

## FICTION AS SHORT-STORYNESS: SOME TEXTUAL STRATEGIES IN ALICE MUNRO'S NARRATIVES

**María Jesús Hernández Larena**  
*Universidad de La Rioja*

I begin to seek some design more in accordance with those moments of humiliation and triumph that come now and then undeniably.

*The Waves*, Virginia Woolf

The strategies we use to narrate our past to others —or to ourselves— can comply with one of two conventions: either we assume that life has been experienced in a continuum, with stages made up of events, emotions or thoughts which can be labeled and which enable us to explain subsequent occurrences, or, we assume that our past contains certain moments in which we remember ourselves in certain situations under the effect of some compelling sensory or psychological force that is unconnected either temporally or causally with the rest of our existence.

Fiction, like any art, is devoted to ordering experiences, and novelists tend to adopt the first of these approaches to experience whereas short story writers tend to adopt the second. This does not mean that novels show the totality of life in a neat chronological succession with fixed cause and effect relations. It means that identity in novels comes about as a consequence of a rendition of a complex network of human relationships supported by a sense of biographical time. In contrast, the short story writer operates on the belief that progress is unfounded, that the transcendence and depth of experience is found in a segment, a facet, an aspect of reality that emits its own significance separately.

Most of Alice Munro's stories are about storytelling. They are made up of stories that characters exchange and use to create their own and other personalities. Her most significant narratives are told from the point of view of would-be-writers, actresses, or recorders of stories being told in the family circle. This makes some of her characters give open publicity to their own theories of fiction, and very often they become the embodiment of certain attitudes towards the "appropriate" way of telling private experience, attitudes which are closely related to methods of recording reality commonly used in the short story genre.

By formulating a definition of the genre *short story* as a particular fictional translation of experience based on temporal criteria, we will attempt to analyze in this paper how some strategies of characterization, narrative climax, and data selection found in Alice Munro's narratives contribute to offer a particular concept of life closely allied to this genre. In so doing, we will also explore the ways in which Munro subverts the implications of certain recurrent strategies commonly employed in short story writing.

All narratives impose a particular synthesis over experience, they operate a selection of the materials of life and this selection is, in part, responsible for the way characters adopt an identity in the text. But the short story, as a genre, can be associated with a definable temporal perspective over experience.<sup>1</sup> Short fiction influences the treatment of actions and individual progress in a particular way: life does not unfold gradually, it is made up of separate stages, of distinct and autonomous spots of time. We know that the novel also accomplishes a selection of the materials of life, but this selection represents an attempt to mimize the continuity of time, to offer a compelling sense of duration, to show and develop connections.

However, in the short story, the concepts of progression, flux, connectivity, are no longer necessary; as readers we are not shown the formation of character, the transitions and the movements of people and societies. Characters do survive without the complex connective tissue of the novel; they are represented as images, gestures, attitudes that illustrate the quality of their lives. We know we will not be witnesses to their vicissitudes through life.

This strategy to represent reality is not only a literary method, it also reflects one of the ways in which reality is formed in our minds. In this sense, the writer Jerzy Kosinski (1978, 160) provides a superb insight into the question of how we give shape to our lives and how the material we store in our memory can be reflected in two different fictional genres:

I think our notion of ourselves is a fiction which is composed of what we have memorized, edited, created, imagined. Our recollection contains, for instance, fleeting moments of childhood, highly telescoped, a few events from the boyhood and adolescence. What else is there? There's no continuity. Is there a real plot? A plot, a sense of destiny is provided for us by family tradition, by society, by a political party, or by our own indoctrinated imagination. The plot is given by outsiders —parents, for example— who insist on destiny of some sort. [...] What is our individual consciousness, or our individual awareness? It is composed of very short incidents. Our memory is the great short story writer. Maybe that is why we believe that everyone has one novel in him: his own empirical existence —if he can extract his self from it. I think it's quite appropriate: our memory is our supreme writer and editor. It is the aesthetic dimension of our life.

Memory does not offer us our past experiences as an uninterrupted transit, as a biographical arrangement with articulated marked off stages; it brings back isolated incidents, objects, faces, impressions that we revise, reconstruct and expand with a new awareness provided by temporal distance.

Munro has often remarked that she takes as her subject “the ways people discover for getting through life” (Hancock 1982, 108) and that “what we use to make our

lives possible...is the created memory or the created story” (Bonetti 1987). For her characters, life does not manifest itself as sequence or a continuing system, and experiences through time acquire solidity in their minds as images of people at separate moments of their existence.

Even in her two short story cycle incursions, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and *The Beggar Maid* (1977), Munro questions the ideas of progression and totality in life experience.<sup>2</sup> The short story cycle is a form that draws upon the characteristics of both the short story and the novel and thus offers the writer some opportunities to explore development in the characters’ lives. But in spite of the fact that we can identify some recurrences concerning characters and their motivations, themes, setting, etc., every story in a cycle ventures into new territory and demands the reader to revise his own methods of giving significance to the narrative each time he reads a new story.

