CHAPTER – V

THE THIRD PHASE :
USE OF LANDSCAPE
CHAPTER V
THE THIRD PHASE: USE OF LANDSCAPE IN


1.3 Introduction

1.4 *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*

2.1 Introduction

2.2 *Runaway*

2.2.1 Different Interpretations of “Runaway”

2.2.2 The Significance of the title “Runaway”


2.2.4 Conclusion

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Landscape in *The View From Castle Rock*

3.3 Analysis of the stories

4.1 Introduction

4.2 Landscape in *Too Much Happiness*

5.1 Introduction

5.2 Landscape in *Dear Life*
CHAPTER- V

1.1 Introduction

Munro’s first collection of stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), was published. The collection brought her name and fame and was honoured with highest literary prize. The twelfth collection, *Too Much Happiness* (2009) was published. More than forty years passed from the first to the thirteenth collection. More than a dozen books were published across four decades; she has remained fiercely loyal to an archetypal Ontario community and a timeless rural country-to, in effect, an imagined version of Wingham and Huron. Readers both local and international “know” these places, possibly better than any other Canadian literary landscape. Munro roots almost all her stories in this area a few hours from Toronto, where she grew up and now lives “I am intoxicated by this particular landscape”, she has said, “and she seeds it with city people transplanted to the country or county people learning urban ways. There is always a tension between these two, and between the recurrent oppositions as well --- marriage and solitude survival and suicide, faith and apostasy. Duality runs through her work like a bright trend” (Eleanor Wachtel, interview, 22-5-2005).

Her early stories offended certain sensibilities when they were first published in the 1950s and 1960s. In some cases, it was no more than her mentioning such open town secrets as the
bootleggers and prostitutes that set people off. Other times, it was
the retelling of a private family sorrow – a child scalded by a pot
of water, for instance – in a fictional setting. A frequent theme of
her work – particularly evident in her early stories – has been the
dilemmas of a girl coming of age and coming to terms with her
family and the small town she grew up in. In recent work such as
*Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) and
*Runaway* (2004) she has shifted her focus to the travails of middle
age, of women alone and of the elderly. It is a mark of her style
for characters to experience a revelation that sheds light on, and
gives meaning to, an event. Commenting upon the title of new
book, *Runaway*, or the flights of women or the infidelity of
women, Eleanor Wachtel wanted to know from Munro about her
opinion. Munro tells Wachtel:

I think they run away from a life in which they can look
ahead and see what that whole life is going to be. You would
not call that a prison exactly. They run away from some kind
of predictability, not just about the things that will happen in
their lives but the things that happen in themselves – although
I do not think most of my characters plan to do this. People do
not usually say, at a certain stage of their lives, “I’ll get out of
this.” And, in fact, I think the people who run away are often
the same people who got into that life most enthusiastically,
thinking, “This is it!” But then they want more; they just
demand more of life than is happening of the moment. And sometimes this is a great mistake. But this is something that women in my generation tended to do because we’d been married young. We’d been married with a very settled idea of what life was supposed to be like, and we were in a hurry to get to that safe married spot. Then something happened to us when we were around forty. And all sorts of women decided that life had to have a new pattern. And I do not know if that will happen to women of the next generation or the generation after that – because so many things will happen to them before they are forty. May be they will decide that enough has happened. And they pick a life and go on with it without these rather girlish hopes of finding love, finding excitement. (Interview, 2005)

Wachtel desires to know the position of men whether men also have the route of escape or transformation Munro quips:

In my generation they certainly were. We did not. I think, see any other means – and they are a pretty traditional one too, you know. Men for women and women for men. Falling in love is still one of the big, big ways to change your life and to give yourself this tremendous charge of excitement and hope. It is still one of the most important things we have (Interview 2005)

1.2 Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage
The Ontario landscape, modest and rolling like that of the American Midwest, was transformed for us by Munro’s stories. Like the highest practitioners of any craft, Munro seems, in her four most recent collections, to have left old forms behind, or to have broken them open, so that she is now writing nor short stories or novellas but something altogether new. The nine tales in *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* feel symphonic, large, architecturally gorgeous. Despite their complexity, they wield the power of urgently felt material, and in each of their many rooms they seem intimate. But it is difficult to locate the author here. In Munro’s earlier work, even in the third person, we felt the authorial presence in spots of density, concentrations of heat. The earlier collections often contained more stories told in the first person. But the shift goes deeper. Munro’s sympathies now seem to fall absolutely evenly. The collection of nine stories is often moody and always moving. Munro is sure about her people precise in her words and with a genius for the description of particular places. In addition to these gifts of a good writer but she is also a born storyteller and by careful assemblage of detail a natural poet.

The first, the title, story concerns deception. The title derives from a schoolgirl’s game of divination. A servant of unprepossessing appearance makes a rapid departure from her employment and the town in which she has lived and worked. She
leaves under the impression that a man in a distant city is ready to marry her. Two mischievous girls have created this false impression by tampering with the letters that purportedly pass between them. When she arrives she finds that the man is ill. She nurses him back to health and takes over the management of his desperate affairs. They marry and have a son.

We are in a different and more serious world with “Floating Bridge”. A woman comes from a consultation with her oncologist. He was guardedly given her hope. She is ambivalent about this. She has prepared herself for death and her doctor’s words seem to be an interruption of this rather than a reprieve. She finds it impossible to share the news with her husband when she gets into his van. There is another person in the van and it is difficult for her to speak in the presence of a stranger, a young woman who is to take care of her. This woman and the husband wrangle well – naturedly but stubbornly and it quickly appears that neither of them are much concerned about the sick wife. Before returning home they run an errand. It brings them to a farm house where the family is hospitable but overwhelming. The wife stays in the car, an action that offends the farmer’s family and angers her husband.

The farmer’s son comes home from work, divines her needs better than her husband and drives her home. They stop along the way. The boy kisses her and his gentle attention
assuages the anguish of her situation. One of Munro’s most challenging husbands to date seems to be suspended in a kaleidoscope by the end of the story we view him in kinder configuration, in one of those miraculous shifts in point of view so necessary to a long marriage.

“Family Furnishings” is about the portrait of a young woman. After a lunch with the aunt she once idolized, full of country food, full also of emotion, from secrets revealed with their attendant burdens of guilt and sorrow, the young woman walks alone through the city. Her friends are away. Her fiancé (who “admired” Hamlet but “had no time for tragedy for the squalor of tragedy in ordinary life” HFC 110) is visiting his “good looking” parent.

She walks and walks, and then slips into a drugstore coffee shop, where the bitter black coffee tastes “medicinal” (119). She feels full not only of food but of people, of life. What soothes her as much as the coffee is the solitude, the urban anonymity: such happiness, to be alone” (HFC 119).

“Comfort” is a very complex story. A man, a former school teacher who resigned rather than bows to the pressure of some fundamentalists, is seriously ill and kills himself. Hina, his wife, discovers the body and frantically searches for some note to her. She suffers greatly from the absence of this note and searches out unusual ways to console herself for its absence. The funeral
director finds the note but it contains nothing for her. The note contains only some rude verse about the fundamentalists. She takes his ashes into the country and scatters them along a road:

Doing this was like wading and then throwing yourself into the lake for the first icy swim, in June. A sickening shock at first, then amazement that you were still moving, lifted up on a stream of steely devotion – calm above the surface of your life, surviving, though the pain of the cold continued to wash into your body. (HFC 155)

The pattern of the collection is roughly alternation of simple with complex story. “Nettles’ concerns a middle-aged woman’s bittersweet chance meeting with the man who was the love of her childhood – a “Love [she now knows] that was not usable, that knew its place” (HFC 186).

In “Post and Beam”, Lorna is married to Brendan, a professor of mathematics. Their friend Lionel is a waste of his former brilliant self but is a valued friend who is infatuated with Lorna. His own affairs take him from them briefly and Lorna’s cousin Polly arrives on a visit. Brendan is not pleased and suspects rightly that Polly has arrived to insert herself parasitically into Lorna’s life. They are obliged to leave her while they attend a wedding to which they have been invited. Polly is distressed out of all season with Lorna’s refusal to include her in the invitation. On the return home Lorna, fearing to find that Polly
has committed suicide in their absence, tries – despite the fact that she is not a believer – to make a pact with God to prevent Polly’s suicide. However, Polly, discovered by the returned Lionel, has been enjoying his company very much and Brendan, seeing this involvement with approval, relaxes his enmity towards Polly. Lorna decides that her bargain with God is to endure and persist.

Munro’s men and women, even dangerous men and reckless women, are now seen from the prospective of an adult watching the doings of kindergarten children. She is far beyond taking sides. In What Is Remembered”, Munro writes:

Young husbands were stern, in those days. Just a short time before, they had been suitors, almost figures of fun, knock-kneed and desperate in their sexual agonies. Now, bedded down, they turned resolute and disapproving. Off to work every morning, clean-shaven, youthful necks in knotted ties, days spent in unknown labours, home again at suppertime to take a critical glance at the evening meal and to shake out the newspaper, hold it up between themselves and the middle of the kitchen, the ailments and emotions, the babies. What a lot they had to learn, so quickly. How to kowtow to bosses and how to manage wives. How to be authoritative about mortgages, retaining walls, lawn grass, drains, politics, as well as about the jobs that had to maintain their families for the next quarter of a century. It was the women, then, who
could slip back – during the daytime hours, and always allowing for the stunning responsibility that had been landed on them, in the matter of the children – into a kind of second adolescence. A lightening of spirits when the husbands departed. Dreamy rebellion, subversive get-togethers, laughing fits that were a throwback to high school, mushrooming between the walls that the husband was paying for, in the hours when he was not there. (HFC 222)

The husband and wife here stay within their mythic traditional parade, but Munro gives them the dignity of the procession’s end while also including two counterpoints to the march: one of frivolity, in the wife’s youthful glamour, her linen dress and white gloves, her knowledge of fusion trivia; the other the fugitive melody of an erotic betrayal, would deeply and perhaps productively into this marriage.

