” (Winther et al 136).

With newer attempts at definitions of the short story the topic of modern and postmodern short stories has already been alluded to, however, the following sections give a brief account of modernism, postmodernism and postcolonialism in the short story. Modernism and Postmodernism can be viewed as a reaction to the disorientation of the 20th century (Antor 310). The historical background to this crisis of orientation are the serious changes that happened in the aftermath of World War I, during and after World War II, from the decline of the British Empire to the beginning of a postcolonial commonwealth, from a shift in the class hierarchy of English society to a change of the role of women, from new technology to the atomic threat to humankind (Antor 311). After the beginning of World War I, summing things up or providing definite answers was not considered appropriate anymore in short stories, it was viewed as too simple or even banal. When Poe’s genre concept of “single effect” was still in place, it was the short stories’ “special power [or even] their formal duty” (Lohafer “Introduction III” 109) “to click at the end” (Lohafer “Introduction III” 109). However, this is too generalising because good stories from any period could never be categorised that easily

(Lohafer "Introduction III" 109). Many authors turned to the short story because its high semantic density and its intense symbolism were apt to analyse the problems of orientation of a time of epistemic hardship and the necessity to position oneself in phases of transition and change (Antor 311).

2.2 The modern short story

Gordimer argues that "[t]he short story is a fragmented and restless form, a matter of hit or miss, and it is perhaps for this reason that it suits modern consciousness [...]" (265). Furthermore, Ferguson contends that the modern short story and the modern novel share the same characteristics, however, they seem to feature more prominently in the short story, due to its physical shortness. She argues that the elements of modern fiction were associated with the literary movement of impressionism, which dominated the late 19th and the early 20th century-novel and short story (see 219-220) and lists the following criteria both for short and long fiction:

- (1) limitation and foregrounding of point of view,
- (2) emphasis on presentation of sensation and inner experience,
- (3) the deletion of transformation of several elements of the traditional plot,
- (4) increasing reliance on metaphor and metonymy in the presentation of events and existents,
- (5) rejection of chronological time ordering,
- (6) formal and stylistic economy, and
- (7) the foregrounding of style. (Ferguson 219)

The main difference to the realist tradition was the perspective: it became more important how something felt to a character than depicting the real world. The author is in the background and the readers are confronted with the subjective views of the characters in a story (see Ferguson 220). "This emphasis on subjectivity inevitably affects the typical themes of modern fiction: alienation, isolation, solipsism, the quest for identity and integration" (Ferguson 220). The absence of an authorial voice gives more power to the readers, who have to construct the meaning of a story themselves, which will never be verified or confirmed. Ferguson argues that this gives the short story "'unity of effect' and a certain vagueness of mystery" (Ferguson 228).

The beginning of the modern short story is usually identified with Chekhov's short stories. May describes the realism of Chekhov's short stories as a "literary technique that insists on

compression, a rhetorical method that reveals meaning by leaving things out, a language style that creates metaphor by means of metonymy and attempts to express inner reality and the unsayable by describing outer reality” (May, *Brother* 145).

Chekhov’s stories were characterised as “storyless, artless, and lifelike” (May, *Brother* 147), which presented the critics of the time with the problem of analysing them when they appeared patternless on the surface (May, *Brother* 147). There were many conflicting opinions of Chekhov’s stories; they were considered at the same time as “‘realistic’, ‘natural’, and ‘storyless’ and [also] ‘poetic’, ‘lyrical’ and ‘aesthetic’” (May, *Brother* 148), which led to confusion on how to interpret them, especially since critics did not really agree with Chekhov’s “distanced objectivity from the story” (May, *Brother* 148). Characteristic of Chekhov and his successors is the “minimal dependence on the traditional notion of plot and their focus instead on a single situation in which everyday reality is broken up by a crisis” (May, “Chekhov” 201). May refers to the technique of using “objective detail[s] to communicate complex states of feeling” (May, “Chekhov” 203) as a Chekhovian device, which has been used by many writers of the twentieth century who employed the same “objective detail and significant situation to reveal subtle moral and emotional situations” (May, “Chekhov” 203).

As the short story is much more compact than the novel, there is less room for characterisation through detailed description and social interaction developed over time, which are typically used in the novel. One rather finds “character as mood and story as a hazy ‘eventless’ becoming” (May, “Chekhov” 200). This means that in the modern short story the mode or tone is more important than the plot of a story. May even points out that atmosphere is more important than plot by arguing that “what unifies the modern short story is an atmosphere, a certain tone of significance” (“Chekhov” 201).

Hunter also argues that traditional story telling mechanisms were left behind to be replaced with concepts like “implication, ambiguity, suggestion, dilation and above all *plotlessness*” (*Cambridge* 7). One important device frequently used in the modern short story he mentions as well is epiphany, which is derived from Joyce and “meant a ‘sudden spiritual manifestation’” (Hunter *Cambridge* 44). This took the place of the traditional resolution of the plot (Hunter, *Cambridge* 45).

The main thing modernism and postmodernism have in common is that they are reactions against something that went before:

As modernism itself was a movement counter to Romanticism and a revolt against the prudishness of the Victorian period, postmodernism is a challenge to the rigidity of form, systems, and codes imposed by modernism. Postmodernism challenged existing modes of thought, economic ideology, and political assertions (Iftekharruddin 1).

2.3 The postmodern short story

The term postmodernism stands both for an era and a supratemporal mentality. It builds on core beliefs of modernism, however, it tries to adapt, correct, reanimate or even destroy those beliefs. Postmodernism is affected by a radical doubt of the existence of reality. Furthermore, postmodern short stories often experiment with the form of a story (Freiburg 331-332). Postmodernism is very diverse and complex, and it includes a number of “philosophical, social, linguistic, and literary interests and attracts a variety of practitioners including social theorists, poststructuralists, and psychoanalysts” (Iftekharruddin 5). Intertextuality is one of the key concepts of postmodern writing (Freiburg 341) that has not been listed with the other essential issues above.

Postmodernism and Modernism differ in a radical scepticism about rationality. Examples would be magic realism and a revitalisation of esotericism. (Freiburg 345). In postmodernism reality is viewed as a construct or as fiction (Freiburg 337-338). A good example of this would be Hayden White’s fictionalising of history (Freiburg 344) or Baudrillard’s theory that erased “the distinctions between the real and unreal” (Iftekharruddin 2).

Freiburg identifies two important categories of the postmodern short story; one is concerned with postcolonial issues, whereas the other one is concerned with gender. “Re-writing” or deconstructing traditional narratives, which is a form of poststructuralism, is a form of protesting outdated gender roles which is often used in feminist texts (Freiburg 350). However, this concerns all populations that are marginalised. Iftekharruddin mentions not only women but also other ethnic populations in dominant nations or others who are not in line with established expectations (3).

Nevertheless, during the postmodern era many short stories were published which did not use formalist experiments or were not trying to rewrite something and were therefore using traditional or conventional forms of the short story (Freiburg 354). This means, although stories were published during a time that was considered “postmodern” it does not necessarily mean that the stories are postmodern, not everybody has adhered to the new trend. Hunter even goes so far as to argue that “modernism has been, and remains, the short story’s centre of gravity – and not only in academic criticism” (*Cambridge* 4).

2.4 The postcolonial short story

Postcolonial studies are a part of postmodernism and concerned with a critical reading of the English canon with regard for a subcontext of colonial exploitation. Their aim is to investigate and scrutinise the origin of the formation of European stereotypes in relation to the so-called inferior “*colonial Other*” as well as the analysis of cultural and literary forms of representation that have developed in postcolonial regions (Reckwitz 358).

Postcolonial literature can be categorised into four essential parts: a black militant ideology of liberation, the white liberal discourse of concern, the colonial diaspora and the hybrid multiculturalism (Reckwitz 363). Furthermore, postcolonial literature is engaged in two different traditions of thought: the old occidental paradigm of consciousness, which believes in the intervention of a subject; and the postmodern construct of reality through language (Reckwitz 380-381).

2.5 What is a short story

After summing up the research of so many different scholars who tried to define the short story for more than a hundred years, one thing has become clear; it is impossible to completely describe this genre, however, there are a few characteristics most scholars agree on.

One very elementary point was the distinction of the short story from the novel. While some (e.g. Pratt) view the short story as dependent on the novel, others insist on its independence. This shows clearly the need to distinguish the short story from the novel especially in terms of prestige. It is very important for most scholars to view the short story as separate from the novel. This is probably the reason for all the arguments about Munro’s short stories being novelistic. Even though the short story and the novel share many characteristics, there is still the difference of length. Although many distinguishing features of the short story and novel have been discussed, there is at least the obvious difference of length everybody can agree on. What really distinguishes them is probably brevity, which has been identified as a behavioural signature (Winther et al 142) and is the reason for many characteristics of the short story. It could be argued that Munro’s short stories are “short, literary prose fiction” (Pasco, “On Defining” 118) and therefore, it is absurd to call them novelistic.

Munro’s writing is just as elusive to characterisation as the genre of the short story, especially as she has been writing over such a long period of time, with her first short story published in 1968 and her most recent collection in 2012. In the beginning of her career her stories have been described as realistic or even documentary, where surface details were used to describe a

more complex inner reality or even to elude to alternative worlds by shifts into the fantastic (Howells, *Alice Munro* 10). This fits the description of the modern short story, but as the short story evolved, so did Munro's writing. She managed to increase possible meanings in her stories while at the same time she denied definite answers (see Howells, *Alice Munro* 10).

Scholars identified a major shift in Munro's writing in the 1980s, when she began to deny the readers the meaningful moments at the end and "her prose became more sparing, elliptical and indirect" (Hunter, *Cambridge* 166). Furthermore, another main subject has emerged in Munro's work, the experience of women in Canada's colonial and postcolonial history" (Hunter, *Cambridge* 166). Those topics definitively fall into the area of the postmodern short story. Hunter Adrian argues that "Alice Munro [...] has exploited the form in order to show how a range of dominant narratives, from historiography to colonialism to feminism, routinely fall short of adequately representing the live stories of women" (*Cambridge* 140).

Consequently, it could be argued that Alice Munro developed from a modernist to a postmodernist short story writer. However, this definition would be too simple for such complex work as Alice Munro's. Even her newest stories could never be characterised as entirely postmodern, there are still modernist elements, which makes a definite tag for her working difficult, however, this will be discussed further in the course of this thesis.

3 Alice Munro in the Canadian context

3.1 General remarks

Alice Munro is an esteemed Canadian author. Not only is she internationally celebrated and highly awarded⁴, but also when the topic is Canada and its literary development her name repeatedly comes up. Furthermore, her stories are often analysed as an illustration for the general development in Canadian literature. A quite recent example of this is *The Contemporary Canadian Short Story in English* by Maria Löschnigg from 2014, where she devotes a huge section to Alice Munro. As Alice Munro is so significant to Canada and a figurehead for Canadian literature, not only since she was awarded the Nobel prize for literature, the history of Canadian literature, and especially of the Canadian short story, will be outlined here, as well as Munro's connection to it.

The development of Canadian literature is closely connected with the search for a Canadian identity. Today it is viewed as versatile and diverse, however, until fairly recently, the Canadian population was seen as consisting of the descendants of British and French settlers mostly, even though in 2001 a quarter of the population was of different origin than those who are considered as original settlers (see Löschnigg and Löschnigg 7). The most recent available data on immigration and origin display an even more diverse picture. The census of 2011 shows that 20.6 percent of the Canadian population are foreign born, while 57.9 percent, that is more than half the population of Canada, have more than one ethnic origin (Statistics Canada). This plurality of Canadian cultural identity has become a decisive factor for Canadian literature (see Löschnigg and Löschnigg 7). How diversity is influential for the Canadian cultural identity will become evident in the course of this chapter, especially in the section about multiculturalism.

Canada's Anglophone literature⁵ has developed from and was influenced by two very dominant literary traditions, while at the same time it has been trying to dissociate itself from them. On the one hand, Canadian literature was seen as a continuation of British literature, and certainly was so for quite some time, and on the other hand, Canadian literature strove to be seen as different from US-American literature (see Löschnigg and Löschnigg 8). Northrop Frye even goes a step further by asserting that "Canada in its attitude to Britain tends to be

⁴ e.g. Nobel Prize in Literature (2013), Man Booker International Prize (2009, 2007), Giller Prize (2004, 1998) and many more (see The British Council)

⁵ It is important to stress that there is no homogeneous Canadian literature, but that it can be differentiated into Anglophone and Francophone literature. Northrop Frye already pointed out that "Canada has two languages and two literatures [...]" (Frye 216-217). In this diploma thesis references are mostly made to Anglophone literature, as Francophone literature is not immediately relevant in connection to this topic, since Alice Munro writes in English.

more royalist than the Queen” (218), while its stance towards the United States is a bit more conflicted. Canada wants to be “sharing in its material civilization but [is] anxious to keep clear of the huge mass movements that drive a great imperial power” (Frye 218).

However, the “growing awareness of Canada’s economic and military dependency on the United States, brought nationalism to the fore in English Canada to an extent not previously seen” (Thacker, *Biography* 206). This in-between attitude of Canadian culture and literature can be seen in the development of Canadian publishing. Although attitudes towards Canadian writing had changed with the rise of nationalism, publishing Canadian books still was economically quite precarious for the publishers during the twentieth century as the competition of books imported from the United States or Britain was quite fierce (Thacker, *Biography* 205). Alice Munro found herself also in an in-between situation. By 1970 Munro had a publisher that had been bought by an US-American company and at the same time she was a member of the Writer’s Union of Canada, which regarded American books and publishers adversely. Later Munro had both an American and a Canadian publisher, who published her books for the respective markets (see Thacker, *Biography* 246 and 344).

These two dominant nations are not the only influence on Canadian identity. Other decisive factors are “Canada’s legacy of explorers and settlers, combined with the country’s experience as a colony” (Goldman 12). When the focus is on Canadian cultural identity two often cited authors come to mind, namely, Margaret Atwood with her study *Survival* and Northrop Frye, who partly base their theories on Canada’s history. Atwood remarks that Canada’s cultural identity is shaped by a myth of victimisation, whereas Frye speaks of the “garrison mentality” of Canadian literature, which refers to the almost obsessive contrast between civilisation and hostile nature (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 8).

In her book *Survival* Margaret Atwood elaborates on the central themes of Canadian literature.⁶ Although published in 1972, her insights are still considered vital, as many contemporary works still reference her findings. However, as popular as her book was and still is, “[h]er representation of Canada’s literary tradition, based as it is on a European legacy of settlers and explorers and an over-arching ‘victim-survival’ thesis, has angered several critics who view her perspective as Eurocentric and her thematic schema as monolithic and reductive” (Goldman 8).

⁶ In this book Margaret Atwood presents her theories on many topics relevant for Canadian literature, however, not all of them are immediately relevant for this thesis, although interesting. Examples are the representation of nature, immigrants, settlers and explorers, family, heroes etc.

The first, and pervading theme, or as Atwood calls it, “[t]he central symbol for Canada” (32), is Survival. While the problems for earlier writers are external, later writers identify more internal problems that concern spiritual survival (Atwood 32-33). In the course of this chapter she also identifies a pronounced tendency for the negative in Canadians, who in turn present themselves as victims (Atwood 35-41). This becomes a motif which permeates the whole book and all the themes she identifies in Canadian literature.

Another interesting feature of Atwood’s study is her theory on the portrayal of women in Canadian literature. By applying Robert Graves’ model, where he divides women into “three mythological categories or identities”, the Diana, a young girl or maiden figure; the Venus, the “goddess of love, sex and fertility”; and the Hecate, “who presides over death” (199), Atwood argues that there is an overrepresentation of Hecate figures, whereas the Diana dies young and the Venus is absent (199). Using the Rapunzel Syndrome⁷ as an explanation, she concludes that Dianas and Venuses are often trapped inside a Hecate figure and therefore are not quite absent but rather concealed (see 209-211).

In her concluding chapter Atwood argues that writers have apparently been aware of the underlying structure of Canadian literature and have worked within it, but also tried to break out of it, at least recently (237-246). She remarks that “[t]he tone of Canadian literature as a whole is [...] the dark background: a reader must face the fact that Canadian literature is undeniably sombre and negative, and that is to a large extent both a reflection and a chosen definition of the national sensibility” (245). Although this sounds quite pessimistic, Atwood seems to rejoice in her findings, arguing that “having bleak ground under your feet is better than having no ground at all. [...] A tradition doesn’t necessarily exist to bury you; it can also be used as material for new departures” (246).

The question of a foundation for Canadian literature, which she partly tries to answer in her book *Survival*, seems to be vital to Atwood, as we can see from her concluding arguments above. Northrop Frye’s take on Canadian identity is also history-related, but his view seems quite different from Atwood’s.

⁷ Atwood explains the Rapunzel syndrome thus: “In the Rapunzel Syndrome there are four elements: Rapunzel, the main character; the wicked witch who has imprisoned her, usually her mother or her husband, sometimes her father or grandfather; the tower she’s imprisoned in – the attitudes of society, symbolized usually by her house and children which society says she must not abandon; and the Rescuer, a handsome prince of little substantiality who provides momentary escape. In the original Rapunzel story the Rescuer is a solution and the wicked witch is vanquished; in the Rapunzel Syndrome the Rescuer is not much help. [...] The Rescuer’s facelessness and lack of substance as a character is usually a clue to his status as fantasy-escape figure; Rapunzel is in fact stuck in the tower, and the best thing she can do is learn how to cope with it”(209).

Northrop Frye's concept of a garrison mentality, which is described in his collection of essays *The Bush Garden*, is considered a central theme in Canadian literature. He explains that "[a] garrison is a closely knit and beleaguered society, and its moral and social values are unquestionable" (226). Although this concept stems from the isolation of frontier communities, it is still adaptable to changes in society. Frye explains it thus:

As the centre of Canadian life moves from the fortress to the metropolis, the garrison mentality changes correspondingly. It begins as an expression of the moral values generally accepted in the group as a whole, and then, as society gets more complicated and more in control of its environment, it becomes more of a revolutionary garrison within a metropolitan society (Frye 231).

The central themes these two important theorists cover resonate in the theories of other authors as well, though they not always agree with Atwood's and Frey's findings. For example, Goldman criticises Atwood's attempt to generalise Canadian cultural identity, though she points out that

[...] it would seem that, taken together, Canada's legacy of explorers and settlers, combined with the country's experience as a colony, has generated a host of discourses (including Atwood's) which have promoted and continue to promote a sensitivity to, if not a preoccupation with, problems of national as well as self-preservation – problems often described as an inability to map oneself on the terrain (12).

Goldman, who is taking a feminist perspective in her book *Paths of Desire: Images of Exploration and Mapping in Canadian Women's Writing*, identifies a parallel in the construction of Canadian identity as a colony and the construction of women's identities (see Goldman 13). This connection will be elaborated further in the context of postmodernism in Canada.

Although, they seem to be greatly valued and often cited, both Atwood's *Survival* as well as Frye's critical contributions need to be regarded discerningly. Keith points out that *Survival* was regarded as a "ready-to-hand guide for modelling courses" (128) without being challenged, apart from a few independent-minded writers, who found those critical implications too confining (Keith 128). Similarly, the value of evaluative criticism was doubted for a long time, on the one hand due to fear of denouncing Canadian literature, and on the other hand because Northrop Frye, with his "disapproval of comparative judgement" (Keith 129), was quite influential. As Keith points out, "[i]n pragmatic terms, the emphasis on nationalistic and thematic issues, focussing on content rather than treatment, fitted all too conveniently into the new pedagogic situation" (129).

3.2 Canadian literature in the historical context – a brief outline of important events

A very important impulse for a new national consciousness was the *British North America Act* of 1867, which elevated Canada from a colony to the status of a dominion; consequently it became semi-autonomous (Löschnigg & Löschnigg 13).

19th century Canadian literature was still conservative and quite unoriginal. It was oriented towards, and partly even an imitation of what was popular in Britain and the United States. Portrayals of exile and being lost in an alien environment were prevalent, as well as journals and documentary writing. The first written records of Canada in the English language were written by people who probably did not consider themselves to be writers. They were explorers who wrote reports which started to be published in the late 17th century (Löschnigg & Löschnigg 14-15).

Due to the expansion of the British Empire, there was an upsurge in travel literature as well as immigrant literature from the 1820s to the 1930s, which was paralleled by an increased emigration to Australia and subsequently to Canada. One of these immigrants was Susanna Strickland Moodie, who came from a family of the English gentry that was well known for their literary accomplishments. To avoid poverty her husband and she immigrated to Canada in 1832 (Dvorak 33).

Moodie is just one well-known example of this kind of exile literature, which shared common features, such as

a double sense of loss: the loss of home, friends and family, and the loss of social status, implying economic resonances but also important cultural, intellectual, and ethical dimensions. There are many textual instances of nostalgia in the form of optatives or the *ubi sunt* motif lamenting a vanished past that is one of the identifying markers of literatures of exile (Dvorak 34).

Colonial life writing, such as Moodie's, has its modern equivalent in immigrant literature, which is now taken up by minority groups of different ethnocultural backgrounds (see Dvorak 36). This topic will be elaborated a little later on in the context of multiculturalism. Furthermore, the accounts of literary female pioneers, like Moodie, can also be seen as the starting point for the central role of female authors in Canadian literature. Their representation of split identity, as well as the affinity of femininity and nature, are still significant motifs of Canadian literature (Löschnigg & Löschnigg 19).

The beginnings of short prose fiction can be placed in the first third of the 19th century. Two important writers who developed this genre with their satirical sketches were Thomas

McCulloch (1776-1843) and Thomas Chandler Haliburton (1796-1865) (Löschnigg & Löschnigg 17).

The time between 1867 and the First World War was a time of progressive thinking, imperialism and nationalism. Canada sought to strengthen its new autonomy, but at the same time Canada wanted to maintain the bond to the empire (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 25). This new spirit of patriotism in the 60s and 70s of the 19th century led to the Canada First movement in 1868, which envisioned a homogeneous imperial Canada which would assimilate ethnic variety into an Anglo-protestant culture. This led to the French-Canadian population hardening their nationalistic views in turn (Löschnigg & Löschnigg 26). However, this vision of wholeness lingered in Canada until the mid-20th century, when the emphasis still was on “wholeness rather than its constituent parts” (Heble 88).

Nevertheless, Canada was viewed as a bicultural nation for a long time, despite the fact that there were many immigrants from Asia and other European nations, especially in the western provinces, where a large proportion of the indigenous population was concentrated as well. Because of the policy of assimilation immigrants close to the Anglo-Canadian majority were preferred, whereas Asians and African Americans were less popular. There was also a large group of Chinese settlers in British Columbia who had worked on the railway line (Löschnigg & Löschnigg 26-27). However, this had not yet found its way into literature. In Pratt’s famous poem *Towards the Last Spike* from 1952 he does not mention those Chinese labourers in his praise of the unifying railway line, a fact which has been criticised by Scott’s response to Pratt’s poem titled “All Spikes but the Last” in 1957 (see Heble 88).

Due to the colonisation and expansion the indigenous population had increasingly been displaced and bereaved of their livelihood. They were relocated to reservations, which in turn obliged the government to care for them as Status Indians (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 25-26).

Initially, Canada’s literature was characterised by national enthusiasm, which means that prose and poetry used Canadian themes, though formally Canadian literature was still oriented towards European and especially British models. The short story, however, had already developed to an independent Canadian form. In contrast to the US, where the short story developed rapidly, this took more time in Canada. In this context the humoristic sketches of Stephen Leacock, the short stories by Duncan Campbell Scott and the animal story have to be

mentioned. The unfinished pictures sketches provide seemed appropriate for the literary representation of Canada (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 27-30).

During the First World War Canada changed dramatically with regard to economy and culture. It was the first big step towards independence, owing to the part Canada played in the war. It was awarded with a new role in global politics and memberships in international organisations. However, the war also had a negative effect on the relations between Anglophone and Francophone Canadians because the latter were opposed to conscription (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 36). Another positive consequence of the war was the accelerated implementation of women's suffrage, especially in those provinces where women played a bigger role in male domains because of their accomplishments during colonisation. The writer and feminist Nellie McClung (1873-1951) furthered the cause considerably in the west. In the eastern provinces women's suffrage was implemented later, in the 1920s, and in Quebec as late as 1940 (Löschnigg & Löschnigg 36). A further impact of the war was the growing strength of socialist forces in its aftermath, which is visible in the literature of the period, which was rather left-leaning and more political (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 36-37).

In contrast to the First World War Canada entered the Second World War voluntarily and as an autonomous nation, namely a week after Great Britain and two years before the United States. The war brought the two North American nations closer together, however the conflict between Anglophone and Francophone Canadians was revived as a result of conscription (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 37).

Although the quest for a collective Canadian identity is not specific for the interwar or post-war period, but rather *the* typical Canadian issue, during these periods the tendency to define their identity as Canadians and their intention to dissociate themselves from the US grew more pronounced (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 37). In this context Kroetsch mentions the cliché of defining the Canadian identity “by explaining to the Americans that [they] aren't British, [and] to the British that [they] aren't Americans” (360). It seems as if the Canadians always feel the need to explain or “insist upon what they are not rather than what they are” (Keith 121). By rejecting the American Revolution on the one hand and the waning influence of the British on the other hand, they are distancing themselves from both of their major influences. Keith sees it as problematic that the Canadians are defining their identity by trying to distinguish themselves from the United States and Britain. He points out that the influence cannot be denied fully because “[p]sychologically, [Canadians] are indisputably a North

American people; at the same time, [they] are anxious to distinguish [themselves] from those the rest of the world recognizes as *the* American people (Keith 121, emphasis Keith).

As a reaction to the Massey report⁸, the Canada Council formed in 1957, which was mainly responsible for an upsurge of Canadian literature. There were two more factors which furthered Canadian literature during the end of the 1950s. On the one hand, cultural nationalism manifested itself in the development of Canadian studies as a distinct discipline, and on the other hand, literary criticism led to an increased awareness of literary theory as well as to a reevaluation of Canadian literature (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 38).

The short story reached its first culmination point in the first half of the 20th century, however, public interest in this genre was still quite low, which becomes evident by the multitude of posthumous publications. Literary magazines like *Preview* and *First Statement* also furthered the success and distribution of short stories (Löschnigg & Löschnigg 51). Strangely, even though the short story seems to be the first form which developed as a distinctive Canadian form, publishers were for a long time reluctant to publish short story collections. This low interest from publishers and the public becomes evident when viewing Alice Munro's publishing history. Although Munro's short stories were highly valued, the market demanded a novel (see Thacker, *Biography* 167). During the 1950s and the 1960s there was a widespread bias against short story collections in North American publishing at large, but especially in Canada. "It was a truism among publishers that such collections did not sell, and that they should be attempted only once an author's reputation was already established through the prior publication of a novel" (Thacker, *Biography* 142). This was quite a difficult task for Munro, who suffered from depression due to her inability to produce a novel for a long time until she finally published *Lives of Girls and Women* in 1971, a book which "certainly fulfilled the expectation, if not exactly the form" (Thacker, *Biography* 161).

The following tendencies for Anglophone Canadian literature since the mid-20th century have been pointed out by Löschnigg and Löschnigg: the ironic undermining of stereotypical images of the self and other; a strong tendency for literary narcissism (trying to define the literary identity of Canada which is still in the shadow of more powerful literary traditions); a strong connection between literary production and criticism; ethnic and regional diversity and a high

⁸ In his biography of Alice Munro Robert Thacker relates an interesting connection between Munro and the Massey report. Munro was supposed to have a short story broadcast on 1 June, however, it was postponed because it coincided with the release of "the Massey Commission report on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences", which he regards as ironic, given Munro's later reputation (see 92).

ratio of women writers. Many of the works address the problem of female identity in a traditionally male dominated pioneer society (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 9-10).

3.3 From unity to disunity to multiculturalism

In the 1950s and 1960s Canada still strove towards unity and presenting Canada “as a kind of homogenous national community” (Heble 88) by disregarding the topic of ethnicity and the influence of different ethnic groups⁹ (see Heble 88). However, disunity and contradiction seem to be the two things where Canadian identity thrives and is created. Referring to Herschel Hardin’s *A Nation Unaware: The Canadian Economic Culture* where he highlights that Canada’s narrative “has emerged out of a series of contradictions [like] French Canada against English Canada, the regions against the federal centre, and, of course, Canada against the United States” (Heble 87), Heble explains how this has contributed to the building of Canadian identity: “It is across these contradictions that Canada has defined itself” (Hardin 12 qtd. in Heble 87).

Similarly, Kroetsch argues that disunity is the key to Canadian identity by asserting that “[i]f [the Canadians] can’t be united, [they] can’t be disunited” (360). While it seems to be enough in the US “to define oneself as American” (Kroetsch 360), it seems to be infinitely important for Canadians to refer to their roots and sources, which influences the way Canadians define themselves, “[They] insist on staying multiple, and by that strategy [they] accommodate to [their] climate, [their] economic situation, and [their] neighbours” (Kroetsch 360).

In this context of disunity, Laura Mulvey has found fitting words: “Canadian culture is not yet a closed book. The historical anomalies that Canada has grown from make contradictions visible. Uniform national identity is challenged by pride in heterogeneity and difference” (11 qtd. in Hutcheon ix). Mulvey’s view is in line with both Kroetsch’s argument of disunity and the Canadian concept of multiculturalism and therefore serves as the perfect transition.

Since the 1960s Canada has occasionally been likened to a mosaic, whereas the United States has mostly been described as a melting pot. The socio-political objective of the Canadian government was to ensure a coexistence of different ethnic groups without losing their distinct cultural identity. This approach is founded in the emancipation movements of different ethnic and religious groups and women, who wanted their status in society to be reappraised. Their aim was to arrive at an authentic self by ridding oneself of the identification with the ‘other’. This was also reflected in the endeavour of the whole nation to prevail against the political,

⁹ see for example the controversy of E. J. Pratt’s *Toward the Last Spike* and F. R. Scott’s “All Spikes but the Last” mentioned before in the context of the Chinese workers on the railway line

economic, technological and military superiority of their neighbour in the south, the United States (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 66).

However, the image of the mosaic seems to evoke an ideal condition which has not yet been reached. Porter, for example, notes that multiculturalism is restricted to the cultural-ethnic level, whereas social and economic discrimination persists. Furthermore, he asserts that “[i]t seems inescapable that the strong emphasis on ethnic differentiation can result only in those continuing dual loyalties which prevent the emergence of any clear Canadian identity” (558). Porter’s statement led to an increasingly critical view on the concept of multiculturalism. However, Porter published his statements on this topic more than fifty years ago, and although his studies surely still have merit, his views on multiculturalism need to be considered critically.

Multiculturalism, which has been incorporated into the Canadian constitution as well as in the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 (Löschnigg & Löschnigg 66-67), seems to be an integral part in the Canadian identity. To give an impression what multiculturalism means in Canada, a brief excerpt of the Multiculturalism Act is provided below.

3 (1) It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Government of Canada to

(a) recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage;

(b) recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity and that it provides an invaluable resource in the shaping of Canada’s future; (Minister of Justice).

As the quote above indicates, multiculturalism, to know their people’s roots and to value their heritage, is essential for their definition as Canadians. Different origin is not only accepted, it is revelled at, it is what makes them Canadians. Kroetsch argues along the same line by pointing out that “the Canadian [...] is always quoting his many sources” (360).

Janice Kulyk Keefer, who has Ukrainian and Polish roots, refines the imagery of multiculturalism by proposing the symbol of a kaleidoscope instead of the mosaic that has been mentioned above, arguing that the mosaic represents an image that is rigid and fixed (see Keefer 16).

Perhaps a better model would be that of a kaleidoscope, which suggests ongoing process rather than fixed and finished product. The user of the kaleidoscope can make out of

separate pieces, in me [sic!] [none]¹⁰ of which is more pnvileged [sic!] [privileged]¹¹ than any other, a changing and infinitely variable pattern precisely because the shifting pans are held together by the cylinder that contains them. And that cylinder, passed from hand to hand, we may liken to Canada itself, with its wilderness and farms [...] and cities, its people, and the values enshrined in our Charter of Rights (Keefer 16).

Whichever metaphor one prefers, it becomes obvious how important multiculturalism is in Canada. Keefer's argument seems compelling, especially as it allows for flexibility in our ever changing society.

Nevertheless, the wish for a harmonic togetherness of different ethnic groups is often not reflected in the everyday social reality of Canada. This can be seen in the conflict between Anglophone and Francophone Canadians, which has intensified especially since the 1960s. Löschnigg and Löschnigg refer to Udo Sautter, who identified three phases in the development of English-French relations since 1763. Politics of assimilation from 1763 to 1867 which failed; politics of accommodation from 1867 to 1945, which promoted equality of both cultures; and finally the phase of increasing emancipation of the French-Canadian population, which is expressed in the growing separatist aspirations since the 1960s (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 67).

A marginalised group which has drawn more attention to itself since the 1960s is the indigenous population of Canada. However, it is important to point out that although they are linked by the same fate, the indigenous population of Canada is not one homogenous group but rather consists of different peoples, who even in some cases speak different languages (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 69).