Susan Garland Mann (1989, 18) points out that the world of a novel continues as the reader goes from chapter to chapter, but the world of each story of the cycle disappears after its last sentence. In the cycle there is no continuing action, characters who occupy the spotlight in one particular story may disappear for good without any explanation being necessary. Characters who end up in one story as being old, or even dead, in these two cycles by Munro, can reappear again at a younger stage of life and have completely different roles as participants in completely different conflicts or situations.

This structure negates the possibility of producing a global effect of unity. In the stories that close the cycles, “Epilogue: The Photographer” and “Who Do You Think You Are?”, we would expect to find a kind of capitulation or a teleology that informs retrospectively the rest of the stories, but they end by introducing a possibility that may alter the heroine’s perception of her past life, although we do not know in which ways. These unrealized possibilities are embodied in the images of two men that resist an integration and interpenetration with the material of the preceding stories.<sup>3</sup> Del’s witnessing the strange gesture of Bobby Sheriff and Rose’s unexpressed feeling that Ralph Gillespie is close to her—even when in childhood, she could not confront him as a “full-length presence”—put an end to these stories without providing the cycle with a meaningful center.

Munro has said “I want to write the story that will zero in and give you intense, but not connected, moments of experience” (Carrington 1989, 3). In the following sections we will attempt to evaluate in which ways her character’s strategies to interpret and represent their lives relate to the specific notions of time and experience already discussed here.

## 1. CHARACTERS EDITING THEIR LIVES: NO WAY OF HANGING PICTURES TOGETHER

In most of Alice Munro’s stories we observe characters surviving by means of stories. Del in *Lives of Girls and Women* and Rose in *The Beggar Maid* turn to story-telling respectively as a means of sidestepping reality to discover the possibilities of words and to be accepted socially.<sup>4</sup> Munro has informed Hancock (1982, 94) that she is interested in the ways people edit their lives and in what they edit out. In some of

her stories we can perceive the contrasts in the different approaches people take when narrating experience.

In “Lives of Girls and Women”, for example, we observe the contrast between two different accounts of the war; one shows action as a system of connected parts, the other, which Del enjoys more, notes the confusion, the particular incidents:

My father saw it as an overall design, marked off in campaigns, which had a purpose, which failed or succeeded. Mr. Chamberlain saw it as a conglomeration of stories, leading nowhere in particular (147).

But one of the clearest and most elaborated cases of this two-sided narrative approach to life is provided by Uncle Craig’s “abstract, intellectual pursuits” (32) in “Heirs of the Living Body”. He is an old man venerated by his two sisters, although his obsession to play the role of a historian is laughed at behind his back. Uncle Craig has devoted his life to writing a manuscript that would contain the history of Wawanash County: “the whole intricate structure of lives supporting us from the past” (31). In contrast to Del, to whom “what happened in the world seemed out of control, unreal yet calamitous” (30), her uncle “saw a simple connection” between himself and the affairs of the township and of the country. Other narrative attempts to explain life include some stories told by old women, stories which could be defined as “ragged patchwork” (35): the two aunts telling now and then brief comical incidents about their past, or Del’s mother being obsessed by the way people’s bodies are made of parts which have an almost independent life.

Uncle Craig dies leaving his manuscript unfinished and his sisters ceremoniously ask Del to finish it. But Del refuses to go anywhere near the manuscript —“It seemed so dead to me, so heavy and dull and useless” (62)—, so she decides to put her own writings in a safe place and take the manuscript down to the cellar. When there is a flood in the cellar Del does not even bother to see if it can be saved, but she remembers how hopeful her aunts had been about her and she feels remorse: “that kind of tender remorse which has on its other side a brutal, unblemished satisfaction” (62).

The story closes at this point, foregrounding Del’s attitude of conscious rejection of the cherished legacy of her ancestors, which her uncle had given the form of an ordered accumulation of facts. Del herself feels it unnecessary to find the connections between all those past names because she cannot grasp the idea of a common origin; for her “it was a mistake from start to finish”. She conceives of people as photographs, individuals who are caught up in particular attitudes and she cannot be interested in them as pieces of a total social system.