“Queenie” is another story with a simple theme although the details are lovingly observed and expertly depicted. It concerns union and parting and the resulting feeling of loss. Two women have grown up as sisters and the younger comes to live with the older, Queenie. But Queenie is not stable. She learns her husband and is not heard of again. The younger woman, now much older, begins to fantasize that she sees Queenie in a variety of encounters with women that are brash and flashy. Each encounter underlines her painful feeling of loss.
Having just passed her 70th birthday, Munro might be expected to turn her formidable talents toward the subject of old age. But only the last story in the collection, “The Bear Came Over the Mountain”, explicitly does so. “Away From Her” is the recent film version of the story “The Bear Came over the Mountain”. In her preface to “Away From Her”, Sarah Polley writes: “I’ve always admired Alice Munro’s writing, but this story punctured something. I read it, stunned, and let it sit there. It seemed to enter like a bullet. So concise and unsentimental, nothing to cushion the blow, of fits impact. When I was finished, I could not stop weeping” (Sarah Polley VIII-IX). The film was successfully debuted at the 2006 Toronto International Film Festival. Polley’s adaptation was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay but lost to “No Country for Old Men”. Munro has her own opinion about the film. As she says, “She thought that “Away From Her”, the recent film version of her story “The Bear Came Over the Mountains”, was beautifully done, but a story can always do so much more than a film. Also, she likes her title better” (interview, internet 2).

“The Bear Came Over the Mountain” occupies a important position as the last story in the collection. Fionna, seventy, is married to Grant. He has been a devoted if sometimes unfaithful husband and her slip into senility dismays him. From onset to incapacity is a very short step and he commits her to meadow
lake, a home for the elderly and incapacitated. The rule of meadow lake prevents his visit for thirty days. As a result of this brutally inhumane rule Fionna no longer recognises Grant and has formed a strong bond with Aubrey, another inmate. There is a crisis when Aubrey’s wife, for financial reason, removes Aubrey from meadow lake. Fionna, pining for Aubrey, suffers from her deprivation and her health begins to fail. The authorities consider it inevitable that they must move Fionna from the relatively unconstrained environment of the first floor to the second floor, reserved for those patients with especially severe mental and physical disabilities. Grant tries to get Aubrey back to save Fionna from this. In pursuit of this aim he meets Marian, Aubrey’s tough-minded and practical wife. Although at first adamant about her decision, she eventually – as a result of Grant’s becoming involved with her – agrees that Aubrey will visit Fionna. But Fionna has recovered from her infatuation with Aubrey and even remembers Grant who makes the most out of this temporary victory. Munro is so often described as a master of psychological insight, which is indisputable, but a story like “Bear” also indicates her expertise at plotting, with surprising twists on every page.

To sum up, like her earlier collections, Munro has set her recent collection, namely, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) in the western part of Ontario, a place
a few hours from Toronto. In her earlier collections, Munro has stated in her interviews the attraction of landscape of the area. In her recent collections, Munro has shifted her focus to the travails of middle age, of women alone and of the elderly. As in her other fiction, the nine stories in *Hateship, Friendship* are set in her native Canada, often in small, provincial, towns similar to her own childhood home of Wingham, Ontario. “They are, for the most part, stories of women – their desires, regrets, strengths, and weaknesses. On subjects ranging from a torrid love affair to a terminal illness to a cruel teenage prank played on an older, lonesome woman, Munro’s stories explore the lavish life of the mind, and the effects one’s inner perceptions can have on the world outside” (Knof, interview1). Munro’s protagonists tend to be women of her own generation, who found themselves caught between traditional gender roles and new possibilities in the wake of the sexual revolution. They battle against their own desire to accept the apparent security of conventional relationships with men. But Munro’s stories undermine the apparent stability of traditional sexual relationships and chart their fragmentation. Her early writing, especially, is preoccupied with the politics of self-location, as her narrators struggle to make sense of their own lives in the context of their restrictive rural environment. They also seek to understand the relationship between the public sphere and a secret world of desire that threatens to become known and
disrupt social order. The sense of a mysterious metaphysical world lurking just underneath the surface of everyday existence pervades her fiction and characters like Del Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) realize that people’s lives are “deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum” (*LGW* 230).

### 2.1 Introduction

Like much of Munro’s previous work, *Runaway* (2004), her 10th short-story collection, is set in the barren, often isolated provinces of Canada and spans several decades up through the 70s. Northern Ontario, the Prairies, the West coast, Stratford are some of the provinces; against these provinces, Munro presents ordinary lives that disguise larger dramas. She delves deep into human belonging and exile.

In her interview with Alfred A. Knopf, Munro has made clear the subject of her recent collections, although she has stated it in her 1998 collection, *The Love of a Good Woman* wherein a woman flees a marriage for another man. Munro writes, “so her life was falling forward. She was becoming one of those people who ran away. A woman who shockingly and incomprehensibly gave everything up for love, other observers would say wryly, meaning sex” (“The Love of a Good Woman”). In her several interviews, she has clearly stated that “my stories are about women – I’m a woman. I don’t know what the term is for men who write mostly about men---“ (Alfred A. Knopf, interview).
Often Munro’s sparsely told stories read like fairy tales where young women who test fate are later in need of rescuing or suffer unexpected and often bitter consequences for their choices. Mythological imagery is woven throughout: a sacrificial goat, Orion and Cassiopeia in the night sky, a gift of a white heifer, a mother mourning her daughter’s disappearance, a fateful storm at sea, a funeral pyre, tricksters and virgins, an oracle. All serve to shape the larger inquiry into where and with whom one finds “home”.

According to Kathy Weissman, the characters of Munro “are endearingly ordinary: They don’t swan around being melodramatic or heroic or incurably romantic. They are often smart, ardent girls, different from others at school, hungry for books and adventure and mystery--- like Grace in “Passion” (New York Times Book Review, Nov. 14, 2004).

Throughout Runaway, Munro details difficult life passages involving separations and homecomings, dislocation and the eternal movement of individuals on buses, ferries, trailers, automobiles and trains. Presented with equal weight is what prevents people from fleeing: sickness, caretaking and the intrusion of death.

But most significantly, Munro illuminates the peculiarity and loneliness that often accompanies women whose temperament and intelligence sets them apart from their loved
ones and who struggle to be free of conventional restraints, then struggle to cope with the consequences.

Another remarkable point of her stories is the titles of the stories. She does not give her books grand titles like “Canadian Pastoral”, “Canadian Psycho”, “Purple Canada”, “In Canada” or “The Plot Against Canada”. Also she refuses to render vital dramatic moments is convenient discursive summary. Also, her rhetorical restraint and her excellent ear for dialogue and her almost pathological empathy for her characters have the costly effect of obscuring her authorial ego for many pages at a stretch. Also, her jacket photo show her smiling pleasantly, as if the reader were a friend, rather than wearing the kind of woeful scowl that signifies really serious literary intent.

More than any writer since Chekhov, Munro strives for and achieves, in each of her stories, a gestaltlike completeness in the representation of a life.

“Runaway, says Maria Fish, which just won the Giller Prize, Canada’s biggest literary award for fiction may very well be the synthesizing work of one of literature’s keenest investigators into the human soul. It will, in any case, reach for beyond its time” (2).

2.2 Runaway

Eleanor Wachtel tells Munro that the title of the new publication, that is, Runaway, fits many of her stories. The title is
about women in flight, running to or from relationships or ways of living. Munro does not agree with her: “No. I didn’t feel that. I had another title picked. I was going to call the book “Powers”, which was a title I liked very much and the title of the last story. And then it occurred to my editor, Doug Gibson – and then to me – that Runway had more life in it, and it did relate to each of the stories, which I hadn’t noticed before” (Interview, 22-JUN-05).

The title has multiple runaways, its ghostly gothic moments, and its exploration of erotic love – all narrative ingredients Munro has made her own. Having seen the significance of the title, let us see what does Munro say about the women, the love, the sex and various subjects that the stories bear.

Runway contains eight stories – “Runaway”, “Chance”, “Soon”, “Silence”, “Passion”, “Trespasses”, “Tricks”, and “Powers”. Each story is dominated by the woman. In regard to her contemporary women, Munro says, “--- Men for women and women for men. Falling in love is still one of the big, big ways to change your life and to give yourself this tremendous charge of excitement and hope. It’s still one of the most important things we have” (Eleanor Wachtel, interview, 5-JUN-05). Reacting to the one reviewer that seven of the eight stories deal with infidelity, romantic encounters outside marriage, Munro writes:

Writers are always writing about infidelity – it’s so dramatic.

Again, maybe this applies to writers of my generation because
we didn’t have as much adventure before we were married. And there’s all this business of the wickedness of it, the secrecy, the complications --- the finding out that you thought you were one person, and you are also this other person. The innocent life and the guilty life. My God, it’s just full of stuff for a writer! I doubt if it will ever go out of fashion. (Wachtel, interview)

In response to the question of Wachtel, regarding the treatment of female sexuality, Munro says that what Canadian writer Audrey Thomas says in regard to the examination of women’s sexuality is true. Wachtel, further, adds “American novelist Mona Simpson says you’ve done for female sexuality what Philip Roth did for male sexuality “(Interview 5-6-05). Like John Updike, Charlotte Bronte and even Jane Austen, Munro writes about sex. Munro responds to Wachtel:

---. I think I write about sex just the way almost everybody I read writes about sex. I try to write about it with a great deal of interest and try to be as truthful as I can – or to think about what people really go through and what they think and how they feel. But I think every writer does that. Joan Updike writes a lot about sex. Charlotte Bronte was writing about sex. I suppose Jane Austen was too. (Interview, 5-6-05)

In her conversation with Eleanor Wachtel, Munro speaks about the subject matter of Runaway. Wachtel tells Munro that all
her stories of *Runaway* contain “the threat of violence, death, suicide, and other forms of terrible loss---” (Interview 22-JUN-05). Wachtel further adds that because of these subjects, the “stories are becoming darker” (Interview). Munro responds to Wachtel’s query:

I think they are, and this is not at all on purpose. I would like to be writing very cheerful stories that would make people feel better when they read them. I hope that people do feel better when they read my stories. I don’t think having this content means that the stories need to be depressing. I don’t know why this is happening. I think it may be that as you become older, there are more things like this coming close to your life, and things you learn about. It could be that – but again, it’s nothing I intended. In the story where the mother is losing her daughter, I was really trying to explore how this could be a quite natural thing. Some things that seem so tragic can also be just things people do. In that story, the daughter has a choice – she can live quite honestly, which means just ditching her mother. Or she can choose to live within her given conventions and to live with every mixed emotions – and that is the way most people live with their parents. Instead, she gets out. And she doesn’t do this because her mother is a terrible person or because she has any great grievance against her mother – she just goes on to a
different life. And this is a terrible blow to the mother; because it’s when you get quite old that the bonds to your children become so central to your life. When you’re in middle age, or a little younger than middle age, the bonds to your parents are there, but they often seem like nuisances. So that’s what this story is really about. (Interview 5-JUN-05)

With this perspective at the back of mine, let us see what Munro has to say in her new collection, Runaway, which contains eight stories.