Canadian literature since the 1960s has been particularly shaped by ethnic diversity. Authors coming from the Jewish tradition provide an important contribution, while authors with a Caribbean background relate their experience with immigration and racial discrimination. But there are many more Canadian writers with different ethnic backgrounds such as people coming from Italy, Ukraine and different parts of Asia such as Japan and China. The important thing, however, is that most of them view themselves primarily as Canadians. This is also in line with the concept of Canada as a multicultural nation (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 70-71).

¹⁰ This quotation is taken from the original source of the article, due to its online publication there have been some errors in the text that are not originally there. The correct words are used in square brackets next to the faulty words.

¹¹ See footnote above

The new sense of Canadian national identity, which arose partly out of dissociation from the US and the quest for identity of different ethnic groups, led to an explosive rise of Canadian literature (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 71). The short story deserves special mention in this context, as it seems that it has profited particularly from this upsurge. Grady points out that in the 1960s and 1970s “[...] the short story has developed into Canada’s healthiest and most versatile literary genre,” (vi) taking over the role poetry had played up until the 1950s of illustrating “[...] the complexities of human life, by helping to bring the unarticulated soul of an entire community into sudden and radiant being [...]” (Grady, vi).

In the context of the short story Keith points out that “[...] it is important to remember that some of the most notable fiction in modern Canada has been written in the short-story form” (80). Furthermore, he points to the significance of “[...] short-story writers [who] have been born elsewhere and bring fresh perspectives on Canada from the outside” (81). Partly furthered by multiculturalism, but also by the influence of emerging postmodernism, previously marginalised groups were inscribed into history during the 1960s and into fiction during the 1970s and 1980s (see Hutcheon 11).

3.4 Between modernism and postmodernism – the “slightly postmodern” Canada

Löschnigg and Löschnigg argue that the contemporary short story is characterised by many forms and themes, however, they list a few pervading properties. There seems to be a remarkable number of women writers as well as a concentration on developmental processes. Another tendency they identify is the writing of short stories in short story cycles, which they view as a continuation of a Canadian tradition. Furthermore, there has been a disposition for regionalism, which has grown even more pronounced since the 1970s. However, it seems that the representation of social issues has been rather neglected as they have mainly been approached by authors from ethnic minorities from the 1980s onwards. Another interesting specialty is the coexistence of conventional and experimental forms in Canadian literature, such as realism, modernism and postmodernism (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 92-93).

Löschnigg and Löschnigg refer to Geoff Hancock, who identifies the reason for this juxtaposition in the development of the short story in Canada. Its late discovery of the short story form for addressing questions of national identity explains why many writers emphasized the topic and fixed their stories firmly in the Canadian reality. However, their writing often bursts the limits of descriptive realism and also incorporates modernist experiments (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 93).

Although many authors experiment with the depiction of reality by using new ways of narrative technique, there are some who evolved from playing with the postmodern form to the metafictional deconstruction of conventional forms (Löschnigg & Löschnigg 104-105). Bowering uses an interesting expression to refer to the texts he collected in an anthology, which could be used to describe Canadian postmodernism in its entirety, calling them “slightly post-modern pieces” (9). How apt this term is for the Canadian postmodern will become clear once this phenomenon is viewed in the context of Canadian literature.

Compared to Europe or the United States, Canada performed its orientation towards modernism quite late, with the trend finding its culmination point in the works of Mavis Gallant and Alice Munro (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 92). However, to describe these authors simply as modernist would be making things too easy. Arguably, to distinguish modernism and postmodernism is no simple matter, as becomes obvious from Linda Hutcheon’s statement in the introduction of her book *The Canadian Postmodern* where she identifies a “continuity between the modernist and the postmodernist” (1).

In the previous chapter postmodernism has briefly been mentioned, however, it needs to be elucidated in the context of Canada. Hutcheon argues that postmodern literature is self-reflexive and therefore blatantly aware that it is made “out of other literature” (1) as well as its inscription in the context of a particular culture. The issue she takes with that definition, however, is that this could as easily be said about earlier modernist writing. What she identifies as the true distinguishing feature between the two is postmodernism’s “self-consciousness of art *as art*” (1, emphasis Hutcheon) and the subsequent challenging of “our traditional humanist beliefs about the function of art in society” (2). Although the concept of postmodernism has been “widely used and debated, internationally and in Canada since the 1980s” (Ball 895), the definition “remains decidedly vague” (Hutcheon 1). Ironically, the definition the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* provides does not clear up matters, stating that it can be either “[s]een as [...] a radical break from or a continuation of MODERNISM” (Ball 895).

Yet, it makes sense to juxtapose modernism and postmodernism in opposition. While modernist authors seem to be looking for “order in the face of moral and social chaos” (Hutcheon 2), postmodernist writers seem to have an “urge to trouble [and] to question” (2) authority. Postmodernism “[...] sets up and subverts the powers and conventions of art. It uses and abuses them in order to suggest that we question both that modernist autonomy and any realist notion of transparent reference” (2). The view on history is also a point of dissent

between modernism and postmodernism. Modernism denies “the literary value of historical fact” (14) but at the same time modernist authors make “use of that fact to make the reality of the fictional world seem authentic” (14). This is in opposition to the postmodern stance that writings of art and history contrast and influence each other and therefore the existence and significance of the other is not denied (14). The best-known controversy between the two is probably the notion of the universal versus the particular. Whereas modernism promotes “[t]he universal [...] concept of humanist Man” (18), postmodernism stands for “a more diversified concept of experience based on *difference*” (18).

It seems as if postmodernism particularly reflects Canadian culture. Like Canadians the postmodern writer is in a marginal position regarding the dominant culture since

“[...] the paradox of underlining and undermining cultural ‘universals’ [...] implicitly challenges the notions of centrality in [...] culture. Since the periphery of the margin might also describe Canada’s perceived position in international terms, perhaps the postmodern ex-centric is very much part of the identity of the nation” (Hutcheon 3).

What Hutcheon implies in the quote above emphasises the parallels of Canadian culture and postmodernism. Another connecting factor between the two is the Canadian concept of multiculturalism.

A unique Canadian implication of postmodernism’s esteeming “the different and the diverse in opposition to the uniform” (Hutcheon 19) lies in the way Canada sees itself. Multiculturalism cannot go hand in hand with valuing the unified. This is also reflected in “the existing Canadian emphasis on regionalism in literature” (19) and “a concern for the different, the local, the particular – in opposition to the uniform, the universal, the centralized” (Hutcheon 19).

What is striking and particular about Canadian postmodernist fiction is that the very real challenge to the conventions of realism has always come from within those conventions themselves. [...] English Canadian novels have self-consciously milked realism for all its power, even while parodying and subverting its conventions. This is yet another of the paradoxes that define the postmodern (Hutcheon 20).

The quote above shows why Bowering’s qualification of “slightly post-modern pieces” (9) is so appropriate for the whole of Canadian postmodernism. It seems that postmodernism is particularly Canadian. Literature takes seemingly conventional forms in Canada that might seem modernist at first glance and then prove to be postmodern after all.

Identifying Munro’s place in the transition between realism, modernism and postmodernism will also be a component in the analysis of Alice Munro’s short stories. Her fiction has often

been described as realist or modernist, however, as we can see from the features of Canadian postmodernism established so far, this might only be superficially true. Maria Löschnigg argues that “[a] close reading especially of her more recent stories reveals the deceptive and subversive nature of her ‘realism’” (Löschnigg, *Contemporary* 7). Therefore, finding Alice Munro’s position between realism, modernism and postmodernism will be part of the analysis.

Hutcheon identifies parody, irony and intertextuality as central forms used in Canadian postmodern fiction to criticise “formal and ideological” aspects (8-9). The same rhetorical devices are also used in feminist fiction. Hutcheon sees quite a few parallels between Canadian literature and feminist fiction, arguing that “women’s writing [may] *appear* more conservative, but in fact it is just *different* (emphasis Hutcheon). Women must define their subjectivity before they can question it; they must first assert the selfhood they have been denied in the dominant culture (6). Similarly, “[...] Canadian writers have first had to deconstruct *British* social and literary myths in order to redefine their colonial history [...]” (Hutcheon 6).

However, Hutcheon is not the only one noting this parallel, she asserts that “[a] number of critics have noted the relationship between the national search for a cultural identity and the feminist seeking for a distinctive gender identity [...]” (Hutcheon 6). For example, Goldman emphasises “the connection between gender identity and national identity” (7) and argues that the works by Canadian women writers she analysed “have been informed by a set of related historical and literary discourses” (7).

Although Hutcheon acknowledges the similarities of feminism and postmodernism as well as “the temporal conjunction” of the two, she stresses that, nevertheless, they cannot be regarded as entirely similar, because “the particular political agenda of feminism” (107) differs from “the more complicitous questioning of the political” (107), which usually will not provide any final answers, of postmodernism (107). She points, however, to the tremendous influence feminism, among other fields, such as “studies of post- colonial racism, Marxist class analysis, and gay theory” (108), has had on postmodernism and its appreciation of difference and diversity (108).

Women writers as well as postmodernists have worked towards replacing “‘universal’ ‘Truth’ with particular truths” (Hutcheon 108), using similar techniques to challenge form and formulate ideological critique, while at the same time pursuing different agendas (Hutcheon

108). Although universals and liberal humanism had been questioned by poststructuralists already, feminists noticed that deconstructing “universal ‘Man’, had not necessarily led to the discovery of Woman” (Hutcheon 108), just as modernism “had not been very ideologically aware of its representations of women” (108). Hutcheon further argues that owing to feminism, postmodernism is aware of these representations now (see 108). To challenge conventions that have been considered ‘universals’, feminism and postmodernism place “themselves and the literature they study in historical, social, and cultural (as well as literary) contexts” (Hutcheon 108) to raise the awareness that the so-called ‘universals’ represent “the values of a very particular group of people – of a certain class, race, gender, and sexual orientation” (Hutcheon 108). Although Hutcheon acknowledges that postmodernism is aware of the representation of different groups and minorities, she argues that “[p]ostmodernist fiction is not really any more democratic or accessible than earlier modernist fiction, it is just as contrived, manipulative – elitist, if you like – but it acknowledges this in its self-situating limitations of address” (Hutcheon 132).

3.5 The beginning of the 21st century and perspectives

At the threshold to the 21st century Canadian literature seems diverse and vital. Tendencies which have been around since the 1980s continue to be relevant. Contemporary Canadian literature presents itself as a literature which participates in international literary developments and reflects the conditions of life at the turn of the millennium. Nevertheless, it managed to preserve its individuality. The ethnic plurality of the country is still a formative influence on Canadian literature. However, the quest for Canadian identity has become a new focus in times of globalization. Rather than on questions of “Canadianness”, the emphasis is on questions of individual or communal identity inside a larger national or international frame of reference (Löschnigg & Löschnigg 139).

The influence of neoliberal thinking can also be detected in Canadian literature. Wyile argues that the changes in the material conditions of the publishing business have had a “deleterious effect on the variety and scope of Canadian literature”, although electronic publishing could be a “genuine possibility to revitalising the study of Canadian literature” (Wyile). Furthermore, he claims that “the impact of neoliberalism and the reverberations of the current crisis are bound to be reflected in the work of Canadian writers in various ways”, just as previous problems have been thematised in Canadian literature. However, Wyile claims that the greatest challenge for the future of Canadian literature will be to fight the erosion of all Canadian literature has achieved during the past fifty years through institutionalisation and expansion.

Multicultural literature and the short story seem to play a central role in Canadian literature; however, determining their perspectives is difficult. Kortenaar concludes that multicultural writing will be constantly changing. “The only thing one can predict about the future of multicultural literature in Canada is that this history will need not just to be supplemented but rewritten, as new forms emerge to alter the picture” (579). Similarly, there is no clear picture for the future of the short story. New argues that it is irrelevant whether there will be a continuation of previous forms and authors or whether there will be new emerging forms and artists, the imperative point is “the genre in the early twenty-first century is clearly not dying” (New 400). This statement is supported by Maria Löschnigg’s recent observation that “the short story indeed holds a prominent position in Canada” (*Contemporary* 2).

4 Characteristics of Alice Munro's Writing

To characterise Alice Munro's writing and to identify only one mode of writing in her stories seems nearly impossible. She has been writing and publishing short stories from the 1950s until today and therefore been influenced by many different forms and styles of writing. Furthermore, her work has developed and matured since the beginning of her writing career. Löschnigg asserts that she has had an "[...] indisputable impact [...] on the development of the contemporary short story not only in Canada, but also internationally" (Löschnigg, *Contemporary* 7). There are many who proclaim Alice Munro one particular kind of writer, and just as many who argue for the opposite side. It is therefore the aim of this chapter to identify the different characterisations of Alice Munro's work and describe them briefly. In the following chapter it will be analysed how these findings are reflected in the collection *Too Much Happiness*.

In Munro's earlier works, the experiences of the protagonists were mostly filtered through a younger, childlike consciousness, whereas in the stories of the 1980s and 1990s the protagonists and narrators have become more mature, being mostly grown-up women or mothers. Additionally, the narrative itself has been more foregrounded from the 1980s onwards. Since the 1990s Munro has been experimenting even more with non-linear narrative structure and fragmented scenes (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 100).

Relationships are clearly central in Alice Munro's stories. Very important are relationships between men and women, female friendships, but the most important of the relationships in her stories are probably the connection between mothers and daughters (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 100). Therefore, these relationships will be considered in the section about themes and motifs.

Munro's protagonists are often interested in the telling of stories themselves, frequently being writers themselves. Furthermore, there is an increasing tendency of thematising the narrative process itself, however, Löschnigg and Löschnigg argue that Munro's technique differs from postmodern metafiction, because Munro does not relinquish plausibility or connection to extralinguistic reality (100). However, Munro's narrators are often unreliable, and therefore, force the reader to search for the true story themselves (Löschnigg & Löschnigg 100). There will be a section devoted to her use of narrators, protagonists and characters.

Abrupt changes in chronology and location are another typical quality of Munro's writing. She often uses temporary and/or spatially widely different scenes and connects them, often disrupting chronology. This meandering narrative structure diverts the reader's attention again

and again from the heart of the story, only to lead them back unexpectedly (Löschnigg & Löschnigg 101). The use of her changes in place and time will be discussed further in some of the subchapters.

Löschnigg and Löschnigg argue that moments of insight, which are reminiscent of Joyce's epiphanies, are typical of Munro's short stories. These visionary moments prevent her stories from being too pessimistic, however, it seems as though problematic and broken relationships are necessary for the insights gained in the end. For the readers to understand and empathise with those insights, there has to be a concentration on the emotional quality of experience, which Munro often conveys through superficial details like furniture, clothes or other items. However, by making extrinsic factors the signifiers of the life of her characters, Munro bestows upon them universal significance, even though her stories are oriented towards regionalism (Löschnigg & Löschnigg 101). Her use of epiphanic moments will be elaborated on further in a designated chapter. Whether or not her work can be classified as regionalist will be discussed in the section that is dedicated to different styles of writing Alice Munro is argued to be working in.

4.1 Alice Munro's styles of writing

There are many different styles of writing Munro is supposed to write in, however, most scholars and critics highlight different traits of her stories which fit different categories. The following section provides a brief overview on the most discussed styles Munro is connected to. Modernism and postmodernism have already been discussed in the previous chapters, therefore, a further discussion is not deemed necessary at this point. In the analysis modernism and postmodernism will be taken into consideration again.

4.1.1 Realism

Realism developed in the 19th century and is based on conventions that are supposed to "depict an ordinary life [...] through details of specific things and actions" ("Realism, Surrealism, and Magic Realism" 938). The writers of realism "believed that their works simply and directly showed what life was like and what happened in it" ("Realism, Surrealism, and Magic Realism" 938). These notions were subsequently challenged by other groups of writers who refined realism into subcategories, and later by modernism and postmodernism (see "Realism, Surrealism, and Magic Realism" 938).

Redekop claims that Alice Munro's stories "are examples of a typically Canadian product: the realistic work that is not realistic" (7). She argues that "so-called 'common readers'" are attracted to Alice Munro's stories because of their realism and representation of her content in

a natural way, but she reasons that her stories are in fact not that realistic although she states that “[t]he word ‘real’ is not an easily dismissed illusion” (Redekop 7) in Munro’s stories. Furthermore, critics have increasingly considered realism as “a vexed issue in recent years. Post-Saussurean work on language questions the concept of realism and representation by emphasizing the arbitrariness of the sign” (Redekop 7). Furthermore, Becker calls Munro’s mode of writing “hyper-realism” (91) and connects this with Munro as a gothic writer. This is discussed further in a section dedicated to Munro and gothic writing.

Critics of Alice Munro’s work who consider her as a realist mainly list two reasons for this categorisation. The first one is “her artful treatment of real life” (Becker 107), which according to Becker should rather be classified as “real female life”, and her “sophisticated ‘verisimilitude’” (107). Becker argues, however, that those critics fail to acknowledge “the complicated artistic process of its achievement” (107) by only highlighting the aspects of realism in her work. The second reason for Alice Munro’s work being categorised as realist Becker lists is her use of autobiographical material (see 107). Blodgett, for example, asserts that “it is difficult not to suppose that the relation between her life and the fiction she makes must be intimate and profound” (1). However, it needs to be pointed out that to consider Munro “primarily a realist, that her knowledge depends exclusively upon relations with ‘family, neighbours and friends,’ and that no transformation from the literal level is possible” would be narrow-minded (Blodgett 1).

It cannot be denied, however, that there are indeed quite a few parallels between Alice Munro’s life and her fiction. One example for such a parallel would be the place her stories are set in; just as Alice Munro moved from southwestern Ontario to British Columbia and back to Ontario again, the same move has been identified in the setting of her stories (see Blodgett 2). Another example of the use of autobiographical material is Munro’s use of her relationship to her mother, which she portrays in several stories.

In an Interview with J. R. (Tim) Struthers Munro reflects on the use of the term “autobiographical” for her work and opts for the use of the term “personal” instead (see 17). Nevertheless, quite a lot has been written on Munro in connection with autobiography, and therefore, there will be a short section on that topic in the analysis of her narrative technique.

Although he would not call it the sole feature of Alice Munro’s writing, Keith argues that “[h]er photographic or documentary realism is an essential [...] aspect of her art” (68). Similarly, Blodgett reasons that “it is an error [...] to argue that Munro is primarily realist” (6)

and brings forward the argument that “it is the ‘photographic’ that is the dark core of her work, and that the brilliance of her art is to present the reader with a more illuminated world, a world that no document can bear witness to” (6). While Blodgett highlights that Alice Munro’s writing “aims beyond what we might take realism to be” (15) he still designates her depiction as “photographic” in the above quoted comment while later pointing out that “[...] rather than photographing the object, she illuminates the subject” (Blodgett 10).

Munro often plays with the readers’ expectations of the relation between truth and fiction, by using her narrators to ponder these questions, and also by using metafictional comments. Instead of presenting life exactly as it is, she employs her writing to fictionalise the complications of life (see Blodgett 72-73). However, Blodgett argues that “the relation of the real to fiction and truth” is “subordinate to a central narrative preoccupation” (78). Furthermore, he has pointed out that “[t]he real is always transformed by fiction” and therefore “fiction can obscure the truth” (157). Munro’s fiction is often conceived as realistic, though many critics of her work argue that her stories only appear realistic on a surface level, because she uses realistic and ordinary details. However, behind this ordinary surface the reader often finds something less ordinary (see Howells, “Indeterminacy” and Carrington).

May argues that realism in the short story manifests differently than in the novel (see *Brother* 149). He describes it as

a literary technique that insists on compression, a rhetorical method that reveals meaning by leaving things out, a language style that creates metaphor by means of metonymy, and an attempt to express inner reality and the unsayable by describing outer reality (May, *Brother* 145).

Furthermore he points out that this form of realism has reached such a high degree of intensity in the modern short story that it “no longer seems objective and real” (May, *Brother* 148) and therefore it has been referred to as “hyperrealism” by critics (May, *Brother* 148). May argues that the modern short story “seems realistic on its surface” (*Brother* 166) while actually “the radical difference between the routine of everyday reality and the incisive nature of story itself” (May, *Brother* 166-167) is stressed.

In Alice Munro’s writing the fantastic and the real coexist, which corresponds with the juxtaposition of fantasy and realism in her narrative. According to Howells, the most important function of fantasy then is to challenge “the limits of realism as fictional construct imposed on reality. The possibilities envisaged by fantasy do not, however, lie outside reality, rather they are contained/hidden within it” (“Worlds” 123). Fantasy and realism are not

actually contradictory but “supplement each other as two kinds of discourse which together make up a fictional text which is still less than the complexity of reality itself” (Howells, “Worlds” 123). According to Blodgett Munro enjoys playing with fantasy “to make us believe that fantasy is only fantasy, then to suggest that there may be meaning in fantasy, and then to throw the whole thing over to speculation” (132).

Howells sees fantasy and realism as contrasts. She explains that “[t]he relationship between realism and fantasy is one of opposition” (“Worlds” 121) with realistic discourse, which assumes “that the world is describable and intelligible rather than alien, [while] fantastic discourse challenges that assumption by focusing instead on what is accidental and inexplicable” (Howells, “Worlds” 121). Fantasy can be viewed as a method of “evasion and resistance” but it can also be used to renegotiate connections (Howells, “Worlds” 122). The true strength of fantasy however, lies in its ability “to rupture the discourse of realism by pointing to its inconsistencies and repressions and then filling those gaps” (Howells, “Worlds” 126). However, fantasy could not exist without realism. They “confront each other in a supplementary relationship, for as both are inevitably incomplete structures imposed on reality, neither discourse ought to be privileged over the other” (Howells, “Worlds” 128-129).

4.1.2 Magic Realism

Magic realism is opposed to conventional realism. It is a form where “other elements intruded into an ostensibly realistic frame, heightening the sense of the imaginary and imaginative in people’s lives and at the same time insisting on their reality as motivating forces and belief systems” (“Realism, Surrealism, and Magic Realism” 938).

Magdalene Redekop refers to Munro’s writing as “magic realism” and argues that it “is a kind of meta-realism” (7). Also, by going away from a simple realist view of Munro’s writing, Howells argues that the narrative perspective of Munro’s stories is incessantly alternating “between realism on the one and and romantic fantasy on the other” (*Contemporary* 63). This mixture of real and imaginary elements that characterises magic realism can also be found in Munro’s writing. Without calling it magic realism Ross describes her mode of writing, where

central characters often find themselves in circumstances where it seems that “anything may happen,” but not because they have left their ordinary world behind them to go through the weak spot in the curtain. The effect is achieved instead through some tilt in their perception which lets them, but not the other characters in the story, see the ordinary as extraordinary (115).

4.1.3 Gothic

Alice Munro's writing has often been described as gothic. Gothic originally describes a writing style found mainly in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, which was "characterised by the use of medieval settings, a murky atmosphere of horror and gloom, and macabre, mysterious, and violent incidents" ("Gothic" 480). This style of fiction can be identified by its use of "grotesque, macabre, or fantastic incidents or by an atmosphere of irrational violence, desolation, and decay" ("Gothic" 480).

Susanne Becker argues that the gothic form has been revived due to two very important movements, feminism and postmodernism. She reasons that this is due to the shared "radical scepticism concerning the universalising humanist assumptions of modern thought and of classic realism" (1). The anti-realism is something the gothic is popular for, and one strategy that Becker sees as most effective she calls "excess", "excess in moral terms, excess of realism into the supernatural, but also formal excess" (1). Becker argues that this form she calls "neo-gothicism" "will signal the emancipatory possibilities of postmodern culture" because she feels that "we live again in times that are sensible to gothic forms of emotion and representation" (2). Furthermore, Becker is convinced that the reason for the continuous success of the gothic form is related to gender and argues: "it is so powerful because it is so feminine" (Becker 2). That neo-gothicism is related to feminism and postmodernism can be seen by looking at the narrative strategies they are using. One example of this is "irony, but also a complex subjectivity and contradictory textual structures" (Becker 6).

Howells calls the Gothic Munro's "favorite fantasy form" though she concedes that the gothic form she uses is "critically scrutinized and updated while still retaining its original charge of menace, mystery and malignancy" (Howells Worlds 122). Howells especially emphasises the gothic in the description of the Canadian landscape and small towns (see Howells, "Worlds" 122).

Categorising Munro's writing as gothic or neo-gothic, if we conform with Becker, would also contradict assumptions that Munro is a realist writer. While Howells stresses that "the world of Gothic fantasy coexists with everyday reality" (Howells, "Worlds" 122), Becker argues that "neo-gothic texts, like Munro's [...] already mock the trust in classic realism" (12). What Becker calls "neo-gothic" is a form of gendered writing she places in a time from the 1970s to the 1990s. According to her it "reflects the feminine dimension of the ongoing cultural and literary change: after all, gothic horror is domestic horror, family horror, and addresses precisely these obviously 'gendered problems of everyday life'" (Becker 4). These kinds of

horror are also those which occur in Munro's short stories. She often uses domestic settings, and domestic horror in her stories.

The image of women that is presented by gothic literature is that of the "monstrous feminine"; women are displayed as madwomen or even demonic (Becker 6-7). The "madwoman in the attic"¹² is one way of portraying women in the gothic context, which includes both the view of women as monstrous and the house¹³ she is confined to, which represents the "domestic horror with no escape" (Becker 10). This "[...] domestic horror draws attention to both the horrors of enclosure for a female subject within 'her place', and to her desire to leave it" (Becker 18). Becker identifies the desire for independence as a core theme of gothic literature, and argues that contemporary gothic texts "recognise and continue the liberating and challenging powers of gothic within modern female culture" (20).

For Canadian neo-gothic texts, the garrison mentality represents pivotal tension. Using Heather Murray's term of "domesticated wilderness" to describe the "grotesque familial horrors in Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*", Becker sees the garrison mentality in Alice Munro's book and other works of Canadian fiction¹⁴ (Becker 90). Becker argues that in Canada the focus of gothic literature has mostly been on "nature, the frontier and the wilderness" (Becker 93). In Quebec and Southern gothic, the garrison mentality is represented in "the confining terrors of small towns in a bleak landscape" (Becker 95), which can also be said of Alice Munro's writing of Southern Ontario gothic, and therefore "its haunting atmosphere must be recognised as a strong marker of Canadian neo-gothicism" (Becker 95).

Rendering something gothic is quite easy; a story that looks quite ordinary on first glance, a realistic depiction for example, "is subsequently transformed into [...] [something] that is not only extraordinary but also endowed with a terrible violent past" (Becker 104). This description sounds quite familiar and connects back to the section about realism and magic realism in particular, where it has already been established by referring to Howells and Carrington that the realistic surface is often penetrated by something extraordinary. Furthermore, Magdalene Redekop describes this technique as "Munro's territory" stating that

¹² The term "madwomen in the attic" was coined by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who were inspired by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* for the title of their book analysing 19th century women writers.

¹³ The metaphor of the house is also one often used for Munro, especially because the house is often seen as a symbol of the female body in feminist criticism because they "have long linked the woman's sphere to her body" (Becker 19). Therefore, it seems ironic that for Munro herself the house does not seem to carry that much metaphorical weight. This is what she said in an interview when the question of houses arises: "Well, houses have a great interest for me. When I look at a house, it's like looking at a person. So obviously they are important but I never think of them being symbolic of anything themselves" (Hancock 211).

¹⁴ Other examples are Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* or Aritha van Herk's *No Fixed Address*.

“familiar, domestic actions are elevated to serve as a powerful means of resistance. Rejecting the defamiliarizing techniques common to many contemporary writers, Munro opts instead for a domestication so radical that we move through the homely to the *unheimlich* or uncanny” (12).

Becker assumes that “radical domestication is a neo-gothic strategy [...] that connects with but also transforms the traces of Gothicism in the web of feminine writing” (104). She proposes that this happens “around the threefold dynamics of the house/text: a structure containing domestic horror (thematically) as well as the process of a female subject (formally) and the related image of the ideal feminine (ideologically). This way, a new type of gothic excess arises: excessive domestication, excessive realism” (Becker 104). Becker claims that “neo-gothic fiction continues gothic form with its provocative, challenging, liberating excess” (256). Furthermore, Becker perceives Alice Munro’s writing as one of “the earlier postmodern fictions [which] use gothic excess to critically ultra-domesticate their textures as *haunted houses*” (256). It is typical of Munro’s short stories that “the horror is only thinly covered by everyday life and needs” (Becker 258).

Although Becker argues so convincingly for Munro as a writer in the neo-gothic tradition, Howells is convinced that “[...] Munro has come increasingly to see Gothic as an ‘unreliable structure’” (Howells, “Worlds” 122).

4.1.4 Feminism and Gender

Feminism and Gender are both very broad topics that are grounded on a wealth of theories and criticism that are impossible to present in detail in the scope of this diploma thesis. Therefore, only theories that have been connected with Alice Munro’s writing or that are used to analyse her writing are mentioned in this chapter.

The late 1960s and early 1970s produced the feminist movement and a literary culture strongly influenced by the feminist practice of consciousness-raising: with the emphasis of telling about women ‘as they really are’, both to destroy traditional patriarchal images of women and to produce new female role models and contemporary liberated feminist heroines [...]. (Becker 106)

This is in accord with Gold’s assessment of Munro’s work. He is convinced that Munro aims to depict “authentic, believable women, women whose childhood and adolescence are preparation for womanhood as well as adulthood [...]” (Gold 7) in her stories. Munro often presents protagonists who break free from their “conformity to prevailing cultural images of women and their proper roles” (Howells Worlds 123). They are often educated and intelligent

which enables them “to deviate openly from the social norms, to escape from this community, and so write their life stories in different ways from their mothers” (Howells, “Worlds” 124).

In a speech honouring Alice Munro Jane Smiley describes how Munro presents the women in her stories:

No woman in an Alice Munro story is ever less than an agent of her own existence, no matter how impoverished or powerless her circumstances, and no woman’s circumstances, in an Alice Munro story, are seen to be trivial. Alice Munro understands, and communicates, that a moral life full of drama can be lived by any woman, in fact, must be lived by every woman (Smiley).

While some of Munro’s critics assert that Munro “is not what one would call a feminist writer (May, “About” x), despite her being “concerned with the issues that confront women (May, “About” x), others argue that her “work is conducive to feminist reading” (Duncan 63), especially in regard to Munro’s later work, where more and more “women break loose from their conventional roles, [and] shake off their [...] passivity” (Duncan 63-64).

Howells concedes that Munro’s focus might not be solely on women, though she argues that Munro is primarily interested in “how female characters re-examine and revise their lives” (Howells, *Contemporary* 57). In a review of *The Love of a Good Woman* Gorra argues that though men are represented in Munro’s stories, she “almost always presents her men as seen by women” (Gorra). Furthermore, Howells is convinced that in stories where she depicts “relationships between men and women” the female figures are defined in “resistance to masculine constructions, as each woman seeks not a room of her own but a space of her own where she can escape the constraints of expectation imposed upon her” (*Contemporary* 57).

Howells argues that Munro “has traced the seductive maps of the feminine imaginary, showing how closely a woman’s sense of identity is bound up with sexuality and desire that seems to defy age and experience” (*Contemporary* 70) continuously during her writing career. Löschnigg’s views on this are quite similar. She claims that female characters are often defined by the male signification of their bodies, or expressed differently, they “have internalized the male gaze and struggle to protect the vulnerability of their (aging) bodies” (“Oranges” 72).

Löschnigg claims that “Alice Munro’s feminism is implicit and non-programmatic” (“Oranges” 60) because she challenges traditional ideologies like patriarchal structures with her relativist mode of writing for the purpose of revealing that fixed models are not able to capture the life stories of women (Löschnigg, “Oranges” 60). Instead of adopting another

fixed view, like some rigid forms of feminism, she “leads us to accept two (or more) truths, two (or more) options, this *and* the other, instead of an either/or opposition” (Löschnigg, “Oranges” 61). Therefore, she is able to avoid “yet another master discourse characterized by binary schemes of thought, her setting – in the Cixousian sense – of ‘multiple heterogeneous *difference*’, which marks the essence of her inherent feminist impact” (Löschnigg, “Oranges” 61).

Therefore, Löschnigg is able to identify the feminist influence in Munro’s writing in “her foregrounding of ‘gender-scripts’, a concept referring to culturally acquired characteristics of femininity which are rendered as biologically determined” (“Oranges” 61). In her stories depicting the transition to adulthood Munro is able to reveal the absurdity of predetermined gender roles (Löschnigg, “Oranges” 61). Additionally, Löschnigg identifies several feminist issues that emerge from Munro’s texts: “her questioning of gender-scripts, her revision of the fairy-tale pattern, her critical featuring of maternity and gender segregation, and the victimization of women on various levels and in various forms, including the commodification of the female body” (“Oranges” 62). Because of “her interrogative multivalent writing technique” (Löschnigg, “Oranges” 62) she manages to subvert “rigid patriarchal structures without running the risk of proposing yet another totalizing model of thought” (Löschnigg, “Oranges” 62). Löschnigg connects Munro’s fluid discourse with “Derrida’s idea of the ‘free-play of discourse’, or Barthes’s ‘plural text’, which also form the basis of Hélène Cixous’s idea of *écriture féminine*” (Löschnigg, “Oranges” 62). She views Cixous’s concept as conducive for a feminist reading of Munro’s writing, however she cautions to view it as essentialist (Löschnigg, “Oranges” 62).