In other stories, people’s identities strike Del as images that the past regurgitates now and then, such as her mother in “Princess Ida”, who “kept her younger selves strenuous and hopeful; scenes from the past were liable to pop up at any minute, like lantern slides, against the cluttered fabric of the present” (73). When in “Changes and Ceremonies” Del’s teacher, Miss Farris, drowns in mysterious circumstances and Del tries to form a unifying and comprehensive idea of her teacher’s personality in her mind, all she can do is to produce a list of Miss Farris’ poses in different situations:

Miss Farris in her velvet skating costume, her jaunty fur hat bobbing among the skaters, always marking her out, Miss Farris *con brio*, Miss Farris painting

faces in the Council Chambers, Miss Farris floating face down, unprotesting, in the Wawanash river, six days before she was found. *Though there is no plausible way of hanging those pictures together* —if the last one is true then must it not alter the others?— they are going to have to stay together now (139). (My emphasis)

Del cannot find a lifeline that brings all those impressions under a unifying light, unlike the people in town, who come up with stories of murder at night or suicide to provide Miss Farris's death with an explanation. But in spite of Del's explicit refusal to use an inherited model of narrative that tries to include everything, she also wants to write a long narrative, a novel:

For this novel I had changed Jubilee, too, or picked out some features of it and ignored others.[...] People in it were very thin, like Caroline, or fat as bubbles. Their speech was subtle and evasive and bizarrely stupid; their platitudes crackled with madness. The season was always the height of summer —white, brutal heat, dogs lying as if dead on the sidewalks, waves of air shuddering, jelly-like, over the empty highway.[...] *All pictures.* The reasons for things happening I seemed vaguely to know, but could not explain; I expected all that would come clear later ("Epilogue: The Photographer", 243-4). (My emphasis)

Despite Del's efforts to write a novel, people's actions always end up as pictures in her narrative; there are no interrelating causes or circumstances, but characters manifesting certain paradoxical traits. The same view is held by Rose, who, in "Royal Beatings", cannot find coherence either between the bits of the past and the present of the people she knows. Flo tells her many stories about the people in town, however:

Present time and past, the shady melodramatic past of Flo's stories, were quite separate, at least for Rose. Present people could not fit into the past. Becky herself, town oddity and public pet, harmless and malicious, could never match the butcher's prisoner, the cripple daughter, a white streak at the window: mute, beaten, impregnated (10).

Munro does not explore how characters develop and become different people, but the multiple hidden possibilities that lie within their selves. She seems to imprint on her heroine's memories certain images that persist. These images are often located at the end of the stories and present characters by a static gesture: Myra's "brown carved face immune to treachery" (110), in "Day of the Butterfly", the narrator's mother waiting for her in the kitchen "with her sleepy and doggedly expectant face" (160) in "Red Dress-1946", or, in "The Spanish Lady", the attitude of the narrator's husband, when he met her at the station the day she had come to marry him: "Red faced, comically severe-looking, full of emotion which he bore staunchly, like a private affliction" (182).

These images, which remain as the ultimate source of knowledge for the narrator, convey an emotional reality in her mind: to be able to think how time affects others, she needs gigantic ellipses in order to draw a contrast or a comparison or, as in "Changes and Ceremonies", to make a list.<sup>5</sup>

In most of the stories included in *The Beggar Maid*, our sense of closure is derived from the opposition between two images of the characters in two temporally distanced moments of their lives. Initially, their personality is outlined in a period of youth or maturity; they are full of life, authority, and lucidity, like Flo in “The Beggar Maid”. When this image is set in contrast with another moment of her life that occurs much later, with no hints to justify transition or change, we gain an insight into the fugacity of the world in which she used to live.

For almost the entire narrative, we observe Flo in the solidity of her familiar world, as wife, shop-assistant, strict mother, tale teller, and eager listener. The inclusion of an image that represents her final destiny produces an atmosphere of unreality, of lack of continuity in her experience. She is a young and an old woman almost simultaneously. We only know about her final years in the last paragraph of the story and this information is hurled into the narrative rather abruptly:

But Flo was in the same place Hat Nettleton had died in, and there wasn't any way Rose could reach her. [...] After Rose put her in the Home, a couple of years earlier, she had stopped talking. She had removed herself, and spent most of her time sitting in a corner of her crib, looking crafty and disagreeable, not answering anybody, though she occasionally showed her feelings by biting a nurse (24).

In these stories, the influence of time is only perceived through contrast, and this strategy eliminates one element: evolution. A sense of mystery and arbitrariness invades us at the end when we become witnesses to such disparate manifestations of the same character, manifestations which turn characters into a source of surprise and time into an element which can neither be “tasted” nor controlled because the expression of its continuity is entirely absent.