### 2.2.1 Different Interpretations of “Runaway”

The collection, Runaway, opens with the title story. Lorraine Mary York, Beverly Rasporich and Andrew Stubb have analysed the story “Runaway” in the light of landscape theory. These critics that analyze Munro’s landscape reveal separate understandings of how the setting comes across to the reader. Beginning with “Runaway” Munro uses the weather and seasons described in the setting as a tool to parallel the relationship of the couple Clark and Carla and to create the principal mood. Prior to realizing the relationship between the two, Munro invents the summer as ‘the summer of rain and more rain ---. The trails were deep in mud, the long grass soaking, leaves overhead sending down random showers even in those moments when there was no actual downpour from the sky” (R 4). To interpret Munro’s revelation of the weather and season in regards to York, the
realistic image portrayed is as if looking at a picture and while looking at the picture the viewer lists all the minute details they see in the picture. With each additional detail, the setting becomes more of a definite place, rather than simply a fictional location. The reader then mentally steps into the story. Munro engages the reader with this unfolding image that the reader can become involved with and relate to. The feeling of water falling off leaves and onto his/her clothing after a storm cleared or watching it happens from a window is a mundane and probable incident.

Even though the weather and the season ascertain the relationship of the reader within the story, it also parallels the relationship of the characters. As Rasporich designates, “the setting reveals details about the character’s feelings and the evolving consciousness. This perceived through the connection between Clark and Carla” (Jenniek April 2011). Their relationships are terrible. They constantly bicker, they rarely communicate, and he harshly commands her, which results in her frequently crying. The constant rain represents Carla’s tears and the gloomy state their relationship is in. The fact that Munro describes that it rains from the trees, even when it is not actually raining signifies the ever-present feel of sadness and depression felt by Carla. The weather corresponds with Carla due to her narration at the time when Munro describes the weather.
However, the rain additionally hints at the continuous state their marriage is in: unhappy and lacking hope. The season is summer, and the weather is not hot and sunny as it is supposed to be, but is the complete opposite representing that their marriage remains in a state it should not be in. While generally people perceive rain as gloomy and hassle to trek through at the time, rain also presents hope for the future for it has the possibility of growing something new. Therefore, the weather and season foreshadow that hope is present in the relationship and the prospect of revival still survive. In examining “Runaway” in Rasporich’s terms the reader gains insight into the lives of the characters and begins to develop a bond.

Stubbs offers the notion that in describing Canadian landscape, Munro juxtaposes reality with fantasy. Munro’s zealous connection to her hometown and Canada in general endures through her work. When Munro addresses that “the trails were deep in mud, the long grass soaking” (R 4) she not only describes a part of her experience of Canada, but she also exposes a large part of herself letting the reader judge as they may. The weather and the landscape are real, but by adding adjectives Munro commutates a message showing the “hidden” part of the landscape. In doing so she forms an atmosphere that correlates with the story. If the setting arose as sunny, with blooming flowers the mood of the story would take on a different affect. In
choosing to make the atmosphere correlate with the events in the
story it flows and adds to the emotion felt by the characters, rather
than coming across as ironic or mocking as a bright sunny setting
would suggest. While Munro uses the realistic elements of the
landscape she manipulates the weather exemplifying Stubb’s
proposal of the juxtaposition with in her writing. In analysing
Munro’s short story “Runaway” in regards to all three theorists
perspectives of her landscape, the reader enters the story and
becomes involved. By examining her work this way, the reader
can also appreciate her detail in the setting as art, symbolic clues,
and insight into Munro’s recreation of her Canada.

2.2.2 The Significance of the title “Runaway”

The opinion of Munro in regard to the title has been
mentioned in the introduction. Munro is fond of simple and short
titles. “Runaway” is one of them. A careful study of the story
indicates that there is no one runaway, but multiple runaways.

Carla, with the help of a friend, runs away from her
increasingly disturbed and hostile husband. She previously ran
away with him, leaving her family – “their photo albums, their
vacations, their Cuisinart, their powder room, their walk-in
closets, their underground lawn-sprinkling system” (R 3) for a
more “authentic” life. So much for the comforts of authenticity.
Halfway to her destination of Toronto, however, “the strange and
terrible thing coming clear to her” (R 4) is that she cannot imagine
life without her husband. As she flees, he persistently “[keeps] his place in her life --- what would she put in his place?” (R 7). She is drawn helplessly (that is, erotically) back, compromised by grief and uncertainty, willing to pay whatever violent price is required to keep her marriage – and in Munro it is always a little violent. The loss of Carla’s pet goat – she imagines, which is to say understands (there is no difference for Munro’s female characters), that her husband has punished her by killing it – is an echo of the many violent visions that Munro’s wives have of the men they have chosen, and of men in general. In “Open Secrets”, a man spraying schoolgirls with a hose (Munro’s work is interested in men with menacing water, especially hoses; one or two of them appear in the current collection) is envisioned by the story to be a murderer. His is a crime his wife has had to accept – though, like the goat’s death in “Runaway”, there is a “brief and barbaric and necessary act” (R 43) reconsecrating the marriage.


“Chance”, “Soon”, and “Silence”, – are interlinked stories about a woman named Juliet. We do not understand the implications of an accidental meeting in “Chance” and a fairly uneventful visit to aging parents in “Soon” until we read the third story, “Silence”. These stories are not just chronologically and thematically connected; what Munro is more like planting time
bombs in the narrative that will explode later on, when we least expect them.

Juliet, in “Chance”, quickly takes up with an older, married man she meets on a train, pursuing him to Whale Bay, on the British Columbia coast, although she has learned almost nothing about him and he does not even know her last name. Their intertwined lives play out through two more stories, “Soon” and “Silence”. In “Silence” a mother who has come late to her vacation, and whose daughter has fled to some kind of alternative spiritual retreat, punishing her mother with discontinued contact, begins a life of solitude and herb-growing. That same mother’s parents, in a kind of back-story titled “Soon”, happily take up berry and vegetable farming after their daughter has left home. Ambivalent parenting abounds. In regard to the next story “Passion”, Munro tells Wachtel:

In the story “Passion” I wanted to tell first about the girl’s relationship with the family, and then about this wonderful moment when she runs away with a man who is married and who has great problems of his own, and how during the course of that day she comes to understand what his problems are – the problems of not being able to bear a life. (Interview, 22 JUN -05)

In “Passion”, a young wife with “pouches of boredom” at her mouth and a “bitter tinkle of a laugh”, explains to her in-laws, “I
don’t have any appetite any way, what-with the heat and the joys of motherhood”, (R 10) and then promptly lights up a cigarette. And in “Passion” Grace is told by her fiancé’s mother, “Woman always have got something, haven’t they, to keep them going? That men haven’t got (R 10). In “Trespasses”, a discontented mother’s psychological preoccupation contributes to the accidental death of her younger daughter. In “Trespasses”, a small town’s women dream of escaping their lives only to find themselves in lives they never imagined. “Tricks” is the story of Robin. She is a nurse who lives near Stratford, Ontario, goes to see a Shakespeare play (until then, her only passion) and encounters --- yes, by accident --- Danilo, a man from Montenegro. They agree that they will meet again a year later. What happens then is a life --- and we follow Robin until she is in her sixties --- that has the arc and heartbreak and curious detainment of genuine tragedy. “Tricks” is so bold, so horrifying. In this collection the story “Powers” concludes with the incarceration of a woman by her husband, after her psychic powers dwindle and can no longer satisfactorily pay the bills. The psychic wife knows what the husband is up to – or so the story with its own clairvoyance, imagines. But the remains passive before her fate.
2.2.4 Conclusion:

To sum up, *Runaway*, is a collection of stories that deal with the problems of women. All the women are attempted runaways of some sort, and they seem to feel that the situation they run toward harbours more truth and hope than the difficult daily world they run from, through the story itself will not judge. Munro’s women are unforensic in their knowledge – perceptive gussers, quiet visionaries, fortuitons survivors. And the stories are uninsistent in their stance. It has been said that erotic love, like certain religious, seems to contain the meaning of life without actually disclosing it.

Another outstanding feature is the structure of the stories. Frequently the structure of the stories works in a circle; we cannot understand the beginning of “Trespasses” until we have read the end or, as in the case of the trio of interlinked stories about a woman named Juliet, we do not understand the implications of an accidental meeting in “Chance” and a fairly uneventful visit to aging parents in “Soon” until we read the third story, “Silence”, “Chance”, “Soon”, then “Silence” could be a novella and, because of length, perhaps give more clues.

More than a dozen chronicles, newspapers, bulletins, magazines, journals, have praised different aspects of the collection. Often compared to Eudora Welty, Anton Chekhov, and James Joyce, Munro is a brilliant short story writer. She mines the
small towns of her native Ontario for inspiration, penning short stories that possess the depth of novels. *Runaway* contains her trademark unconventional plots and lost characters. Critics agree that the suspense and drama lodged within the characters give each story its power. According to *The Oregonian*, like the best writers, Munro involves readers in her characters’ thoughts and actions, “coaxing trust out of our hands before we realize we had it to give away” (*The New Review*). The tiniest details relate to the largest themes – and most, involving women – are not happy. As the *Seattle Times* notes, Munro introduces “tougher and chiller than usual” moments than in previous collections, like 1994’s *Open Secrets*. But, even with a darker view of human nature, Munro “sings, and her women are heroic” (*Boston Globe*).

### 3.1 Introduction

In an “Art of Fiction” interview with the *Paris Review* in 1994, Munro said of William Maxwell’s memoir, *Ancestors*, that “he did the thing you have to do, which is to latch the family history onto something larger that was happening at the time – in his case, the whole religious revival of the early 1800--- if you get something like that, then you’ve got the book”. In *The View From Castle Rock* Munro creates a similar context. Beginning in the Scottish Borders in the eighteenth century, she follows the progress of the Laidlow family as it immigrates to North America
and eventually settles in Huron County, Ontario where she was born raised.