The above already mentioned fairy-tale pattern is reversed in several of Munro’s stories because her heroines often seek their autonomy instead of waiting for a hero to rescue them (Löschnigg, “Oranges” 64). Despite her frequent rejection of traditional roles “it would be wrong to argue that Munro’s female characters all successfully overcome the restrictions of gender-scripts or happily break out of unhappy marriages” (Löschnigg, “Oranges” 66). Instead, “they offer to the reader a whole range of alternatives, often through complex reflections on the part of female characters, and through Munro’s multi-layered narrative texture, which urges a questioning of gender norms” (Löschnigg, “Oranges” 66). Although traditional roles are often rejected, mothers always play an important role in Munro’s fiction. Redekop even attributes to Munro an “obsession with mothering” (1) and shows how many

manifestations the figure of the mother has in Munro's stories and how the mothers in her stories struggle to accommodate their different roles (see Redekop 1-11).

At the end of her article about feminist implications in Munro's writing Löschnigg concludes that "Alice Munro is both a feminist and *not* a feminist writer" ("Oranges" 75). She justifies this stance by foregrounding how Munro challenges gender-scripts and depicts various female perspectives without submitting to prescriptive models and therefore "deconstructs power as such through her insistently interrogative approach" ("Oranges" 75). Löschnigg's assessment of Munro connection to feminism seems to be in line with Munro's own view on that matter. When asked by Harold Horwood if she is a feminist she answers: "Yes, I think I am. Of course everybody defines it differently. I'm a feminist about certain measures that I would support. But if it's defined more broadly as an attitude to life which is imposed on me by someone else, then I don't accept that" (Horwood 133). However, she concedes: "In fiction I not only don't think of feminist politics, but of the class struggle, or anything else; I think of what's going on *in* my story and that is all" (Horwood 134).

4.1.5 Regionalism

Region is a very important element in Canadian literature, and can even "be seen as a decisive factor in shaping the contemporary short story" (Löschnigg *Contemporary* 6), where rural areas feature extensively. Deborah Treisman calls Munro a regional writer because she is deeply ingrained in the landscape and social life of small towns in a particular region, southwestern Ontario (Thacker, *Biography* 499). Alice Munro's stories are often set in small towns in southwestern Ontario, where she is originally from. Despite this fact, and the assumption that she has put southwestern Ontario on the map or given it a voice (see Thacker, *Biography* 570), May argues that it is not quite appropriate to call her a regionalist writer (May, "About" x).

When asked in an interview with Tim Struthers about Wingham and other regional material in her stories, she agrees that this material functions as furniture of her stories, because it is familiar to her. However, she challenges all assumptions of her as writer of regionalism with the following statement:

I never think I'm writing a story about Wingham or I'm writing a story about a Southwestern Ontario small town. Ever. I just use that stuff because it is familiar to me. [...] I think this is a total confusion about what fiction is. They want a picture of the town, and they want a picture that they find agreeable, and I'm not concerned with any kind of comprehensive picture." (Struthers 33).

However, she is still often considered a regional writer. In another interview she stresses that

geography is very unimportant. [...] A lot of people think I'm a regional writer. And I use the region where I grew up a lot. But I don't have any idea of writing to show the kind of things that happen in a certain place. These things happen and the place is part of it. But in a way, it's incidental." (Hancock 200).

Thacker is convinced that Munro is not a mere regional writer, because she is "a writer who transcends the narrowly provincial, ironically, by knowing her home place so well and focusing so unerringly on its details, its textures." (*Biography* 458).

4.2 Narrative Technique

To begin this chapter about Munro's narrative technique, it seems appropriate to cite an interview she has given, where she states her flexibility:

It has never occurred to me to work towards a style. I don't think I have a style. I don't recognize a style. I would probably call it something else. I would call it a way of telling a story. Or something like that. There I like to be fairly flexible (Hancock 219).

Nevertheless, it is the aim of this chapter to identify a few key characteristics of Munro's writing.

Blodgett argues that her style appears intimate and compassionate but at the same time there are contradictions and even paradoxes (Blodgett 72). Munro's stories have many different levels or layers, and for the meaning to unfold in the course of a story, what the reader knows is constantly revised, and even at the end of a story there is often no final conclusion (see Blodgett 77). The revision of meaning happens in different ways. First, there is temporal disordering; the reader simply does not get the whole truth at one time, but meaning is revised again and again by new information from the past and present. Second, there are alternations of perspective (see Duncan 105), which will be discussed in more detail in the section about narration. This is also indicated by Howells, who argues that Munro's "narratives depend on shifts from one point in time to another, from one point of view to another, covering and recovering the same ground from different angles" ("Indeterminacy" 142). Because the stories never fully dissolve inconsistencies, Howells argues that in Munro's fiction "truth [is] indistinct and meaning indeterminate, like the direction of the story itself which is always shifting its ground" ("Indeterminacy" 142). Howells also points out that Munro's stories often lack connections, which makes them appear discontinuous, which often encourages the reader even more to find those connections, and therewith meaning ("Worlds" 121). Howells' assertions tie in perfectly with what Munro has expressed in an interview with Geoff Hancock: "I think I was writing about kind of random connections of lives. I just wanted a feeling of this randomness" (193). In the same interview Hancock asks her whether she likes

having “several layers of meaning and intent” to which she responds: “What I like is not really know what the story is all about. And for me to keep trying to find out.” (196). To further her argument Howells highlights the gaps in Munro’s fiction that she calls enclosed spaces. She argues that Munro’s “narrators are aware that language never quite connects with the experience it evokes, and the reader is made aware by the spaces typographically signalled between different segments of the story that gaps leave room for more meanings than they formulate” (“Indeterminacy” 142).

Another feature of Munro’s writing is the use of intertextuality. She frequently uses other texts in her writings such as the bible or literary sources in her short stories (see Martin 189). Another example of her use of intertextuality are letters or newspapers, some of them fictitious, some real, which represent “materialized items of truth” and add “[a]dditional layers of meaning” (Löschnigg, *Contemporary* 25).

To highlight the paradox in Munro’s writing, Martin emphasises the oppositions and inconsistencies in her stories and argues that these “produce ironies and paradoxes, but also sometimes moments of vision in which the oppositions are reconciled or are seen as parallel [...]” (12-13). Although Martin argues that Munro continually surprises the reader “with new characters, modes and insights” (205), he offers some generalisations about her writing:

She achieves thematic richness by establishing oppositions, incongruities and paradoxes, often breaking down chronological sequences or allowing the sophisticated adult to recall the freshness and vivacity of the child’s experience in order to juxtapose such contraries as the strange and the familiar and the touchable and the mysterious, or alien (205).

Munro often uses a retrospective technique which allows her to move around in time. Martin has found this technique already in a quite early story and describes the technique: “the reader starts in medias res, which hold him in suspense while the missing but suspected antecedent horrors are filled in” (Martin 32). The retrospective technique Munro is using shows the reader “[...] the best of both worlds; she induces us to accept within the perceptions of child perspectives that could only be in the retrospective awareness of an adult” (Martin 59). Munro’s use of narrative time will be addressed more detailed in a following section.

In the *National Post* Jane Urquhart finds a very apt description of Munro’s writing:

Munro never lets us walk away without knowing that some other narrative was possible, and she has always been a master at showing us how missed cues and misperceptions can alter the course of an entire life. And an entire life is what we get in each of these stories, the full canvas. One of the great mysteries of Alice Munro’s genius as a writer

of short stories is just how she manages to cause her readers to feel closer to the characters she creates than they do to certain members of their own family (qtd. in Thacker, *Biography* 516).

As can be seen, it is quite hard finding a narrow definition for Munro's writing, therefore it is best to conclude with a remark of Munro herself: "It's hard to generalize at all because I think that each story is quite different. That they are quite different in whatever it is I am trying to get in them" (Hancock 201).

4.2.1 Structure

Blodgett calls Munro's sense of structure random and explains that her stories often

seem to be merely accumulations of reminiscences that go to a certain point, then resume at a different moment. The act, then of reading Munro forces one to observe the action that comprises the story as planes set at different angles, but all drawn toward some moment of clarity in which the various planes are reilluminated" (Blodgett 35).

The structure of Munro's stories often appears "accidental" because the plot does not have a strictly structured design, and the protagonists seem at the mercy of their fate (Blodgett 119). In an interview with Geoff Hancock Munro describes how she writes a story: "I have this picture. It generates some other images and attracts them like a magnet. Things stick to it. Anecdotes and details. I just feel that so much of it is in the dark. The structure of the story is building up, and you don't see the final shape at all." (216). Her way of writing a story could be the reason why Ross argues that Munro frequently places ceremonial events at the centre of her stories. She gives examples "such as a school play, an annual party, a dance, a first date, a home-coming, or a memorial service" ("Legend" 113) and argues that these often represent an "encounter with death and the initiating into sexual roles" (113). Another description of her stories' structure is provided by Carrington who identifies the following characteristic elements: "[...] a watcher, a sense of something secret, a sudden revelation of the secret, and a struggle to control the threatening results of this revelation" (38).

4.2.2 Time

Munro's use of narrative time has already been mentioned briefly in connection with her narrative technique, but this chapter aims to explore it further. Blodgett describes Munro's retrospective technique quite aptly:

[...] time in Munro appears to owe more to chance than anything resembling clock time. Nevertheless, the space within which the figure plays always appears to move along various layers of time, part of the object being to find how these layers relate. No single layer, however, gives the meaning, so one can begin almost anywhere (Blodgett 17).

Thacker argues that Munro had already perfected her retrospective narrative technique in her first collection and calls the way in which past and present intermingle in her stories “the catalytic factor in Munro’s substantial art” (“Clear” 37). This moving between past and present instead of a linear progression of time in Munro’s stories shows the reader how past and present are interconnected (see Blodgett 74). Munro often uses memory for her shifts in time, “without attempting conclusions. And [...] to prompt uncanny similarities between past and present, suggesting that in the recurrence of the similar something transcends what is really before us now” (Blodgett 132). Duncan emphasises that because memory connects the present and past of someone’s life, it can be both seen as “a source of guilt” and “a means of escape (103).

Munro’s use of time is also important in terms of the narrator. By using temporal distance the split between the older and younger self of the narrator becomes more obvious. The use of the retrospective technique can occur both with first- and third-person narrators (see Carrington 6). Furthermore, Carrington lists Munro’s “manipulation of narrative time as a possible reason for critics to view her stories as novelistic, arguing that the broad time frame gives them “the breadth of novels” (7). In addition, May argues that unlike many other late twentieth century short story writers, she details her stories elaborately “as if she had all the time in the world” (*Brother* 235). However, he stresses that “a Munro story is deceptive; it lulls the reader into a false sense of security in which time seems to comfortably stretch out like everyday reality, only to suddenly turn and tighten so intensely that the reader is left breathless” (May, *Brother* 235).

Another feature of Munro’s use of narrative time is the way she presents her “reminiscence so that it gives the appearance of immediacy” (Thacker, “Clear” 53). Thacker attributes this to “Munro’s physical descriptions and other exact details [that] lend such clarity to the presentation that readers think the events are unfolding before them” (“Clear” 53). Furthermore, the voice of the more mature narrator “seldom intrudes overtly; instead, it is subtly present to instruct, clarify, and expand the younger narrator’s pronouncements” (Thacker, “Clear” 56).

In an interview with Munro, Geoff Hancock mentions her interesting way of describing the passage of time: “There’s a very strong sense that your stories are about how time is remembered. There are gaps. It’s not just chronological time. It’s ‘felt time.’ The story isn’t really realistic in its time. But it’s realistic in the way time is felt to be real” (200). Her

response is equally interesting: “Well, I like doing that a lot. I like looking at people’s lives over a number of years, without continuity. Like catching them in snapshots” (Hancock 200).

4.2.3 Place

Place holds an important position in Alice Munro’s stories. She mainly uses settings in southwest Ontario, where she grew up, and British Columbia, where she lived for some time, also features repeatedly. However, she has extended her settings more and more in the course of her writing career. A good example of this would be the title story of *Too Much Happiness*, which will be analysed in the following section.

Critics find the place she sets her stories in terribly important; however, Munro comments on that when interviewed by Geoff Hancock:

[...] to me, that kind of geography is very unimportant. I don’t think that a story in which the characters go through their actions in, say Tokyo, is somehow a deeper story with a kind of meaning in it you can’t have if the characters do those things in Moose Jaw. I don’t think the setting matters at all. [...] But I don’t have any idea of writing to show the kind of things that happen in a certain place. These things happen and the place is part of it (200).

Löschnigg identifies place as a “major linking device in Munro’s stories” (*Contemporary* 21) and confirms that they are mostly set in Canada. She argues that the stories that are set in southwestern Ontario, or Huron County to be more specific, are in the majority. She emphasises the “authentic feel” Munro has acquired for this region and connects the “‘superficial’ verisimilitude” that is so often mentioned in connection with Munro’s writing to this place. In contrast, she considers the settings in British Columbia to be more constructed. In the topic Munro’s stories feature Löschnigg recognises a connection to place. Whereas Munro sets her mysterious or dark stories in southwestern Ontario, the stories set in British Columbia focus “on young married couples, motherhood, and on the intricacies and difficulties of relationships” (Löschnigg, *Contemporary* 21).

Another point of view on place in Munro’s stories comes from Charman, who argues that “the natural world in Munro’s stories actually derives more from textual representations than from actual experiences” (May, “About” xi). Therefore, Munro’s places have to be seen more as “literary than geographical” (May, “About” xi). This view is also held by Beran, who identifies intertextuality in the creation of Munro’s settings. The literary allusions she uses come “from fairy tales, Christian and classical mythology, and the works of other writers to create an imaginary landscape” (May, “About” xi).

Huron County features so frequently in Munro's stories that it has been completely connected with her name. Thacker names two examples of the nicknames for Munro's home place that are connected to her. The first and less frequently used is "Munroviana" and the second, often used by commentators is "Alice Munro County" and illustrates Munro's importance for this place by stressing that "Huron County was being seen as a mythical place, a literal place made magical by its rendering in Alice Munro's fiction" (Thacker, *Biography* 463). Although often depicted in Munro's stories, Vancouver features differently from southwestern Ontario in her stories. Possibly mirroring the view of Vancouver as "archetypal postmodern metropolis" (Cox, "Vancouver" 64) it is often featured as alien and inauthentic. Additionally, it frequently "represents a transitional space rather than a place where they can assimilate" (Cox, "Vancouver" 66) for her protagonists.

Simonds identifies a change during Munro's writing career concerning the naming of places. She argues that later in Munro's career the places in her stories are more likely to be unnamed, even if they are identifiable because of their description. Additionally, she finds that the titles of about a fifth of Munro's stories are linked to place (37).

4.2.4 Narrator and Characters

Löschnigg argues that "[...] Munro's writing constantly experiments with shifting points of view, thus highlighting the importance of who sees." (*Contemporary* 42). Munro uses first-person and third-person limited narrators, often using a retrospective technique, as well as omniscient narration, which can achieve a more dramatic effect (see Martin 151).

Munro often uses a confiding first-person narrator to tell her stories, so frequently, in fact, that it has been considered characteristic of her short stories (see Duncan 19). By analysing "The Peace of Utrecht" as an example Duncan elucidates characteristic attributes of Munro's first-person stories. She finds "[...] temporal and spatial, shifts; the systematic purposeful arrangement of narrative sections; and the use of tense and aspect to convey nuances in the narrator's retrospection" (19). Furthermore, Duncan also argues that there are continual changes of focalization because "[t]he adult narrator is not the same as the young girl who is sometimes the subject of focalization [...]", which, she argues, "creates a kind of dual voice" (19). Martin argues that this "allows the stories to be confessional, intimate, fresh and lively, and at the same time informed with mature and ironic perception" (45).

Using third-person narrators, Munro filters the information about the other characters of a story through the mind of a reflector and therefore restricts the knowledge of the reader to the knowledge of the third-person narrator or protagonist (see Grabes 122-124). Carrington points

out that by moving from one point in time to another in the narration Munro generates “an internal split between the experiencing participant and the observing, retrospective narrator” (7). Furthermore, he argues that in stories narrated by a third-person narrator, a double split frequently occurs. One of these is the same kind of split that can be found in first-person narrators, and the second is a split between the protagonist and an omniscient narrator who frequently comments ironically on the situation (Carrington 7). It is characteristic of Alice Munro’s short stories for the focaliser to shift “between narrator and protagonist, older and younger self” (Blodgett 25). Blodgett argues that this shift in the focalisation can be identified by specific words or even punctuation, for example adjectives or semicolons, that can be identified as comments of the older or younger selves (see 25). Furthermore, Carrington identifies Munro’s narrators and protagonists as watchers. He argues that they watch themselves and others, and ultimately are watched by an omniscient narrator (see 7-8). Another oddity he points out about narrators and protagonists is that they are often writers (see 206).

It is clear that Munro gives it a lot of thought whether to use first- or third-person narration. In an interview with Tim Struthers she argues that she gets a feel for which type of narration she should use in a story. Furthermore, she points out

[...] a lot of my stuff I write in both first and third person. Or I start off one way, and then I do it the other way. And sometimes I have to do it in both to get the final. I’m doing that right now. Rewriting in third person something I’ve written in first person because there were things I couldn’t know until I wrote it in first person (Struthers 24).

Sometimes Munro uses more than one focaliser in her stories. By providing multiple perspectives the importance of events can be stressed (see Blodgett 143). This means she does not only use it when she shows us the mind of a narrator when he or she is younger and more mature, but also with two different persons acting as focaliser. The shifts in perspective achieve several functions. Firstly, by using external focalisation, Munro can present the scene and characters; secondly, “by juxtaposing the external and the internal viewpoints, she immediately generates a tension between” (Duncan 43) different portrayals. By using this “shifting focalization [Munro] lays bare the chasm in understanding that each characters has of the other” (Duncan 48). Contrasting and providing multiple perspectives is also how Munro creates her characters. Rather than depicting a single character she always presents the reader with contrasting pairs to provide more complexity in her character construction (see Glover 48-50).

Blodgett notices comments by Alice Munro's narrators in her stories that could be interpreted as metafictional, and argues that those comments are supposed to remind the reader that the story is fictional and to encourage the reader to question the story (see 72). Blodgett has called statements by the narrator that often appear as metafictional comments "interruptions because they intervene in the narrative moment" (73). The purpose of these "interruptions" is to bring to mind how problematic issues of truth, knowledge and perception can be within fiction, especially as they refer to something outside of the story (Blodgett 73).

4.2.5 Irony

Irony seems to be one of Munro's frequently used rhetoric devices. While Martin asserts that Munro "has an ironic vision" (61), McMullen points out that "[i]rony is at the core of Munro's view of humanity and events" (161). Furthermore, Carrington claims that "the ironic reversal of both the characters' and the readers' expectations" is "one of the most characteristic patterns" of Munro's writing (14). Howells argues that this use of irony enables Munro to "keep different, often contradictory, meanings in circulation" ("Indeterminacy" 144). Another reason for writers using irony is to distance themselves from the story, and therefore they are able to "suspend judgment" and to enable readers to interpret the meaning of a story themselves (Orange 92-93). Martin argues that the effects Alice Munro's irony produces are often comic, however, he emphasises that she is never sarcastic, because even if she displays something grotesque the final impression emerging from her writing always involves compassion and humanity. However, by using irony she is able to depict people and situations unsentimentally (61, 185).

Despite Munro's "ironic sense of humor" (*Controlling* 5) which makes her stories funny, Carrington finds them "often intensely uncomfortable to read. The final emotional residue that many of her stories leave behind – paradoxically both because of her humor and in spite of it – is a lingering sense of unresolved ambiguity and dismayed unease" (5).

4.2.6 Autobiography

Many critics argue that Munro's writing has a "strong autobiographical dimension" (Löschnigg, *Contemporary* 20). According to Thacker "[a]utobiography is imbedded in Alice Munro's work, autobiography always resonant with fictional imaginings [...], and she can be seen as always 'writing her lives,' the lives she has both lived and imagined" (Thacker, *Biography* 18-19). However, seeing Munro's stories as simple rendition of her life would be too easy. Löschnigg argues that "Munro's continual revisiting of places as well as her re-associating with characters and her re-evaluation of situations have to be seen as an ongoing

process of re-examination of her life-experience, a testing of possibilities rather than a smoothly connected life-story" (*Contemporary* 20).

In an interview with Tim Struthers Munro has called what critics have identified as autobiography "personal material" and juxtaposes this to with "straight autobiographical material" (17). Osachoff argues that the assumption of Munro's work as autobiographical could be based on the type of first-person narration Munro often uses, like in *Lives of Girls and Women* (61). However she is also aware of her narrators diminishing this impression by being "conscious of the problems that are involved in using autobiographical material" (62), which emphasises that the memories are fictional and belong to the narrator. In the end, she comes to the conclusion that "[t]he 'I' of a story is not Munro, although the narrator and writer may have memories and concerns in common" (63). Munro herself has talked about drawing from facts of her own life in a 1974 radio broadcast: "Most of the incidents I use do have their starting point in something that really happens. [...] There's always a starting point in reality" (*CBC*). However, she then goes on changing what has happened in real life and transforms it into a story. In Thacker's biography of Alice Munro he argues that she has frequently "drawn on the factual details of her life – where she has been, whom she has known, her roots, what has happened, how things have turned out – in the fiction she has published" (*Biography* 16). However, he stresses that she probably does not do so more than other professional writers (see 16).

One of these factual details Munro often uses in her stories is the place she has grown up in, Wingham, or on a larger scale Huron County or southwest Ontario. Thacker argues that "there is no doubt that Wingham's geography, economic bases, demographics, and cultural ethos have been shaping presences in her fictional imaginings." (*Biography* 43). Another personal feature Munro frequently uses are her parents' lives. Thacker relays that in "The Peace of Utrecht", which is about Munro's mother, she tries to come to terms with her death. For him this "represents Munro's imaginative homecoming to Wingham after her years away in Vancouver, home to the personal material that would subsequently become her hallmark." (*Biography* 150). Subsequently, the death of her father also inspired her writing and "after his death [he] became an intimate presence in the fabric of her breakthrough stories of the late 1970s and into the 1980s." (Thacker, *Biography* 316). Thacker argues that Alice Munro has already tried to rework personal material into fiction in some of her earlier stories from the 1950s, although he concedes that they are not as emotionally deep as the stories where she tries to come to terms with what happened to her mother. He also stresses the connection with

Wingham (*Biography* 131-132). As for what Munro has to say about using autobiography in her stories, there is an interesting statement in an interview with Geoff Hancock: “Most of my stories aren’t nearly as much [autobiographical] as people think” (215).

It might be worth mentioning that many of the more autobiographical stories were not included in the collections that she put together at the time they were written because Munro thought they did not fit in with the other stories. These she included in her collection *The View from Castle Rock*, which was considered the most autobiographical collection until the publication of *Dear Life* (see Thacker, *Biography* 528-529).

4.2.7 Illumination

One can often find a moment of illumination in Munro’s stories, when a narrator has a revelation about something. Munro likes to call an instant like that “queer bright moment” (Duncan 72). Another phrase that has been mainly used by critics in connection with Munro illuminating something is “clear jelly” from her story “Material” (see Thacker “Clear”). Blodgett, for example reasons that “the sense of illumination that it contains may be found everywhere in Munro’s work” (Blodgett 150). In the foreword to *The Moons of Jupiter* Munro expresses her fondness for illuminating moments, writing: “I think there should be a queer bright moment like that in every story” (Munro, *Moons* xv). Duncan argues that these moments represent “the core of her narrative – a crucial scene, or image, or narrative comment” (74) and will clear some of the mystery in her stories, but these moments are never intended to entirely solve them. Furthermore, Duncan finds the word “queer” so suitable for Munro’s insights because they emphasise the strangeness of her revelations (see 74). What has been described above could also be called an epiphany, however, these moments of illumination often have an elusive quality, and therefore, that term would be too narrow (see Howells, “Indeterminacy” 147).

Several scholars have commented on the lack of revelation in Munro’s epiphanic moments, which makes them somehow ambivalent. For example, Murphy highlights that she “frequently undercuts [...] the epiphany-like closure of her earlier stories with speculations about the tricks memory plays. Rearranging details, confusing fact and fantasy, and simply mistrusting perception, Munro’s characters stumble upon moments of ‘accidental clarity’ [...] which lead nowhere and prove nothing” (Murphy 50). Similarly, Löschnigg argues that the revelatory moments in earlier stories were more epiphany-like, however, “this is questioned in more recent stories by the foregrounding of the unreliability, limitation and insufficiency of this insight [...]” (Löschnigg, *Contemporary* 28). The reason for depicting epiphanies as

unreliable structures could be that Munro likes “to look at what people don’t understand. What we don’t understand. What we think is happening and what we understand later on, and so on” (Hancock 201).

4.2.8 Endings

Endings are a very important part of Munro’s stories, especially because it is the one part of her stories she keeps working on and rewriting the most, even if she has an already approved ending for a story ready to be published. Thacker has expressed the importance of her endings thus: “the endings of her stories always matter, they get the most attention, the most frequent changes” (*Biography* 563). The importance of the ending is also indicated by what Munro said about endings in an interview with Geoff Hancock:

I know the ending when I start a story. But that sometimes changes as I go through it. I don’t have any worry, ever, about the end. It may change a bit or something may be substituted but the ending is one of the things that is there very early. Almost as early as that kernel [...] the centre of the story (224).

Munro often uses indeterminate or open endings in her stories, where she provides no definite solution in the end and leaves the reader to determine the meaning for themselves (Howells, *Contemporary* 77-78). This is accord with what Munro has said about the meaningfulness of her endings in an interview with Tim Struthers:

So in those stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* there’s an awful lot of meaningful last sentences. There’s an awful lot of very, very important words in each last little paragraph. And that’s something that I felt was necessary at the time for the stories to work. [...] And now, I would go back, if I could rewrite most of those stories, and I would chop out a lot of those words and final sentences. And I would just let each story stand without bothering to do the summing up, because that’s really what it amounts to (9).

The endings of Munro’s short stories are very important, they can change the meaning of the whole story, however, her endings are often ambiguous and deny clear meaning (see Blodgett 17). Blodgett considers “the function of closure to reflect upon the story in order to adumbrate its truth as specific meaning” as characteristic of Munro’s writing, arguing that the primary task of Munro’s narrators is “to suggest the meaning by both indirection and reflection” (22-23). This is substantiated by Martin who believes that “[a] writer like Alice Munro does not want her meanings and designs to be exposed too plainly; the reader must be given the task, and the pleasure, of discovering as much as possible of these for himself” (81). He explains that this seems to be the reason for Munro to not depict the meaning of her stories clearly but rather to place clues on the margins of her stories for the readers to find. Martin assumes that

relaying the meanings more clearly would not only limit the reader's pleasure in deciphering the clues but also restrict the meaning of her stories in general (81).

4.2.9 Paradox and Parallel

Munro often uses paradox in her stories. Many critics have noticed these paradoxes and Martin goes even further by claiming that the usual method of Munro is to present the reader with "paradoxes and contrasts [that] surprise us with parallels, and vice versa" (104). McMullen argues that "Munro uses the paradoxes of language to reveal the paradoxes of life and the ambiguities of language to reveal the ambiguities of experience" (145). She expresses these paradoxes by using contradictory descriptions and as a consequence is able to convey the complexities of the world (see McMullen 145-146). Furthermore, McMullen identifies the centrality of paradox in Alice Munro's work in many different features. She argues that Munro's characters and/or narrators are developing an awareness for

the paradoxical nature of the world and of humanity – the coexistence of the dull with the exciting, the grotesque with the commonplace, the prosaic with the romantic, the mundane with the marvellous – and the difficulty, of not the impossibility, of distinguishing the real and meaningful from the illusory and delusive (144-145).

Though not denying a humorous component of Munro's use of paradox, McMullen argues that Munro's practice goes much further than superficial comicality because it reveals "a doubling of perspective" by utilising the paradox in the structure as well as in technical or linguistic form (145). It is important to stress that the paradox in Munro "is embedded in the story's structure, not in any array of oxymorons. The structure, by transposing the intently dramatic into something almost commonplace, shows how life contradicts the expectations of art" (Noonan 165). However, she nevertheless uses "descriptive adjectives [that] are often contradictory, oxymoronic" (Noonan 170).

Martin observes, that Munro conveys her insights not only in contradictions but also in parallels (1). Her depictions often look contrary at the first glance, however, "by a characteristically paradoxical twist, it turns out to be parallel to the first, the same but in a different form: the familiar and the ordinary becomes strange to the point of mystery" (Martin 10). Martin calls this occurrence of paradoxes and parallels in Munro's fiction "the pervasive motif of similarity and difference, familiarity and strangeness, and ultimately of the sense of multifariousness and mystery which is a key to her imagination and vision" (41). Glover also argues that Munro's style is built on "parallel contrasts: characters, families, ways of speaking, even homes and neighbourhoods" (48) and reasons that "[t]his system of composing

by parallel and antithesis extends to Munro's subplots" (50). Furthermore, Glover explains that Munro

clearly also composes with an eye to elaborating this system of repetitions, parallels, reflectors, and contrasts. Munro deliberately juxtaposes similar or parallel scenes to add a dimension of meaning not contained in the mere story. Similar things – characters, scenes, locations, families – are contrasted, and different things are stamped with unexpected similarity, creating a complex structure of inter-relation, cross-reference, and identity not, perhaps, reducible to a single simple theme (54).

4.3 Recurring Themes and Motifs

Some critics have accused Munro of being repetitive or boring in her themes and stories, however, others have praised that although she often returns to themes of earlier stories, Munro always manages a fresh look at them (see Martin 14-15). Munro manages not to repeat herself when she is re-exploring a theme. Although one can identify basic similarities in the theme, she always uncovers something that has been hidden before. "[B]y returning to the same theme, she clarifies her misconception of what she thought was happening and sees what she had not understood in her earlier attempt" (Carrington 98). Munro has commented on this in an interview with Tim Struthers: "It may be that you do have to go back over and over again and mine the same material and look at it in different ways, or in the same way, and sometimes you get to it and sometimes you don't" (12). In a review of her collection *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* Franklin writes that "several of the stories read as answers to stories that Munro has written before" (Franklin), which strengthens the view expressed by Carrington above.

Blodgett identifies change as a prominent theme evident everywhere in Munro's writing, as well as the consequences of change (33). One of those changes has already been discussed in her use of narrative time, however, it permeates her stories in more than one way. Blodgett argues that meaning is often derived from change, however, he emphasises that "change is dramatically perceived not as moving from one position to another, but paradoxically, as likeness" (41). Irvine identifies change in the relationships depicted in Munro's stories, her characters and the situations she places them in, as well as in the structure of her stories. Irvine finds the constant change she describes as "flux" fascinating, because it creates an ambivalence that makes meaning harder to grasp (see 99-100). Ultimately, however, Irvine is convinced that Munro's preoccupation with change relates "to her perception of experience as a woman and to the lives of the women about whom she writes" (101).

Löschnigg identifies the mysterious as a key aspect of Munro's stories that has been present in her writing for a long time. However, she is convinced that "her narrative handling of the

mysterious has become more daring, moving in many stories into the realm of the murder mystery [...].” (*Contemporary* 28). Murder mysteries are definitively part of the collection *Too Much Happiness*, which will be analysed in the following chapter. Judith Maclean Miller argues that although Alice Munro often writes mysteries, they are no conventional mystery stories, because they “do not have a detective, or a sidekick. No one pulls the clues together at the end of the story in the library, or anywhere else. No punishment is meted out. There are not even really clues, just bits and pieces of information that appear here and there, floating through silences” (Maclean Miller 43). Löschnigg reasons that Maclean Miller has captured a crucial aspect of Munro’s work with her observation about mysteries in her stories and explains that this has become even more noticeable in Munro’s rather recent stories, where “the secrets hidden below the surface of ‘normality’ have become darker and more menacing” (*Contemporary* 30).

The relationships between parents and their children comprise a theme that can be considered as central in Munro’s work. Munro has repeatedly commented on the influence of her parents on her writing and critics have frequently observed that influence. However, “the centrality of the mother in Munro’s writing” (Irvine 104) is foregrounded most. Carrington argues that Munro has written stories that feature the relationships of parents and their daughters to deal with memories of her own parents that still obsess her. However, he highlights the prevalence of the mother-daughter theme, which is second only to her exhaustive treatment of love in its various forms (see 184)

Munro comments on how her mother has influenced her writing in an interview with Geoff Hancock: “[...] the whole mother-daughter relationship interests me a great deal. It probably obsesses me. The way fathers obsess some male writers” (215). She explains that the intense relationship with her mother has prompted her to approach this topic so often. The illness of her mother, Parkinson’s disease, created a lot of tension that Munro turned into what she considers her first “real story” after the death of her mother, “The Peace of Utrecht” (Hancock 215). The mothers in Munro’s stories often resemble Munro’s own mother in one way or another. Sometimes they struggle with the same or similar impairing illnesses, or they have the same profession as her mother (see Carrington 21, 197). The theme that is the most haunting, however, in the depiction of parent-child relationships is “the dying mother” and how both children and parents have to come to terms with the helplessness that death and terminal illness entail (Carrington 186).