## 2. “FEELING THE DARKNESS COLLECTING”: MUNRO’S EPIPHANIC WAYS OF LOOKING AT FAILURE<sup>6</sup>

The genre *short story* and the concept of epiphany represent our hope of finding a magic gesture that synthesizes the quality of a life through a moment of experience. The epiphany embodies a sense of our existence as separation from the flow of time by concentrating on one stimulus, on the nature of a perception which strikes the perceiver as containing a certain truth about his or her life. It represents an attempt at grasping the “inner texture” of isolated segments of our life, snatching them out of time in order to understand and exorcise them. The narrator of “Material” in *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You* (1985) provides an almost physically tangible example for this idea when she discovers that, Hugo, her ex-husband and writer, has managed to capture in a story the “essence” of a person they met in the past: “There is Dotty lifted out of life and held in light, suspended in the marvellous clear jelly that Hugo has spent all his life learning how to make.” (48)

Munro’s earliest narratives are full of these privileged moments of awareness that find artful expression. There is an explicit attempt to capture a new conscience of things that have been long familiar, even routine for the first person narrator. They are “lifted out”, “held still —[...] radiant” (*Lives of Girls and Women*, 249) and immobi-

lized in the *clear jelly* of words, giving characters a quality of legend, melodrama or simplicity; unchangeable figures inhabiting the narrator's memory.

This happens in "Walker Brothers Cowboy", "Images" or "Dance of the Happy Shades", stories where the first-person narrator has final insights of the people who surround her by observing them in unusual attitudes and situations. Other stories come to an end when the narrator revises one character's behavior and fuses one selected trait of this character's personality with an image, as in "Red-Dress-1946":

I went past the kitchen and saw my mother. She was sitting with her feet on the open door, drinking tea out of a cup without a saucer. She was just sitting and waiting for me to come home and tell her everything that had happened. And I would not do it, I never would. But when I saw the waiting kitchen, and my mother in her faded, fuzzy Paisley kimono, with her sleepy but doggedly expectant face, I understood what a mysterious obligation I had, to be happy, and how I had almost failed it, and would be likely to fail it, every time, and she would not know (160).

However, it is the very same notion of epiphany—understood as a method to give significance to life—which Munro constantly contests and holds under scrutiny. *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You* offers us a gallery of characters that are left all by themselves at the end of each story, feeling miserable because they cannot express what they think they know. Their feelings cannot bend to the generalizations they need, as in "Material", "Forgiveness in Families", "Tell Me Yes Or No" or "Executioners", where the narrator sits in the dark "thinking uselessly and helplessly" (151-2). In the closing paragraph of "The Spanish Lady", the sight of a man dying at the station reduces all lived experiences to insignificance:

By that cry Hugh, and Margaret, and the Rosicrucian, and I, everybody alive, is pushed back. What we say and feel no longer rings true, it is slightly beside the point. As if we were all wound up a long time ago and were spinning out of control, whirring, making noises, but at a touch could stop, and see each other for the first time, harmless and still. *This is a message; I really believe it is; but I don't see how I can deliver it* (184). (My emphasis).

In "Memorial" this failed epiphanic attempt is defined as an "act done without faith" (217), and in the last story of the collection, "The Ottawa Valley", the narrator admits that, although she has been able to catch the personalities of some of her relatives "as a series of snapshots" that have come out "clear enough", she cannot illuminate her mother's life, which is the real intention of her narration; her mother appears "indistinct, her edges melt and flow" (235).

The notion of epiphany involves the discovery of a new perspective; a new piece of information will allow oneself to grasp the meaning of an element of one's past for the first time. However, as used by Munro, it shows that individuals are isolated and embedded in their own time because it represents merely a private source of knowledge, it produces a lonely act of communication of oneself with his or her set of memories. It proves that every individual is not adjusted to a common system and that to understand is a separate act, a latent occurrence. In this way, Munro's characters always seem to be living in different dimensions of existence; the characters' insights

into the world they inhabit cannot be communicated and are anyway at odds with other characters' vision of things.

When at the end of "Simon's Luck" Rose learns that her lover had died of cancer although she had been thinking that he had dropped her for no good reason, her revision of that period of her life in the light of this new piece of information adds chaos to an existence where judgments and solutions can never be reached. This late discovery creates, according to Rose, a new disarrangement, a shift of "emphasis that throw[s] the story line open to question" and "throw[s] the windows open on inappropriate and unforgettable scenery" (177).

In "Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux" a misunderstanding of an incident that takes place at a family party leaves a child unable to understand the most ordinary things, alienated from a shared dimension of time in which the others are leaving:

No, he hadn't forgotten those things so much as grasped how silly they were. How silly it was that he should have a name and it should be Colin, and that people should be shouting it. It was silly, in a way, even to think that he had shot Ross, though he knew he had. What was silly was to think in these chunks of words. Colin. Shot. Ross. To see it as an action, something sharp and separate, an event, *a difference*.

He wasn't thinking of throwing himself into the river or of anything else he might do next, or of how his life would progress from this moment. Such progress seemed not only unnecessary but impossible. His life had split open, *and nothing had to be figured out any more* (82). (My emphasis).

There is a perception of the events, or rather, a misperception, that alienates Colin from a flux of time in which other characters are living. For him, reality "splits open", from this moment on, the known, the "taken-for-granted" world will be full of inconsistencies, it will appear in the form of a mirage. His new awareness only makes him discover the incoherent and illusory nature of his life, it leads to a hesitation about reality as a stable and reassuring source of information.