In several forthright and revealing interviews, Munro has categorically stated that *The View From Castel Rock* (2006) contains stories that are mostly autobiographical. In stories that are more personal than any that she has written before. Munro pieces her family’s history into gloriously imagined fiction. When the book was published, many critics, reviewers, and interviewers swarmed round Munro for their questions. Lisa Dickler Awano was one of the many who desired to know more about the new collection from Munro. Munro tells Awano:

I think that that’s very helpful, because otherwise what you’ve got is family history, and that’s very interesting to you and other members of your family perhaps, but not generally. This book has a lot to do with a certain part of Scotland which had also undergone an interesting religious phenomenon, although not exactly a revival. The protestant faith there hand taken hold in a very austere form, and it had a total effect on people’s lives. Also, allied with this religion, there was education, because reading the *Bible* was terribly important. As a result, you had what you might call an educated peasantry, a lower class who could all read, and who spent their time, what leisure they had, in a kind of exploration of what were really theological or philosophical questions.
These were questions that would lead you to some pretty difficult, and even pretty crazy, conclusions. So they were wrestling with all of this material, and that in itself is interesting. This was not happening in many places to people of this class. In addition, the Borders of Scotland – this is southern Scotland, below the Firth of Forth, which I’m writing about – gave rise to a period in history that is called the Scottish Enlightenment and there were writers and the philosopher David Hume, and the economist Adam Smith, and people like that, who started coming out of more or less the same background. (Interview, 23 August 2010)

In addition to her interview, Munro has expressed the same views in her “Foreword” to *The View From Castle Rock*: “I was doing something closer to what a memoir does – exploring a life, my own life, but not in an austere or rigorously factual way. I put myself in the centre and wrote about that self, as searchingly as I could” (2006, i). Munro further states:

Part of the new book is about my family from material that I have gleaned from research, and part of it is from my own life and my own experience, but not always completely autobiographical, completely based on fact. However, these stories are more nearly autobiographical stories than those I have published elsewhere. Some of them I’ve written as much as ten years ago, but haven’t published them in my
other collections because they seemed to me to belong in a somewhat different setting. Some of these stories have fictional elements to them, but I think they are always very psychologically true. (Awano: interview)

Henry James warns in his preface to “The Aspern Papers”, against writing about the too distant past. His “visitable past”, a world we may reach over to as by making a long arm we grasp an object at the other end of our own table”, is more or less anything within living memory: accessing it is like “looking over a garden wall into another garden.” Beyond that, he cautions, “a succession of walls appears --- even by use of our longest ladder we are baffled and bewildered – the view is mainly a view of barriers.”

Of course, every good rule in literature is proved by its exceptions. Before The View From Castle Rock, Munro too had almost always written about this “visitable past”, reaching back to the beginnings of the 20th century, with only one or two rare forays deeper into time. (“Meneseteung” and “A Wilderness Station”).

3.2 Landscape in The View From Castle Rock:

In “The View From Castle Rock”, Munro travels the territory with her husband who is a geographer and who has a sound knowledge of the physiography of Southern Ontario. Munro has fascination with the human and natural history of her native ground – the land that lies roughly between Lakes Erie and
Huron, not too far from Michigan, and is sometimes called Soweto – is inexhaustible. Taking “Special maps” of the Ontario region, she takes one map:

Look at just one map – a section of southern Ontario south of Georgian Bay. Roads, towns, and rivers appear, as well as township boundaries. But look what else – patches of bright yellow, fresh green, battleship gray, and a darker mud gray, and a very pale gray, and splotches or stretches or fat or skinny tails of blue and tan and orange and rosy pink and purple and burgundy brown. Clusters of freckles. Ribbons of green like grass snakes. Narrow fluttery strokes from a red pen. What is all this?” (A. O. Scott 2)

Literally, of course, all this is a representation of geological phenomena that Munro goes on to evoke with marvellous enthusiasm. The View From Castle Rock, like her previous collections, is no exception for using landscape in short stories. Munro observes:

The landscape here is a record of ancient events. It was formed by the advancing, stationary, and retreating ice. The ice has staged its conquest and retreats here several times, withdrawing for the last time about 15000 years ago. Quite recently, you might say. Quite recently now that I have got used to a certain way of reckoning history.” (A. O. Scott: Native Ground”)
Family and personal history have always figured prominently in Munro’s reckonings, but “The View from Castle Rock” makes some of the sources of her earlier stories much clearer. “Lying Under the Apple Tree” can be cited as a good example where Munro pays special attention to the details of small-town and rural life. According to Laschnigg, “Lying under the Apple Tree”, combines the themes of initiation into special realities and initiation into sexuality, as the young girl falls in love with a stable – boy, Russell Craik.

“Lying Under the Apple Tree” opens with rural atmosphere where Miriam McAlpin kept horses. She lived in a house that had been the original farmhouse, close to the horse barns, with her old parents, who seldom came outside. Munro, like a photographer, depicts the natural scene of the apple trees that suggest a young woman’s burgeoning sexual desire. The apple tree in springtime, full of heavy blossoms, becomes the image of desire:

In one of the pasture fields for the horses, next to the town street, there were three apple trees, the remains of an old orchard. Two of them were small and bent and one was quite large, like a nearly grown maple. They were never pruned or sprayed and the apples were scabby, not worth stealing, but most years there was an abundant flowering, apple blossoms hanging on everywhere, so that the branches looked from a little way off to be absolutely clotted with snow. (197)
Symbolism and imagery is an important device that Munro used to explore the patterns of human behaviour. This device is used to reveal the innermost thoughts and emotions of the characters. The story is full of references to an apple tree; the tree is full of heavy blossoms, the season is spring. All these symbols and images become the image of desire. Considering the story centres on a romance with a randy young member of the Salvation Army, the tree also stands in for an ironic image of Eve’s temptation. Here, Munro describes the protagonist in relation to her would-be lover. She writes,

I did not speak much about myself and I did not listen to him all that closely. His talk was like a curtain of easy rain between me and the trees, the light and shadows on the road, the clear-running creek, the butterflies, and all that part of myself that would have paid attention to these things if I had been alone. ---. I was half-hypnotized, not just by the sound of his voice but by the bright breadth of his shoulders in a clean, short-sleeved shirt, by his tawny throat and thick arms. He had washed himself with lifebuoy soup – I knew the smell of it as everybody did – but washing was as far as most men went in those days, they did not bother about the sweat that would accumulate in the near future. So I could smell that too. And just faintly the smell of horses, bridles, barns, and hay. (210)
Munro’s plain spoken language captures the landscape and its people with unflinching honesty. She writes of the past but rarely, if ever, devolves into Saccharine nostalgia – she writes of body odour, drowned kittens, poverty – and not without compassion, or at least the recognition that while her own life has taken her away, she is nonetheless integral to these stories and this home a lasting part of her.

To sum up, in her Foreword to *The View From Castle Rock*, Munro has mined the history of her family. She provided the reader the fiction imbued with rigorous emotional truth for decades. She considers truth and fiction as two streams that in this book “came close enough together that they seemed to me meant of flow in one channel” (Kevin Show: 10 December 2008).

Considering the enormous output of Munro’s scholarship, it is to be noted that within the scope of a dissertation one cannot make a comprehensive study of every story where Munro depicts or makes some reference to the landscape of her region. The researcher has opted for one of the popular short stories, namely, “Lying Under the Apple” wherein Munro, with a view to describe the romance of Miriam McAlpin and Russell Craik, has made use of her landscape for the exploration of the theme of initiation of sexuality.

3.3 Analysis of the Stories: *The View From Castle Rock*
The collection is divided into two parts. The first “No Advantages”, tells of Munro’s Laidlaw ancestors leaving Scotland and setting in that part of Ontario later to be identified by readers as “Alice Munro Country.” This part of the book is most obviously fictionalized – through there are old letters and journals quoted throughout. It is also rather dull stuff, faithful in spirit to the proud, silent, hard-working, and humourless natives of Munro country, and their construction of lives “monastic without any visitations of grace or moments of transcendence” (9). Of course those epiphanic moments and visitations are what Munro’s fiction is all about, but here they are muffled in history.

The key episode in the first part of the book takes place in the story “The View From Castle Rock”, when James Laidlaw takes his ten-year old son Adrew to the top of the rock of Edinburgh Castle to show him the sphere of America “Where every man is sitting in the midst of his own properties, and even the beggars is riding around in carriages” (“The View From Castle Rock” 30), and “Where all the blessings of modern invention were put to eager use and the people could never stop improving the world around them” (62). Munro begins to imagine the thoughts and intentions of her relatives who decided to cross
the ocean and settle in “America” (partly in the U. S., and finally all together in Canada).

In “Illinois”, the best story in the first section, William, the rebellious Laidlaw brother who settled in the U. S. rather than Canada, has died of cholera the same day his wife, Mary delivers her daughter to add to the brand of young sons. William’s brother Andrew dutifully travels to Illinois to bring Mary and her children north. A mean prank results in the disappearance of Mary’s newborn daughter from the roadside inn where the travellers spend the night. The family blames Becky Johnson, a half-white and half-aboriginal woman who had been helping Mary, for the abduction.

In the book’s second half we settle in familiar Munro country. Much of her canon centres on Huron County in southern Ontario where Munro was raised and still spends much of her time. Readers of previous Munro’s stories will recognize both the geographic and psychological landscape. In fact, this book serves as something of a concordance to her collected works, as if we have seen the essential vault from which so much of her fiction has been sourced. The interweaving of fact and fiction goes on throughout the narrative. The stories in the second part of the book, “Working for a Living”, and “Fathers” are about Munro’s
father. As an adult, her father raised animals, especially silver foxes and mink (Munro 1994: 1, 15). In the two narratives, the stories of the protagonist’s father and Munro’s father coincide. In “Working for a Living”, during the war the business of the protagonist’s father fails, the way Munro’s father’s did, but is saved by the mother who manages to sell their furs to American tourists. In the end, they give up the whole enterprise, and the father finds a job in a foundry. In “Fathers” the author compares her schoolmates’ fathers Dahlia Newcomb’s and Frances Wainwright’s fathers – to her own. Dahlia’s father is a violent man who regularly beats his children and wife. Munro’s father is said to have been very severe, using corporal punishment sometimes but never without a reason.