Love is a theme that is frequently portrayed by Munro in her stories in various forms (see Blodgett 130, 152). Furthermore, Carrington argues that the “repeated explorations of the humiliations of love” are a prevailing theme in Munro’s writing (Carrington 184). He also points out that it is significant that sexuality, which can be an expression of love, and death are often associated with each other (Carrington 11).

Carrington argues that death and sex are often linked in Munro’s stories. He gives a few examples, one of them is from *Lives of Girls and Women* when the narrator is almost drowned after intercourse (see 70). Ross also sees a link between sex and death, however, she identifies “[t]he encounter with death and the initiating into sexual roles [as] the two most important ritualized events used [...]” (113).

Death serves as a powerful motif in Alice Munro’s short stories which she acknowledges in an interview with Graeme Gibson where she states that, for her, writing “has something to do with the fight against death, the feeling that we lose something every day, and writing is a way of convincing yourself perhaps that you’re doing something about this” (Gibson 243). Orange, too, is convinced that death permeates Munro’s short stories (96), while Carrington even goes so far as to argue that “[...] the inevitability of death hovers over much of Munro’s fiction” (38), substantiating his claim with the people in her stories who include “the ghosts of dead mothers [...] [and] accidentally killed children and young people” (38).

5 Analysis of the stories in the collection *Too Much Happiness*

The following chapter provides a thorough analysis of the short stories in the collection *Too Much Happiness* by Alice Munro. Each assessment starts with a plot summary and then analyses the characteristics of Alice Munro's writing, which have been discussed in the previous chapters. The analysis will discuss Alice Munro's narrative technique, her writing style, themes and motifs and other significant features of the stories in the collection *Too Much Happiness*.

5.1 Dimensions

5.1.1 Synopsis

The story shows the development of the main character and focaliser, Doree, from a submissive, naïve girl to what may be the start of a new life as an independent woman. The reader encounters Doree as a broken woman. She does not care about her life and she does not seem to have a purpose in life. Gradually, we, as readers discover what happened to her. The reader sees that after her mother died, an older man, whom she viewed as some kind of authority father/mother-figure, takes advantage of her. Doree is already pregnant and married, a year after she met Lloyd (also a year after her mother's death) and they move away from the Sechelt Peninsula in British Columbia into the middle of nowhere. Lloyd becomes more and more controlling, and one night, after a fight with Lloyd, Doree leaves the house. When she gets home the next morning, Lloyd has killed their three children. He does not seem to be sorry, or have any emotion about that. His only motivation seems to be to punish Doree for running out on him. Her friend Maggie calls the police and Lloyd is imprisoned as criminally insane.

Two years after Lloyd has killed their children Doree gets in contact with Lloyd again. It appears as if she is falling back into old patterns. Lloyd is manipulating her to visit him with his letters and it seems as if Doree is beginning to trust him again, and maybe even forgive him. After her first visit he writes her a letter, which makes her come back and see him again. In a second letter he gives her hope, that their children are happy in another dimension. And finally, when the reader fears that the protagonist has given in, something happens. In a car accident that happens right before Doree's eyes a young man is terribly injured and she saves his life by applying techniques she has learned in case something would happen to her children. It seems ironic that Lloyd insisted that she learn those techniques, when applying these techniques to save the young man seems to have given Doree a new purpose in life and a reason not to go back to Lloyd, and maybe even start a new life.

5.1.2 Characters and Characterisation

The two most prominent characters are Doree, the protagonist and Lloyd her criminally insane husband. Other characters that are developed to some point are Doree's friend Maggie and Doree's psychiatrist Mrs. Sands. Maggie's husband, the bus driver and the motorist are not developed and only have supporting roles.

Doree is the focaliser and main protagonist of the story. We encounter her first as a broken woman who likes her work because "it occupied her thoughts to a certain extent and tired her out so that she could sleep at night" (Munro, *TMH* 1). So the reader knows from the beginning that she experienced something traumatic that makes it hard to sleep. She is oppressed by her husband, which becomes clear in numerous scenes and sentences. Here are a few examples: "She had got out of the way of wearing makeup because he hadn't allowed it [...]" (Munro, *TMH* 3).

Also about how easily she had become pregnant at first, and how she didn't so easily anymore, and how that made Lloyd suspicious, so that he went through her dresser drawers looking for birth-control pills – thinking she must be taking them on the sly.

"And are you?" Maggie asked.

Doree was shocked. She said she wouldn't dare.

"I mean, I'd think that was awful to do, without telling him. It's just kind of a joke when he goes looking for them" (Munro, *TMH* 10-11).

When she met Lloyd she was young (16 years old) and impressionable, and therefore it was easy for him to make her dependent on him after her mother's death. She is easily influenced by Lloyd, also when her own opinion is different:

Then Doree asked herself why she should care what Maggie might think. Maggie was an outsider, not even somebody Doree felt comfortable with. It was Lloyd said that, and he was right. The truth of things between them, the bond, was not something that anybody else would understand and it was not anybody else's business. If Doree could watch her own loyalty it would all be alright (Munro, *TMH* 12).

Doree is totally dependent on Lloyd: "No matter how worn out she got with him, he was still the closest person in the world to her, and she felt that everything would collapse if she were to bring herself to tell somebody exactly how he was, if she were to be entirely disloyal" (Munro, *TMH* 14).

The first time she resisted her husband in an argument without trying to placate him or give in, she left the house after the argument to regain her composure and went to her friend Maggie. When she came back Lloyd had already killed their children. With this action he had

taken all the fight out of her, she had a mental breakdown and had to be medicated to be able to calm down. After the death of her children she was dead inside: “For almost two years she had not taken any notice of things that generally made people happy [...]” (Munro, *TMH* 27). She does not seem to care what happens to her. It even seems as if she might come back under Lloyd’s influence, although she denies it to herself. At the end of the story, however, we see a new Doree emerge. Though she is still reserved, we see her taking charge by helping the young man in the accident, even making other people follow her orders. It seems as if in the end she is free of Lloyd’s oppressive influence.

Lloyd is an old hippie, which he has in common with Doree’s mother, however, he is younger than her. He used to be popular with the patients when he was working as a nurse at the hospital Doree’s mother was in, because of his joking manner and “strong touch” (Munro, *TMH* 4). He is authoritative and demands that people listen to him because of his confident demeanour. He has strong opinions and is not afraid to voice them. However, he is also manipulative, controlling and paranoid. The paranoia can be seen in several scenes, for example the issue with breastfeeding (Munro, *TMH* 7), how he is convinced Doree is using birth control without his knowledge (Munro, *TMH* 10-11), and finally the fatal incident, the fight Doree and he have about a tin of spaghetti when Lloyd believes Doree wants to poison him and the children, which leads to her running out after the fight and him killing the children because, according to him, he wanted “to save them the misery [...] of knowing that their mother had walked out on them” (Munro, *TMH* 17). There are several points in the story that show his paranoia and prove his insanity.

He is controlling on several occasions, and here is an assessment from Doree’s perspective on this character trait of Lloyd’s: “It got worse, gradually. No direct forbidding, but more criticism” (Munro, *TMH* 12). He tries to take away Doree’s only friend Maggie, by criticising her repeatedly and making Doree completely dependent on him. Lloyd is not only controlling, he is also sadistic. This sadistic nature can be seen by his words to Doree when she finds their children murdered and he taunts her by saying: “You brought it all on yourself” (Munro, *TMH* 15). Furthermore, we see how manipulative Lloyd is when Doree visits him for the first time in the institution he is imprisoned in and in the letters he writes to her. When Doree visits him in the institution he seems different, weaker, not himself. She describes him as “vacant” (Munro, *TMH* 6) and wonders if he was being medicated. He appeared like a ghost or a character in a dream. Only in his manipulating letters does she glimpse parts of his old self again.

There are two minor characters, Doree's psychiatrist Mrs. Sands and her friend Maggie, who should be characterised briefly because of their support for Doree. Mrs. Sands appears careful and kind as well as insightful. She does not push Doree's thoughts in any direction but lets her discover what she is feeling and thinking herself. Doree's friend Maggie is mostly portrayed negatively with Lloyd's words. While she is described as "tall, flat-chested, cheerful, and opinionated" by the narrator (Munro, *TMH* 10), Lloyd calls her "the Lezzie" (Munro, *TMH* 10). Maggie is a good friend to Doree and senses that something is not right. However, influenced by Lloyd that "Maggie was an outsider, not even someone Doree felt comfortable with" (Munro, *TMH* 12) Doree does not confide in her.

5.1.3 Structure and Narrative Technique

The present time of the story is not determinable precisely, however, that the bus driver calls help on his mobile phone is a clue that the now in the story is either set in the present or the not so distant past. The time frame of the action is a bit more than seven years, from Doree meeting Lloyd for the first time to the present of the story. Furthermore, the time frame can be pieced together by Doree's age when meeting Lloyd, which is 16, her marriage and first pregnancy a year later (Munro, *TMH* 4), the age differences of her children (Munro, *TMH* 7) and that it is two years since Lloyd murdered their children (27).

The present time in the story stretches over several weeks from Doree's first visiting Lloyd to the accident. The second visit happens three weeks after the first (Munro, *TMH* 20), then Doree visits Lloyd the week after. Probably in the week after she receives the first letter (Munro, *TMH* 21) which prompts another visit, probably the week after. After this visit Doree gets another letter, after which several weeks pass before she tries to make her way again to Lloyd, which is interrupted by the accident. Maybe the timespan even amounts to half a year. She has been working for one and a half years when she visits Lloyd for the first time, but it is two years since the murder, so the timespan must be somewhere in between.

There are two distinguishable places where the story takes place. The first one is Mildmay, where Doree and Lloyd moved after their marriage (Munro, *TMH* 4). The second is London, where the facility Lloyd is treated in is located. Both places are located in Ontario, the county Alice Munro was born in. Mildmay is a small rural town, whereas London is a city. Another place that is mentioned is the coast, as the place where Doree grew up, the Sechelt Peninsula in British Columbia. Other places in the story are not identifiable, such as the place Doree lives in now. Other than that it is "a town a good distance away from where she used to live" (Munro, *TMH* 2) and that she has to take three buses to get to the facility, there is no clue to

what town it is exactly. The last place mentioned in passing is Europe, where Maggie spent some time before training to become an optometrist. However, there is no further information provided, nor is it further referenced. This story can be seen as an example of how Munro uses the places she knows best, British Columbia and Ontario.

The story consists of many short scenes which switch between past and present. Therefore, the structure of the story could be called “accumulations of reminiscences that go to a certain point, then resume at a different moment” (35) as Blodgett argues, however, to call this structure random, as he does, would be defining it too narrowly. The “accumulations of reminiscences” (Blodgett 35) and how they are placed keep the reader in suspense. The story is not presented in a linear fashion, which makes it more enthralling and delays the revelation of the dark secret, the murder of the children. Although there seems to be no ceremonial event which Ross often places at the heart of a Munro story, there is nonetheless an “encounter with death” (113) which he has linked with those events. Carrington’s evaluation of the structure of Munro’s stories also has merit (see 38). Although there seems to be no watcher, a dark secret that is not initially revealed permeates the story.

The story is narrated from the point of view of Doree in the form of a third-person limited narrator. No other focaliser becomes obvious and apart from the pieces of the story that comprise Lloyd’s letters, the reader only experiences the story from Doree’s perspective.

There is a moment of illumination at the end of the story. It is on purpose that this is not called an epiphany, because the moments of illumination in Munro never show a definite answer or truth and neither does the one in this story. The accident of the truck driver seems to galvanise Doree. She is able to resuscitate him with techniques she has learned at Lloyd’s insistence in case something happened to their children. However, this moment shows no final solution. The reader does not see whether Doree managed to save the young man or if he dies later from his wounds, nor does the reader see whether Doree’s decision not to visit Lloyd anymore is reversed or not. All we see is a moment in Doree’s life, where it seems as if it might be about to change, so this is an open ending, which is typical for Munro.

The letters Lloyd writes to Doree are intertextual items. They are set apart from the rest of the text by means of spacing and furthermore they are italicised. To call them “materialized items of truth” would be too farfetched, however they do provide “[a]dditional layers of meaning” (Löschnigg, *Contemporary* 25) as well as give hope to Doree, although it is false hope, because the letters are a medium to manipulate Doree into visiting Lloyd again.

There are a few paradoxes that turn into parallels or vice versa in the story. Like Doree, Maggie teaches her children at home, though for entirely different reasons. Whereas for Doree Lloyd was the motivator to keep the children closer to them, in Maggie's case her children have allergies and asthma, which keeps them from going to a regular school. Furthermore, Maggie's character is entirely different from Doree's. She is more mature, and also older and she has experienced life (went to Europe when she was young, had a career before retiring to take care of the kids). Another parallel are Doree's mother and Lloyd, who are both "old hippies". However, he has left the hippie philosophy of life behind and adopted new views: "His philosophy of life had changed as he got older – he believed now in marriage, constancy, and no birth control" (Munro, *TMH* 4).

Ironically, the reason Doree can save the boy at the end of the story is Lloyd, who insisted that she should learn how to deal with emergency situations "in case one of the children had an accident and he wasn't there" (Munro, *TMH* 30). It seems ironic that Lloyd wanted her to learn a technique to save the children, when in the end he was the one to kill them. There is a further irony in the way Doree's children were killed. Lloyd asphyxiated them, and Doree saves the young man by clearing his airway and giving him artificial respiration.

5.1.4 Title, Themes and Motifs

The title clearly refers to the "Dimensions" Lloyd has mentioned to in his letter to Doree, where he writes that he had seen their children in an alternate dimension, where they are well and happy.

I say they exist, not they are alive, because alive means in our particular Dimension, and I am not saying that is where they are. In fact I think they are not. But they do exist and it must be that there is another Dimension or maybe innumerable Dimensions, but what I know is that I have got across to whatever they are in. [...] So after such suffering and solitude there is a Grace that has seen the way to giving me this reward. Me the one that deserves it the least to the world's way of thinking (Munro, *TMH* 25).

The first theme that is identifiable for the reader is death. Even before the death of the children is revealed, the reader gets clues as to what is about to happen. The first clue is in a conversation with Doree's psychiatrist where she says:

"I know these words have been done to death," she said. "But they're still true."

She blushed at what she heard herself say – "death" – but did not make it worse by apologising. (Munro, *TMH* 3)

This scene already alerts the reader that death has a deeper meaning in the story. However, the narrator then deflects from the real tragedy of the story by telling the reader about the death of Doree's mother, and therefore the beginning of the story to the tragic death of the children.

Another clue about the death of the children, which at that point of the story has not yet been revealed, is when Doree relates the first time that she visits her therapist and has been handed a pamphlet in the waiting room that says ““When Your Loss Seems Unbearable ...”” (Munro, *TMH* 8). Even during this scene the death of the children is not referenced, only her mother's death is mentioned. However, there is a brief allusion to what Lloyd has done: “They never spoke of Lloyd in those days. Doree never thought of him if she could help it, and then only as if he were some terrible accident of nature” (Munro, *TMH* 8).

The death of the children is probably the saddest part of the story. Although the actual scene when Lloyd kills the children is not described, the way in which Doree finds the children's bodies and her reaction convey to the reader a feeling of anguish.

Dimitri still in his crib, lying sideways. Barbara Ann on the floor beside her bed, as if she'd got out or been pulled out. Sasha by the kitchen door – he had tried to get away. He was the only one with bruises on his throat. The pillow had done for the others.

“When I phoned last night?” Lloyd said. “When I phoned, it had already happened.

“You brought it all on yourself,” he said (Munro, *TMH* 15).

The first time the theme of hope enters the story is as hopelessness. In a conversation Doree has with Lloyd after he is locked up he claims to not want to interfere with her life, to which Doree almost answers “What life?” (Munro, *TMH* 21) because she has not really felt alive since the death of the children.

Paradoxically, Lloyd, the very person who took hope and love from Doree by murdering their children, gives Doree a feeling of hope again when he writes in his letter to her that he has seen the children in another dimension, where they are happy. Doree is aware that her psychiatrist would have her accept that this is “dangerous nonsense” (Munro, *TMH* 26), and therefore, she does not visit her anymore. She wants to hold on to this feeling of hope, which makes her experience a sliver of happiness again:

She didn't alter her opinion, but she still held on to what he'd written, like a secret. And from time to time, when she was in the middle of spraying a bathroom mirror or tightening a sheet, a feeling came over her. For almost two years she had not taken any notice of the things that generally made people happy, such as nice weather or flowers in bloom or the smell of a bakery. She still did not have that spontaneous sense of happiness, exactly, but she had a reminder of what it was like. [...] It was the idea that

the children were in what he had called their Dimension that came sneaking up on her in this way, and for the first time brought a light feeling to her, not pain (Munro, *TMH* 27).

She holds on to the hope that what he writes is true, because it gives her some solace.

The final sliver of hope that can be glimpsed in the story is when Doree helps to rescue the young boy. The reader can see that there is hope for Doree's future without Lloyd in it as a controlling influence.

As far as gender roles are concerned, Maria Löschnigg argues that "[b]y foregrounding the victimization of women at the hands of male characters, Munro exposes the destructive effects, not only of male chauvinism, but of unbalanced power relations in general" (Löschnigg, "Oranges" 71). In this story we can see that Doree is victimised by her husband. Furthermore, the gender roles in the story seem quite traditional. Doree stays at home with the children, takes care of them, keeps the house in order and does the grocery shopping. However, her role is more than just "traditional", she is submissive to her husband and is not allowed to deviate from his opinions; she is suppressed by him. Lloyd takes on a traditional male role by being the provider of the family. Although his wife teaches the children at home, he teaches their son "about geography and the solar system and the hibernation of animals and how a car runs" (Munro, *TMH* 9), which seem like traditionally male subjects. Although Maggie seems more educated than Doree, has life experience and has worked as an optometrist alongside her husband for a long time, she still represents a traditional female role. She has given up her profession to stay at home with the children and has become a housewife.

This story is quite gloomy in its portrayal of a woman after the death of her children. It manages to convey the despair of the mother upon losing her children, and shows vividly her horrifying experience with her oppressive husband who killed the children out of spite. Despite these obviously negative and depressing themes, the story manages to convey a glimmer of hope at the end, when Doree saves a young man.

5.2 Fiction

5.2.1 Synopsis

I. Joyce is married to Jon. Both are very intelligent but dropped out of school to lead a free life. They settled down later, him as a carpenter and her as a music teacher. Jon falls in love with his apprentice Edie and Joyce moves out. For a time she is very unhappy. She wants Jon to notice what she does and for him to realise that she can be happy without him. She dresses more provocatively and flirts with everybody, drinks too much and talks badly about Edie.

There is some mention of Edie's daughter, who plays the violin in Joyce's music class, however not even her name is mentioned. Joyce is really looking forward to the music recital and it goes brilliantly, but what she was really anticipating does not happen, Edie and Jon are not coming to the performance.

II. Many years later Joyce is married again, she is the third wife of Matt. They seem to lead a comfortable, generally happy life together. They have many friends and many activities they do together or separately. Joyce gets along well with her stepchildren, at least with the one that is discussed in more detail in the story. Joyce and Matt are having a party at their house when Joyce notices a girl. It turns out that the girl is a writer who has published her first book and Joyce sets out to buy her book. Going through the titles of the stories she finds one whose title speaks to her: "Kindertotenlieder", which is also a piece by Mahler, which means something to her as a musician. So she reads it and discovers her own story from a different perspective, from the perspective of Edie's child, Christine, who she assumes to be Christie O'Dell, the writer of the book. This appears partly as a separate story in the story. When she wants to thank Christie for the story, Christie does not seem to recognize her and so Joyce leaves the bookshop thinking that this will probably turn into a good story someday.

5.2.2 Characters and Characterisation

There are quite a few characters in the story. The protagonist and focaliser Joyce; her first husband Jon; his apprentice and later wife Edie; Matt, Joyce's second husband; Sally, his first wife; Doris, his second wife; Tommy, Matt' and Sally's son; Jay, his lover; Christie, possibly Edie's daughter; and also the two main characters of the story within the story the teacher and the child. Characterising all the above mentioned characters would be quite extensive, therefore, only Joyce and Christie and their respective counterparts in the story within the story, will be analysed in more detail.

The story presents Joyce's life from a time of supposed happiness over a period of grief and sadness because of a failed marriage to happiness again. Therefore, there are two quite different characterisations of her in the two parts of the story. In the first part Joyce is described as exceptionally smart and talented with her violin. She seems happy with her life as a music teacher and her husband Jon, leading a relatively simple life. After the break-up of their marriage she is very unhappy and tries different coping mechanisms: she has new friends who have also experienced similar things, so they can complain and drink together. She drinks too much, dresses provocatively and flirts with everybody. She wants to impress her former husband with "how pretty she looked, how sexy and happy, how she was simply

bowling over all the men. [...] Although Jon had never been taken in by showy looks or flirty behaviour, had never thought that was what made her attractive” (Munro, *TMH* 41). In the second part the reader sees a completely different Joyce: she has taken up playing cello again and is “now a professional cellist” (Munro, *TMH* 42). She is married to Matt now and they seem to lead a happy, fulfilled life. Both of them have amicable relationships with their ex-spouses and there are no hard feelings anymore. People envy her and the relationship she and her husband have.

Christie is considered as “rather aloof” (Munro, *TMH* 48) by Tommy and his lover Jay agrees by pointing out that ““She thinks she’s hot shit”” (Munro, *TMH* 49). Also, Joyce’s first impression of her is rather unfavourable: “Joyce has taken an instant dislike to her. The sort of girl, she thinks, whose mission in life is to make people feel uncomfortable. Tagging along [...] to a party at the home of people she doesn’t know but feels right to despise. Because of their easy (shallow?) cheer and their bourgeois hospitality” (Munro, *TMH* 46). However, this negative impression is reversed after Joyce reads Christie’s book, which makes her feel closer to her.

The characters of the story within the story are the teacher and the child, which correspond with Joyce and Christie in the main story. The teacher is described as kind and making jokes to lighten the atmosphere when the children are disappointed with their performance. The teacher is described as joking with the attendant, selling ice cream as well. This does not integrate with the sad picture that is painted in the first part of the main story. At the end of the story within the story the bitterness that characterises Joyce in the first part of the main story is conveyed by an unpleasant laugh by the teacher for her former husband.

The child lives with her mother, who is a recovering alcoholic, however, before she lived in a foster home. She is not very talented for playing the violin but she tries very hard because she loves her teacher. The child is quite shy and undecided, however, maybe this has to do with the presence of the teacher she wants to impress. When the child realises with time that she was used for the information she could provide about her mother and her teacher’s former husband, she becomes bitter but also proud because she vows never to be fooled again. However, in the end she lets go of that as well and simply remembers the love for her teacher and the happiness.

5.2.3 Structure and Narrative Technique

The time frame of the story is about thirty years from the ending of Joyce’s first marriage to a time many years later, when she is married again. It is possible to estimate the time frame by

using the age of Christie, who Joyce presumes to be Edie's daughter, who is "Definitely older" (Munro, *TMH* 48) than thirty.

The story is set on the west coast of Canada. The place where Joyce lives with her first husband is called Rough River, which is later specified to be "a small town on the coast of British Columbia" (Munro, *TMH* 50), however, it seems to be a fictional place. The second place that the story is set in is Vancouver, where Joyce lives with her second husband. There are other places mentioned in the story, such as Ontario, where Jon and Joyce "met at an urban high school in a factory city in Ontario" (Munro, *TMH* 33), or the Oregon coast, where they lived for a while when they dropped out of college. However, those are not places the story is set in but which are merely mentioned in passing.

The story is divided into two main parts which are numbered with Roman numerals. The first part tells the story of what happened with Joyce and her first husband and the second part shows the reader what her life is like now with her second husband. The story within the story is inserted in the second part, but gives a new perspective on the first part. The first part only consists of three sections, two of them longer, with a shorter one inserted. The second part is much longer than the first part, although it only has one longer section and all the other nine sections are quite short.

There is a story within the main story, however, the story is only narrated as an individual story from page 51 to 52, otherwise the story is mostly integrated in the original story. That it is really a story within a story, becomes clear with the change of focalisation for that part of the story. It is still narrated by a third-person limited narrator, however, a different one. Most of the rest of the story is recounted by Joyce, the focaliser of the main storyline. Furthermore, the telling is continuously interrupted by Joyce's thoughts of what she expects to happen next, how the author turned history into story by changing what has happened. Some of the parts from the story within the story are not even distinguished or spaced off from the main text but just continue with the next paragraph.

The story is narrated by a third person limited narrator and is focalised by Joyce. Apart from the story in the story the reader only perceives Joyce experiences. The story in the story is also narrated by a third person limited narrator and is focalised by the child, whom Joyce assumes to be Christine, the child of her ex-husband's new wife.

There are two illuminative moments in the story in the story. The first is a negative one, where the child realises she has been used for the information she can provide about her

mother and her teacher's former husband and turns bitter. However, there is a second illuminative moment at the end, where the child is able to let go of these negative feelings: "Love. She was glad of it. It almost seemed as if there must be some random and of course unfair thrift in the emotional housekeeping of the world, if the great happiness – however temporary, however flimsy – of one person could come out of the great unhappiness of another" (Munro, *TMH* 59). One of the illuminative moments is also reflected in the main story. When Joyce realises that this story is about her life, she stops reading it to her husband immediately, she seems a bit shocked but continues reading. In the end the story is not what she thought it would be, but brings her great joy. The ending of "Kindertotenlieder", which is the second illuminating moment mentioned above, seems to resonate in Joyce, who feels that this assessment of happiness is quite true.

The greatest paradox and at the same time parallel in "Fiction" is the story within the story. It is about the same time in Joyce's life that is narrated in the first part, however, from a completely different perspective. In a way it parallels the first part of "Fiction" because it gives the same basic facts, however, how those instances are interpreted and viewed by the respective protagonists is where the stories differ. While the first part of "Fiction" talks about Joyce's coping with the break-up of her marriage, the story within the story notes this fact in passing: "This leads to a conversation about the house the child lives in now, the house where the teacher used to live" (Munro, *TMH* 55). Whereas the story within the story focuses on the child's love for her teacher, in the first part of "Fiction" the child is only mentioned briefly and without giving it a name: "Edie's daughter was one of the performers, so Edie would have to be there" (Munro, *TMH* 41).

The way short stories are referenced in this story seems quite ironic, especially since short stories seem to be referred to with some scepticism to the genre itself. Joyce seems disappointed that the book she just purchased is a collection of short stories: "*How Are We to Live* is the book's title. A collection of short stories, not a novel. This in itself is a disappointment. It seems to diminish the book's authority, making the author seem like somebody who is just hanging on to the gates of Literature, rather than safely settled inside" (Munro, *TMH* 49-50). The protagonist seems to regard short stories in a way many critics of this genre do: as nothing special, not a proper novel; however it turns out that this story really affected the person reading it emotionally, which seems paradoxical. May considers this as "a wily jab at all those critics who have trivialized the short story as a genre and chided her [Munro] for not writing something more serious, namely novels (*Brother* 257).

5.2.4 Title, Themes and Motifs

The title of the story is referenced in a conversation between Joyce and her husband Matt about the book she is reading: “‘She’s written a book then? What is it?’ / ‘Fiction.’ / ‘Oh’” (Munro, *TMH* 50). This conversation shows clearly the low regard Matt has for fictional writing. Therefore the use of this title can be seen as ironic, as it turns out that pretty soon Joyce considers the piece to be quite autobiographical, seeing her own life in the story “Kindertotenlieder”. When she wants to thank the author though, she does not seem to recognise her, making it seem like the story could have been fiction after all. Furthermore, the title “Fiction” could be an allusion to the fact that many critics consider Munro’s stories to be mostly based on facts without the extended use of fictional elements. Although the protagonist clearly sees herself in the story, the writer does not seem to know her. This could be another way of Munro to tell her readers and critics that the majority of her “stories aren’t nearly as much [autobiographical] as people think” (Hancock 215).

The theme of love can take many different forms, and in this story it does. Apart from the love happily married couples have for each other, there is the unrequited love that Joyce still has for her former husband in the first part of the story. Furthermore, there is the love of the child for her teacher in “Kindertotenlieder”, which is probably described in the most detail of all different forms of love in the story. This has already been discussed in the paragraph about illumination.

Change can be identified in several instances in the story. First of all, it can be seen in Joyce who seems completely different in the two parts of the story. She seems quite depressed in the first part, while she seems happy and content in the second. Furthermore, relationships are also changing throughout the story. Although in the beginning the marriage of Joyce and Jon is presented as happy, there is already a foreshadowing of the end of their relationship, when he uses words that are not typical of him but of Edie. Joyce realises this later, thinking: “She should have understood, and at that moment, even if he himself was nowhere close to knowing. He was falling in love” (Munro, *TMH* 37). However, their relationships changes yet again: in later life they appear to have an amicable relationship again when they are both happily married with new partners. Change is also emphasised in the story within the story, especially in the ending. The love of the child for the teacher changes with the awareness that she was used to bitterness. However, in the end this changes again to love and the awareness that happiness can be born of another person’s tragedy.

Family is also a theme that runs through the story. Out of the break-up of Joyce's and Jon's marriage new families are formed. There is the family Jon makes with Edie and her daughter, however, as we see in the second part of the main story, this family is broken up again, as Jon is married to a third woman now. They have made a new family together and he even has grandchildren now, which is why he does not attend the party. Joyce has also created a new family with her second husband Matt. Although they have no children together, she seems to get along well with his children and they form a complicated kind of patchwork family including two former wives, the first being mentally incapacitated because of an accident and the second having found her true love in a woman. The way the families are represented in the stories seems unconventional, however, they seem happy nonetheless.

There is nothing particularly striking about the way the different gender roles are presented in the story. It could be worth mentioning that all the women who appear in the story are working and that none of them represent the traditional role of the housewife.

"Fiction" seems to be a highly self-referential story. It illustrates the power fiction can have in the impact the story "Kindertotenlied" makes on Joyce, while at the same time it is critical of fiction by displaying Matt's disregard for it. Furthermore, it presents a sceptical view of short stories by showing Joyce's disappointment upon discovering that she bought a collection of short stories, which can be seen as a reference to critics who hold the short story in low esteem.

5.3 Wenlock Edge

5.3.1 Plot

In "Wenlock Edge" there is a first person narrator who is from a small town and studies English and Philosophy on a scholarship. She lives in a rooming house where she soon gets a roommate, Nina. Her life story does not really add up but instead of questioning it, the narrator feels like she is not worldly enough. Nina apparently became pregnant at a very young age and married the father, then they had a second child and the father left to find work but never came back. So Nina left the children with her grandmother and left too. She found a rich man to take care of her but when she got pregnant he did not want the child, so she took care of it on her own. When the child died because of some strange coincidences (she went to the wrong hospital and had to go to another one) she goes back to him and he takes care of the funeral costs and takes her back. Then one day, when Nina is supposed to meet Mr. Purvis for dinner, she appears to be sick and sends the narrator to him. At his place everything seems strange to the narrator. She is asked to undress before she sees him. The narrator feels that the

driver, Mrs. Winner, dares her into it. The narrator knows she was not coerced but wonders why she did it. During dinner the nakedness does not seem to be sexual at all and Mr. Purvis does not make any advances. After dinner he asks the narrator to read from a book to him. The first poem is “Wenlock Edge”, which is also the title of the story. When the narrator comes back home, Nina is gone. Mr. Purvis and Mrs. Winner are looking for her. It turns out that Nina has run away with Ernie Botts, the narrator’s cousin, who she herself does not think to be desirable at all. Nina confides in the narrator, telling her she and “Ernest” are in love and urges her to not tell Mr. Purvis. However, after just one week Nina is gone from Ernie’s life.

5.3.2 Characters and Characterisation

There are several characters in the story that are characterised directly or indirectly by the narrator to varying degrees. The narrator, her cousin Ernie Botts, her roommate Nina, their landlady Beth, her husband Blake and their children, two other scholarship students living in the house, Kay and Beverly, Mr. Purvis and Mrs. Winner.

The narrator seems a little naïve at the beginning of the story despite being smart. She readily believes Nina’s story although it sounds quite improbable. She studies English and Philosophy on a scholarship and seems more interested in her studies than her social life. In the beginning of the story she admits to having a mean tongue but meaning no harm by it. Luft points out her naivety by showing how she is mistaken in the characters of others. “She mistakes the courtly Earnest for a buffoon and the depraved Mr. Purvis for a gentleman” (Luft 113).

Ernie appears to be serious and earnest, just as his name suggests. He respects higher education but has none himself. However, he also seems unworldly and proper because he is easily embarrassed by the narrator telling him of two of his housemates and their underwear. Although he does not seem to have much money he always invites the narrator to Sunday dinner because she is a relative.

Nina appears sophisticated and has seemingly been through a lot in her short life of twenty-two years already. She does not seem to have many needs and is a good roommate for the narrator because she does not demand any attention and leaves her in peace. This is why they take up talking about their lives, which reveals that Nina is a liar and manipulative. Nina is not a diligent student and seems uneducated. She seems a little unstable, which becomes clear when she and the narrator talk about Nina’s and Ernie’s relationship, and Nina becomes irrationally angry when the narrator mentions Mr. Purvis.