Another story, "Labor Day Dinner", finishes as a whole family returns home from a visit and nearly have a serious automobile accident. The characters remain for a few seconds in a state of shock because they understand how close they were to tragedy. However, the narrator leaves them before they can reach an interpretation of this sudden event which ends a day full of resentment and incomprehension: "They feel strange, as flattened out and born aloft, as unconnected with previous and future events as the ghost car was" (159).

The endings of Munro's narratives show that the discovery we expect the character to undergo in a short story is very often absent, and our expectations will be doubly frustrated if we try to find a privileged moment that, as a set of fireworks, illuminates retrospectively characters' experiences. Munro often shows the void that appears when feelings are peeled back, she shows that there are no decisive moments that define or seal off one's life. According to Helen Hoy (1991, 11-12), Munro proves that "the more insupportable suspicion" humans have to bear is "that the drama of one's life generally is an artificial construct, a self-indulgent excrescence."

Besides, characters may not possess all the facts, or their perceptions and testimonies may be partial, misfocused or incomplete. This deficiency becomes even more apparent in Munro's last collection of stories, *Open Secrets* (1994). These stories

often present characters by juxtaposing the contents of their consciences about the same or even different periods of their lives. Although we initially imagine that their confluence will operate a deepening into the nature of their feelings and impressions of life, they violate these presuppositions (Hebble 1994, 122-3); there is a movement towards meaninglessness, absence, oblivion or confusion. Either characters look into an open secret without being able to decipher its meaning or they cannot articulate how time has left them where they are.

Ajay Hebble (1994, 12) has pointed out Munro's emphasis on "the undecidability that inhabits every system of communication". There is no communicating path that leads us coherently from one character's set of memories to another's. In "Vandals", two first-person accounts —by two women, Bea and Liza— of the same man show such different pictures of him that they seem irreconcilable and give no explanation about Liza's impulse to vandalize his house after his death. Neither can Liza's husband understand her behavior and, at the very end of the story, he even loses interest in his wife's unresolved past:

He only wanted to get home. It wasn't much after three o'clock, but *you could feel the darkness collecting*, rising among the trees, like cold smoke coming off the snow. (294) (My emphasis)

We cannot say that in *The Progress of Love* and *Open Secrets* we sense a change in the characters' attitude or identify any step forward in their knowledge of the world, nor do we modify our evaluation of the characters' nature. However, there is a final acknowledgment: the existence of a moment in time that may contain a clue, a key, but this key cannot be understood. We are left doubting if memory is a useful act and questioning whether or not life is made up of oriented meaningful time. There are two models of probability coexisting, reality and hallucination, reality and desire. If memory confuses and elides what has actually existed it should not therefore be the basis for one's present sense of the self.

In Munro's later work, epiphany will not be experienced as a treasure buried somewhere in the text, it rather represents our aim, as readers, to find meaning and relevance. The narrators' explicit insistence on the questionable nature of their "tricks" to invent connections and illumine a shapeless experience makes us aware that epiphany is an act of desire, the focus being not on its revelatory contents, but on the act itself, which springs from the deceptive belief that things can be synthesized and represented, from a desire for recovery, revelation, and private connection.<sup>7</sup> As readers, we feel like the characters at the end of stories such as "Carried Away", "Open Secrets" or "Vandals": blank, wondering, not being able to "figure things out anymore", and feeling the darkness collecting.

### 3. "NOT EVEN THE WHOLE RIVER, BUT THIS LITTLE STRETCH OF IT": ALICE MUNRO AND "SHORT-STORYNESS"

The essential tenet of the short story as a distinct genre has always been identified as its fitness to contain, in a short time span and one setting, a complexity of connotations derived from the exposition of one particular case selected from the

immense panorama of the human condition. But beyond the somewhat narrow definition of the short story as a fictional form that cannot provide full character and can only reflect one single mood—a definition which Munro's works clearly prove to be inappropriate—many critics, among them Bayley (1988), Rodríguez Pequeño (1995), or May (1995)—have dealt with the form as an “effect” or a perspective which may be present in almost every genre but which is fully and most significantly realized in the short story.

Susan Lohafer (1989, 58) suggests that the short story “is a matter of relationships between the text and the reader—how, or in what terms, the text makes us think”. The short story may be impossible to define, according to Lohafer (1989, 61); however, “we can evaluate a variety of frames that allows us to respond to “short-storyness in the world”.<sup>8</sup>

Readers and critics of Alice Munro's work are often bewildered by her generosity of detail, by the ample scope of her imaginary worlds, which confers to her stories an almost novelistic quality. This characteristic is registered in the introductions to her books in which reviewers warn readers of the panoramic view Munro offers in each story. In this sense, most of the stories of *Open Secrets* seem to meet the demands of the traditional novel as they are listed by R.S. Crane (1988, 132): a diversification of adventures and characters and a variety of incidents and circumstances that cooperate to produce an outcome and to delay it.