The stories “The Ticket”, and “Home present a succession of life stages for the protagonist, with many correspondences to Munro’s life. In “The Ticket”, just before her first wedding Munro ponders the marriages of other women in her family and concludes that only aunt Charlie married for love. The same aunt gives Alice a significant amount of money, in case she decides to get out of her marriage. Since marriage at the age of twenty takes the protagonist away to the West Coast, in “Home” she returns to Western Ontario, after ending her first marriage like Munro in
real life), and finds herself unable to relate to the place, since it has changed.

In “What Do you Want to Know For?”, the author or the protagonist, after being married for the second time, tries to solve, with her husband, the mystery of the crypt in the nearby churchyard. At the same time, she has been diagnosed with breast cancer, which turns out to be a faulty diagnosis, an episode similar to one in Munro’s life. In the story, the author ponders the correspondences or identifications between fact and fiction, and concludes:

But there is always more than just the keen pleasure of identification. There’s the fact of these separate domains, each with its own history and reason, its favourite crops and trees and weeds – oaks and pines, for instance, growing on sand, and cedars and strayed lilacs on limestone – each with its special expression, its pull on the imagination. The fact of these little countries lying snug and unsuspected, like and dislike as siblings can be, in a landscape that’s usually disregarded, or dismissed as drab agricultural counterpane. It’s the fact you cherish. (322)

In “Messenger”, the author returns to Illinois, where her ancestor William Laidlaw died. She goes to an Unknown
Cemetery but finds no trace of him there. The book closes with the oldest memories of Munro’s living ancestors, and then comes full circle by returning to Munro’s early European immigrants. The historical fact is turned into a story enriched with imagination – thus it becomes ever lasting.

By inserting autobiographical elements into her stories and by giving a subjective response to events in her life and to a broader range of cultural and historical events, Munro reinvents people’s lives and events into stories. In an interview, she explains her technique of reinvention in the following way: “It’s an exercise in --- I would call it discovery, but I suppose everything you write is reinvention, because it’s got to pass through you, it’s what you can see” (Awano 2006:23). Stories themselves become the perpetuation of “truth” as seen through the authoress’ eyes and, as such, evidence for the future. For, after all, “the fiction makes us real” (Kroetsch 63).

4.1 Introduction

After publication in 2006 of The View From Castle Rock, Munro disturbed her readers by announcing that she might be finished with writing. Spending so much of her life being an observer, she said had raised fears that she was missing out on “life as an ordinary person.” However, she discovered that she
“wasn’t very good at not writing” (online) and resumed after three months. The fruit of her resumption is *Too Much Happiness* (2009), a volume of ten stories that reminds us of Munro’s enduring qualities while proving that she continues, as she approaches her eightieth year, to fashion new ways of expressing her still evolving sense of history.

*Too Much Happiness* is her thirteenth book in a nearly sixty-year career. The collection reads with the headlong rush of both a thriller and a romance. In ten stories, told with equal power and precision from male and female perspectives, Munro explores how people do and do not move on with their lives after losing what they thought they could not live without.

*Too Much Happiness* is a bit of an ironic name for this collection. While reading the first few stories, it felt like the stories kicked off right about the time the “happiness” ended in the protagonist’s lives when everything seemed to be hunky – dory, and then the world came crashing down. The stories, in their simplicity and their profundity, explored how the protagonists reacted, and gave a tremendous insight into the workings of a human mind.

**4.2 Landscape in *Too Much Happiness***
Alice Munro’s 13th story collection, *Too Much Happiness*, will surely be one of the most venerated and widely reviewed of the bunch. Debuting mere months after her virtual coronation with the Man Booker International prize for her body of work, and sidling out from beneath the long shadow cast by her repeated threats of retirement, these ten short stories cement the capstone on what fellow Canadian Margaret Atwood has described as Munro’s ascent to “international literary sainthood” (A review by Ellen Urbani, December 3rd, 2009).

Many of the stories in Munro’s new collection begin and end in old age, arcing back to defining incident from childhood. “I am amazed sometimes to think how old I am”, the protagonist in “Some Women” declares at the start. “I can remember when the streets of the town I lived in were sprinkled with dust in summer, and when girls wore waist cinches and crinolines that could stand up by themselves, and when there was nothing much to be done about things like polio and leukaemia” (*MH* 164). After unravelling a devastating tale, the story repeats its mantra: “I grew up, and old” (*MH* 187). The pattern is evident elsewhere in the collection, and indeed throughout her recent books.

The inextricability of happiness and unhappiness may be the thematic web that Munro weaves throughout many of the
stories in this collection, especially since several reviewers have already suggested that there is much more violence in these stories than in Munro’s previous work: two young girls murder an abhorred playmate; a man kills his children because he thinks his wife has walked out on him; a woman dying of cancer is threatened in her home by a man who has murdered his family. However, in keeping with the theme of “too much happiness”, or happiness bound up with unhappiness, the horror in these stories is often balanced by some compensatory acceptance.

With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see the rural Canadian landscape in her stories.

*Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) and *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) are set in the rural Canadian landscape which appears so frequently in Munro’s stories. The subsequent collections such as *Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You*, *Who Do You Think You Are?, The Moons of Jupiter* are set in rural South western Ontario and specifically Wawansh County drained by the seasonally flooding Wawansh River. *The Progress of Love, Friend of My Youth, Open Secrets, Selected Stories, The Love of a Good Woman, Runaway, Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage, The View From Castel Rock* are set in rural Canadian landscape. When Munro wrote her first short
story at the age of nineteen, the landscape was very fresh in her mind. Her latest collection, *Dear Life*, was published in November, 2012 when she was eighty year old. Throughout her career, Munro was freshly familiar with the territory.

In an earlier conversation, Robert Thacker, her biographer, remarked that as Munro has aged she has tended to return not only to the County, but to a specific period : the 1930s and 40s, when she was Alice Laidlaw walking from Lower Town into Wingham. The movement lately has been still further back in time, into the nineteenth century, and the roots of her people, and of the landscape. From her younger self, she is shifting into her pre-self, almost, a kind of genteel erasure of that famous author.

Thacker made another, more speculative point about Munro’s ongoing need to be present in Huron County.

Nearly every story hinges on some calamity, some unanticipated and mostly arbitrary event. Such things appear, before they happens, neither probable nor possible, though afterward they may well come to seem inevitable. These are calamities of love, or more frequently of violence : violence inflicted by accident and illness, or violence inflicted by other people, usually men. “Men. What they do. It’s so sick and stupid.
You can’t believe it”, one character reflects. “That’s why it’s true.”

The collection begins with a frightening story “Dimensions.” The story is set in Kincardine where the protagonist was waiting for the city bus. Munro describes the geography of the place when the protagonist was journeying:

She had grown up on the coast, where there was such a thing as spring, but here winter jumped almost directly into summer. A month ago there had been snow, and now it was hot enough to go bare-armed. Dazzling patches of water lay in the fields, and the sunlight was pouring down through the naked branches. (MH 2)

The weather of the place describes the situation of the place, and the protagonist carrying her mental burden. She remains perversely loyal to a husband. She continues to visit him in prison until a serendipitous moment opens her up to a breath of life she vicariously discovers through someone else. The central character has enslaved herself in the grim world of undeserving loyalty and, for the most part, numbs herself to the tragic life she has inherited from her husband. Her epiphany, if you can call it that, has a razor-sharp suddenness to it but, to her credit, the author refuses to bask in a any long-winded analysis of the
character’s swift change of heart. Like life, an opportunity arrives, we react to it quickly, case closed.

In describing Canadian landscape, an author juxtaposes reality with fantasy. “Dimensions” can definitely be interpreted as a fantasy since the triple child murder is a violation of what is generally accepted – a father does not kill his children. However, normative rules and conventions are even more subverted when Duree almost forgives Lloyd, she still feels connected with him: “the thought that Lloyd, of all people, might be the person she should be with now” (MH 28). In Munro’s short stories, the horrifying events are always one degree further distanced from regular crimes. In this way, as Rosemary Jackson puts it, fantasy “disturbs ‘rules’ of artistic representation and literature’s reproduction of the ‘real’” (14).

In his article on “Growing up into Alice”, K. D. Miller raises certain questions: can a human being be inherently evil, can someone who has committed the worst imaginable crime be deserving forgiveness; is there life after death. It is also a story whose subject matter, in less skilled hands, could have overwhelmed its treatment” (online)

“Fiction” is the second of ten stories of Too Much Happiness. The story takes us back to the memory of Munro
when she published Lives of Girls and Women. Spanning five decades of a literary career, the woman who wanted to be a novelist but got sidetracked by the demands of domesticity and therefore adapted herself to the short-story model is still reflecting on the view into, and out of, the places where we settle. In the ambiguously titled “Fiction” she writes of a woman’s particular fascination with the uncurtained windows of patio doors, “meant not just to look out on but to open directly into the forest darkness” (33) a harbinger of the submerged external themes abounding within this collection: the release from physical bodies and corporeal love–death from cancer, murder, suicide, heart attack and heartbreak–from faces and bodies that bear the scars of history and years, from marriages that bind too tightly. Even the stories summations are themselves cut short; more than half end with a truncated, single–sentence paragraph, as if snuffed out at precisely the right moment, yet still, somehow, caught unawares. “I grew up”, one concludes, “and old” (MH 187). With these ideas in mind, let us see “Fiction” in which how Munro has portrayed the landscape.

Lorraine Mary York, Beverly Rasporich, and Andrew Stubb have argued various theories concerning the means by which Munro conveys the landscape and the significance of it.
According to them, the first factor is the setting which reflects upon the inner most feelings of the characters. The setting also immerses the reader inside the story in a photographic and paradoxical way.