Mr. Purvis seems quite eccentric. The narrator does not know much about him from Nina, other than that he is controlling, before she meets him for the first time. The narrator has to undress before she is allowed to go inside the house to meet him. He seems educated, which can be seen in the conversation with the narrator and his extensive library. Despite the narrator being naked he does not take advantage of her or harasses her in any way, though he seems to enjoy her discomfort and blushing.

5.3.3 Structure and Narrative Technique

The structure of the story is very straightforward; the action develops chronologically, with the exception of the insertion of Nina's life story and the last part of the story. The passage of time is quite straightforward and linear. Although it is clear that the story is told from a vantage point when the narrator is more mature, there is one major timeframe in the story. There are only two exceptions, where something from the past is included as background information for a person. The first instance is at the beginning of the story, when the narrator tells us that Ernie and his mother used to visit their family on their farm. The second is when Nina tells her life story. The main plot develops over the course of a few months, from the beginning of the semester until Christmas. According to Bernstein the story takes place "between 1954 and 1968, though its prevalent social mores favour the earlier decade" (Bernstein 66), which he deduced from the stamp the narrator uses to send the letter at the end of the story.

The story primarily takes place in London Ontario, where the protagonist studies on a scholarship. The other places mentioned in the story were part of the two instances in the past of the story. The first is the farm where the narrator grew up, which is probably located in rural Ontario. The other places are mentioned in Nina's back story: Laneyville, a town near Chicago, where Nina's grandmother lived; Chicago, where she met Mr. Purvis; Japan, where Nina and Mr. Purvis planned to get an abortion for her, which she did not go through with; London (GB) and Paris.

The story is narrated by a first person limited narrator. We only see what the narrator sees, there is no omniscient narration to fill the gaps for the readers and no other focalisers. There is a noticeable difference between the experiencing narrator and the one telling the story, which becomes apparent by comments such as the description of Mr. Purvis' clothes: "He wore a dark blue blazer, a white shirt, an ascot scarf (I did not know it was called that), and grey slacks" (Munro, *TMH* 76). Therefore, it is clear that the story is narrated from a vantage point where the narrator is more mature and older than the one experiencing the story. It is

however, not clear how far the distance is, as there are no clues and no frame story is provided.

There is a moment of illumination, an epiphany-like revelation the narrator has while reading naked to Mr. Purvis:

It wasn't really that I forgot where I was or who I was with or in what condition I sat there. But I had come to feel somewhat remote and philosophical. The notion came to me that everybody in the world was naked, in a way. Mr. Purvis was naked, though he wore clothes. We were all sad, bare, forked creatures. Shame receded. I just kept turning the pages, reading one poem and then another, then another. Liking the sound of my voice. Until to my surprise and almost my disappointment – there were still famous lines to come – Mr. Purvis interrupted me (Munro, *TMH* 81).

However, this illuminating moment is later qualified by a scene where one of the poems the narrator read to Mr. Purvis confronts her with the memory of the night, which she is ashamed of:

And a few steps into the tunnel the lines began to assault me.

On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble

I would never think of those lines again without feeling the prickles of the upholstery on my bare haunches? The sticky prickly shame. A far greater shame it seemed now, than at the time. He had done something to me, after all (Munro, *TMH* 88).

There are a few instances of intertextuality, where passages from A. E. Housman's poem "On Wenlock Edge the Wood's in Trouble" from the book of poems *A Shropshire Lad* are quoted in the story. The poem has a prominent place in the story. Not only does it refer to the story's title, it is also catalyst for two moments of illumination, the first positive and the second negative, which have been described above. Furthermore, literary works such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Scarlet Letter* are referenced in the story. In her article about "Wenlock Edge" Joanna Luft highlights the striking parallels and contrasts of this story with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Although she has based her analysis on the original *New Yorker* story, which for her shows more pronounced parallels (see Luft 103), the points she made in her article are reflected in the version of *Too Much Happiness* as well.

There are no noticeable paradoxes or parallels, apart from the characters which contrast each other. The narrator, a country girl who is quite educated, is contrasted by Nina, who also grew up in the countryside, but seems much worldlier, however, not educated. The other contrast is between Ernie, or if we want to favour the speaking name, Earnest Bottom, as the narrator called him in her youth, and Nina, whose life story consists of elaborate lies.

The meaning of the ending does not really become clear at first glance because the chronology is disrupted. However, when reading carefully, one notices that the last passage happens before Nina is gone from Ernie's life. The motivation of the narrator for sending Ernie's address to Mr. Purvis is not totally clear. The reader does not know why the narrator wants Mr. Purvis to know where Nina is, other than that she wants to expose Nina's lies. However, by exposing her the narrator has broken the promise she had given Nina earlier.

This changes the meaning of the penultimate section of "Wenlock Edge":

Nina has not left Ernie, as the penultimate section of the story suggests; the narrator has betrayed her whereabouts to Mr. Purvis. [...] By rendering what has just occurred unclear, as well as chronologically tricky, Munro places the reader in danger of misreading the story, just as the narrator initially misreads her encounter with Mr. Purvis (Luft 121).

5.3.4 Title, Themes and Motifs

The title of the story refers to the poem "On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble" in the book of poetry by A. E. Housman called *A Shropshire Lad*. It is mentioned two times in the story. The first is when the narrator is asked to read from *A Shropshire Lad* by Mr. Purvis, while she is naked. The reading of the poems soon makes her less uncomfortable, because of their familiarity. The second instance is at the university, where they have an installation with poems by English Country Poets, Herrick, Housman and Tennyson. Now she connects the uncomfortable and humiliating situation with the poem. It appears as if she only realises the gravity of the situation she was in, when she is confronted with the poem again.

Lies constitute an important theme in the story. There are a few things that do not add up about the story of her life Nina told the narrator. When Nina first meets Mr. Purvis she wants to bring her children to live with them, because he has a big house with plenty of room but Mr. Purvis does not like children, and therefore the subject is dropped. However, when Nina becomes pregnant and decides to keep the baby, she does not send for her other children. The story with the child that died because they were in the wrong hospital does not sound very probable either. Either Nina herself did not take proper care of the baby and it died, or there never was a baby and it was all invented. When Nina has run away and is together with Ernie, it is confirmed that Nina is a liar, as she refers to Mr. Purvis as her uncle, when she has told the narrator something completely different about their relationship. Now, at the latest, the reader is questioning everything she has told the narrator, who also must have seen through her lies at least then. However, Nina is not the only liar in the story. The narrator has to be seen as equally untrustworthy. Despite her promise to Nina not to reveal her relationship with

Ernie to Mr. Purvis or Mrs. Winner, the narrator posts a letter containing Ernie's address to Mr. Purvis. With this action she has not only broken her promise and the trust of her only friend at that time but also destroyed the relationship between Nina and Ernie, making him miserable.

There is some of Alice Munro's own experience in the story, like growing up in rural Ontario like the narrator did and then going to London/Ontario to study on a scholarship. She even lived in a rooming house while studying (see Thacker, *Biography* 95). However, to call the story autobiographical because the narrator and Alice Munro share the same background is far-fetched. Munro's own experience simply provides a frame for the story.

As far as gender roles are concerned, there are several women in the story who represent traditional gender roles. The narrator's landlady Beth's role has many different facets. On the one hand she takes on the traditional roles of housewife and mother, taking care of everything on her own. Her husband, who is a medical student, never helps her with anything. Furthermore, she also manages the house and collects the rent despite being the mother of two young children. The two other scholarship students living in the house, Kay and Beverly, also have traditional values regarding marriage and work. While at the beginning of their studies of Modern Languages they had ambitions to become translators at the United Nations, they have changed their ambition in life to become wives, which is quite a disappointment for the narrator. However, there is also a woman with a non-traditional role. Mrs. Winner seems quite different from the above mentioned, more traditionally oriented, women. She is working as a driver, which does not seem to be a typical profession for a woman at that time. She seems to be totally loyal to her boss despite his perversity and spies on Nina for him.

This story leaves the reader puzzled as to its meaning. The narrator has told an episode from her life, which seems quite conventional at the beginning when she tells the reader about studying at university and living in a rooming house, but the story turns traumatic with the experience the narrator made at Mr. Purvis' house. Despite the negative experience the narrator seems to regard Mr. Purvis higher than her friendship with Nina and betrays her trust. Her motives for doing this and telling the story of what happened remain hidden.

5.4 Deep-Holes

5.4.1 Synopsis

Deep-Holes is a story told from the perspective of a mother. Starting with an incising experience of the "near death" of one of her boys, the story tells the development of the mother and the son. When the family accompanies the husband to his research venue for a

family picnic, one of the boys, Kent falls into a deep-hole. He breaks both of his legs but his father rescues him and takes him to the hospital. The relationship between the father and the boy seems strained. The father seems to dislike the boy somehow and the boy thanks the father for his rescue overly often. The relationship between the boy and the mother grows closer over the course of his stay at home due to his broken legs and the long recovery time. The mother likes researching remote islands most people do not know about and finds a confidante or even a kindred spirit in her son. Her son is very clever and quite ahead at school, however, when he goes to university to study science he soon drops out and moves to a “suburb just north of Toronto” (Munro, *TMH* 101) and works at a Canadian Tire store. He seems to be happy, has gained some weight, found new friends. When his mother wants to visit him again, he is gone and she does not know where to. After some time she gets a post card from Needles in California, but in the note he tells her not to look for him, because he is somewhere else already anyway. She does not hear from him for years and likes to think that he is on one of those remote islands they were researching together. After the death of her husband, whom she has grown closer to while helping him with his research in geology, she finds her son again. By accident her daughter discovers him when they are watching the news about a fire in Toronto, where he is helping people and carrying somebody who has been injured. The sister tracks him down and then the mother and her son meet again. He seems to live in some kind of commune of beggars or religious sect. None of them work, they beg for money, they scavenge for old, thrown-out things they can fix. One person cooks for the whole commune, and it is a different person every week. They have a conversation but in the middle he goes away to eat because he is hungry and the mother waits for him. He seems surprised that she is still here when he comes back. He is certain that he has found his purpose in life now that he does not think about himself but how to help others. The last part is about Sally again, how she felt about seeing him again and that she would write a cheque for him or that she might change into a different person with age.

5.4.2 Characters and Characterisation

The characters in the story are the focaliser Sally, her husband Alex, their children Kent, Peter and Savannah and Marnie, the cook in Kent’s commune.

In the beginning Sally is a young mother of three children. Löschnigg points out that Sally is “juggling her various roles” (Löschnigg, *Contemporary* 47), which can be seen during the picnic, where it becomes obvious that it is not always easy for her to please her husband and children alike. She is portrayed as a devoted mother who worries for her children, even after they are already grown up.

As a boy Kent has a strong connection to his mother, and his father is even convinced that he is too attached to Sally, and thinks him to be “crudely excited by the sight of Sally’s breast” (Munro, *TMH* 95) when she is nursing. Kent is very smart and he gets good grades in school but he is also a know-it-all. Furthermore, Alex considers Kent “a sneak and a trouble-maker and the possessor of a dirty mind” (Munro, *TMH* 96). Kent likes to show off, especially his knowledge. Despite that he can act in a very grown-up and patient manner; he is “especially courteous to his father” (Munro, *TMH* 100) for saving his life, who views this as mockery. When he is an adult he leaves university and drops out of society. In the beginning he just seems to want to live a free life with less responsibility, however he still shows many signs of his old self, still showing off, while at the same time he claims to have given “up his intellectual pridefulness” (Munro, *TMH* 103). Still many years later, he seems changed again. He is living in a commune of beggars now and has left society completely behind. He is convinced he lives in the present and avoids relationships. Sally thinks he despises her, which is probably true, because she represents his old self to him and brings this old self out in him, which he has left behind with his old life.

5.4.3 Structure and Narrative Technique

The structure of the story is chronological. It consists of thirteen parts that are separated by paragraphs. It is noticeable that most of the parts are relatively short and only two of the sections go over several pages. These sections are the description of the picnic where Kent fell into one of the holes and the meeting with him after many years of having no contact. This shows the main focus of the story, the relationship between Sally and her son Kent, or Kent’s development from a child that had a near-death experience to the adult who feels he has been born again as Jonah. The time frame runs over several years or even decades, from when Sally was a young mother of three children to when all her children are grown up and have started their own lives. It seems as if the time span is about thirty or forty years.

The story is set in Ontario. The picnic where the incident happened took place on Osler Bluff in Ontario. There are a few other places that are mentioned in the story, even exotic ones, but the main action takes place in Ontario. The other place where an important part of the action takes place is Toronto, also in Ontario.

The story is narrated by a third person limited narrator and focalised through Sally, the mother of three children. The focalisation never changes from Sally to another person. When thoughts of other persons are presented they are filtered through her mind.

There are two instances of illumination that happened to Kent throughout the story. In his letter from Needles he writes:

“It seems so ridiculous to me,” he said, “that a person should be expected to lock themselves into a suit of clothes. I mean, like the suit of clothes of an engineer or a doctor or a geologist and then the skin grown over it, over the clothes, I mean, and that person can’t ever get them off. When we are given a chance to explore the whole world of inner and outer reality and to live in a way that takes in the spiritual and the physical and the whole range of the beautiful and the terrible available to mankind, that is pain as well as joy and turmoil. This way of expressing myself may seem overblown to you, but one thing I have learned to give up is intellectual pridefulness –“ (Munro, *TMH* 102).

He goes on explaining how the experience of falling in the hole has changed him:

Further on in the letter – or rampage, as Alex called it – Kent had said that he had been luckier than most people in having what he called his near-death experience, which had given him an extra awareness, and for this he must be forever grateful to his father who lifted him back into the world and his mother who had lovingly received him there.

“Perhaps in those moments I was reborn” (Munro, *TMH* 102).

However, Kent has turned his back on these revelations when he joined the commune. He calls himself Jonah, also thinking of Lazarus before, but thought this “too self-dramatizing” (Munro, *TMH* 112). He looks down on his old illuminations, thinking them worthless now: ““My life, my life, my progress, what ill I could discover about my stinking self. Purpose of me. My crap. My spirituality. My intellectuality. There isn’t any inside stuff, Sally. [...] There is only outside, what you do, every moment of your life. Since I realized this I’ve been happy”” (Munro, *TMH* 113).

So in this story the first illuminative moment is reversed by the second. And there is still a third illuminative moment Sally has at the end of the story. Despite her not being able to totally reconnect with her son, she does not despair, thinking that age might be “her ally” and she will change into a different person: “She has seen the look on the faces of certain old people – marooned on islands of their own choosing, clear sighted, content” (Munro, *TMH* 115). This third illuminative moment might override the ones that came before: despite this being Sally’s illumination it could also be true for her son.

There is a reference to the *Zeitschrift für Geomorphology* for which Alex has written an article. This is an actual journal, however, the author used the English form of the German word “Geomorphologie”. There is another intertextual item, the sign that warns people of the deep holes: “CAUTION. DEEP-HOLES” (Munro, *TMH* 94). Although a letter from Kent is

referenced in the story, it is not distinguished from the rest of the text but integrated and summarised.

5.4.4 Title, Themes and Motifs

The title of the story refers to the deep holes on the Osler Bluff, into one of which Kent fell when he was a boy. Löschnigg argues that the deep holes in Munro's narrative

not only symbolize the dark secrets hidden under the surface of visible reality, but also serve as a symbol of Munro's writing style, its interplay between the definite and the indefinite, and her creation of gaps in meaning which may be filled by a set of possibilities within a paradigm (Löschnigg, *Contemporary* 47).

Therefore, the title of the story could refer to the uncertainties of life.

The relationship between parents and children is a major theme in the story. The relationship of Kent and his father appears to be paradoxical. It seems paradoxical that Alex resents his son Kent for loving his mother. Apparently, he is jealous of the bond they share with each other. Alex seems to accuse his son of inappropriate behaviour towards his mother, although an oedipal period is perfectly normal for children to have. Their relationship seems strained, despite Alex rescuing Kent from the hole and Kent being overly thankful for his father saving his life. The relationship between mother and son seems much closer, at least when Kent was younger. Sally and Kent develop a special relationship when he has to stay at home to recover after the accident and grow extremely close. Kent becomes his mother's confidante when she reveals to him her fascination with remote islands. It becomes their secret project to research those islands together.

Change is also a prominent theme in the story. It can mostly be seen in the personality of Kent, which has been discussed in his characterisation. Furthermore, change is also referenced at the end of the story, which has been discussed in connection to Sally's illumination.

Beran perceives no foregrounding of "recent Canadian cultural trends" (334) in Munro's stories, such as "the Canadian multicultural mosaic" (334) or other "[c]urrent Canadian political issues" (334) which are influencing other Canadian writers. However, in this story there is a passage which references multiculturalism and which shows that this concept is not accepted by every Canadian, especially those from rural areas:

She had a feeling of dismay and embarrassment. Dismay because of Kent's apparent absence, and embarrassment because she was feeling just what people from her part of the country often seemed to feel, though she would never say what they said. You'd think you were in the Congo or India or Vietnam, they would say. Anyplace but Ontario. Turbans and saris and dashikis were much in evidence, and Sally was all in

favour of their swish and bright colours. But they weren't being worn as foreign costumes. The wearers hadn't just arrived here; they had got past the moving-in phase (Munro, *TMH* 107-108).

Multiculturalism is viewed from the perspective of a person with a rural background, who probably does not come into contact with many Canadians with a cultural background different from her own.

Some aspects of the gender roles, too, have already been discussed above in the characterisation and in the paragraph about the relationships between parents and children, however, there are a few further things that need to be pointed out. Initially, Sally represents the typical roles of wife and mother, however, with time she also becomes Alex's assistant for his geological work. Alex is characterised by Kent as a typical gentleman, which he also displays with his actions. He is courteous to his wife and displays the ideals of a gentleman who would "have rescued anybody" (Munro, *TMH* 100). An interesting bit of information about Alex is provided by Sally, who is breastfeeding their little daughter: "If Alex finds the sight distasteful – she knows he does, he dislikes the whole conjunction of sex and nourishment, his wife's breast turned into udders – he can look away, and he does" (Munro, *TMH* 97). The gender roles Sally and Alex represent are rather traditional, however, not oppressive.

This story is centred on Sally, the mother of three children. Although women, in general, and mothers, in particular, are often portrayed by Alice Munro, she manages to present each of them with an individuality that shows that no woman or mother is alike. Furthermore, the relationship between parents and their children is at the centre of the story, which is likewise a favourite subject of Munro.

5.5 Free Radicals

5.5.1 Synopsis

The story is about a woman, Nita, who has lost her husband, Rich. He died unexpectedly although being in good health. The woman herself has cancer, so the couple thought that she would die first. In a memory we see how the two of them got together: her husband was married to another woman before and he bought a little house he renovated and extended. Although his first wife, Bett, was not interested in the house initially, she soon wanted to be a part of it and help her husband. However, he was already falling in love with his second wife, who was also working at the university. Now, after her husband's death, her cancer is in remission and she does not seem to know what to do with herself. She used to be an avid

reader who could sit for hours reading, which is one reason why she and her husband worked so well together. Now she cannot concentrate on a book anymore.

Nita opens the door when a stranger knocks who pretends to look at the fuse box. Soon she realises that he did not want to look at that and that he is dangerous. He makes her prepare something to eat for him and in the meantime he smashes the plate, so he has a weapon. He confesses to Nita that he has killed his whole family because he would only have inherited the house he grew up in if he took care of his demented sister. When he refused his aunt offered to do it. When he found out, he said that of course he would take care of his sister, but his parents wanted the children's aunt to check in sometimes, which made him angry. He pretended that everything was fine and was invited for a family meal where he killed everybody there, his parents and his sister. However, his aunt was not there so he could not kill her. He ate all the food that was supposed to be for the family dinner by himself and set out to flee on the back roads. He has wandered there for quite some time when he arrives at her house. He wants them to drink wine together, but Nita cannot drink anymore because it does not agree with her anymore because of her illness. So he drinks the whole bottle of wine almost alone, she is just sipping a bit. After hearing the story of how he killed his whole family, Nita realises that although she has cancer and not so long to live anymore, she does not want to die. So she tells him a story of how she killed her husband's affair by twisting the story of his first wife to bond with the murderer, so he will let her go instead of killing her, too. In the end he lets her live and she gives him the keys to her husband's car so he can get away. Soon after a police officer knocks on her door to ask her about her husband's car. She pretends to not know anything and he tells her that it was stolen and involved in an accident. A triple murderer had an accident with the car and it was destroyed. Nobody else was involved and she can count herself really lucky that she got away.

5.5.2 Characters and Characterisation

The characters and persons mentioned in the story are Nita, her late husband Rich, his first wife Bett, a few of Nita's friends, the murderer and a policeman.

Nita is characterised as a mourning widow. Before she was diagnosed with cancer she liked to drink wine and was an avid reader, however, now she cannot drink anymore and the magic world reading provided for her seems to be gone. She still follows her normal daily routine, although she does not seem to know what to do with herself and cannot bring herself to clear out her husband's things. Despite her illness and seeming acceptance of her imminent death because of her cancer she still has a strong will to live.

The murderer seems uneducated, which becomes apparent in the way he speaks, for example: “I should have ate before I came here” (Munro, *TMH* 124). He seems unstable and unreliable. Although he claims that he is not lazy and always tries to earn his living, he cannot keep a job because he “wasn’t brought up to take shit” (Munro, *TMH* 128). He snaps when his parents reveal to him that he only gets the house he was promised if he takes care of his sister and therefore kills all of them. It seems as if he tells the story of the murder because he needs to confide in somebody, or maybe he does it to ease his conscience. He seems ready to snap again when he asks Nita whether she thinks him dumb or nervous. He comes across as not very smart: although he seems cunning, he believes Nita’s story and thinks they will keep mutual confidence about the murders.

5.5.3 Structure and Narrative Technique

The story’s structure is quite straightforward. It begins with a description of Nita and her process of mourning her husband’s death. The story consists of four parts. The main action of the story is just one day. There is information included that happens before this day at the beginning of the story relating the death of her husband. Furthermore, there are also some other passages that tell things in the past, such as how Nita and Rich came together, or the two murder stories. The time in which the main story takes place cannot be determined exactly, however, it must be after 2004 (the model of the car, see Munro, *TMH* 126) and presumably before 2008, the year the story was published first in the *New Yorker* (see Munro “Free Radicals” as published in the *New Yorker*). However, it is possible that it is set in the future, although this seems unlikely.

The story is set in Wallenstein, a village in Ontario, Canada. There are other places mentioned in the story, such as Nova Scotia, where Rich’s brother lives and California and Arizona, places where Bett moves.

The story is told by a third-person limited narrator and is focalised by Nita, the main character of the story. The focalisation never changes throughout the story. However, the perspective of the murderer becomes also apparent because of the frequent use of direct speech throughout the encounter of the murderer and Nita in the story.

There is a great illuminative moment in this story. The protagonist, who is in remission of her cancer, has resigned to dying at the beginning of the story. It was a great shock that her husband died before her because he was in good health despite being older than her. There is a situation in the story where it becomes clear that Nita is not afraid of dying: “Then for the first time since he entered the house she thought of her cancer. She thought of how it freed

her, put her out of danger” (Munro, *TMH* 127), which makes her smile despite the dangerous situation she is in. But being faced with the actuality of her death when she is threatened by the murderer, she realises that she does not want to die and still wants to live. The protagonist’s thoughts on what could happen make it clear that she is not ready to die: “It could happen. As soon as she gave him the keys it could happen. Would it help her to tell him she was dying of cancer? How stupid. It wouldn’t help at all. Cancer death in the future would not keep her from talking today” (Munro, *TMH* 135).

There are a few paradoxes in the story. First of all it seems paradoxical that Rich died before Nita because he was supposedly in good health and Nita suffers from cancer. Furthermore, it seems paradoxical that although Nita is suffering from cancer and seems reconciled to her imminent death, she fears dying when her life is threatened by the murderer.

The way Nita wants the murderer to trust her includes both paradox and parallel. She gives the story of how she met her husband a paradoxical twist by taking on the role of Rich’s former wife. In reality, Rich left Bett, his former wife, for Nita. However, in the version Nita tells the murderer she assumes the role of Bett, whose husband tells her of his affair and his intention to leave her. While in real life the separation happened, in the story Nita tells, she, assuming the role of Bett, has killed Rich’s lover by baking a rhubarb tart with the poison that comes from the veins of rhubarb leaves. By twisting what actually happened into a murder story and to parallel her situation with that of the murderer, she is able to make the murderer sympathise with her.

5.5.4 Title, Themes and Motifs

The title of the story is “Free Radicals”, which are “[h]ighly reactive molecules with an unpaired electron that are capable of causing damage to proteins, nucleic acids, and lipids in body tissues” (“Free Radicals”). There are substances that counter the effects of free radicals, which are antioxidant nutrients (“Antioxidant Nutrients”), which can be found in red wine, for example. The narrator thinks about this word when the murderer is in her house drinking wine after he has eaten. After she suddenly blurts out the words “Free Radicals”, she explains to the man: ““It’s something about red wine. It either destroys them because they’re bad or builds them up because they’re good, I can’t remember”” (Munro, *TMH* 132). In the end the alcohol in the wine was probably the cause of the murderer’s death: just like antioxidants are supposed to kill the free radicals, the wine has killed the “free murderer”.

Death seems to be the most prominent theme in the story. It permeates the whole story from the beginning to the end. In the beginning of the story the death of Nita's husband is told and the story continues with how Nita deals with his death. Furthermore, through Nita's cancer death was and is a presence in her life even before her husband's death. When the murderer comes to Nita's house, he tells her the story about the death of his family, how he murdered them all. Being afraid for her life, Nita realises that she does not want to die yet and comes up with her own story about murder and death. Just as death permeates the story, it becomes clear through her grief how much Nita loved Rich. Munro thus links the theme of death with the theme of love.

The theme of change becomes apparent in various places in the story. First of all, there are the changes in Nita since her diagnosis of cancer. She cannot drink and read anymore, which before she loved to do. Mostly she sits now and thinks of nothing, when before she was always immersed in some book. Other changes in her can be seen in her appearance: she has lost a lot of weight because of her illness and the therapy. In the beginning of the story she seems resigned to dying, however, at the end of the story she has found a new will to live. There is another change in the story regarding the murderer. When he entered the house she does not suspect him of anything but a "change in his voice" (Munro, *TMH* 123) makes her aware that his intentions might be sinister.

As far as gender roles are concerned, the two wives of Rich represent opposites. Nita does not represent the typical housewife; she does not like to cook and take care of everything, which is a contrast to Rich's first wife Bett, who apparently was the perfect housewife. Nita was "the other woman" which led to Bett's and Rich's divorce. Later she is embarrassed to think "how readily she had played the younger woman, the happy home wrecker, the lissom, laughing tripping ingenue. She was really a rather serious, physically awkward, self-conscious woman [...]" (Munro, *TMH* 119).

The story "Free Radicals" thematises death repeatedly, first in the death of the protagonist's husband and then in the murder of the intruder's family. Furthermore, death hovers over the protagonist in form of her cancer. She is resigned to death at the beginning of the story, having expected to die herself before her husband. Paradoxically, the danger of being killed by the intruder rekindles her will to live.

5.6 Face

5.6.1 Synopsis

A man tells the story of his life from his birth to the present. He tells us that his father was not happy when he was born because he had a big red birthmark on one side of his face. That is why he grew up a bit sheltered, at least in the first few years of his childhood. Later he was sent to a boarding school. We find out that he had a childhood friend before that, a girl who was the daughter of a woman who was probably the narrator's father's mistress. They were very close and played a lot together and made all kind of nonsense. Their friendship came to a sudden end when they found some old paint in the cellar and the girl, Nancy, painted her face red, showed it to him and said that she looked like him. The boy was shocked because he thought she looked hideous and did not think that he looked like that. His mother threw out the mother and the girl. Later, after his father's death, his mother told him that the girl cut open half of her face in order to look like him. Nobody told him at that time but it was the talk of the town back then.

In the meantime the protagonist has become quite famous. He went to university and associated with people in artistic circles. He also played and directed plays at the theatre. After university he turned to radio, where he hosted a few popular shows. Now, he is retired and returns back to his childhood home. His father died quite a few decades ago and also his mother has been dead for a while. Originally he intends to fix the garden and property to sell it, but then he decides to stay. One day something happens to one of his eyes because a wasp stings him and he has to go to the hospital, where they bind both of his eyes and he has to stay overnight. While he is at the hospital a woman comes to his bed to read to him. He is a bit reluctant to let her read because he is used to trained voices but she makes a game out of it by reciting lines from poems and he has to continue. This works fine until the woman recites one that he believes he has never heard. The woman seems to be disappointed about that. The protagonist tries to find the poem and encounters it in his home on a piece of paper in a handwriting he does not know.

5.6.2 Characters and Characterisation

The characters in the story are the narrator; his mother; his father; the gardener Pete (Sneaky Pete); Mrs. Suttles (Sharon); her daughter Nancy, the narrator's childhood friend, and the mystery woman in the hospital, who is possibly Nancy.

The narrator grew up quite sheltered, and although he was physically flawed by his birthmark his mother wanted him to feel beautiful. He loves his childhood friend Nancy like a sister and the two of them often behave mischievously together until the fateful day when Nancy

painted her face and made the narrator realise how he looked. When he is grown-up he seems confident and to have a fulfilled social life.

5.6.3 Structure and Narrative Technique

The time in the stories spans the whole life of the narrator. He starts the story with the events of his birth and his childhood. The story ends many years later, when the narrator has grown old and retired to his childhood home. The main part of the narrator's childhood that is narrated, the events with his friend Nancy, happens during World War II, but it is not totally clear how old the narrator is at the end of the story or when the now of the story actually is. The narrator goes a bit back and forth between the present and the past and does not narrate completely chronologically, filling in information as it seems suitable.

The story is set in Ontario. The house the narrator grew up in is located on the cliffs above Lake Huron, however, the town is not clearly specified. Furthermore, the narrator has also lived in Toronto.

The story consists of seven parts that are separated by paragraphs only. The first, which could be considered an introduction, relates the basic points in the narrator's life from his birth to his retirement. The second part contains the main story, the "Great Drama" of the narrator and his childhood friend. The third is very short and contains just additional information for the great drama. In the fourth part the narrator tells the reader how his mother related the story of what happened to Nancy. The fifth part is again quite short and narrates the changes the narrator's mother has went through when she grew old. The sixth part is in the present again, when the narrator is stung by a wasp and the woman in the hospital reads to him. The last part relays how the narrator looks for the poem and finds it and reminisces what if he met Nancy in Toronto.

The narrator is a first person narrator who looks back at his life from the distance of old age. This is typical for narrators in Alice Munro's short stories. However, what is unusual is that the narrator is male. Alice Munro's narrators are mostly women, therefore, it is quite significant that a man should narrate this story. The narrator seems reliable, although he admits to some things he cannot remember clearly. This is probably the reason why he appears trustworthy. However, there are a few things he merely assumes to have been this way, but again, he admits to those things when telling the story.

There is no true illuminating moment in the story, there is just a moment when the narrator suspects there is something more to the encounter with the woman in the hospital. Though it

is hinted at that the women who read and recited the poems to the narrator in the hospital is the narrator's childhood friend Nancy, it is never explicitly stated. Nor is it revealed whether this means anything to the narrator.

There is a reference to *Alice in Wonderland* (Munro, *TMH* 151), which the narrator's mother read to him and his friend. Furthermore, there are a few poems the narrator and the woman recite together. Some have a few lines recited by the two and others are merely mentioned by their title. There is a passage, however, when the narrator finds the poem he could not identify. Then the whole poem by Walter de la Mare is reproduced in the story, set off from the rest of the text and in italics. In the story the narrator discovers it on a piece of paper in a handwriting he cannot identify. It seems unlikely that Nancy should have written down the poem when she and the narrator were friends and she was living there because they were both relatively young and probably not yet interested in poetry. Yet, it seems as if the poem has a deeper meaning for the narrator. Although it seems a sad poem, the narrator states: "The poem didn't depress me. In some peculiar way it seemed to back up the decision I had made by that time, not to sell the property, but to stay" (Munro, *TMH* 162). However, it is not stated clearly why this poem should back up his decision, whether it is the memories in the house, the memories of his childhood friend, or maybe even the possibility of seeing her again. All of those are alluded to at the end of the story, however, no definite answer is given. The ending of the story thus is indeterminate, the narrator is thinking whether it would have changed anything, if he had met Nancy again somewhere in Toronto: "You think that would have changed things? / The answer is of course, and for a while, and never" (Munro, *TMH* 163).

The mother and father of the narrator represent direct opposites in his life. While his mother is caring and wants to shelter him from the outside world, his father cannot even look at him. The narrator explains that, although neither he nor his mother would have used the word, his mother was "devoted" (Munro, *TMH* 142) to him, while his father mostly ignored him.

The other pair of contrasting characters are the narrator's mother and Sharon Suttles. Although both have an intimate relationship with the narrator's father, if the reader accepts the narrator's assumption that Sharon was his father's mistress, they are complete opposites. While the narrator's mother is a caring mother, who takes the children to the beach and reads to them, Sharon seems a neglectful mother who never forbids her child anything but who also will not fix a snack for the children. While the narrator's mother seems to be a perfect

housewife, Sharon seems to represent the typical picture of a loose woman, wearing red lipstick, “lying on the couch [wearing a kimono], smoking” (Munro, *TMH* 148).