Munro has always been praised for her capacity to squeeze meaning out of the most trivial realistic detail, for her precise documentary approach to the realities seen and felt by her characters. However, she manages to keep her long narratives bound to the genre circumscriptions in such stories as “Carried Away” or “A Wilderness Station” by creating a single axis or center of gravity which is often a single incident or emotion. In spite of the fact that “A Wilderness Station” is made up of the letters several people exchange over a period of one hundred years, their identities remain almost anonymous and their lives are made dependent on one single aspect: their attempt to understand Annie, the main character.

It is Annie's final acknowledgment of her past errors that makes, at the end of the story, many of the previous accounts of her life and deeds subordinate to something more important and urgent: her awareness that she had been deranged. This awareness is located in the last sentence of the story: “I did used to have the terriblest dreams” (225). There is only one turning point or inflection, as Frank O'Connor (1962:24) claimed about all short stories: “the light is focused fiercely on one single decision”.

All the information we accumulate about the characters in “Carried Away” is again played down in contrast to the significance of one particular moment or attitude that pushes everything back and reduces it to irrelevance. No matter how many men Louisa has met and what has become of their lives; what remains truly essential to the story is one situation that has not varied since the beginning of the story: the frustrated relationship between her and Jack, a soldier, the illusory quality of their contact, which has been manifested by letters, dashed hopes, and even by Louisa's hallucinations.

The narrative never departs from the imaginary nature of their relationship and shows us how they address each other from different dimensions of reality. The traditional dramatic changes in their lives—love, marriage, children—are mentioned and discarded. The same happens at the end of “Open Secrets”, where the long life, with its biographical course, its facts, changes, and possibilities remains outside the story:

Maureen is a young woman yet, though she doesn't think so, and she has life ahead of her. First a death—that will come soon—then another marriage, new places and houses. In kitchens hundreds and thousands of miles away, she'll watch the soft skin form on the back of a wooden spoon and her memory will twitch, but it will not quite reveal to her this moment when she seems to be looking into an open secret, something not startling until you think of trying to tell it (159).

These glimpses into a gap, into an open secret, threaten the characters' possibilities of "some reasonable continuance" in their lives (51), as with Louisa in "Carried Away". Munro here, as usual, is interested not in "the shift in character" but in "the power which a moment or perception has to change us", as Walton Beacham (1981, 16) defined the kind of amazement readers experience in the short story.

Alice Munro shows that the short story has no restrictions in the representation of time. However, she emphasizes that its function is not to observe minutely life's connective tissue, but to gesture at the validity of some transient perceptions. Although we can be witnesses to movement and change, as in fact we are in her stories, these factors are disregarded totally. From a short story, as early century critics claimed, we expect a final puzzle, a contrast, an error, a contradiction, and this is what Munro finally offers: a combination of elements which do not only certify the existence of a world but encourage us to infer meaning from a testimony of life slanted "contextually".<sup>9</sup>

Rekedop (1992, XIII) remarks that Munro has not written long narratives because of her refusal of the "old kind of progress". May (1995, 105-6) claims that human meaning is conveyed in the short story by means of a gesture which saves the narrative from abstraction and from plot. What remains with us in Munro's stories is an isolated, self-standing insight, although this insight, as we have mentioned before, results in an evasion from knowledge and its underlying intention is to catch ourselves in the act of looking.

When Munro described the land of her ancestors in an article for *Weekend Magazine*, she wrote:

We believed there were deep holes in the river ... I am still partly convinced that this river —*not even the whole of it, but this little stretch of it*— will provide whatever myths you want, whatever adventures. I name the plants, I name the fish, and every name seems to me triumphant, every leaf and quick fish remarkably valuable. This ordinary place is sufficient, everything here touchable and mysterious (quot. by Ross, 1983, 125). (My emphasis).

However long a river or a life may be, Munro chooses to bestow attention to a part, not to the whole ever-flowing system. Her vision is, in a sense, paradoxical, because she attempts to give a sense of totality and fulfillment to "a little stretch" without renouncing to note down every object and living thing in it. Perhaps, with her short stories, she does not offer us "snapshots", —with its implicit component of spontaneity and lack of intellectual or artistic effort—, but "portraits" of people, with all shades of color and complexity of detail. Although they are carefully drawn and exhaustively filled in, they still affect us with the power of images.