“Beyond the limits of the town into the forest” (32), this is the way Joyce, as a middle-aged woman, describes the typically Munrovian setting of her house some thirty years ago when she was married to Jon. The introduction gives the reader already the impression that Joyce and Jon’s young marriage will not last, because of the threatening way in which Munro describes their house. For instance, when she describes the new type of “patio doors”, which were usually left uncurtained and were perhaps “meant not just to look out on but to open directly, into the forest darkness, and they displayed the haven of house so artlessly” (33), the reader get the impression that this “house” is very fragile. York informs us how Munro communicates the descriptions of the setting as if the reader is looking at a photograph. The setting reveals details about the character’s feelings and the evolving consciousness. Jon, husband of Joyce, changes his interest to another woman, Edie. Joyce, in the second part of the story, is a middle-aged woman and married to Matt. Later, we see that Joyce buys Christie’s first book, *How Are We*
to Live. When Joyce discovers that the book is a collection of short stories, this is a disappointment to her because it seems to “diminish the book’s authority, making the author seem like somebody who is just hanging on to the gates of literature” (49). This shows Munro’s sense of self-deprecating humour, alluding to her own genre and literary critics ingrained prejudices against it.

The juxtaposition of reality and fantasy is another element that the theorists notice while analysing Munro’s landscape. In this story, there are allusions to gothic incidents, but in reality, nothing seems to take place. First of all there is the mystery surrounding Edie and the way she seduces Jon. Secondly, there is also some mystery in the tale within the tale when Joyce tells Christie she does not need to be scared of the woods. The description of the safe paths and the different sorts of flowers reminds one Little Red Riding Hood, especially when Joyce interrupts the story by saying: “she can feel the horror coming. The innocent child, the sick and sneaking adult, that seduction. -- - The woods, the spring flowers” (56). However, nothing happens and the story ends with the child observing at last conversation Joyce and Jon, whereupon Joyce drives away without taking leave of Christie. We stumble out at the story’s end, marvelling at the
beguiling relationship between fiction and reality; asking ourselves, “What is real?”

“Wenlock Edge” is the third story of the collection. The story contains a multiple depictions of women – Nina, Beth, Kay and Beverly, Mrs. Winner etc. This is the story about a girl from the countryside who studies English and philosophy in London, Ontario. Nina comes to stay with the protagonist. Nina is a damaged girl with a marriage and three children behind her. She is forced to endure a brutal act of revenge in return.

When Mr. Purvis and Nina went out for a Saturday night dinner, Nina expected a mansion to stay. But Purvis came to stay in a modern, flat-roofed house without Christened lights, “no lights of any kind” (74). The description of the house is somewhat creepy, being dimly lit with pompous furniture, mirrors and rags. In a windowless room with a bench and hooks around the wall, the protagonist is told to leave her clothes, all her clothes. At first she is a perplexed, but because she does not want to be a loser and out of pride she obeys. She then describes how she walks naked to the room of Mr. Purvis, “my eyes avoiding the mirrors” (76). In fantasy of literature, mirror is used as a metaphor for the production of other selves. By refusing to look in the mirrors, the protagonist refuses to face her other self, her rational self that
would warn her against what she is doing, she refuses to face reality.

In a similar way, the narrator of “Wenlock Edge” cannot see the difference between what is real and what appears to be real, the shadows of her own mind. She is not able to see the difference between reality and fiction.

“Deep-Holes” is the fourth story of the collection, *Too Much Happiness*. “Deep-holes” is one of the shortest stories in this collection and is essentially about deep-rooted holes within a family, such as the unbridgeable gap between the father’s bourgeois values, considered ‘the normal’, and Kent’s life among ‘the low’, the ex-centric the ‘other.’ To be brief, here are people in a family and they fall into deep holes of separation and lack of communication. Since the accident Kent has had some kind of wield phobia to holes. To him, everybody is in the hole. So he escaped the family, lived “in present”, and tried not to touch all the “meanings” in the life. During the picnic his father described how erosion caused the formation of the crevasses in the long geological time. He is trying to keep himself out of all the holes. Having seen the significance of the title, let us see the setting of the story, which is one of the determining factors of landscape.
In “Deep-Holes”, Munro uses the picnic place described in the setting as a tool to parallel the relationship of the couple Alex and Sally and to create the principal mood. The story opens with Sally, mother of three children, preparing for a picnic. Just as the female protagonist in “Dimensions”, Sally is a rather subservient woman: “She protested, but he insisted” (93). Her husband is a geologist, and in the course of the story, it becomes clear that he is a tough, heartless man. The picnic takes place in a rather unusual setting, at a mountainous, rocky place. They go to “Osler Bluff” because Alex wrote an article about this place, and he wants to show it to his family. Before entering the park, there is a board which says: “CUTION:DEEP-HOLES” (94). Similarly as in the title, there is, a hyphen between “deep” and “holes”, for which no particular explanation is given. However, the hyphen does make the reader attentive to these two words: (deep) holes are present throughout the whole story, such as the holes in the rocks, the crater “for beneath her shoes filled with rubble” (104) and the burned hole in Kent’s blanket.

Sally understands that this place is not appropriate for a picnic with young children, but she does not say anything to Alex. Instead, her attention goes to the hyphen on the board: “Why the hyphen?” Sally thought. ‘But who cares’” (94). She is afraid of
telling her opinion to Alex, of objecting to his ideas. When they were walking along a high bluff, she is worried about her sons and she can hardly keep up with their high place, however, she remains silent:

Sally stumbled along fuster than was easy for her, with the diaper bag and the baby Saranna. She couldn’t show down till she had her sons in sight, saw them trotting along taking sidelong looks into the black chambers, still making exaggerated but discreet noises of horror. She was nearly crying with exhaustion and alarm and some familiar sort of seeping rage. (94)

In the remaining part of the story Munro has shown the relationship between parents and children. Kent proves to be like his father, Alex.

“Free Radicals” is the fifth story of the collection. “Free Radicals” is about a bittersweet confrontation that ends with poetic justice.

The title “Free Radicals” is actually a chemical term, referring to molecules that can easily bind with other cells, whereby they can disrupt their functioning. Free radicals are formed each time the body converts food into energy, but they can also be formed through environmental factors such as
pollution, cigarette smoke, radiation and herbicides. Sometimes they can attack DNA-cells to such a great extent that it can lead to cancer and they are also involved in the damage of the liver due to the excessive use of alcohol.

Nita has been a free radical by binding herself to Rich, whereby his relationship with Bett could not function anymore. At a later age, she herself was literally the victim of these free radicals, because by drinking redwine everyday, they have affected her liver and caused her to have cancer.

The central character who has cancer and whose husband has recently died, has her home invaded by a man who shows her pictures of his parents and sister that he was recently murdered. In spite of the fact that she knows the cancer will kill probably her, she clings to life and tries to gain the intruder’s sympathy by telling him how she has been guilty of a crime in her past. However, the story is a lie, a fiction in which she takes on the role of her husband’s wronged first wife who is going to poison the other woman. Telling her that what he did was not so underhanded as what she did, the murderer leaves, only to be killed in a car accident. Like the protagonist in “Wenlock Edge”, Nita is an admirer of literature and she uses fiction to manipulate her own life and that of others.
“Face” is the sixth story of the collection. In her interview with Awano, Munro speaks of “Face”:

I loved writing “Face” because I don’t know what came first. I guess that first scene, where the father rejects (his de figured child) completely. I have known (of people), not in my husband’s generation, but in the generation before his, who would just do that. --- I wanted to write a story about this, but also to write about how somebody survives; and he does survive. --- It’s about love, and love among children. So we’ve got hate among children and love among children.

(Awano, interview October 22nd, 2010)

The themes of relationships between parents and children, husbands and wives, childhood friends are explored in “Face”, “Some Women”, “Deep-holes.” “Child’s Play”, “Face” and “Deep-Holes” – are wonderful youth narratives that come to full bloom for the characters much later in life. “Face” was written in the voice of an elderly gentleman, whose boyhood is recounted. It is the story of a man who was born with a big purple birthmark on the right side of his face, for which his father immediately rejected him. He grows up with the polarity of his mother’s extreme devotion to him and his father’s resentment. We are given a number of events such as Sharon Suttles and her daughter
Nancy who came to stay at the protagonist’s home, his calling of “Great-Drama” (142), biting of a wasp to eye, reading of poems etc.

The landscape described reveals the inner mind of the protagonist. The boy and his parents “lived on the cliffs above Lake Huron, in the Victorian house my grandfather had built facing the sunset” (MH 139). A couple of years after his mother’s death, he is planning to sell the house, and while walking through the garden, memories of his childhood pop up. A couple of decades ago, there was another building on their property. It was called Bell’s cottage and rented to a woman named Sharon Suttles, who lived there with her daughter Nancy when the protagonist was between five and eight years old. The house and the garden seem to have adverse effect on the protagonist:

But I feel more at ease there than in the house, which looks the same on the outside but is drastically altered on the inside---. In the garden there were no such alterations, merely neglect on a grand scale. Old perennials still straggle up among the weeds, ragged leaves larger than umbrellas mark the place of a sixty – or seventy-year-old rhubarb bad, and a half-dozen apple trees remain, bearing little wormy apples of some variety whose name I can’t remember. The patches I clear
look minute, yet the piles of weeds and brush I have collected seem mountainous. They must be hauled away, furthermore, at my expense. (HM 144-145)

“Some Women” is the seventh story of the collection. In this story Munro tries to survey the setting –part of Ontario to Toronto. Munro demonstrates her facility with the child’s –eye view of adult life, a technique originally made famous by Henry James What Maisie Knew.