5.6.4 Title, Themes and Motifs

The title of the story refers primarily to the narrator’s face, which is blemished by his birthmark. However, it may also refer to the narrator’s childhood friend Nancy, who tried to make her face look like the narrator’s, first with the paint and later more permanently by cutting her face.

There are several drastic changes in the story. The narrator symbolises such a change for his parents’ marriage. Although it is not explicitly stated that they led a happy marriage before the narrator was born, some remarks his mother makes hint at a closer relationship earlier. The father does not accept the son because of his face, however, the mother loves him unconditionally and has to divide her attention between the two. This leads to a rift between the narrator’s mother and father. Another change is brought about by Nancy painting her face red. This changes not only their relationship from friendship to not seeing each other anymore, but also the narrator’s self-image. Although his birthmark was the colour of mulberry, the normal colour for it, the narrator states that “[...] this was not how I saw it in my mind. I believed my birthmark to be a soft brown colour, like the fur of a mouse” (Munro, *TMH* 153).

Love is a theme that runs through the story, however not the conventional romantic love between a man and a woman. Instead there are other forms of love referenced in the story. There is the love, or maybe only infatuation, the narrator has as a child for grown-up women. He claims to have experienced this kind of love several times. Once for “a tomboyish young maid named Bessie, who took [him] out on jaunts in [his] stroller and swung [him] so high on the park swings that [he] nearly went over the top” (Munro, *TMH* 147-148). Another time he felt like that for a friend of his mother’s “who had a velvet coat and a voice that seemed somehow related to it” (Munro, *TMH* 148). He also feels some kind of love for Sharon Suttles, who he thinks is his father’s mistress. However, the feelings are different from his other child loves. He notices her appearance and her bright red lipstick.

Then there is also the love he has for his childhood friend Nancy, which is again different. Although they did play sex games, exploring each other, this does not seem to be the defining nature of their relationship. It rather seems like the love between siblings. The narrator’s mother scolds him after he pulled Nancy under the water when they went to the beach that he

“should treat her like a little sister” (Munro, *TMH* 150), which makes the narrator think to himself that this “was exactly what [he] was doing” (Munro, *TMH* 150). How deep this love ran can also be seen in what Nancy did to her face: she cut it open so that she would resemble the narrator. His mother comments on that: ““Such deep feelings. Children have”” (Munro, *TMH* 158), to which the narrator responds: ““They get over that”” (Munro, *TMH* 158). It seems as if he has meant much more to Nancy than she to him.

Furthermore, there is also the mother’s love for her child. Although the father never accepted his son, the mother never lets him feel unloved. She takes care of him and protects him from everything, especially when he is younger, which is probably why he is home-schooled until the age of nine. She wants him to feel beautiful, saying things about his birthmark like “It makes the white of that eye look so lovely and clear” (Munro, *TMH* 139). She wants to shelter him from everything harmful and only tells him about what Nancy has done to her face years later because she thought it would have been too distressing for him at that time. The narrator himself admits that he has “made [his] father the beast in [his] account so far, and [his] mother the rescuer and protector” (Munro, *TMH* 142) and believes this to be the truth.

The gender roles of the narrator’s parents have already been discussed briefly in the paragraph about paradox and parallel, however, it is worth expanding on them a bit. The narrator’s mother is devoted to her child and has to divide her attention between her husband and her child in her role of both mother and wife. How much the narrator’s mother loves her child has already been explained in the above paragraph. The strained relationship between father and son has also influenced the relationship between the parents, which has already been discussed in the paragraph about change. The narrator’s father acts as provider for the family, but otherwise he plays hardly a role in the narrator’s life as a father figure. He has his work and acquaintances, who he is popular and mostly ignores his son. He is a hard man, who has a vehemence about viewing things, which makes others think highly of him.

This story is quite unusual for Alice Munro in terms of the narrator. It is quite rare for her to use a male narrator, although there are elements in the way he narrates the story, which are quite typical of Munro’s narrators, like temporal shifts in the retrospective narration. Furthermore, it also leaves the reader wondering about the meaning of the story with the open ending.

5.7 Some Women

5.7.1 Synopsis

A woman reflects on how old she has grown by relating a story of when she was a young girl. She was looking after a sick dying man, Bruce Crozier. He had leukemia, which was always deadly back then because there was no treatment. The man was a war veteran and married to a college professor, Sylvia Crozier. The woman had to teach two days a week at the college where the two had met and that is when the girl looked after the man. She only had to bring him water, move the fan and essentially leave him in peace. She was alone with the sick man and his stepmother for her first day. On her second day somebody else came to the house, a masseuse who massaged the stepmother Dorothy. After the massage she visited the sick man. She told that she used to be a nurse aid and tried to make him more comfortable, rearranged his cushions, his bedding, gave him a sponge bath, played games with him and kept him company. She flirted with him all the time and told him how good-looking he was, despite this being untrue, as his body was wasted away by his illness. This went on for quite some time, until the last day the girl was working there. This was also the last day the masseuse could visit the sick man without his wife being there. It seems like his stepmother had planned this to be a special day. When the girl went up to the man's room, he asked her to lock the door to his room and hide the key and to only give it to his wife when she comes home. The masseuse and the stepmother both assumed that he locked the door himself and the masseuse feared he will do something to himself, which seemed really odd to the young girl since he was dying anyway. When the wife came back home the girl gave her the key, which she had hidden in a book. When the wife came out of the room, she had to "tell" his stepmother something, which could lead the reader to believe that the man had in fact killed himself. Then young Mrs. Crozier took the girl home asking her if she thought that the man would do something to himself which she negated. The wife seemed really happy and relieved that the man locked the masseuse out and after that they moved to a remote cottage, where the man died.

5.7.2 Characters and Characterisation

The characters in the story are the narrator, Mr. Crozier (Bruce), young Mrs. Crozier (Sylvia), Old Mrs. Crozier (Dorothy), Roxanne (the masseuse), Hervey (Old Mrs. Crozier's helper in the garden) and the narrator's mother.

In the main story the narrator is a young girl who likes to read. She seems not very confident and a bit naïve, although she seems to shed a bit of that naiveté in the course of the story. The man she cares for, Mr. Crozier seems "tolerant [and] gentle" (Munro, *TMH* 174) to her

despite his approaching death . He seems to like Roxanne's ignorance, which might makes him feel superior. In the end he seems to be strong enough to make a decision by locking out everybody but his wife. His wife Sylvia was the only university graduate the narrator knew at that time. She is devoted to her husband. The mother of her husband Old Mrs. Crozier wants to have everything her way and does not seem to like changes. The narrator calls this "the rule of Old Mrs. Crozier" (Munro, *TMH* 165). She is passionate about her garden, but again everything has to be like she wants it. The narrator is surprised when Old Mrs. Crozier is joking with her stepson and Roxanne because of her otherwise stern manner.

Roxanne is described as a lively, smiling, teasing and cheerful person who is strong-minded but also caring. The narrator considers her inferior to Sylvia, for example, because she seems to be uneducated. She tells jokes that seem inappropriate or have a double meaning and at the same time she pretends to not notice those things or to find them awful. The narrator describes the kind of woman she thinks Roxanne to be in the following paragraph:

I began to understand that there were certain talkers – certain girls – whom people liked to listen to, not because of what they, the girls, had to say, but because of the delight they took in saying it. A delight in themselves, a shine on their faces, a conviction that whatever they were telling about was remarkable and that they themselves could not help but give pleasure (Munro, *TMH* 176-177).

Furthermore, she thinks that "Roxanne wanted admiration, which was her nature" (Munro, *TMH* 178).

The narrator's mother seems to be a bit of a busybody, at least she appears that way to her daughter. She seems to think practically and always "defended women who were working on their own" (Munro, *TMH* 167).

5.7.3 Structure and Narrative Technique

The structure of the story is simple and straightforward. There is a very brief frame story, which explains that the main story happened a long time ago and details what happened to the characters of the story in the end. The main story is structured chronologically, the only exceptions are pieces of background information that are added. The main story is set in the distant past, when the narrator was still a young girl. The time in the story moves along chronologically and spans for the duration of the narrator's summer job of looking after Mr. Crozier.

The story is set in an undisclosed small rural town. It could be located somewhere in Ontario. The only place name mentioned in the story is Ontario, when Roxanne details her life story of moving from northern Ontario to Toronto.

The story is narrated by a first-person limited narrator, who narrates the story from the distance of a long time, which becomes obvious from the frame story. The narrator begins the story by telling the reader: “I am amazed sometimes to think how old I am” (Munro, *TMH* 164) and ending the story with: “I grew up, and old” (Munro, *TMH* 187). The narrator seems to be reliable.

There seems to be no major illuminative moment in the story. The narrator has a few minor revelations, like the one about “certain girls” which has been discussed in the section about the title. The only bigger revelation, or illumination, seems to be Mr. Crozier’s when he decides he does not want to see Roxanne anymore and chooses his wife.

There are a few paradoxes and parallels between the characters. Roxanne and Sylvia appear as opposites because Roxanne seems uneducated while Sylvia teaches at university. Old Mrs. Crozier and Sylvia seem to be at odds as well, maybe because Old Mrs. Crozier sees a kindred spirit in Roxanne.

The book *I Promissi Sposi* is mentioned in the story, however there is no reference to its content other than that the narrator considered it “heavy going” (Munro, *TMH* 166). The book is the place where the narrator hides the key to Mr. Crozier’s room. Looking for the title of the book, only one with a similar title: *I Promessi Sposi* could be found. Other book titles that the narrator considers too dry are mentioned: *Civilisation of Trial* and *The Great Conspiracy Against Russia*.

5.7.4 Title, Themes and Motifs

The title of the story is not as easily identifiable as in the other stories, where the exact wording of the title can be found in the story. Instead, there is a variation of the title in the story: “I began to understand that there were certain talkers – certain girls – whom people liked to listen to, not because of what they, the girls, had to say, but because of the delight they took in saying it” (Munro, *TMH* 176-177). This variation “certain girls” instead of some women refers to Roxanne, the masseuse. However, it is not clear whether the title itself only refers to her. It can be assumed that the title refers to more, or even all the women in the story, as the phrasing is different in the story and the story title. The story features many female

characters, and the only male characters described or mentioned in the story are not characterised in as much detail as the female characters.

The role of the mother seems to be a significant theme in the story. Although the narrator's mother has no prominent role in the story, she is characterised by the narrator's comments about her. It is noticeable that the narrator's mother shares the fate of many mother's in Alice Munro's story by ending up struggling "with a crippling disease" (Munro, *TMH* 187). The other mother in the story is Old Mrs. Crozier, who is Mr. Crozier's stepmother. She does not seem to be the caring mother type, although she encourages Roxanne to tend to Mr. Crozier. However, her motives for doing this remain unclear.

Change becomes evident in two major themes: time and death, although the two are sometimes linked. The passage of time, which is conveyed mostly by the frame story, is a prominent indicator of change. It shows how the protagonist changed from a young girl to an old woman, although other than a difference in age, the story does not give any clues as to what changes the narrator has experienced. In the last paragraph, which is part of the story's frame, there is some information what happened to the characters in the story and what changes their lives have taken. The changes range from growing old, having a crippling disease, changing one's whole personality after a stroke to death, the final change. Death also contributes to change during the story. The changes Mr. Crozier goes through because of his impending death from leukemia are mainly physical: his body wastes away. The disease probably also has a strong influence on Mr. Crozier's mind. In the beginning he seems resigned to die, which seems to change somewhat under Roxanne's care. However, it seems he finally found his strength again on the narrator's last day of work when he asks the narrator to lock him in his room, which Old Mrs. Crozier comments on: "'Stronger than you'd think,' she muttered" (Munro, *TMH* 184).

The themes of love and death are interconnected again in this story. Shortly before the ending of the story the narrator establishes a connection between the two themes:

I understood pretty well the winning and losing that had taken place, between Sylvia and Roxanne, but it was strange to think of the almost obliterated prize, Mr. Crozier – and to think that he could have had the will to make a decision, even to deprive himself, so late in his life. The carnality at death's door – or the true love, for that matter – were things I had to shake off like shivers down my spine (Munro, *TMH* 187).

As can be surmised from the title, women play the main roles in this story, which is also reflected in different gender roles. There are many different types of women mentioned in the

story and the only man in the story seems unimportant to the narrator, although he seems to be considered a prize for Sylvia and Roxanne.

On the one hand there are working women in the story, which was quite unusual at that time. The narrator's mother defends women who are working, which often led to arguments with her grandmother. Both Roxanne and Sylvia work, however the difference is that while Roxanne appears to be uneducated, Sylvia as a university teacher has a higher education. Furthermore, Roxanne represents the other woman. Although she is not a mistress in the usual sense of the word, since Roxanne and Mr. Crozier never have any privacy to do anything sexual, there is emotional betrayal involved. The fact that Old Mrs. Crozier encourages a relationship between the two seems odd, although it could be explained by the fact that Old Mrs. Crozier is "a second wife picked up on a business trip to Detroit" (Munro, *TMH* 166) and might see a kindred spirit in Roxanne.

This story is typical for Alice Munro in terms of the narrator. The retrospective narrator tells about an incident in her past when she was a young girl. Although other typical features of Munro's writing, like shifts in time, do not occur, it can still be considered a continuation of characteristic features of her writing.

5.8 Child's Play

5.8.1 Synopsis

This story is again told by a woman who calls herself old and who looks back on her childhood. It becomes already clear in the beginning of the story that something terrible happens in its course. The narrator tells about summer camp, where she meets Charlene. They wear the same hat and are mistaken as twins. They like it and tell themselves everything about each other, share their stories and quickly develop a strong friendship. Both of them share an awful story. Charlene tells about surprising her brother during sex and the narrator tells her new friend about Verna, a mentally challenged girl who used to live next to the narrator and who she is afraid of and hates. She tells her how awful she is and that she stalks the protagonist. Charlene immediately hates her, too. When a group of "Specials" arrives at the camp during the last week and she is with them, they try to avoid her and Charlene wants to protect Marlene from her. On the last day of camp the two girls kill Verna by drowning her. It is not described as an intentional act, but rather as something they did not think of doing until it is too late, something unconscious. The two girls never see each other again afterwards until Charlene is dying of cancer and her husband sends a letter to Marlene. The narrator comes back from a journey and gets the letter from Charlene's husband asking her to come to the

hospital because his dying wife wishes to see her childhood friend. Although she thinks Charlene must be dead by now, she goes to the hospital to see her. She is surprised when they let her see her, but Charlene is unconscious and the nurse gives her a note from her that her husband was not supposed to see. It tells Marlene to go to a specific church and find a father Hofstrader, who knows what to do. It is quite clear that the note is about the “incident” when the two of them killed Verna. Now that she is dying, Charlene wants absolution. After receiving the note the protagonist drives straight to deliver the message although she did not intend to do anything. When she arrives at the church the priest is not there because he is on vacation. However, another priest tells her he will contact him about the matter because the protagonist will not let him say no. When she is back in the car thinking of what to do next she recalls the final part of the story in the camp when the girls killed Verna. This part of the story is only revealed to the reader at the end.

5.8.2 Characters and Characterisation

The characters in the story are the narrator Marlene, her mother, her father, her childhood friend Charlene, Verna, Pauline the swimming coach, a middle-aged woman who is teaching the “Specials”, Charlene’s husband, a nurse and the priest.

The narrator describes herself as a child as “awkward, precocious, timid, full of [her] private rituals and aversions” (Munro, *TMH* 195). In her adult life she has become a scholar and published a controversial book. She always ends relationships before they grow too serious, because if she allowed herself to be that close to someone, she would also have to reveal her darkest secret, which she is not willing to do. The murder she has committed probably influences her whole life, however, she does not talk about it. The only glimpse the reader has on her conscience are her thoughts when she is talking to the priest on Charlene’s behalf: “Was I not tempted, during all this palaver? Not once? You’d think that I might break open, be wise to break open, glimpsing that vast though tricky forgiveness. But no. It’s not for me. What’s done is done. Flocks of angels, tears of blood, notwithstanding (Munro, *TMH* 220).

Verna is a child who moved in next to the narrator when she was quite young. In the story she is called “special”. It seems like she is not developed cognitively as well as other children her age although physically she is all right. The protagonist, Marlene is afraid of her and hates her as a child and describes her as mean.

The narrator met Charlene at summer camp, where they were best friends for the span of a summer. She appears more confident than herself to the narrator. Afterwards, they never had contact again until Charlene is dying of cancer as an old woman. Charlene seems to have led a

relatively normal life, she went to college and got married later. Although she seems to have repressed the memory of killing Verna enough for leading a relatively normal life, now that she is dying of cancer the murder seems to weigh upon her conscience and she wants to receive absolution by confessing to a priest.

5.8.3 Structure and Narrative Technique

The timespan of the story is quite long. It is probably about sixty years. This can be estimated by using the age of the narrator at the earliest instances she narrates, which happen just before she starts school at the age of five or six (*Canadian Information Centre*) and the probable age of the narrator at the time of telling the story, which is after she retired, so she is probably older than sixty-five years old (*Canada.ca*). Most of the things the narrator tells the reader happened during her childhood, however, there are of few details of her adult life that are told in between.

The place the story is set when the narrator is still young is not named, but it is described as a small town. Other places are mentioned in the story, such as the place Charlene grew up in, Guelph, which is located in southwestern Ontario. Therefore, it can be assumed that the small town the narrator grew up in is also located in southwestern Ontario. The place the narrator lives as a grown-up is Toronto, which is also in Ontario. Patagonia is also mentioned in the story as a place the narrator has travelled to.

The story is not structured chronologically, the narrator jumps between different parts of the story, not wanting to reveal the reason for telling the story too early. The first three very short parts are probably there to prepare the reader for what is to come in the story. Then the story begins with the main part of the story, the time in the camp. After mentioning Verna to her new friend Charlene, the next two parts of the story are about Verna. After the narrator has told about her hate and fear of Verna, the story resumes in the camp. It is again interrupted at the moment Verna is making her way toward the narrator and her friend. In the next three parts the narrator tells what happened between her childhood and now. The next two sections resume in the now of the story. There is a short part inserted in the story, the letter Charlene has written to Marlene. There are two more very short parts before the secret of what happened in the camp is revealed; both of them heighten the anticipation. The part of the story where the murder is relayed is sectioned off from what came before with a line. The last part tells how the narrator and her friend murdered Verna and how the camp must have reacted to the discovery of the body, but this is not something the narrator has seen herself, which

becomes clear with the last sentence, which is also sectioned off from the last part: “But I believe we were gone by then” (Munro, *TMH* 223).

The narrator is a first-person limited narrator. Unlike with most first-person narrators, the reader also gets to know the name of the narrator, Marlene. Her reliability is debatable, which becomes clear from Maria Löschnigg’s comments:

The unequivocally apologetic tone of Marlene’s first-person account constitutes an additional level of meaning which constantly questions what is articulated on the surface level, and which leads to the almost unbearable moral impasse which has become so typical of Munro’s recent writing. It is this rendering of psychological immensities of human behavior by means of the first-person narrator’s ambivalent discourse which is mainly responsible for the enigmatic quality of this story (*Contemporary* 40).

With her way of telling the story, the narrator tries to diminish the gravity of her role in the child murder. She wants to establish her dislike and fear of Verna from the beginning of the story and tries to incorporate other explanations for her behaviour.

There is one moment in the story which is described like an illuminative moment. Despite its horror, the scene where Marlene and Charlene kill Verna is described by the narrator “as if we were doing just what was – amazingly – demanded of us, as if this was the absolute high point, the culmination, in our lives, of our being ourselves” (Munro, *TMH* 222). Even the weather which has been described as overcast and not as bright before is changed after they committed the murder: “It seems too much to say that the discouraging clouds cleared up just at that time, but at some point [...] the sun burst out [...]” (Munro, *TMH* 222). The murder is clearly displayed in a positive light with optimistic adjectives to make the dark deed appear brighter. This positive description of the scene and the use of language, the so-called insight the narrator thought to have gained, that it could be right to kill the girl, is a twisted use of an illuminative moment. Although it is described as an insight and appeared so to the narrator at that time, this moment represents the opposite.

Marlene and Charlene represent both paradox and parallel of each other. When they are children they look similar, but they instantly try to find what is different about them. They immediately become friends, although they come from different backgrounds. Charlene’s parents have more money than the narrator’s, for example. As grown-ups they choose different paths. While Charlene marries and regrets not having children, the narrator shies away from serious commitment and focuses on her career. While Charlene feels very guilty about killing Verna, the narrator seemingly has no regrets regarding the incident.

The use of the word “special” is also paradoxical. On the one hand it is used to refer to disabled persons as a euphemism, and on the other hand it is also used for describing the narrator. The following sentence was written in a letter by Charlene to congratulate Marlene on her book: ““Congratulations again. I must say I was surprised but not entirely because I always suspected you might do something special”” (Munro, *TMH* 209).

5.8.4 Title, Themes and Motifs

The title of the story cannot be found in the text of the story with the exactly same words. However, there is an incident between the narrator and Verna, when Verna has destroyed the narrator’s leaf house and she complains to her mother. Her mother responds to her: ““She only wants to play. She doesn’t know how to *play*”” (Munro, *TMH* 198). This could be one meaning of the title, referencing how the narrator felt about Verna, who she does not want to play with, maybe because Verna is not capable of playing with other children due to her lack of understanding the concept of a game. However, there is another possible, more sinister meaning the title could have. The expression child’s play also means something is a mere trifle, and maybe not even worth mentioning. It could be a way of discounting the graveness of the murder the narrator and her friend have committed. Maria Löschnigg argues for a similar meaning of the title. She is convinced that “[t]he title, in fact, suggests in a condensed form what Marlene does through the entire narrative, as it plays down the monstrosity of the act, which is revealed only at the very end of the story (Löschnigg, *Contemporary* 37).

The story centres on the problem of guilt. Despite the apologetic tone the narrator adopts throughout the story, it seems as if the motivation for the narrator’s telling is first and foremost regret and guilt the narrator has over killing Verna. However, the narrator never seems regretful throughout the story, rather she seems to justify her actions, making them seem like they are not such a big deal. The narrator’s friend Charlene, who has helped her kill Verna, seems to regret her actions truly, and even seems to have talked to a priest about it. Although the story is born from guilt the narrator never says that she feels guilty, rather the whole story seems to be a justification of her actions.

Change can be found in numerous instances in the story. Change is especially stressed at the beginning of the story when the narrator begins her account after the two initial paragraphs which are supposed to make the reader aware that something awful will happen in the story. She says:

Every year, when you’re a child, you become a different person. Generally it’s in the fall, when you re-enter school, take your place in a higher grad, leave behind the muddle

and lethargy of the summer vacation. That's when you register the change most sharply. Afterwards you are not sure of the month or year but changes go on, just the same. For a long while the past drops away from you easily and it would seem automatically, properly. Its scenes don't vanish so much as become irrelevant. And then there's a switchback, what's been all over and done with sprouting up fresh, wanting attention, even wanting you to do something about it, though it's plain there is not on this earth a thing to be done (Munro, *TMH* 188-189).

The above paragraph shows how important the theme of change in the story is. It is a way for the narrator to diminish what she and her friend have done by pointing out that she is a different person now and how easy it is to suppress anything negative a person has done in her childhood. However, it seems as if the narrator has not really changed, but rather suppressed the memories of her horrible deed. Furthermore, the last sentence ties in with the theme of guilt that has been discussed above and which comes back to haunt the narrator.

It seems striking how change is used to describe the atmosphere before and after the murder of Verna:

There was a change, that last weekend, a whole different feeling in the camp. Nothing drastic. [...] And all this seemed to have begun with the arrival of the Specials. Their presence had changed the camp. There had been a real camp before, with all its rules and deprivations and enjoyments set up, inevitable as school or any part of a child's life, and then it had begun to crumple at the edges to reveal itself as something provisional. Playacting (Munro, *TMH* 204).

She also describes the difference in the atmosphere at the camp and the weather:

Nobody knew how to speak of this, but a lassitude spread amongst us, a bored ill temper, and even the weather reflected this feeling. It was probably not true that every day during the past two weeks had been hot and sunny, but most of us would go away with that impression. And now, on Sunday morning, there was a change. While we were having the Outdoor Devotions [...] the clouds darkened. There was no change in temperature – if anything, the heat of the day increased – but there was in the air what some people called the smell of a storm (Munro, *TMH* 205).

The changes the narrator describes above seem to be another way to rationalise and apologise for what they have done. In the first part she argues that everything felt “provisional” or like “Playacting” (204). It is a logical consequence that the girls cannot be held responsible for their deed if they did not feel that it was real, however absurd and twisted that is.

The second quote is a way of showing for the narrator that this change not only affected them but also the weather. The way in which the weather is described does not only make the atmosphere appear sinister, it is also a metaphor for how the narrator felt at that time. This can be seen clearly in the description of the weather right after Marlene and Charlene murdered

Verna: everything brightens up again. This has already been discussed in the section on illumination.

Another theme in the story is death, which in the case of this story happened by murder. It is conspicuous that the word murder is never mentioned by the narrator when she talks about what happened to Verna. Neither is the word death mentioned in connection to Verna. The word death is only connected to Charlene, who is dying of cancer, and subsequently it is used to establish a parallel to the narrator's parents, who have already died.

The theme of love can be found in the positive and negative sense in the story. The narrator experiences an instant hate for Verna because she is afraid of her. The same instant reaction happens when she meets Charlene, however, in a positive way: they instantly become friends.

Furthermore, love can be viewed in connection to guilt. The guilt both Marlene and Charlene harbour prevents them from more meaningful relationships. Both Charlene and Marlene appear haunted by what they have done to Verna. Although Charlene has married, she never confided in her husband about the murder. She does not seem to want him to know that part of her even when she is dying; instead she sends Marlene to the priest. Marlene on the other hand has never married. She had lovers she considered but could never truly let go and fall in love: "What I mean by 'important' is that with those [...] two, then, the time would come when you want to split open, surrender far more than your body, dump your whole life safely into one basket with his. / I kept myself from doing so, just barely" (Munro, *TMH* 211). Despite Charlene's marriage she was not able to truly let somebody in, just like Marlene, who could not let herself trust fully, and be loved fully because of the ugly secret in their past.

In terms of gender roles Marlene and Charlene have developed in completely different ways. Charlene went to St. Hilda's, which the narrator considered to be "a Ladies College" (Munro, *TMH* 208) and married afterwards, leading the life of a housewife but sadly for her their marriage is childless, and therefore she is engaged in other activities that seem appropriate for a married woman of that time. Conversely, the narrator considers herself to have been a more serious student and also made her studies her profession and never married. She taught at a university and travelled frequently. So while Charlene's role as a wife seems quite traditional, the narrator has led a more unconventional life.

This is the second story in the collection that thematises the murder of a child. However, unlike in "Dimensions", where the bodies are discovered dead, the act of killing the child is

described by the narrator in “Child’s Play”. Despite the horrifying subject of the story it is gripping and does not relinquish its hold on the reader.

5.9 Wood

5.9.1 Synopsis

In this story the protagonist is Roy, a man who upholsters and renovates furniture. However, his real obsession in life is cutting wood. He and his wife Lea lead a happy but childless marriage. The protagonist cares for his niece Diane like a daughter and she also helped him with his work for some time, but she stopped working with him because her husband did not consider the work appropriate for a woman, although she told Roy that she could not stand the smells because of her pregnancy. After a long illness Roy’s wife Lea does not appear to be herself anymore. She was always a chatty people person but after her illness she resigns from her job because she thinks she was sick because of all the germs people brought into the dentist’s office and generally does not want to see people, not even her family who she used to have around every Sunday. The love for the trees is a great force in the protagonist’s life. He has the permission of a farmer to cut trees in his forest but encounters a local misfit, who tells him that somebody obtained a big contract for these woods. So Roy becomes scared that somebody else will cut down all the trees that he wanted to cut. He already makes up a story in his head about what he will say if somebody says that somebody else has a contract to cut the wood in this forest. He will say that he has an agreement with the farmer and that he is allowed to cut the wood unless the farmer says otherwise. Because of the fear that he will not be able cut the trees anymore he immediately takes his truck to go to the woods when his niece takes his wife to the reflexologist and asks to borrow the truck the following day. In the woods Roy is caught up in his thoughts and does not pay as much attention to where he is walking as usual, and therefore trips and falls. He injures his ankle and his knee but he manages to crawl out of the woods to his car. When he is almost at the car he is nearly out of energy, but his wife is there to fetch him. While being at her appointment she thought of an explanation for the talk about the contract: He himself has the contract and gossip has blown it all out of proportion. He says that he thought of the same explanation himself when he was in the woods and saw a buzzard. The rescue seems to be quite odd, because his wife is acting completely normal again, although she has been indifferent and anxious for quite some time. Now she seems to be as strong as ever. Although she has not been driving for months, she takes the car, drives to where Roy is cutting wood and rescues him. At the end of the story Roy seems quite in his thoughts, thinking of a different word for the bush, which he rarely uses: forest.

5.9.2 Characters and Characterisation

The characters in this story are Roy, his wife Lea, their niece Diane, Percy Marshall and the farmer Eliot Suter.

Roy seems to be a loner, who rather spends the time burning different wood in his shed than socialising with the large extended family of his wife. Before her illness his wife Lea seems to have been the opposite of him and is described as a talkative and lively person, who likes to have her family around. She seems also easy-going and does not mind giving Roy time on his own. After her illness she is often nervous and seems to have lost interest in the world around her.

Percy is a local misfit who “walks the roads, walks along the creeks and through the town, talking to himself, sometimes playing the part of the half-wit vagabond and sometimes presenting himself as a shrewd local character” (Munro, *TMH* 232). He likes to gossip, however, the protagonist considers him to be honest.

5.9.3 Structure and Narrative Technique

The structure of the story is quite simple and straightforward. At the beginning there is a description of the focaliser and the people close to him. The information that is in the now of the story is in the present tense, while additional information is added in the past tense. Therefore, the additional information is not provided in the form of flashbacks, but rather like anecdotes, although some of them are described vividly, such as the visits of Lea’s family.

The time frame is a relatively short one, it seems as if it just spans a day, from Roy’s conversation with Percy Marshall about somebody getting a contract for cutting the wood until the accident Roy has when he is going woodcutting. There is also background information provided that dates back to earlier occurrences, such as the role Diane played for Roy when she was younger and a description of Roy’s wife before and after her illness. Those instances lie back several years from the main storyline and the main time frame.

The name of the place is never explicitly stated in the story. However, the river Peregrine is mentioned in the story, which is a “pseudonym for the Maitland River” (Simonds 36), which in turn is located in Ontario (*Natural Resources Canada*). Therefore, it is possible to give a rough location, Ontario. Furthermore, it is a rural area, which can be seen by the description of the people and landscape, especially the trees and the forest.

The story is narrated by a third-person limited narrator and is focalised through Roy. The focalisation never changes throughout the story. The focaliser's passion for wood becomes apparent in the numerous lengthy descriptions of different trees and properties of their wood.

There are two instances in the story that could be categorised as illuminating. The first happens after Roy's accident, when he is crawling back to his truck and sees a buzzard. While he is watching the animal, a thought occurs to him.

A large bird rises out of the bush to one side of him and he cranes his neck to see what it is. He thinks it's a hawk, but it could be a buzzard. If it's a buzzard will it have its eye on him, thinking it's in luck now, seeing he's hurt?

He waits to see it circle back, so he can tell what it is by the manner of its flight, and its wings.

And while he's doing that, while he's waiting, and taking note of the bird's wings – it is a buzzard – he is also getting a drastically new idea about the story that has preoccupied him for the last twenty-four hours (Munro, *TMH* 242).

The story is interrupted before Roy's idea is disclosed. It is only revealed when his wife comes to his rescue. Her reason for coming out to the woods was not some premonition that he was hurt, but the idea that the contract Percy Marshall heard about was in fact Roy's, however, the details were exaggerated because the farmer Roy made the deal with is known to embellish. She wanted to tell him immediately because she knew he worried about the contract. Ironically, they had the same thought occur to them.

The second illuminating moment is a private one of Roy. It has already been established throughout the story that he is obsessed with wood and on the drive home after the accident his thoughts drift to the bush:

There's another name for the bush, and this name is stalking around in his mind, in and out of where he can almost grasp it. But not quite. It's a tall word that seems ominous but indifferent (Munro, *TMH* 244-245).

However, only later the word he has been looking for comes to him:

Forest. That's the word. Not a strange word at all but one he has possibly never used. A formality about it that he would usually back away from.

"The Deserted Forest," he says, as if that put the cap on something (Munro, *TMH* 245).

This word that Roy searches for and considers to be so extraordinary and considerably more meaningful, seems to be a perfectly normal word. Possibly he finds the word more significant, because he does not use it in his everyday speech.

It seems paradoxical that both Roy and his wife have the same idea at almost the same time. The illumination Roy had in the woods is paralleled by his wife's, which even brings back some of her old lively personality.

5.9.4 Title, Themes and Motifs

The title of the story occurs numerous times in the story. When the narrator describes different kinds of wood and trees, and the properties of the wood. Wood is also a synonym for forest, or bush, as it is called in the story. It is the obsession of the focaliser of the story.