Throughout Munro's work we observe characters constructing somebody from pictures and being amazed at such a puzzling patchwork their memories form. These characters are conscious of their inability to "repossess the world" —using Del's words

in *Lives of Girls and Women*— by experiencing a continuous flow of time which has been lived with all its multiple manifestations. Once the epiphanies included in Munro's earlier books stop reflecting the notion that the world can be finally understood by a sudden perception, her stories focus on paradox and juxtaposition as a substitute for the strategy of presenting final illuminating insights. Her characters become aware that to be able to avoid the anxieties produced from lack of knowledge, they must fabricate devices that comfort them. "I have no proof. I construct somebody from this one smudgy picture, I am content with such clichés" (34) says the protagonist of "Material" when she tries to understand her husband's personality.

Although Munro's protagonists feel the necessity to be under the spell of some act of epiphany, they finally render their attempt at capturing the transcendence of their lives as a useless, desperate, ridiculous addiction. Louisa in "Carried Away" gets involved in one of these acts: she thinks she meets again the man she fell in love with and this vision lifts her out of her ordinary life and offers her a true approach to the cruelties of love. But just after this happens she feels "a cavity in her chest, and revolt in her stomach" (50) and she realizes that: "It was anarchy she was up against—a devouring muddle." To counteract life's unpredictability and informational gaps all she can do is to offer "impromptu tricks and radiant vanishing consolations" (50). She is aware that her own life threatens her with an single certitude: something unresolved might become permanent.

Munro refuses to provide readers with the satisfaction of finding an ultimate ecstasy of coherence—traditionally associated to the short story—and she forces her readers into a world where they can get lost in details. However, in spite of her almost extreme inclusion of detail and ample temporal scope, her narratives do not make us question whether we are reading novels or short stories because they revolve around a single axis, which is often a minor element and only an evanescent part of someone's life. The focus of her stories on a reaction or a gesture, on a few moments which cannot verge into one another creates a design which challenges the idea that life affects us as a biographical sequence, as a whole and indivisible mass.

## Notes

1. Mijail Bajtin (1991, 242) elaborates a valuable study of the different types of ancient classic genres on the hypothesis that the notion of time can be characterized and described. He identifies different kinds of time that are set in contrast with the concept of "biographical time" defined as the time in which man goes through the path of life. It is formation time, the uninterrupted transit that shapes man's personality. Our hypothesis that a genre can be associated with a particular conception of time could be backed up by his study.
2. *Who Do You Think You Are?* is the original title under which this short story cycle was published in Canada. This title was changed to *The Beggar Maid* in Britain and the United States. Since we have worked on the English edition, the latter title will be used. According to Coral Ann Howells (1987, 2) the change was due to the fact that the connotations of the question, which have to do with the Canadian search for a distinctive identity, would have been lost on readers abroad.
3. Hanson (1989, 25) argues that the short story works by presenting images in an "untranslated state". These images are not symbols to be explained, but "things" in themselves.

4. See Taylor (1983), Struthers (1983), Prentice (1991) and Redekop (1992, XII).
5. When thinking about themselves, characters cannot either experience themselves in time, as in "Winter Wind" (*Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You*, 198), which closes at a point where a woman finds herself old but cannot understand how this could have happened. See also "Spaceships Have Landed" (*Open Secrets*, 259).
6. The phrase "looking at failure" has been borrowed from Redekop (1992, 237). Redekop uses this expression to explain Munro's constant deferrals of meaning and her tendency to avoid a closure or a resolution in her stories.
7. See "Material" (48), "Tell Me Yes Or No" (124), "Winter Wind" (193) and "The Ottawa Valley" (235) in *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You*.
8. This variety of frames may refer to the implications of the epiphany (see Pickering 1989, 49, Shaw 1983, 193), fantasy and the duality of experience (see Gordimer 1986, 460, González Salvador 1980, 61-82, Cortázar 1983:27-8), subtlety and indirection (see Hampson 1989, 69-85, O'Faolain 1951, 205-6), restricted focus and relevance of the seemingly unimportant (see Baquero Goyanes 1967, 68, Beacham 1981, 10), absence of context and difficulty to find a plot (see Charles E. May 1989, 66-7, Suzanne Ferguson 1988, 469), etc.
9. See Shklovski (1970:127-9,136), Eichenbaum (1970:151).