The now-elderly narrator looks back on the late 1940s, when at the age of 13 she got a summer job fetching and carrying for a cranky old lady Mrs. Crozier:

I am amazed sometimes to think how old I am. I can remember when the streets of the town I lived in were sprinkled with water to lay the dust in summer and when girls wore waist cinches and crinolines that could stand up by themselves, and when there was nothing much to be done about things like polio and leukaemia. Some people who got polio got better, crippled or not, but people with leukaemia went to bed, and some weeks’ or months decline in a tragic atmosphere, they died. (MH 164)

Munro’s memory of the town’s landscape of forth years back is quite fresh. Munro has suggested that a life spent in the
small towns of southern Ontario has exposed her to a wider range of human types than she might have encountered in an urban existence, where people are more stratified both socially and professionally. Brooke Allen observes in NBCC Featured Review: “This seems a plausible theory and goes far toward answering the ever – interesting question of why it is that quintessentially urban writers (Joyce, Dickens, Balzac) present a more complex but not necessarily richer vision of human life than rural or “regional” authors (Faulkner, Hardy, Flaubert)”. (Jan-26-2010)

Munro being the regional author has presented “richer vision of life” (Brooke Allen) of Mrs. Crozier family. “Some Women” is about an older, nameless narrator looking back on an event from her youth. She recalls a job she had when she was thirteen, during the summer holidays. Mrs. Crozier’s son is dying of leukaemia in an upstairs bedroom; his wife, Sylvia, has a job teaching summer school two afternoons a week. The people of the town did not appreciate her service: “People were just down on her because she had got an education” (MH 167). “Another thing they said was that she could have stayed home and looked after him now, as promised in the marriage, instead of going out to teach” (MH 167). Munro focuses on the narrowness and
meanness of the community. Old Mrs. Crozier does not like her intellectual daughter-in-law any more than the rest of the town does. Munro draws our attention different types of women of her place – Mrs. Crozier, Sylvia, Roxanne. The community of Southern Ontario appreciates Roxanne rather than Sylvia and others. Sylvia is seen as monstrous woman for not quitting her job and taking care of her husband full-time.

The story has certain Gothic conventions. In *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions*, Becker writes than Munro once linked reading and writing a story to entering a house. In this way, a story is compared to a structured house, “with the connectedness of enclosing spaces, with separation from the outside, and strong emotions on the inside: the image recalls gothic texture and its domestic horror, its plot of objection and its affective form. Munro’s fiction consciously rewrites than complicated structure of the gothic house with its uncanny centre” (Becker 114-115). This story is a nice instance to illustrate this idea of a structured house, with the uncanny centre being the sick Mr. Crozier’s room, surrounded by the stairs, the kitchen and the sunroom, where Mrs. Crozier gets her massages. The story switches between these rooms, which are reflected upon from a distant past, but the strong
emotions that once lived inside this house remain in the memory of the narrator.

To sum up, this story wonderfully shows Munro’s skill in describing a child understands of an adult’s life: “I understand 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. Cozier” (MH 187).

In her interview with Awano, Munro says, “That is so very horrifying story, [“Child’s Play”] as horrifying as “Dimensions”. What I’m really doing there is trying to get at what I believe is the genuine ruthlessness in children” (Interview, October -22-2010). Verna, in “Child’s Play”, whose status as mentally challenged is feared and resented by the story’s narrator, Charlene. The character of Verna is vividly described, put at arm’s length from us and then brought nearer until we start to experience some of the heroine’s irrational terror. We know it is irrational; we guess Verna has more to fear from the heroine than she from Verna, but we are compelled to feel the heroine’s emotions.

According to Alfred A. Knopf, “Child’s Play” certainly has a shivering gothic quality to it” (Alice Munro, Too Much Happiness, 2009).
Marlene, the narrator, tells Charlene about a mentally disabled girl who lives nearby her, Verna. Marlene develops a kind of aversion to her. She says that she “hate her as some people hate snakes or caterpillars or nice of slugs. For no decent reason. Not for any certain harm she could do but for the way she could disturb your innards and make you sick of your life” (HM 200). Verna was done nothing to enrage the narrator, but she acts somewhat strangely, for instance, she “could stay in one place longer than anybody I ever knew, starting at just one thing” (HM 197). Also, her origins are unknown, “she appeared in the summer before I was to start school” (HM 194). The narrator is aware of the fact that her hatred is unfounded, she repeatedly justifies herself, for instance by saying: “Children of course are monstrously conventional, repelled at once by whatever is off centre, out of whack, unmanageable” (HM 195).

Marlene and Carlene drowned Verna after the attack of a big wave coming from a motor boat. She and Charlene already left before anybody discovered Verna’s body. They both made a silent agreement not to keep up with each other in order not to be reminded of their terrible act. It is argued that Charlene is Marlene’s double, she is her unconscious which she tries to ignore. In the end, Marlene’s senses take over and lead her to the
church, where she experiences a sort of epiphany by which she is able to tell what happened on the final day of the camp.

To conclude, “Child’s Play” is one of the most haunting stories in Munro’s collection. The story has been included in The Best American Mystery Stories 2008, edited by George Pelecanos. The story reminds one of Edgar Allan Poe’s gothic short story “The Tell–Tale Heart” (1843), wherein the narrator tells the reader how he murdered an old man for no other reason than for his “vulture eye” which he truly hated.

“Wood” is the last but one collection of stories, Too Much Happiness. As a writer, Munro is known to be a tireless self-editor who will often continue to rewrite and revise her stories, even after they have been accepted for publication. “Wood” which first appeared in The New Yorker in 1980, is a good example. After nearly thirty years, Munro returned to the story. The second version of “Wood” has been published in Too Much Happiness, Munro’s most recent collection of stories.

Like many of Munro’s stories, “Wood” is set in “Munro Country”, the Huron County farmlands of South Western Ontario – “Sowest, as the Canadian locale is popularly known – where the author came of age and has lived much of her life. While growing up in this practical-, minded community, she played down her
creative ambition so she would appear to fit in better with her peers.

There was no more wild country in Huron County then (in the first quarter of the 20th century) than there is now. Perhaps there was less. The forms had been clear in the period between 1830 and 1860, when the Huron Tract was being opened up, and they were cleared thoroughly. Many creeks had been dredged – the progressive thing to do was to straighten them out and make them run like tame canals between the fields. The early farmers hated the very sight of a free and admired the look of open land. And the masculine approach to the land was managerial dictatorial. Only women were allowed to care about landscape and not to think always of its subjugation and productivity.

Roy’s workshop is in a shed behind the house. It is heated by a woodstove, and getting the fuel for the stove has led him to another interest, which is private but not secret. That is, everybody knows about it but nobody knows how much he thinks about it or how much it means to him. The trees Roy seeks out for cutting are those that lagging firms have rejected as not being useful or beautiful. Roy looks for treetops left behind after logging, or trees targeted by the “forest management people” for
removal, because they are “diseased or crooked or no good for lumber” (MH 229).

The physical setting in “Wood” as in all of Munro’s fiction, is psychologically revealing. Descriptions in her stories serve a narrative purpose. The long passage describes trees in the Sowesto bush: iron wood, cherry, apple, ash, maple, beech and oak. At first glance, this cataloguing may seem to contribute only atmosphere to the story. But as Roy reflects on the trees’ appearances – the maple trees, for example, “always look like the common necessary tree in the backyard”, and the oak trees, “always look like trees in story books”, with “intricate surface, and the devilish curling and curving of the branches” (MH 230), and as he contemplates how they grow and behave and make him feel, they become stand-ins for members of his community.

Realising that Percy Marshall is going to cut trees or going to clear the wood with bulldozers, Roy goes off to the bush with his axe and chainsaw to cut as many trees as possible. He twists his foot and falls, which cause the axe handle to hit him hand on the knee of his twisted leg. His ankle appears to be broken and he understands that “in order to get back to the truck he’s going to have to abandon his axe and chainsaw and get down on his hands
and knees and crawl” (MH 239). He forgets the situation very soon, and thinks about his wife.

Roy has been crippling himself, throughout the story; through his low self-image; through his insistence that nature is a controllable universe; through his deafness to his own intuition. As Roy stops thinking about his axe and his chainsaw, he began to think of his wife. He also thinks about Diane, Lea’s niece, whom he seems to worship a lot. He thinks that Diana is a possible successor of his profession, but he stops thinking because “she got married suddenly at the age of seventeen” (MH 224), and her husband did not think that working with wood was a suitable profession for a woman. He also mentions that he hates the River Inn, a resort hotel, because “when Diana had applied for a job there, as a waitress, they had turned her down, saying that she was overweight” (MH 235). When Diana asks him to use his truck, he immediately changes his plans for her and he even thinks of filling it up with gas.

In Roman mythology, Diana is the goddess of the hunt and of the woods. Roy has a fascination for her. Diana is also known for her chastity and when Diana marries, this may come as a disappointment to Roy. When he is crawling through the woods, he experiences a sort of epiphany. He understands that the woods
are not so homely and safe as he thought, he thinks of Diana again, but now he concludes that “her life is her life, there is not much use worrying about it, and he thinks of his wife” (MH 240). When he finally arrives at his truck, his wife is there, she has got her vitality back and looks as if nothing ever happened. She came to the bush because she had had an insight which restored her energy and she wanted to tell Roy about it immediately. She realized that what Percy had told Roy was not true, he had just “heard some talk but not about some strangers getting a licence to lag the bush. What he heard was all about Roy himself” (MH 243).

Roy and Lea are awakened from the dream world. Roy feels that his wife acts normal again. He understands that with regaining his wife, he has lost his safe place in the bush, he no longer feels a part of it:

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. (MH 245)
A new word pop up in his head another name for the bush which he has never used before: forest, “The Deserted Forest” (MH 245).

“Too Much Happiness” is the concluding and the title story of the collection, *Too Much Happiness*. Unlike the other stories in this collection, the title story is not set in Huron County, but on the European continent. “On the first day of January, in the year 1891, a small woman and a large man are walking in the Old Cemetery, in Genoa” (MH 246), these are the first words of the story.


Based on *Little Sparrow: A Portrait of Sophia Kovalevsky* (1983), Munro has rewritten the last days of Sophia’s life, at a time when she finally seemed to have achieved some happiness
both on a professional and personal level: she has won the Bordin Prize, has overcome the deaths of her sister and husband, and she is about to remarry. However, one notices from the beginning of very first pages, the reader is confronted with a gloomy and threatening atmosphere: “One of us will die this year. --- Because we have gone walking in a graveyard on the first day of the New Year” (MH 247). Some pages further, “a black cat obliquely crosses their path” (253), which makes the reader even more alert to a bad ending. Throughout the story, the reader is given clues that Sophia’s mental and physical health is failing rapidly.

Munro takes into consideration the important events in the life of Sophia, a historical protagonist. The researcher simply notes the important events, and cannot make a comprehensive study for want of space. These events are – her love for Maxims, her award of Bordin Prize, rejection of proposal from a German, her to Nice to see Maxims, a trip to Paris to meet Jaclard and her nephew Urey, she married Vladimir Kovalevsky, suicide of Vladimir, her visit to Berlin, she was in deathbed, two days later she dies of pneumonia, her last words being “Too Much Happiness”.