Change can be seen in the story in connection to Lea, Roy's wife. At the beginning she is described as lively and good-natured, however, with her illness, her character changes. She seems depressed and cannot find the energy for things which were simple and easy for her before. Then, at the end of the story, the reader can see another change in her. With the revelation that Roy might be the person who has the contract after all, and her intense desire to tell him about this idea have prompted her to leave the depressed and introverted persona behind that she has adopted after her illness.

Munro imbued her story with a sense of the mysterious. At the beginning the wood is described as an obsession of Roy and his love for the different kinds of trees becomes clear in his thoughts about them. Different kinds of trees are described for one and a half pages to convey his obsession with them. Here is an example of the descriptions:

Beech trees and oaks are another matter – there is something notable and dramatic about them, though neither has as lovely a shape as the big elm trees that are now nearly all gone. Beech has the smooth grey mark, the elephant skin, which is usually chosen for the carving of initials. [...] Beech will grow a hundred feet high in the bush. In the open they spread out and are as wide as high, but in the bush they shoot up, the limbs at the top will take radical turns and can look like stag horns" (Munro, *TMH* 229).

However, later, after Roy's accident the wood turns sinister and mysterious:

The dark and the snow are too thick for him to see beyond the first trees. He's been in there before at this time, when the dark shuts down in early winter. But now he pays attention, he notices something about the bush that he thinks he has missed those other times. How tangled up in itself it is, how dense and secret. It's not a matter of one tree after another, it's all the trees together, aiding and abetting each other and weaving into one thing. A transformation, behind your back (Munro, *TMH* 245).

It is then that he thinks of the word forest, a word that he thinks of before as "ominous but indifferent" (Munro, *TMH* 245). So, the wood has changed from something ordinary, into something mysterious and back into something ordinary again, when he can finally find the right word.

Although calling the story autobiographical would be vastly exaggerated, this “is a story which follows closely something that did happen” (Hancock 193). So maybe arguing Munro used a “starting point in reality” (*CBC*) would be more appropriate. Furthermore, Munro “availed herself of Fremlin’s knowledge of woodcutting” (Thacker, *Biography* 387) for this story, which could also be interpreted as either autobiographical material or a “starting point in reality” (*CBC*).

In terms of gender roles the people in the story seem to adhere to traditional roles. Although Lea works as a receptionist she is generally responsible for the housework, while Roy works in his shed. Therefore, they seem to have a traditional distribution of roles. Roy seems to be open to letting women into the male domain of woodworking by having his niece working with him, however, “her husband didn’t think it was the right kind of work for a woman” (Munro, *TMH* 225). Roy seems to criticise this kind of thinking; although the next lines are not specified as Roy’s thoughts, they seem to be his: “So now she has four children and works in the kitchen of an old people’s home. Apparently her husband thinks that is all right” (Munro, *TMH* 225). The word apparently gives the reader a hint that these thoughts are in fact Roy’s and that he does not like the way Diane’s husband manipulates her into behaving as he wants her to.

This story is one of the oldest stories in the collection. It has been revised for the inclusion in the collection, but the first version of “Wood” was published in 1980 already (see Thacker, *Biography* 383). This story seems quite different from the other stories in the collection and seems not as captivating as other stories in the collection. However, it has been labelled “a fairytale, covert but classic” by Beverly Haun, who considers it the best story of the collection.

5.10 Too much happiness

This story is based on the life of Sophia Kovalevsky, who was both a novelist and mathematician. Alice Munro wrote that story after discovering some information about Sophia Kovalevsky in the *Britannica* which sparked her interest in her life. After that she researched her life and found one book especially inspiring: *Little Sparrow: A Portrait of Sophia Kovalevsky*. Munro states that she has “limited [her] story to the days leading up to Sophia’s death, with flashbacks to her earlier life” (*TMH* Acknowledgements).

“Too Much Happiness”, after which this collection of short stories was named, is one of the most complex stories of this volume of short stories. It is also the only story which is based on a real person. The reader views the final days of Sophia Kovalevsky’s life, but through the

numerous flashbacks, mostly in form of memories and dreams, we see her whole life. Although the story is set only during the span of a few days we get an insight into Sophia's whole life, her youth, her love, her genius.

5.10.1 Synopsis

The story starts with a quote from Sophia Kovalevsky about mathematics.

I. The first scene already hints at what is to come in the story. Sophia Kovalevsky and Maxsim Kovalevsky, who are not married or related but lovers “are walking in the Old Cemetery, in Genoa” (Munro, *TMH* 246) on the first of January in 1891. Sophia tells Maxsim that because of this one of them will die that year.

In a flashback the reader finds out how the two of them met, both being Russian exiles in Stockholm (Sweden). Although she saw it as her duty to entertain a fellow Russian exile, they instantly fell for each other. However, he was a proud man who felt ignored when Sophia won the Bordin Prize and got all the attention. He left her and wrote her a letter saying that he did not love her. After some time they did take up their relationship again with the promise of getting married in spring.

Back to the now of the story: Maxsim takes Sophia to the train because she has to go back to work. She is reluctant to leave especially after one remark of Maxsim gives her the feeling that he does not want to marry her in the spring although she has already written to her friend Julia that they have “happiness after all. Happiness after all. Happiness.” (Munro, *TMH* 253).

II. On her journey back to Stockholm we see the story of Sophia's life in the form of flashbacks. The first one is about Paris, induced by negative thoughts of her dead sister's husband, Jaclard, which makes her dream and think about her sister Aniuta. Her sister was a free spirit who “submitted [a] story to a magazine edited by Fyodor Dostoyevsky” (Munro, *TMH* 255), where it was printed. Their father was enraged and accused Aniuta of prostituting herself. After that Fyodor proposed marriage to Aniuta, which she declined. Later she married a communard who was captured and subsequently rescued by Sophia's husband Vladimir, who bribed somebody to free Jaclard.

Back to the present: Sophia makes a stop in Paris to visit Aniuta's son and her husband. There she also writes to two friends. Marie Mendelsohn to help her find a dress for the upcoming wedding, and Jules Poincaré, a fellow mathematician who recently won a mathematical prize awarded by the king of Sweden. He complains to Sophia about their former mentor

Weierstrass, who criticised and challenged his work. Sophia reassures the man, telling him that in any case he won the prize.

After seeing Jules, she goes to visit her nephew Urey, but she only encounters Jaclard, which disappoints her a bit. The visit is not really pleasant. Jaclard reminisces about old times, turning himself into a hero, never mentioning all the help of other people. After some time Urey comes home and Sophia sees the resemblance to her sister. Jaclard says that he has married again but does not want to introduce her to Sophia because she values her reputation. Sophia tells him of her own plans to marry, to which Jaclard responds that he heard of Maxim but nothing of marriage.

Sophia asks Urey to take her to the station because she wants to talk to him on the way. He does not seem to have a fondness for anything to do with his Russian heritage and seems to despise everything Russian. He says he wants to become an omnibus boy because calling out the stations is something useful that will always be needed, whereas being a mathematician is useless and he would not be able to respect himself. Sophia gives him some money after thanking him for carrying her bags, but not as much as she intended before. She again thinks of Urey's resemblance to her sister, who always made trouble.

III. Sophia is on the train again and not feeling very well. She reminisces about old memories of Paris, where they had given her the Bordin Prize. But she also remembers that she was not accepted by the wives of her fellow mathematicians, as opposed to Stockholm where they always invite her.

Sophia is on her way to William Weierstrass, her former professor, and on the train she recollects a few memories of how she met him and got to know him. When she first came to Weierstrass' house he and his sisters, Clara and Elise, both did not know what to make of her. In an attempt to discourage her, Weierstrass had given Sophia some mathematical problems he thought she could not solve, but Sophia came back having solved all of them. In the beginning Weierstrass did not believe she solved them herself, so he let her explain how she did it and was surprised by her mathematical genius. When Sophia arrives late at night, she senses that Weierstrass is unwell because of the behaviour of his sisters.

Flashback: When Sophia worked with Weierstrass she lived in a small apartment with her friend Julia, who studied chemistry. They did not have much money, so they could not afford to go to concerts or other entertainment, but they were invited for a meal and reading at the Weierstrass' house and even in a way integrated into the family. However, to everyone's

surprise they found out that Sophia was married, though it was not a “normal” marriage but a “white marriage” (Munro, *TMH* 274) where the partners are married but do not consummate the marriage or live together as husband and wife. Sophia was married because in Russia an unmarried girl cannot leave the country without her parents’ consent, so Aniuta, Sophia’s sister, found a man who was willing marry her for that purpose. However, Vladimir would not marry Aniuta or her friend, but proposed to Sophia and asked her father for Sophia’s hand. Sophia told her parents that she was in love with him and wanted to marry him, but they said that they must wait. Vladimir was not really one to impress the family, so Sophia went to his place one day writing a letter to say that she was there and her father should not oppose the marriage any longer, and he did not.

Present: When she sees the professor the following day he seems a little confused, having forgotten that her sister Aniuta and Sophia’s husband Vladimir have been dead for a while. They talk about her upcoming marriage to Maxsim, with the professor expressing his concern for her not being able to practice mathematics anymore, but Sophia dismisses this by saying that he is not against her practicing mathematics. They also talk about the new book she has written, a novel “about a girl who is more interested in politics than in love” (Munro, *TMH* 280). She thinks that he will not like the book and that nobody will read it because it will get censored in Russia and is too Russian for everybody else. When she says goodbye she thinks that she will never see Weierstrass again.

IV. This part is about the time after Sophia had finished her dissertation and went back to Russia for some time and did not think about mathematics and her work. Her sister was there with her little son and also Vladimir, who became her real husband, although she had not fallen in love with him. They soon had a baby, who was named Sophia but called Fufu. They had money problems and Vladimir became depressed, but after moving from Petersburg to Moscow he got out of that and went to work for the brothers Ragozin, who seem to have had a negative influence on Vladimir. He started talking in a misogynist way and treated Sophia badly. That made her leave him and Russia. Although Vladimir finally grew suspicious of the Ragozins, he was too deeply involved to be able to get away. Vladimir finally committed suicide some time after the bankruptcy of the Ragozins, leaving some letters to explain his side as well as letters for friends and family, except for Sophia. She was devastated by his death and did not sleep or eat until she was force-fed and fell asleep. After that she behaved normally again, taking up her mathematical work once more. Weierstrass had found her a job in Sweden, and after dealing with the problem Vladimir and the Ragozins had created, she

went to Sweden with her daughter. When she went there she promised herself: “No more foolishness [...] I am now going to make a proper life. [...] She had not met Maxim. Or won the Bordin Prize” (Munro, *TMH* 286).

V. Present: This final part is the last part of Sophia’s journey home. On the train Sophia meets a man who seems familiar to her, but whom she thinks she has not met. He turns out to be a doctor, who tells her that she should not go through Copenhagen on her journey home because of an outbreak of smallpox there. He leaves her at Rostock and gives her a pill, which she should take to rest in case she finds the journey tiresome. Although she is not sure what to make of the doctor’s warning, she changes her ticket so that she does not have to go through Copenhagen, though the journey will take much longer that way. The trains she is taking now are much less comfortable, not well heated and do not have any other amenities, such as a tea waggon. She has to change trains and when she finally wants to board the train to Stockholm the porter refuses to carry her luggage because she does not have any Swedish money on her. In an effort she manages to carry it herself to the train but breaks out into a coughing fit. When she asks the conductor whether there was an outbreak of smallpox in Copenhagen he has not heard of it. Finally, on this last train she takes the pill the doctor gave her, which gives her the strangest feelings.

Sophia is happy to be back in time to give her lecture, which she manages to give without any problems, her cold seemingly gone, although she still feels the effects of the pill. After her lecture she goes to a party, where she is lively and talkative until finally “[s]he was too full of glowing and exceptional ideas to speak to people any longer” (Munro, *TMH* 299). She leaves the party, flags down a bus which takes her in the wrong direction and walks home clad only in her party dress, but does not feel the cold. This happens on a Friday. The next day she has to stay in bed and send for a doctor. She talks about the doctor on the train, confusing him with her husband. Friends of her take care of her. She talks about the books she has written and about her ideas for a new one but becomes confused before she can explain properly. Although she is worse on Sunday she wants to see her daughter’s costume for a children’s party. The following day she asks Teresa Gulden to look after her daughter. Shortly after that she wakes one final time, when they give her daughter the chance to talk to her one last time.

5.10.2 Characters and Characterisation

The list of characters, persons and historical figures mentioned in the story is long. Therefore, only a few are selected for characterisation. However, for completeness’ sake they are all listed here. Sophia Kovalevsky; Maxim Kovalevsky; Mittag-Leffler, a mathematician;

Fyodor Dostoyevsky; Aniuta, Sophia's sister; Fufu, Sophia's daughter; Julia, Sophia's friend who studies chemistry; Marie Mendelson; Victor Jaclard, Aniuta's husband; Urey, Aniuta's child; Sophia's father, the General; Vladimir, Sophia's husband; Jules Poincaré, a mathematician; William Weierstrass, Sophia's old mentor; Charlotte Corday; Clemenceau; the two unmarried sisters of Weierstrass, Klara and Elise; Sophia's mother; the brothers Ragozin; the doctor from Bornholm; Earl of Bothwell; Mary Queen of Scots; Professor Tyrto; Teresa Gulden; Teresa's daughter Else; Ellen Key.

This list only includes characters and historical figures who are mentioned by name in the story. There are further supporting characters like maids, conductors, porters and more, however, they will not be analysed; to say that many supporting characters exist in the story should be enough. Because there are so many characters and persons mentioned in the story, only some that are considered important will be analysed in detail.

There are many instances in the story where Sophia Kovalevsky is characterised. The following passage shows how her mentor Weierstrass saw her when she was studying with him:

She was a shock to him in many ways. She was so slight and young and excited. He felt that he must soothe her, hold her carefully, letting her learn how to manage the fireworks in her own brain.

All his life – he had difficulty saying this, as he admitted, being always wary of too much enthusiasm – all his life he had been waiting for such a student to come into this room. A student who would challenge him completely, who was not only capable of following the strivings of his own mind but perhaps of flying beyond them (Munro, *TMH* 270).

This shows not just what she was like, but also how her mentor viewed her and what she meant to him. At this time his sisters viewed her as frightened and shy, too innocent to have a husband already.

The Sophia Kovalevsky the reader encounters in the story has many facets. She is a gifted mathematician with a brilliant mind, which becomes clear when she receives the Bordin Prize in Paris. She is considered a “novelty, a delightful freak, the woman of mathematical gifts and female timidity, quite charming, yet with a mind most unconventionally furnished” (Munro, *TMH* 249-250). However, besides being a mathematician Sophia is also a writer. She is passionate about her writing, because it comes from the heart. The books are written from love and nostalgia for her home place and her sister:

She had written the recollections of her life at Palibino in a glow of love for everything lost, things once despaired of as well as things once treasured. She had written it far from home when that home and her sister were gone. And *Nihilist Girl* came out of pain for her country, a burst of patriotism and perhaps a feeling that she had not been paying enough attention, with her mathematics and the tumults of her life.

Pain for her country, yes. But in some sense she had written that story in tribute to Aniuta. [...] The story would be praised by those banished Russians who might manage to read it in manuscript. A book had only to be refused publication in Russia to engender such praises among political exiles, as Sophia well knew. *The Ravesky Sisters* – the recollections – pleased her more, though the censor had passed it, and some critics dismissed it as nostalgia” (Munro, *TMH* 281).

As can be seen in the quote above, she feels very passionately about her writing and the topics she covers in it.

Sophia Kovalevsky is described to be capable of great feeling. There are two instances when this becomes especially prominent: first in her reaction to Maxim’s rejection, which leaves her devastated and sad, but still functioning as “her mathematical self” (Munro, *TMH* 250). Secondly, in her reaction to her husband’s death, whom she did not love, however, mourns quite deeply by refusing food and not leaving her room. Both times she is able to leave her strong feelings behind to take care of a problem at hand. In the first instance to take care of her daughter, and the second to work on a mathematical problem. Duffy interprets Sophia as follows: “[c]apable of tempestuous emotional moments, she does not appear to have been enslaved by them, able to cope with storm and calm alike (200). Despite being married, widowed and engaged again Sophia appears to be an independent woman who does not need a man to take care of herself. She is able to earn her living by working at the university in Stockholm, however, she is glad when she thinks she will not have to teach anymore after her marriage to Maxim.

Sophia describes Maxim Kovalevsky as “very energetic and very good-humoured except when he is very gloomy” (279). He is a Russian expatriate because of his liberal thinking. In a letter to a friend Sophia describes him thusly:

He is very joyful, and at the same time very gloomy –

Disagreeable neighbour, excellent comrade –

Extremely light-minded, and yet very affected –

Indignantly naïve, nevertheless very blasé –

Terribly sincere, and at the same time very sly (Munro, *TMH* 248).

She describes him as full of contrasts and paradoxes, and this is also how he is depicted in the story. Despite the fact that he seems to love Sophia, he is not able to accept that she is more famous than him. He feels ignored and jealous and leaves her, writing a letter saying he did not love her. However, when Sophia considers marrying a German who seems to be in love with her, Maxsim proposes to her.

Aniuta, Sophia's sister, is described as an unconventional woman who had quite a temperament. She sold a "story to a magazine edited by Fyodor Dostoyevsky" (Munro, *TMH* 250), which enraged her father, who considered this a form of prostitution. As a girl she had a "hunger for danger, for righteous glory" (Munro, *TMH* 261) and was generally a wild spirit. For example, it was Aniuta who located Sophia's husband so she could study abroad. She is described as an idealist and married a French communard. In her later days she appeared changed, which probably was connected to her husband's unfaithfulness.

Sophia's daughter Fufu is described as "supposedly neglected but devastatingly merry little Fufu" (Munro, *TMH* 250). Although she sometimes seems to be neglected by her mother, for example after Sophia was left by Maxsim, she is also loved by her, which can be seen in how she is interested in what her daughter does and wants to talk to her even though she is dying.

Victor Jaclard was Aniuta's husband. He makes himself out to be the hero and was also viewed like that by his wife. "He was physically brave, he had ideals, he was born a peasant and knew what it was to be despised" (Munro, *TMH* 262). However, despite his heroics, he is also self-centred and ungrateful, he thinks only of himself, which can be seen in his behaviour towards Vladimir, who rescued him from imprisonment, but is somehow never mentioned in Jaclard's tale. Furthermore, he is described as bad-mannered and unfaithful to his wife from the beginning of their relationship. He is also vindictive and mean, which can be seen from his remark to Sophia about the woman he cannot introduce to her.

Urey is Aniuta's child and reminds Sophia of her. He seems honest when he explains to Sophia that his father does not want her to meet his new wife because he is ashamed of her appearance and not because she is too respectable. He also tells her of his dislike for everything Russian and that he considers mathematics useless. He is not afraid to speak his mind or offend her.

Sophia's husband Vladimir Kovalevsky undergoes some change in his personality throughout the story. In the beginning he is described as devoted to his studies as a palaeontologist, who "only wanted to look at the fossils in the Jardin des Plantes" (Munro, *TMH* 257). Nonetheless,

he rescues Jaclard when he is imprisoned. He accepts that Sophia and he lead a “white marriage” and supports her in her desire to be a mathematician. When Sophia and Vladimir do consummate their marriage after her graduation, they become the parents of a little girl, and he spoils them both with presents. However, when the czar is assassinated he falls into a depression, and after he gets involved with shady characters, the brothers Ragozin, he changes completely and treats Sophia in a misogynist way. Although he realises that trusting the Ragozins was a mistake he is too deeply involved with them, and when he is under suspicion of criminal acts he commits suicide.

Weierstrass is first characterised through the eyes of his sisters:

They know that their brother has a wonderful brain, that he is a great man, but they know also that he must have a dose of prunes every day, because of his sedentary occupation, that he cannot wear even the finest wool next to his skin, because it gives him a rash, that his feelings are hurt when a colleague has failed to give credit to him in a published article (though he pretends to take no notice, both in conversation and in his writing, praising punctiliously the very person who has slighted him) (Munro, *TMH* 268).

Although this characterisation mentions his brilliant mind, it is occupied with everyday matters, which seems to be gender-related, because that is what occupies the thoughts of the two ladies who take care of their brother.

When Sophia sees the professor again, he seems confused, forgetting that her sister Aniuta and Sophia’s husband are dead already. Although Sophia thinks that he will die soon, which he does not, she is sure that his name will not be soon forgotten, although “[h]e cared more for the work than for his name, when so many of his colleagues cared equally for both” (Munro, *TMH* 281).

Klara and Elise are the two unmarried sisters of Sophia’s mentor. They seem to be occupied with taking care of their brother and other housewifely tasks such as knitting. They are warm and welcoming toward Sophia, when they get over their initial surprise of her. Sophia finds it astonishing “how jolly they could be yet how conventional” (Munro, *TMH* 272).

5.10.3 Structure and Narrative Technique

The time of the main storyline is clearly indicated in the story. It starts on the first of January in 1891 and ends with the death of Sophia Kovalevsky on 29th January 1891 (see Schroeder). However, the true timespan is much longer because there are flashbacks from Sophia’s earlier life. The earliest flashbacks are from Sophia’s childhood, for example when she was twelve years old and discovered her love for mathematics.

The story is set in many different places all over Europe and even the main storyline changes places because it consists largely of Sophia Kovalevsky's journey from Genoa to Stockholm. The places that are mentioned or are a part of the story are all over the world, however, most of them in Europe: Uppsala, Beaulieu, Paris, Petersburg, Nice, Cannes, Palibino, New Caledonia, Versailles, Heidelberg, Berlin, Switzerland, Warsaw, Moscow, the United States, Odessa, Bornholm, Copenhagen, Denmark and Helsingborg. Though some of the places are merely mentioned once, some of them are described in further detail.

The story consists of five parts that are numbered with roman numerals. These parts are further divided into various smaller sections. Whenever a new topic or flashback is introduced, it is sectioned off by paragraphs. The summary of the story is using the sections that are used in the story.

According to Boucherie this structure causes

[...] time to flow in all directions from and to the present moment in which the character finds herself. A kind of mosaic is thus created where the total picture is more than the sum of its parts. It causes Sophia's life to emerge as a multi-faceted and constant movement, a profound mystery made up of very concrete and precise details yet constantly going beyond them (148).

This structure has the effect of conveying a feeling of getting to know the character of Sophia Kovalevsky without necessarily explaining everything. The reader is able to glimpse the important parts of Sophia's life although in actuality they only see her last days. The memories are always sparked by a thought about a person or place, and therefore the interlude seems to be no interruption in the story. Although the structure is far from chronological it appears logical.

Part of the story is narrated by a third person omniscient narrator. This becomes evident especially at the beginning with the description of Sophia and Maxsim, which is not focalised through the eyes of a character, and the ending of the story, where the reader is informed what happened to some of the characters in the story. Apart from those instances, most of the story is focalised through Sophia Kovalevsky, therefore it is limited to her perspective. However, there are a few instances in the story when the reader is presented with thoughts other than Sophia's, which are always quite short and integrated in a way that they could be Sophia's thoughts. For example, there is the passage where Klara and Elise encounter Sophia for the first time and the reader is presented with their thoughts of her. However, the next sentence makes it seem as if Sophia could have recalled their thoughts: "This was all told to Sophia later, when she had become their friend" (Munro, *TMH* 268). In another instance, when the

reader is presented with Weierstrass' thoughts of Sophia it is clearer that those thoughts could not be Sophia's.

There are several points in the story where some kind of illumination appears. A reference to the title shows an instance when Sophia realises that she and Maxsim have a fulfilling relationship. For this reason Sophia "has already written to Julia, saying it is to happiness after all. Happiness after all. Happiness" (Munro, *TMH* 253). Typical for Munro this illumination is only short-lived, because at the same time as Sophia tells the reader what she has written to her friend, she starts doubting her relationship with Maxsim because of a remark he has made. The second time the title is mentioned is at the end of the story. It seems as if with death she

Another kind of illumination happens when Sophia is high on the pill the doctor has given her. She experiences an "extraordinary feeling – the change of perception" (Munro, *TMH* 298) and feels "as if her heart could go on expanding" (Munro, *TMH* 298). After taking the pill she feels enlightened and "[e]vents and ideas now taking on a new shape, seen through sheets of clear intelligence, a transforming glass" (Munro, *TMH* 298). Sophia compares this feeling to her first encounter with trigonometry at the age of twelve, which also made her extremely happy. The encounter with mathematics seems to have been a real epiphany and enlightening moment for the protagonist, and with the drug she seems to experience the feeling again. When she runs out in the night from a party after a lecture she has given she leaves because "[s]he was too full of glowing and exceptional ideas to speak to people any longer" (Munro, *TMH* 299). Still influenced by the drug, or her near death, she talks about the books she has written and about her ideas for a new one but "[...] became confused and laughed because she was not doing this more clearly. There was a movement back and forth, she said, there was a pulse in life. Her hope was that in this piece of writing she would discover what went on. Something underlying. Invented, but not" (Munro, *TMH* 301). Whether these illuminative moments can be attributed to the effects of the drug she has taken or some insight she has gained because of her near death is impossible to say; they are insights nonetheless. However, again the illuminative moment is short lived in Munro, cut short by the death of the protagonist.

Sophia's love of both mathematics and the writing of fictions is a paradox that seems quite improbable. Usually, a person is either interested in one or the other. However, the way Sophia's mentor Weierstrass views mathematics also corresponds with fiction: "[...] there must be something like intuition in a first-rate mathematician's mind, some lightning flare to uncover what has been there all along. Rigorous, meticulous, one must be, but so must the

great poet” (Munro, *TMH* 270). Marijke Boucherie also notes the connection of mathematics and fantasy (147) by referring to the quote at the beginning of the story by Sophia Kovalevsky saying that “this science requires great fantasy” (Munro, *TMH* 246). Although this link seems paradoxical, in this story fiction and fantasy are viewed as parallels and not as opposites.

The character of Maxsim seems to entirely consist of paradoxes, which can be seen from the characterisation above. Furthermore, it seems paradoxical how he references Sophia in his speech at her funeral, not as a lost lover, but as “a professor of his acquaintance” (Munro, *TMH* 303).

There are two paragraphs at the end of the story that could be considered ironic. Weierstrass outlived Sophia for six years and “had said to his sisters that he knew he would never see her again” (Munro, *TMH* 303), while ironically Sophia thought the same about him when she left Berlin. Furthermore, Maxsim’s fate seems also ironic. He returned to Russia, where he “founded the Party for Democratic Reform in Russia, taking a stand for constitutional monarchy” (Munro, *TMH* 303). However, ironically, he was not radical enough for Lenin and too radical for the czarists (Munro, *TMH* 303).

There are two intertextual passages in the story. The first is a quote by Sophia Kovalevsky at the beginning of the story about mathematics. This could be a clue as to what the story is about, namely Sophia’s life. The second intertextual passage is a letter written by Sophia to a friend, where she provides a description of Maxsim. This letter is set off from the rest of the text and written in italics.

5.10.4 Titles, Themes and Motifs

The theme of happiness is closely connected to the title, which is mentioned two times in the story. The first instance is in letters Sophia writes to her friend Julia. In a letter she writes before Christmas she confides “that she did not know whether she was going to happiness or sorrow” (Munro, *TMH* 252). However, after declaring herself to Maxsim he keeps his word and they decide to be married in the spring. When she leaves Maxsim to go back to her job, Sophia “has already written to Julia, saying it is to happiness after all. Happiness after all. Happiness” (Munro, *TMH* 253), although she fears from a remark made by Maxsim that he does not want to marry her. The second time the title is mentioned in the story is when Sophia is dying at the end of the story and is able to speak only a little bit. Her friend Teresa, who is there when it happens, thinks “she heard her say, ‘Too much happiness’” (Munro, *TMH* 302).

The pursuit for happiness is a theme that permeates the story. The first mentioning of happiness refers to Maxsim and Sophia's love. She is not quite certain about his affections, because he has left her before. So she disputes whether it is truly happiness. When she is dying she is probably certain of his love, because of their marriage plans. However, the remark of "Too much happiness" probably does not refer to him as Sophia might still be under the influence of the drug the doctor has given her. It could refer to a number of things, from her love for mathematics to the brilliant ideas that she has for new books or mathematics and the love for her daughter. All these things are described in the last few pages, after Sophia has taken the drug to her death, whereas there is no mention of Maxsim. It could just be the drug's influence or approaching death that she feels there is too much happiness.

Beran argues that many "stories by Munro discuss happiness as they finish" (340) and gives a few examples. She is convinced that "eternal happiness seems outside of the contemporary Weltanschauung reflected in Munro's fiction" (332) but considers momentary happiness a possibility.

Happiness, then, to the extent that it reflects tawdry ideals of popular culture or the conventionality of the happy ending, is frequently treated ironically in Munro's writings. [...] Instead, like the characters, readers feel the tensions throbbing between the endings of Munro's stories and the endings that popular culture teaches us to want and that much literature of the past teaches us to expect. [...] Munro's stories provoke readers to think about happiness in a context that goes beyond the stories of individual characters (Beran 340).

In this story happiness is treated ironically because of its connection to death. Although it is also connected to traditional love and marriage, embodied by her relationship to Maxsim, in the end, Sophia experiences "too much happiness" when she is dying.

Marijke Boucherie interprets the last words of the protagonist in a much more positive way. She argues

[...] if Sophia Kovalevsky's last words, «too much happiness», may be read as the ultimate affirmation of her alienation, they can also be seen as Sophia's final discovery that the meaning of life lies in the confluence of all its variables in a truth that acknowledges and celebrates life's mystery. Happiness means to live. Too much happiness means to die from the happiness of life (Boucherie 151).

There might be some truth in both of these interpretations, however, seeing it as an illumination or even epiphany on the part of Sophia Kovalevsky that she indeed has led a happy and fulfilling life or just that she is not able to bear all the illuminating thoughts she is

not able to express anymore, makes this almost seem like a happy ending. This would be rather atypical for Munro, however, it fits the story.

Love is a strong theme in the story that takes various forms. There is Sophia's love for mathematics, which, when she first encounters it, is for her like "a natural gift, like the northern lights [...] not mixed up with anything else in the world, not with papers, prizes, colleagues and diplomas" (Munro, *TMH* 299). Furthermore, Sophia loves her writing, which has been discussed in her characterisation already. The love for her dead sister is still strong, it inspired a book and in the conversation with Weierstrass about her sister she declares that her "heart will never heal" (Munro, *TMH* 279). The love for her daughter Fufu is never so explicitly mentioned in the story though it becomes quite clear when Sophia is dying and shows interest in the costume her daughter will wear for a children's party, which emphasises Sophia's love for her daughter at the end of the story. The relationship of Sophia to her parents is only referenced very briefly. Then there is the aspect of romantic love. Sophia did not love her first husband in a romantic way although she did mourn him when he died. Her love for Maxsim seems to entail everything her marriage missed in terms of romance. It is conveyed as a tragic relationship with ups and downs. Maxsim and Sophia's upcoming marriage makes up a big part of Sophia's thoughts and her future happiness. Nevertheless, it seems like all of this is just in her head when you recall several incidences in the story: first Maxsim says he will never marry, although they later talk about a marriage in the spring; again when they say goodbye, Maxsim mentions that Sophia probably cannot get away from work, which leads her to think for a moment that he might not mean to marry her; then the encounter with Jaclard, who knows about her relationship with Maxsim but will not believe they will get married; lastly Maxsim's speech at Sophia's funeral, where he appears as no more than an acquaintance.

Death permeates the story starting with the first scene of the story. This scene is set in a cemetery on the first of January. Therefore Sophia remarks to Maxsim: "'You know that one of us will die,' she says. 'One of us will die this year.' [...] 'Because we have gone walking in a graveyard on the first day of the New Year'" (Munro, *TMH* 247). This is the first of many references to an impending death. There is another foreshadowing when Sophia sees a black cat crossing their path on the platform of the train station. Although this is no direct reference to death, black cats supposedly bring ill luck. The next reference to death appears in a conversation she has with Jules Poincaré when they talk about the prize he has won. Jules is sure that his name will not be forgotten, which makes Sophia think the following: "Every one

of us will be forgotten, Sophia thought but did not say, because of the tender sensibilities of men – particularly of a young man – on this point” (Munro, *TMH* 259). Again, death is not directly mentioned but implied. At the end of the second part Sophia’s death is mentioned again in another foreshadowing when she thinks about her nephew Urey: “Urey might change his course; there was no telling. He might even come to have some fondness for his aunt Sophia, though probably not till he was as old as she was now, and she long dead” (Munro, *TMH* 265). The last two pages of the story are about Sophia Kovalevsky’s death, her funeral and what happened after her death to some of the characters in the story. Although death seems to be the conclusion of the story, the last sentence challenging the finality of death by showing that Sophia Kovalevsky still has an impact on the world, although she is already dead: “Sophia’s name has been given to a crater on the moon” (Munro, *TMH* 303).

The theme of change can be seen in numerous instances in the story, which is only logical, since the story tells almost the whole life of Sophia Kovalevsky. It can be seen in her husband’s personality, which has been discussed above, and also in their relationship, which changed from a white marriage to a real one. Change is noticeable in almost every person who Sophia visits along the journey, which can be seen in the contrast of her memories of them and the encounter they have during her journey.