## Reference

- Bajtín, Mijaíl. *Teoría y estética de la novela*. Madrid: Taurus Humanidades, 1991.
- Baquero Goyanes, Mariano. *Qué es el cuento*. Buenos Aires: Columba, 1969.
- Bayley, J. *The Short Story: From Henry James to Elizabeth Bowen*. Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1988.
- Beacham, Walton. "Short Fiction: Towards a Definition." *Critical Survey of Short Fiction*. Ed. Frank Magill. London: Methuen, 1981. 1-17.
- Bonetti, Kay. "Interview with Alice Munro." Audiotape. *American Audio Prose Library*, AAPL 7052, 1987.
- Carrington, Ildico de Papp. *Controlling the Uncontrollable: The Fiction of Alice Munro*. Illinois: Northern Illinois UP, 1989.
- Cortázar, Julio. "Some Aspects of the Short Story." *Style* 22.1 (1983): 18-38.
- Crane, R. S. "The Concept of Plot." *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. Eds. Michael Hoffman and Patrick Murphy. 131-142.
- Eichenbaum, Boris M. "Sobre la Teoría de la Prosa." ed. Tzvetan Todorov.
- Ferguson, Suzanne C. "Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form." Hoffman, Michael and Murphy, Patrick. eds. 457-471.
- González Salvador, Ana. *Continuidad de lo fantástico: Por una teoría de la literatura insólita*. Barcelona: Gráficas Diamante, 1980.
- Gordimer, Nadine. "The International Symposium on the Short Story." *Kenyon Review* 30.5 (1968): 457-463.
- Hampson, Robert. "Johnny Panic and the Pleasures of Disruption." Ed. Clare Hanson. 69-85.
- Hancock, Geoff. "An Interview with Alice Munro." *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 43 (1982): 74-114.
- Hanson, Clare ed. *Re-reading the Short Story*. London: Macmillan, 1989.
- " 'Things Out of Words': Towards a Poetics of Short Fiction". Ed. Clare Hanson. 22-33.

- Heble, Ajoy. *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994.
- Hoffman, Michael and Patrick Murphy eds. *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. Durham: Duke UP, 1988.
- Howells, Coral Ann. *Private and Fictional Worlds: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970's and 1980's*. London: Methuen, 1987.
- Hoy, Helen. "Alice Munro: 'Unforgettable, Indigestible Messages'." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 26.1 (1991): 5-21.
- Kosinski, Jerzy. "Jerzy Kosinski Interviewed by Jerome Klinkowitz." *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers*. Eds. Joe Bellamy and Joe David. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1978. 142-168.
- Lohafer, Susan. "Introduction to Part II." *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*. Eds. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey. Baton Rouge: Louisiana UP, 1989. 57-61.
- Mann, Susan Garland. *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide*. Connecticut: The Greenwood Press, 1989.
- May, Charles E. 1989. "Metaphoric Motivation in Short Fiction: 'In the Beginning Was the Story'." Eds. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey. 62-73.
- *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995.
- Miel, Jan. "Temporal Form in the Novel." *MLN* 84 (1969): 916-930.
- Munro, Alice. "Walker Brothers Cowboy", "Images", "Day of the Butterfly", "Red Dress-1946", "Dance of the Happy Shades." *Dance of the Happy Shades*. London: Penguin, 1983.
- "Heirs of the Living Body", "Princess Ida", "Changes and Ceremonies", "Lives of Girls and Women", "Epilogue: The Photographer." *Lives of Girls and Women*. London: Penguin, 1982.
- "Material", "Forgiveness in Families", "Tell Me Yes or No", "Executioners" "The Spanish Lady", "Winter Wind", "Memorial", "The Ottawa Valley." *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You*. London: Penguin, 1985.
- "Royal Beatings", "Simon's Luck", "Who Do You Think You Are?" *The Beggar Maid*. London: Penguin, 1980.
- "Labor Day Dinner". *The Moons of Jupiter*. London: Penguin, 1984.
- "Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux." *The Progress of Love*. London: Flamingo, 1988.
- "Carried Away", "Open Secrets", "A Wilderness Station", "Spaceships Have Landed", "Vandals." *Open Secrets*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1994.
- O'Connor, Frank. *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story*. London: Macmillan, 1962.
- O'Faolain, Sean. *The Short Story*. Connecticut: The Devin-Adair Company, 1974.
- Pickering, Jean. "Time and the Short Story". Ed. Clare Hanson. 45-54.
- Prentice, Christine. "Storytelling in Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* and Patricia Grace's *Potiki*." *Australian-Canadian Studies: A Journal of the Humanities and Social Science* 8.2 (1991): 27-40.
- Redekop, Magdalene. *Mothers and Other Clowns: The Stories of Alice Munro*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Rodríguez Pequeño, Francisco Javier. *Ficción y géneros literarios*. Madrid: Ediciones de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 1995.
- Ross, Catherine Sheldrick. "At Least Part Legend: The Fiction of Alice Munro." Ed. Louis K. MacKendrick. 112-125.
- Shaw, Valerie. *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction*. London: Longman, 1983.

- Shklovski, Viktor. "La Construcción de la 'Nouvelle' y de la Novela." Ed. Tzvetan Todorov. 127-157.
- Struthers, J.R. Tim. "The Real Material: An Interview with Alice Munro". Ed. Louis K. MacKendrick. 5-36.
- Taylor, Michael. "The Unimaginable Vancouvers: Alice Munro's Words." Ed. Louis K. MacKendrick. 127-143.
- Todorov, Tzvetan ed. *Teoría de la literatura de los formalistas rusos*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Signos, 1970.
- Woolf, Virginia. *The Waves*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973. 204.