Although the story is set in Europe and has a historical protagonist, yet the story has a lot of similarities. Munro’s
intention seems to highlight the character and Sophia who has a number of resemblances of her Huron County protagonists. Sophia is a stubborn and romantic woman who wants a career and a family. Sophia has some mental problem. She suffers from delusions about a marriage that will never take place. In her memoir, Anne Carlotta Leffler, with whom Sophia worked together in writing plays, wrote the following beautiful lines that summarise the problem that many of Munro’s female protagonists in this collection are faced with:

As her mind craved absolute truth, absolute light, so her heart craved absolute love –a completeness which human life does not yield, and which her own character in particular rendered impossible. It was this discard that consumed her. If we start from her own belief in a fundamental connection between all phenomena of life, we see that she was bound to die, not because some strong and destructive microbes had settled in her lungs, or because the chances of her life had not brought her the happiness she desired, but because the necessary organic connection between her inward and outward life was missing; because there was no harmony between her thought and feeling her temperament and her character.
At a time when most women were still assigned a place in the house and the kitchen, Sophia Kovalevsky tried to escape from this stereotype. According to Susanne Becker, this is what feminine Gothic is about, it is “domestic horror with no escape” (57).

In his article “Disturbing to Others: The Too Great Happiness of Alice Munro and Sophia Kovalevsky” (210), Marijke Boucherie observes: “Alice Munro’s story “Too Much Happiness” is the story that the dying Sophia Kovalevsky plans to write. It is the story of a happiness that is not related to a specific circumstance, but a picture of happiness that emerges out of the convergence of all the elements of life seen interconnected and considered in simultaneity. It is the happiness of creating something that is invented, but not, of approaching something that, as in mathematics, is always already there and waits to be uncovered: the soul of the house, the soul of the story the soul of the character: the soul” (152).

To sum up, what is striking about this collection is quite what Munro’s characters have to endure: violent crimes, debilitating accidents, terminal illnesses, as well as the less lurid of life’s dramas, such as adultery, divorce and a great deal of
depression. And though the stories may be black, these women show remarkable fortitude and often manage to wiggle free from the miseries Munro inflicts on them. She has the highest of touches, with every word seeming entirely necessary, but nothing set in stone. This fluidity is encapsulated in the final lines of “Face”: You think that would have changed things? The answer is of course, and for a while, and never” (MH 163). Munro said in her acceptance speech for the Man Booker International Prize, which she was awarded earlier this year, cementing the wide acclaim she now commands, that she is interested not in happy endings but in “meaning--- resonance, some strange beauty on the shimmer of the sea” (Lorna Bradbury, 2009.1). This remarkable collection certainly captures that—and more of a sense of happiness than might at first seem possible.

5.1 Introduction

Munro’s latest collection, Dear Life gives us stories (fourteen stories) that have a similar density but that are less elliptical and less psychologically complex. With the exception of four revealing semi-autobiographical pieces that close the volume, most of the stories pivot around a melodramatic event, and many have ironic, O. Henryesque conclusions that can feel overly stage managed. Prior to the publication of these stories in
one volume by *Vintage* in 2013, these stories were previously published in the following: “In Sight of the Lake” and “Night” in *Granta*; “Pride” and “Train” in *Harper’s Magazine*; “To Reuch Amundsen”, “Corrie”, “Dear Life”, “Gravel”, “Haven”, and Leaving Maverly in *The New Yorker*, and “Dolly” in *Tin House*.

In her previous collections, it is noted that how people’s lives often change abruptly due to either by accident, bad luck or calculated risk. Her stories tended to give us a Kaleidoscopic views of such events, conveying both the precariousness by daily life and the subjectivity of memory. Munro is now 81, seems to have increasingly by turned toward stories with some more tightly plotted narratives, more closure and more Aesup-like morals. There is a terseness to these tales (more than half of which have a single word for a title), a sense of impatience on the part of the author. With this account in view, let us see how Munro has portrayed landscape in her stories.

### 5.2 Landscape in *Dear Life*

*Dear Life* contains fourteen short stories. Many of these stories are set in small Canadian towns much like the ones in which Munro has spent much of her life, and many look back on childhood or youth events from a vantage point decades later.
Although she has lived in other cities, Munro returned many years ago to the landscape of her childhood, and her home is 20 miles from where she went to school. She lives, like her characters, in a stable, small-town world, where it is possible to know certain things about people and to be surprised by what they do next. Here she is, talking to an interviewer about a plane, spotted in a local field:

The man who owned that farm had a hobby of flying planes, and he had a little plane of his own. He never liked farming so he got out of it and became a flight instructor. He is still alive. In perfect health and one of the handsomest men I have ever known. He retired from flight instruction when he was 75. Within maybe three months of retirement he went on a trip and got some odd disease you get from bats in caves. *(The Guardian, Thursday 8 November 2012)*

In a known landscape, every house asks and answers the question “What happened here?” By leaving and then returning to the countryside of her childhood, Munro has stocked and then restocked her mind with other people’s choices, fates, furniture, budgets, realisations and regrets. The “natural” shape of her stories comes from a sense of the way life goes.
Time reveals. Things “turn out”. We know how they turn out because people do not disappear, or not for long.

Some of the stories in her new collection, Dear life, begin with the cultural and economic shift that happened after the Second World War and end anytime around now. The past resurfaces constantly in these tales; there is no escaping it, or its sense of consequences. However, the past does not just catch up with Munro’s characters; it also exists, quite peaceably, behind the present.

Dear Life contains fourteen stories. “To Reach Japan”, the first entry in the collection, finds Greta and her young daughter Katy on a train to Toronto to house sit a friend’s home for a month while Greta’s husband and Katy’s father begins a new job elsewhere. While on the journey, the normally quiet and contained Greta gets too deep in the drink with a younger fellow they meet on the train and, in a moment of lusty abandon, loses track of Katy. Of course, mother and daughter are reunited, but not without Greta feeding the full weight of what might have happened.

Munro’s new story and second in the collection is “Amundsen”. The story is about a particular woman who has a brief affair with a particular man, who decides at the last minute
not to marry her. In “Leaving Maverley”, Morgan, a half-curmudgeonly small town movie theatre projectionist and his doting wife take a wayward girl named Leah under their wing that, not long after, runs off with the minister’s son. As is often the case in Munro’s stories, time is not kind to any of the three, doling out tragedy in droves. Leah’s marriage fails, causing her to lose her children. However, it is Morgan’s loss of his wife that stings the most. “Gravel” is the story of two sisters who live in a ramshackle trailer by a water-filled quarry after their mother left their sturdy, boring father for a younger, wilder man. When one sister drowns in the gravel pit on the other’s watch, there is no question that is to blame. Their mother, a little too wild? The boyfriend, two stoned to jump in and sure her? Or the narrator who stood by, watching her sister drowns? “Haven” is the story of a growing girl who is forced to stay with her aunt and uncle while her parents perform missionary work in Africa. Her aunt lives for her uncle; he, on the other hand, is self-contained and distant. Eventually, his irrational hatred for his musically inclined estranged sister brings realizations to a head. “Pride” is a story about a wealthy girl and a disabled boy who grew up in the same town and as adults have a somewhat awkward friendship.
“Carrie” is the story about love affair between a wealthy eccentric and a married architect.

In “Train”, a returning soldier leaps off the back of a passenger train just before it delivers him to a long-anticipated reunion with his finance. “In sight of the Lake” is the story of an elderly woman who fears the gradual loss of her mental powers. But is her mind deteriorating or becoming more imaginative? Is Nancy crazy- or is it the rest of the world that’s nuts? “Dolly”, being the narrator of the story, cut off from the outside world writing about neglected female Canadian authors. Her comfortable but unfulfilling life has been disrupted by the arrival of her husband’s old flame. “The Eye’ is the first of Four directly autobiographical stories from Munro’s childhood that close the collection. About an independent, guitar, playing, dance hall-attending young woman named Sadie, who is the absolute antithesis of Munro’s mother. The private moment when Munro sees Sadie’s eye--a revelation that no one else sees--is something to be treasured. “Night” is similar to “Train” in its theme by hiding or blocking out a taboo thought. The relationship between the tumor removed from Munro during her appendectomy and the thoughts that swirl in her head the summer following the operation is fascinating. “Voices” is about Munro and her mother who go together to a dance at a neighbour’s house only to leave shortly afterward because of how Munro’s mother feels about one of the women at the party. On the way out, Munro sees a girl
crying on the stairs being comforted by whispers from soldiers about to return to battle in World War II. The voices have stayed with Munro all the way into her eighties. “Dear life” is the concluding and title, story of the collection. “Dear life” is about her growing up. Her father started a business raising foxes and minks for their pelts. Eventually the business failed and her father went to work in a forgery. Her mother developed Parkinson’s Disease when she was in her forties. The family did not realize that it was progressive and incurable. Munro concludes her story “Dear Life” with her psalm of life:

I did not go home for my mother’s last illness or for her funeral. I had two small children and nobody in Vancouver to leave them with. We would barely have afforded the trip, and my husband had a contempt for formal behavior, but why blames it on him? I felt the same. We say of some things that they can’t be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves. But we do it all the time. (“Dear Life”, 319)

Eighty-one year old Munro writes on her last four concluding stories:

The final four works in this book are not quite stories. They form a separate unit one that is autobiographical in feeling though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact. I believe they are the first and last--and the closet--things I
have to say about my own life. (Book reporter, New York November 19, 2012)

Most of her stories take place in her country, Canada, often in small towns in to the countryside or Toronto or Vancouver. Most of the stories take place in rural areas of Canada and many of them occur in earlier times. Few are contemporary. This is likely because Munro herself grew up in an earlier age than now. The stories are remarkable for the character sketches. There are strong but complex women whose lives are often changed or pushed in entirely new directions by spur of the moment decisions or chance encounters. Many men seem to be attracted to the “Bad boy” type. They usually suffer the consequences. In addition, the collection includes the stories about the little girls. The collection is remarkable for her non-forgettable characters. The themes such as death, love, loss, guilt, shame, lust, loneliness that appear in her earlier collections are explored again in her last collection. While many reoccurring themes are explored, Dear Life is as fresh and illuminating as any of her previous collections, if not more so. As another reviewer so fittingly put it “there are no clunkers here” (Review, Dear Life : Stories, November 19, 2012).