Gender roles and especially the roles of women play a very important part in the story. Sophia Kovalevsky was the first female professor of mathematics at a European university (Boucherie 145) and can therefore be considered a pioneer for women’s rights. Duffy considers it significant that the revolutionary activity of Sophia’s sister is included in the story, which underlines “the theme of women’s political struggle” (202), and is convinced that Munro “has a particular story to tell about women savants and the obstacles they encounter, a pointed, even didactic, tale of the trials endured by women” (Duffy 202-203).

Sophia can be seen in various roles throughout the story. In her role as a mother she admits herself often a bit neglectful, because she is too occupied with her own thoughts. However, as has been pointed out before, she still shows her love for her daughter, even with death approaching.

Because of her mathematical genius she is considered an oddity and in France she is slighted because of that, whereas in Sweden she seems to be accepted despite her “oddity”. Her status as someone different or even odd is clearly shown when she describes how she is treated by the wives of her fellow mathematicians in Paris:

The wives of the great scientists preferred not to meet her, or invite her into their homes.

Wives were the watchers on the barricade, the invisible implacable army. Husbands shrugged sadly at their prohibitions but gave them their due. Men whose brains were blowing old notions apart were still in thrall of women whose heads were full of nothing but the necessity of tight corsets, calling cards, and conversations that filled your throat with a kind of perfumed fog (Munro, *TMH* 266-267).

Despite their traditional thinking, these wives are nevertheless conveyed as strong-willed. They make their husbands do what they want, upholding the traditional view of women and slighting one who is different. The women in Stockholm are described much more open-mindedly: “They had respect for what she did, and many of them believed that more women should do such things and someday they would” (Munro, *TMH* 267).

To be a married woman seems to be of some importance to Sophia, who was hurt by Jaclard’s refusal to introduce her to his new wife, and dismissed bad thoughts about the women and wives of colleagues she encounters with the thought that: “At any rate she would soon be a wife herself, and the wife of a rich and clever and accomplished man into the bargain” (Munro, *TMH* 267).

Weierstrass’ view of Sophia as a woman is interesting. When they discuss her writing, Weierstrass says: “‘Truly I sometimes forget that you are a woman. I think of you as – as a – ’ [...] ‘As a gift to me and to me alone’ (Munro, *TMH* 280). This might be seen in connection to the expectations he had for a student such as Sophia. “A student who would challenge him completely, who was not only capable of following the strivings of his own mind but perhaps of flying beyond them” (Munro, *TMH* 270). It is also a possibility that her gender is not important to him but only her mathematical mind, so he is able to forget that Sophia is a woman. Although he is a brilliant mathematician, he seems completely dependent on his two sisters who are living with him, which can be seen in the characterisation above.

A role that Sophia definitively does not want to play is that of a “hausfrau”, which she suspects a German suitor of hers is looking for. For this reason, and because of the fact that Maxim has proposed to her in his jealousy of this man, she does not want to marry him. Sophia considers Maxim’s expectations of a wife more desirable for her:

He expected some decorum, but not the decorum of the hausfrau. He would never object, as a Swedish husband might, to her cigarettes and endless tea drinking and political outbursts. And she was not displeased to see that when his gout bothered him he could be as unreasonable, as irritating and self-pitying as herself. [...] Maxim would not interfere with her real work, which was research, not teaching. He would be glad she

had something to absorb her, though she suspected that he found mathematics not trivial, but somehow beside the point” (Munro, *TMH* 252-253).

This description of the kind of marriage she expects them to have sounds like a modern relationship, where both partners have equal rights. He will not interfere with her “real work” or criticise her lifestyle, while she will take care of him when he is unwell. There is another instance in the story where it becomes clear that Sophia would not be suited to be a housewife, namely when she visits Weierstrass:

Sophia climbed the stairs thinking not of the professor but of these two women who had made him the centre of their lives. Knitting mufflers, mending the linen, making the puddings and preserves that could never be trusted to a servant. Honouring the Roman Catholic Church as their brother did – a cold undiverting religion in Sophia’s opinion – and all without a moment of mutiny as far as she could see, or any flicker of dissatisfaction. And never, as far as Sophia could see, a flicker of dissatisfaction.

I would go mad, she thought (Munro, *TMH* 278).

This shows that Sophia has already escaped traditional thinking in terms of women’s roles so that she herself could never take on that kind of role.

Marriage is viewed in a different light than usual, because Sophia and Vladimir do not enter into marriage because of love, but to enable her to study abroad. When they get married “Sophia was overjoyed, not indeed to be marrying Vladimir but to be pleasing Aniuta by striking a blow for the emancipation of Russian women” (Munro, *TMH* 276). So in this case marriage represents freedom for the women to follow their ambitions.

Aniuta could be described as a feminist and as a free spirit. Sophia remembers her as a young woman “full of scorn for her present life and faith in her destiny that would take her into some entirely new and just and ruthless world” (Munro, *TMH* 265). Aniuta is the one who arranges the meeting with the man Sophia marries to be able to study abroad. What also indicates her feminist ideals is the choice in heroines Aniuta has. She admires women who made a strong impact on history, like Mary Queen of Scots.

From the men in the story four are worth mentioning in this section: Jaclard, Urey, Vladimir and Maxsim. Although Jaclard has high political ideals, women rights do not fall into this category for him. He treats his first wife Aniuta badly, being unfaithful to her from the beginning. His new wife seems to be only there to take care of his needs. He represents a misogynist traditional male role. Urey, his son, at least seems aware of women rights, although he shows no indication of supporting them, which becomes clear in a conversation he has with Sophia. Talking about his stepmother he says:

She is as ugly as a sewer rat, that's why he didn't want you to meet her.'

'You shouldn't talk that way about women.'

'Why not, if they want to be equal?'

'I suppose I should say 'about people'' (Munro, *TMH* 263).

Vladimir makes a transition from an understanding open-minded husband to a misogynist. With the white marriage he has with Sophia he supports her in her quest to study abroad so she can follow her passion for mathematics. This seems rather unusual for the time, however, it was apparently common for Russian nihilists to fight against any form of oppression (Schroeder). However, as has been shown above in his characterisation, he changes his ways completely after getting in contact with the brothers Ragozin. The change is described in the story:

He became aloof, he took on rough and superior airs. Name me one truly important woman, he said. One who has made any real difference in the world, except by seducing and murdering men. They are congenitally backwards and self-centred and if they get hold of any idea, any decent idea to devote themselves to, they become hysterical and ruin it with their self-importance (Munro, *TMH* 284).

While at the beginning of the story he seems supportive of Sophia and her aims in life, this shows a completely different man. Later Sophia reflects on his character:

Vladimir had not been a coward – look how he had rescued Jaclard – but he did not have the manly certainties. That was why he could grant her some equality those others couldn't and why he could never grant her that enveloping warmth and safety. Then near the end when he came under the Ragozin influence and changed his tune – desperate as he was and thinking that he might save himself by aping others – he turned to treating her in an unconvincing even ridiculous, lordly style. He had given her then the excuse for despising him but maybe she had despised him all along. Whether he worshipped or insulted her it was impossible for her to love him (Munro, *TMH* 295).

What we can see in this quote is an explanation for his change of character. Sophia considers him weak-minded and therefore, susceptible to be influenced by others. In the beginning it seems as he is influenced by women or nihilist ideas to fight against oppression, however, later he is exposed to different influences, which he expresses with his misogynist behaviour.

Maxsim on the other hand, is described as a strong man who can be relied and leaned on because of "[t]hat marvellous assurance he has, that her father had" (Munro, *TMH* 294).

Sophia goes on explaining the type of men Maxsim and her father represent:

They would be displeased to have anybody call them docile, yet in a way they are. They submit themselves to manly behaviour. They submit themselves to manly behaviour

with all its risks and cruelties, its complicated burdens and deliberate frauds. Its rules, which in some cases you benefited from, as woman, and then some that you didn't (Munro, *TMH* 294).

Despite Maxim's traditional male views, Sophia is convinced that he "would not interfere with her real work, which was research, not teaching. He would be glad she had something to absorb her, though she suspected that he found mathematics not trivial, but somehow beside the point" (Munro, *TMH* 253).

Sophia Kovalevsky's life and her genius are clearly conveyed in Munro's story and described by Duffy in the following way:

In her brief span of 41 years, Kovalevsky's achievements in mathematics helped to shatter the many barriers blocking any major female entry into scientific endeavor, both institutional and individual. She also wrote novels, a memoir, and social and cultural commentary, all the while engaging in political and social activism that earned her a role in the attempts at the modernization of Russia that so engaged the intelligentsia of her day (Duffy 199).

The last words of Sophia "were said to be 'too much happiness'" (Boucherie 146), which have probably inspired the title for the story.

The name of the woman who this story is about appears in various different forms throughout the story. In the quote at the beginning of the story her name is spelled Sophia Kovalevski (see Munro, *TMH* 246), in the story her surname is spelled Kovalevsky (see for example Munro, *TMH* 247) and sometimes her first name is not referred to as Sophia but as Sonya (see Munro, *TMH* 249). What could be interpreted as carelessness of the author or editor of the story has its roots in Sophia Kovalevsky's history. Her actual name is Sofja Wassiljewna Kowalewskaja, which is often modified to Sofya Kovalevskaya in English-speaking countries, but other uses of her name include Sonja, Sonya or Sophie for her first name and Kowalewski, Kowalewska, Kowalewsky or Kovalevsky for her surname (Schroeder). Therefore, using different versions of Sophia Kovalevsky's name could be in reference to this fact.

Although it is already indicated by Alice Munro's acknowledgement at the end of "Too Much Happiness", Duffy confirms that the story "sticks very close to historical fact for its content, relying heavily upon biographical material that can be looked up" (196). Furthermore, Duffy argues that "the Doctor from Bornholm represents what seems to [be] Munro's sole imaginative intervention into the life-story that she tells with a strict fidelity to the historical record" (201).

Therefore, the part with the doctor at the end of the story seems interesting: “[He] read of her death in the newspaper, without surprise. He had occasional presentiments, disturbing to one in his profession, and not necessarily reliable. He had thought that avoiding Copenhagen might preserve her. He wondered if she had taken the drug he had given her, and if it had brought her solace, as it did, when necessary, to him” (302). This piece of fantasy in the story seems very peculiar, because otherwise it adheres to the facts of Sophia Kovalevsky’s life. Maybe this piece of fantasy should just remind the reader of the strength of fantasy in its ability to challenge the assumptions of realism “by focusing instead on what is accidental and inexplicable” (Howells, “Worlds” 121). So this piece of fantasy in the otherwise quite factual story is there to remind the readers that they are dealing with fiction after all.

6 Conclusion

Alice Munro has become famous almost entirely for her short stories. Already with her first collection of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades* she won the Governor General's Award in 1968 and launched her career. Although the short story garnered recognition during the 1960s, authors were encouraged to publish novels. This was extremely difficult for Alice Munro, who struggled for a long time with the form of the novel, before finally publishing *Lives of Girls and Women*, which has, at least initially, been considered a novel. However, gradually *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Who Do You Think You Are?*, a second set of connected short stories that has often been referred to as a novel, have been categorised as short story cycles (see Löschnigg & Löschnigg 99-100). From the analysis of the stories in the collection *Too Much Happiness* it becomes clear that the requirements for defining them as short stories are fulfilled. The stories can be read "in one sitting" (Poe 60), and Matthews "chief requisites [of] compression, originality, ingenuity, and now and again a touch of fantasy" (77) can be found in these stories. Compression can be seen best in the title story of the collection, which is, ironically, the longest. Munro manages to fit a description of Sophia Kovalevsky's whole life into sixty pages. The way the stories are written appears to be entirely original and shows Munro's ingenuity. Furthermore, despite the claim of many critics that Munro mainly uses autobiography in her stories, they certainly include elements solely derived from fantasy.

According to Pratt's first proposition "[t]he novel tells a life, [while] the short story tells a fragment of a life" (99), but some of Munro's stories, like "Too Much Happiness", are able to convey a whole life, by using flashbacks and memories. This could be a reason for critics to refer to Munro's stories as novelistic; however, as Pasco has already pointed out, the best stories do "communicate not a segment, a tattered fragment, but a world" ("On Defining" 127). Pasco's definition of short stories as "*short, literary prose fiction*" ("On Defining" 118) can be used for Munro's stories, even though some of them are longer than others.

Gordimer's statement about a moment of truth in short stories also corresponds with Munro's writing. Gordimer points out that "[a] discrete moment of truth is aimed at – not the moment of truth, because the short story doesn't deal in cumulatives" (265). This is reflected in Munro's use of moments of illumination, which never aim to be fixed; the meaning of these illuminations constantly changes.

Ferguson argues that in the modern short story the readers "have to construct the meaning of a story themselves" (228), which is often true in Munro's stories. An example from the

collection would be the story “Wood”, where the reader is left to wonder at the end of the story why the word “forest” leaves such a big impression on Roy. Another feature of modern short stories is described by May, who claims that the authors manage to express inner reality [...] by describing outer reality” (*Brother* 145). This can be seen, for example, in “Child’s Play” and the description of the weather before the girls kill Verna. Hunter claims that modern short stories are plotless (see 7), which is not true for Munro’s stories. All of them have a storyline that can be summarised. Furthermore, there are also features of postmodern short stories in Munro’s writing. Experiments with form (see Freiburg 331-332) cannot exactly be seen in Munro’s stories, apart from non-linear plots and jumps in time. However, there are instances of intertextuality (see Freiburg 341) in many of her stories. Marginalised groups (see Iftekharuddin) do get a voice in Munro’s stories to some extent. Although she does not mention ethnic minorities in her stories, she manages to give women a voice.

In connecting theory with the analysis it becomes clear why some critics regard her work as novelistic, however, it has also been established that Munro’s stories can definitively be called “short stories”. It is not entirely clear whether her stories are modern or postmodern, as there are some features of her work that fit into either category. Therefore, the categorisation of Munro’s short stories will be more fruitful when it is considered in connection to Canada. Whether her stories are modernist, postmodernist or even still written in a realist mode of writing might not become clear from a general definition of the genre, and the Canadian context might provide further insight.

The question whether Munro is writing within the tradition of realism or whether her stories are modernist or even postmodernist is not easy to determine. Many critics argue that Munro’s “sophisticated ‘verisimilitude’” (Becker 107) and her use of autobiographical material are reasons to view her work as realistic (see Becker 107). Although many critics have identified features of autobiography in many of her previous stories, in the collection *Too Much Happiness* only minor details can be viewed as autobiography. Some of the stories that include factual information have a “starting point in reality” (*CBC*), however, they cannot be considered autobiographical. Therefore, calling all her stories autobiographical seems far-fetched. Autobiography might be more prominent in other collections, such as *The View from Castle Rock* or *Dear Life*.

Although Munro’s stories seem to represent people in a realistic way, there are also fantastic elements in her stories (see Howells, “Indeterminacy” and Carrington), which makes the reader aware of the fictionality of the stories. Blodgett argues that Munro aims to represent

more than realism (see 15), by illuminating the subject she is writing about instead of depicting it as it is. For example, in “Wood” Roy has an illumination while watching a buzzard fly over him. Munro is clearly not aiming at simple descriptive realism with this, but at some kind of illumination. One of the techniques May mentions for realism in the modern short story is “to express inner reality [...] by describing outer reality (*Brother* 145). This can be seen in “Child’s Play” with the description of the weather before and after the murder of Verna. Because of the coexistence of realistic details and fantastic elements in Munro’s stories it is also plausible to ascribe her works to magic realism.

It becomes clear from the analysis why many critics view Munro’s work as works of realism, as many aspects of her work support this theory; however, as May has pointed out about the modern short story, Munro’s stories only seem realistic on the surface level (see *Brother* 166), there is more to them than it appears at first glance. Considering Canada’s “slightly postmodern” literature for a further analysis might be beneficial here.

It has already been established that Munro’s stories have some characteristics of the modern short story. However, when one considers how Hutcheon distinguishes modernism and postmodernism, it seems that Munro’s stories rather fit the category of postmodernism. While modernist literature represents the universal (Hutcheon 18) and order (Hutcheon 2), postmodernist literature presents a more diversified picture (Hutcheon 18) and is not afraid to question authority (Hutcheon 2). Considering these characteristics, Munro’s stories rather fit into the category of the postmodern, because she manages to present a diversified picture of the people she writes about. Furthermore, she often uses irony and intertextuality in her stories, which have been identified as features of postmodernism as well (see Hutcheon 8-9). Munro presents many different people (see Hutcheon 19), which can be seen in Munro’s representation of different people from diverse backgrounds leading different lives, who are always presented with care and considered in their individuality.

It seems that even though Munro’s stories seem realistic, they would also fit the category of the modern short story and of the postmodern short story. However, Munro’s stories have to be considered in the context of Canada, where forms like realism, modernism and postmodernism are able to coexist because postmodernism is working within those conventions (Hutcheon 20). Therefore, it is possible to argue that her stories incorporate some traits of all three literary conventions and call her mode of working “slightly postmodern”, consistent with Canadian tradition.

Atwood's assumption that Canadians present themselves as victims (see 35-41), does not seem to be true for Munro's stories. Although some of the characters in the analysed short stories can be viewed as victims, such as Doree in "Dimensions" or Roy in "Wood", in the end they do something and take their fate into their own hands, Doree by helping the young man and deciding not to visit her repressing husband, and Roy by crawling out of the wood despite his hurt leg. The statement by Atwood concerning the portrayal of women in Canadian literature (see 199-211) thus cannot be verified in Munro's stories of this collection. There is such an abundance of different women and different roles those women incorporate/represent that this model would be much too reductive. There are various young girls in the stories, such as the narrator in "Wenlock Edge", or the narrator in "Some Women", therefore falsifying the assumption that the Diana is not represented, or dies young (see Atwood 199). However, due to Munro's retrospective narration it could be argued that they are "trapped" inside a Hecate figure (see Atwood 209-211), as from a narrative point of view this could be seen as true. In "Some Women" an older woman tells a story that happened in her youth, the frame story is the older woman (Hecate) and it encloses the main story which represents the younger woman (Diana). Nevertheless, the role of Venus can also be found in several of the stories, for example, Sally in "Deep-Holes" is a young mother or Roxanne in "Some Women", who represents life and love for a dying man. There are many older women in the stories of this collection, however to see all of them simply as the figure of a Hecate "who presides over death" (Atwood 199) would be too narrow-minded. The women in these stories, regardless of age, represent a multitude of different roles and many defy categorisation, therefore, a narrow model, which Atwood presents in her study, is not suitable for analysing the women's roles in Munro's stories.

A garrison mentality as Frye describes it (see 226), cannot be seen in the stories of *Too Much Happiness*. Although Frye argues that the garrison mentality is adaptable to changes in society in the form of "a revolutionary garrison within a metropolitan society" (231), this could not be identified in Munro's stories either.

As Kroetsch (360) and Keith (121) have pointed out, defining Canadian identity is about distinguishing themselves from other nations. It seems that Canadians always feel a need to clarify "what they are not rather than what they are" (Keith 121), "by explaining to the Americans that [they] aren't British, [and] to the British that [they] aren't Americans" (Kroetsch 360). A feature such as described above can be found in "Wenlock Edge", where the narrator feels the need to clarify that she is studying in "London, Ontario" (Munro, *TMH*

62), although this might become clear from the context. In “Dimensions”, where London is mentioned as well, there is no such clarification. The reason for this could be that in “Wenlock Edge” there is a first-person narrator who has this Canadian characteristic internalised and therefore feels the need to explain the difference, whereas with a third-person narrator such clarifications seem unnecessary.

Although multiculturalism is ingrained into Canadian cultural identity it does not seem to be represented in Munro’s stories very much. Beran observed that Munro “does not foreground recent Canadian cultural trends” (334) such as “the Canadian multicultural mosaic” (334) or other “[c]urrent Canadian political issues” (334) which are influencing factors for other Canadian writers. However, there is one story in *Too Much Happiness* where multiculturalism seems to be integrated to some extent. In “Deep-Holes” there is a passage that shows that multiculturalism is not accepted by every Canadian, and shows the perspective on multiculturalism from a person with a rural background. The person is fully aware that the people she is encountering in the city she is visiting are Canadians, but she is also conscious of the views of other rural people. There are no other instances where the concept of multiculturalism is mentioned or hinted at in other stories from the collection.

Some critics consider Munro to be a gothic writer. Some elements of gothic writing, such as representing women as monstrous (see Becker 10) seems to be represented very sparsely in Munro. Although in “Child’s Play” two girls murder a third one, this cannot really be viewed as a representation of women as monstrous. However, “domestic horror with no escape”, which is considered typical for gothic writing, can indeed be found in the story “Dimensions”. Becker sees a connection of gothic literature and the garrison mentality in the “confining terrors of small towns in a bleak landscape” (Becker 95) and identifies this connection in Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women*. Although these markers might have been found in other works of Munro, the stories in this collection do not use descriptions like that. Although nature is depicted as mighty, in “Wood” for example, the tone is neither bleak nor menacing, but rather in awe of nature. Howells argues that “[...] Munro has come increasingly to see Gothic as an ‘unreliable structure’” (“Worlds” 122). This could be the reason why some characteristics of gothic writing do occur in her stories but why they do not incorporate all of them.

Critics often debate whether Munro is a feminist writer. Gold argues that she depicts “authentic, believable women” (7), which can also be seen in the analysis of the collection. Munro does not shy away from depicting the women in her stories authentically, although this

also means not always showing them favourably. Munro does not aim at an ideal portrayal of women that would not be realistic. For example, the way Joyce is depicted in the first part of “Fiction” is not very flattering, however, authentic and believable. Howells argues that Munro often writes about women who want to break free from their “conformity to prevailing cultural images of women and their proper roles” (“Worlds” 123). This can be seen in “Dimensions”, when Doree finally breaks free of Lloyds influence, or in “Free Radicals”, when Nita takes her husband to the railway tracks to make love. The most striking example, however, is Sophia Kovalevsky in “Too Much Happiness”, who was the first woman to work as a mathematics professor at a European university. Gorra argues that Munro depicts the men in her stories “as seen by women”. This can be viewed very well in “Too Much Happiness”. Maxsim is characterised through the eyes of Sophia and Weierstrass is presented through the eyes of his sisters. This can be explained by the fact that most of Munro’s narrators and focalisers are women, therefore, their point of view prevails in the depiction of other characters. However, in this collection there is also a male first-person narrator in “Face” and a male focaliser in “Wood”, therefore, these two stories can be seen as an exception from this assumption. Löschnigg’s conjecture that female characters “have internalized the male gaze and struggle to protect the vulnerability of their (aging) bodies” (“Oranges” 72) seems to be true to some extent in *Too Much Happiness*. For example, Joyce in “Fiction” seems to be much more confident about the security of the affection of her second husband when she is older than in the first part, where she dresses provocatively to attract the attention of men in general, but mostly her first husband. Although this might seem strange, since her body must be aging, a possible explanation could be that she is aware of the male gaze, but also feels secure in her second marriage and therefore this does not seem to affect her as much. Furthermore, Löschnigg argues “that fixed models are not able to capture the life stories of women” (“Oranges” 60). This seems to be reflected in Munro’s stories as most of the depicted women represent various different roles. Additionally, the women in Munro’s stories often change throughout the story. Examples of this are “Fiction”, where Joyce is represented as desperate and sad in the first part, whereas in the second part she leads a happy life and seems content, and “Dimensions”, where Doree changes from a victim to a person who might take her future in her own hands. Munro’s representation of different women with different backgrounds who sometimes change through their experience confirms Löschnigg’s assessment that she does not adopt a fixed view of women (see “Oranges” 61). Two other key words Löschnigg uses are “maternity” and “victimisation of women” (“Oranges” 62), which can be found in the stories of *Too Much Happiness*. There are various women in the stories

who are mothers, and all of them are represented differently. Women as victims can be seen, for example, in “Dimensions”, where Doree is the victim of her husband’s abuse, in “Too Much Happiness”, where Aniuta is treated badly by her husband, or in “Free Radicals”, where Nita is robbed. Löschnigg also identifies the reversed fairy-tale pattern as a way for Munro’s heroines to seek autonomy (see “Oranges” 64). This can be found, for example, in “Free Radicals” where Nita manages with her own wit to escape a dangerous murderer instead of relying on some hero to come by and rescue her. In Munro’s stories the reader is presented with “a whole range of alternatives” (Löschnigg, “Oranges” 66), with different women roles, “which urges a questioning of gender norms” (Löschnigg, “Oranges” 66). There are a multitude of different women in Munro’s stories, some of them seem more conventional, like Sally in “Deep-Holes”, who is a housewife and mother, while others are more revolutionary, such as Sophia Kovalevsky in “Too Much Happiness”. Alice Munro presents various female perspectives without submitting to prescriptive models, therefore, Löschnigg’s assumption that “Alice Munro is both a feminist and *not* a feminist writer” (Löschnigg, “Oranges” 75) seems most suitable for her writing.

Munro is often considered a regional writer, because she often sets her stories in small towns in Ontario (see Thacker 570). In this collection, there are several stories that are set in such small towns, for example “Dimensions”, “Free Radicals” and “Wood”. However, Munro has already pointed out in an interview that she uses this region because it is familiar to her (see Struthers 33) and not because she views the geography as something important (see Hancock 200). The same impression was derived from the analysis of the stories. Although some are set in Ontario it does not seem to be the main focus of the stories to capture the region, just as Munro has expressed it in her interview with Geoff Hancock. Munro uses both of her “favourite” settings, Ontario and British Columbia, in various of the stories, however, there is no striking difference in the representation of the two places, which has been suggested by various critics. Nine out of the ten stories are set in Canada and only one is set completely outside of Canada, namely “Too Much Happiness”, which is set in various places in Europe. Most of the other stories, which are set in Canada, also mention other places apart from where they are set, including faraway places in other countries or on other continents.

Blodgett’s argument that the structure in Alice Munro’s stories seems random (see 35) is only partly true. Her stories are almost never structured chronologically, however, the structure is not random at all. There is a clear design behind how the parts in her stories are organised, and which information is given at a certain time. This can be seen especially well in “Child’s

Play". The revelation of the secret is delayed until the end of the story, although several times before there are allusions to it already. The narrative only develops to the moment right before the girls murder Verna and is then interrupted by the narrator to provide the reader with other information. This serves to heighten the tension and does not appear to be random at all.

Munro uses different kinds of narrators in her stories. She uses a confiding¹⁵ first-person narrator in "Child's Play", for example, and changing focalisation in "Too Much Happiness". Munro's retrospective technique is mentioned frequently in connection to her narrators because it often creates a shift or split between an older and a younger narrator (see Blodgett 25 and Carrington 7). A split between experiencing and narrating self can best be seen in "Child's Play", where the narrator wants to distance herself from her former self by focusing on change and illustrating that she is not the same person anymore. A shift can best be seen in "Face", where the narrator seemingly immerses in his memories and views the events through the eyes of the child he was then.

Munro's use of time in her stories varies. Blodgett argues that time appears to be random in her stories, which is partly true, since most of her stories are not structured chronologically. However, the connection between past and present (Thacker, "Clear" 37 and Blodgett 74) can be seen in her stories because she is using a retrospective technique. Stories in this collection that use a retrospective technique are for example "Dimensions", "Face" and "Child's Play".

The features of Munro's narrative technique in the collection *Too Much Happiness* predominantly correspond with the theories scholars have formulated. Irony occurs in many of Munro's stories, however, this irony is not always comic as Martin (61) suggests. In "Dimensions" for example, the irony seems rather cruel. Besides this pessimistic use of irony there are also other examples which are more humorous, such as Munro's self-irony in "Fiction". All of the stories in the collection have at least one illuminative moment, however, these revealing moments are not always how they are expected. Sometimes what is revealed in one moment is questioned in the next. Other insights appear to the reader as not insightful at all, because they are so perverted. Furthermore, these revelations are often elusive or reverse their meaning in the course of the stories. The endings of Munro's stories are mostly open and indeterminate (see Howells, *Contemporary* 77-78), such as in "Deep-Holes" where it is left open whether Sally and her son will reconnect or not. There are often intertextual passages in Munro's stories. These are either fictional, such as letters written by a character in

¹⁵ Although the narrator is reluctant to confide in anybody close to her or even a priest, she confesses what she has done to the reader.

the story, such as in “Dimensions”, or they refer to a real literary text such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in “Wenlock Edge”. All the stories in the collection featured some kind of paradox and/or parallel, either in the characterisation of the figures in the story or in other instances.

Many critics argue that Munro repeats the themes in her stories, though some argue that despite turning to old themes, she always provides new perspectives (see Martin 14-15). Some of the recurring themes can be found repeatedly in the collection, the most prominent being change, with love and death in second place. It can be validated that despite the recurrence of these themes in most of the stories that they appear in quite different shapes. Furthermore, the themes are not treated in the same way in each story and therefore they do not appear repetitive.

As the analysis of the short stories in the collection *Too Much Happiness* shows, the different classifications of Munro’s writing style seem for the most part justified. Her work has aspects of realism, modernism and postmodernism, however, as she is working within a Canadian tradition, “slightly postmodern” describes her writing best. The analysis demonstrates that gender and feminist issues occupy an important place in Munro’s writing without imposing any fixed models. Therefore, Löschnigg’s assessment that “Alice Munro is both a feminist and *not* a feminist writer” (“Oranges” 75) can be confirmed. Concerning her narrative technique the analysis illustrates that Munro still likes to employ narrators who tell their stories from temporal distance using a retrospective technique, often uses irony and paradoxes that turn into parallels. Her illuminate moments often seem strange or elusive, and the endings of her stories remain open. The themes and motifs, which have recurred in previous collection can likewise be found in *Too Much Happiness*, however, she always manages to treat the themes differently and is able to provide new perspectives on them.

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9 Appendix

Abstract

This diploma thesis analyses the characteristics of Alice Munro's short stories. She has been writing and publishing short stories from the 1950s until today. She won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2013 and is considered to have had a significant impact on both the international and the Canadian contemporary short story (see Löschnigg, *Contemporary* 7). She has been influenced by many different forms and styles of writing and therefore categorisations of her writing style and narrative technique are abundant and sometimes contradictory. After establishing the background of Alice Munro's writing by providing some information on short story theory and Canadian literature, the different characteristics of Munro's writing are summarised. This commences with a discussion of various writing styles she is supposed to work within. Afterwards, Alice Munro's narrative technique and recurring themes and motifs are discussed. In the subsequent analysis of the short stories of the collection *Too Much Happiness* the above mentioned criteria are considered to illustrate how these findings are reflected in the short stories of this collection. The analysis shows that her work has aspects of realism, modernism and postmodernism, however, as she is working within a Canadian tradition, "slightly postmodern" describes her writing best. Alice Munro can both be seen as "a feminist and *not* a feminist writer" (Löschnigg, "Oranges" 75) because gender and feminist issues occupy an important place in Munro's writing without imposing any fixed models. Concerning her narrative technique the analysis illustrates that these predominantly correspond with the theories scholars have formulated features in the collection *Too Much Happiness*. Previously recurring themes and motifs can likewise be found and are viewed from new perspectives in *Too Much Happiness*.

Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit beschäftigt sich mit den Kurzgeschichten von Alice Munro, die seit den 1950ern bis heute Kurzgeschichten schreibt und publiziert. Sie gewann den Nobel Preis für Literatur im Jahr 2013 und hat einen signifikanten Einfluss auf die gegenwärtige internationale und kanadische Kurzgeschichte (Löschnigg, *Contemporary* 7). Sie wurde verschiedenen Einflüssen und Schreibstilen ausgesetzt, weshalb es eine Vielzahl von verschiedenen Einschätzungen ihres Schreibstils und ihrer Erzähltechnik gibt, die sich jedoch teilweise widersprechen. Zuerst werden Informationen zu Alice Munros Hintergrund gegeben indem die Theorie der Kurzgeschichte und die Kanadische Literatur beleuchtet werden. Die Erörterung von Alice Munros Schreibweise beginnt mit den verschiedenen Schreibstilen, die ihr zugeschrieben werden, danach werden ihr Erzählstil und wiederkehrende Themen und Motive diskutiert. In der darauffolgenden Analyse der Kurzgeschichten des Bandes *Too Much Happiness* werden diese Kriterien beleuchtet, um zu zeigen wie diese in den Geschichten dieses Kurzgeschichtenbandes wiedergespiegelt werden. Die Analyse zeigt, dass Munros Schreibweise Aspekte von Realismus, Modernismus und Postmodernismus aufweist. Da sie aus einer kanadischen Tradition heraus arbeitet, beschreibt „slightly postmodern“ ihre Literature am besten. Alice Munro kann gleichzeitig als feministisch und nicht feministisch (Löschnigg, „Oranges“ 75) bezeichnet werden, weil feministische Themen und Gender einen wichtigen Platz in ihrem Schreiben einnehmen, ohne fixe Modelle vorzuschreiben. Die Analyse von Munros Erzähltechnik zeigt dass die Merkmale des Kurzgeschichtenbandes *Too Much Happiness* größtenteils den Theorien entsprechen, die bereits aufgestellt wurden. Wiederkehrende Themen und Motive konnten ebenfalls in dem Band identifiziert werden und werden neu betrachtet.