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world Alice Munro is describing. *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) was intended as a novel, and published as one, but is in fact a collection of interlinked stories. In this book, the narrator Del Jordan explains what she hopes to achieve in writing a work of fiction about small-town life in Ontario. (*Who Do You Think You Are?* (*The Beggar Maid* for the U. S. Reading public) – all the stories are centred on the same two characters, Rose and her step-mother Flo. *Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You* (1974) Munro’s second collection of unrelated stories, is the Janus volume in her development as a writer. John Updike compares Munro to Chekhov. The sisters, mothers, and daughters, aunts, grandmothers, and friends in these stories shimmer with hope and love, anger and reconciliation, as they contend with their histories and their present and what they can see of the future. *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982) contains themes that are developed in more than one context. That familiar Munro subject, the attempt to reclaim the past through a return journey figures in “The Stone in the Field” and “Accident”. In many of the *The Moons of Jupiter* stories, women like Rose, or at least in Rose’s situation, find their lives are defined by unsatisfactory but inevitable relationships with predatory men. *The Progress of Love* (1985) retains much of the diversity and the enigma of those in
The Moons of Jupiter. Several exhibit the diversionary narrative that swerves between events past and present. *Friend of My Youth* (1990) deals with the conflict between private and public aspects of a protagonist’s life. The protagonists who appear irrational are punished with humiliation and psychological isolation. *Open Secrets* (1995) contains eight stories. Munro deals with the subjects such as love or romance, sex or sexuality, dreams, alcohol, revenge, Tuberculosis, small-town life. These stories are set or focused on Munro’s native Canada, Huron County, and particularly in the small fictional Ontario town of Carstairs. *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998) contains eight stories. Munro investigates the lives of modern women. *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) shows the effect of memories arriving as jolts to the present. There is the failure of mind and body and the constraints of loneliness. The stories in *Runaway* (2004), of trapped lives and missed opportunities, of dulled passions and the need for flight, are among the most beautiful and haunting that Munro has ever written. There is a lingering sense of regret throughout this true and heartbreaking collection, and a resigned acceptance of that. *The View From the Castle Rock* (2006) is a memoir that reads like a collection of stories, an emotional treatise on memory, and an attempt to find
the pitch of the present in the distant past. It is an outstanding achievement a characteristically intricate weaving of fact and fiction. Munro shows the pull of the past, exploring the pressing and urgent need to make our own personal myths as the drift of the years begins to narrow the future. *Too Much happiness* (2009) is Munro’s thirteenth short story collection, published at the age of seventy-eight and forty years after her first collection appeared. The collection contains ten stories that reflect on child murder in “Dimensions”, broken marriage in “Fiction”, oppressive behaviour in “Wenlock Edge”, rejection and hatred in “Deep Holes”, stories of murder in “Free Radicals”, mutilation and rejection in “Face”, disease in “Some Women”, cold blooded murder in “Child’s Play”, epiphanies in “Wood”, and sexism in “Too Much Happiness”.

In each collection we regularly see the same small-town, rural, Canadian setting where she grew up and continues to live “because I live life here at a level of irritation which I would not achieve in a place that I knew less well” (Online “Alice Munro Biography”). However, *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982) presents a great variety of settings – Australia, Toronto, and New Brunswick as well as the more usual southwestern Ontario.
Thomas E. Tausky, in his “Biocritical Essay” (1986) observes:

This collection [The Moons of Jupiter] is not, however, dominated by Huron County character types, or even by the return to Huron County of those who survived their childhood in that area. The representative protagonist of the book is a middle-aged woman of unspecified or briefly indicated origins with both a career orientation towards some form of the arts, and a troubled personal life. With variations appropriate to the individual narrative, such a character is central to fix --- of the eleven stories. (8)

Another earlier collection, Open Secrets (1995) has a different setting. Most of her stories are set or focused on Munro’s native Canada, Huron County, and particularly in the small fictional Ontario town of Carstairs, although the setting in “The Albanian Virgin” is in British Columbia. In The View From Castle Rock (2006) the setting in half of the stories does not take place in more familiar Munro territory. A young boy is taken to Edinburgh’s Castle Rock, where his father assures him that on a clear day he can see America, and he catches a glimpse of his father’s dream. In stories that follow, as the dream becomes a reality, two sisters-in-law experience very different kinds of passion on the long
voyage to the New World; a baby is lost and magically reappears on a journey from an Illinoois homestead to the Canadian border. Most of the stories in the first part of The View From Castle Rock are about the passage across the Atlantic. Most of the stories of Too Much Happiness (2009) are set in the rural Canadian landscape that appears so frequently in Munro’s stories. In “Wood”, about a man obsessed with cutting wood, the forest itself plays a central part in the narrative as the source of the deepest and the most mysterious longings. Stories such as “Wenlock Edge” and “Too Much Happiness” have different settings. The concluding and the title story “Too Much Happiness” 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” (246), these are the first words of the story. In most of her collections, one notices the setting – Huron County – dominates the narrative.

Having read various collections of Munro’s short stories, like a layman one would ask a question –where did Alice Munro come from? Munro’s several interviews with Jeanne McCulloch and Mona Simpson, Lisa Dickler Awano, Geoff Hancock, Graeme Gibson, Alfred A. Knof, Alistari Maclead, John Metcalf, Ken Murch, Alan Twigg, J. R. Structhers, Mari Stainsby, and a
host of critics plus some of the essays of Munro come to help us in tracing the setting, Huron County which dominates her stories. In this connection, the role of journals, newspapers and reviewers of America, Britain and Canada cannot be oversighted.

Out of readings of this extant material, we notice that Munro springs from Huron County, in south-western Ontario. Ontario is the large province of Canada that stretches from the Ottawa River to the western end of Lake Superior. This is a huge and varied space, but south-western Ontario is a distinct part of it. It was named Sowesto by the painter Greg Curnoe, a name that has stuck. Curnoe’s view was that Sowesto was an area of considerable interest, but also of considerable psychic murkiness and oddity, a view shared by many. Robertson Davies, also from Sowesto, used to say, “I know the dark folk-ways of my people” (online). Munro knows them, too.

Like Huron lies at the western edge of Sowesto, Lake Erie to the south. The country is mostly flat farmland, cut by several wide, winding rivers prone to flooding, and along the rivers, a number of smaller and larger towns grew up in the 19th century. Each has its red-brick town hall (usually with a tower), its post-office building and handful of churches of various denominations, its main street and residential section of gracious homes, and its
other residential section of the wrong side of the trucks. Each has its families with long memories and stashes of bones in the closets. Sowesto contains the site of the Donnelly massacre of the 19th century when a large family were slaughtered and their home burnt as a result of political resentments carried over from Ireland. Lush nature, repressed emotions, respectable fronts, hidden sexual excesses, outbreaks of violence, lurid crimes, long-held grudges, strange rumours – these are never far away in Munro’s Sowesto, partly because all have been provided by the real life of the region. John Kenneth Galbraith, Robertson Davies, Marian Engel, Graeme Gibson and James Reaney all came out of Soweto; and Munro, after a spell on the west coast, moved back there, and lives at present not far from Wingham, the prototype of the various Jubilees and Walleys and Dalgleishes and Hanratty in her stories.

Some of the physical features of the regional novel are people, life, customs, habits, manners, traditions, language, etc. These features appear in her earlier publications such as Dance of the Happy Shades (1968) and Lives of Girls and Women (1971), Munro has been regarded as a regionalist. The regional artist emphasizes the unique features of a particular locality but her creative imagination enabled her to rise from the particular and
local to the general and universal. The selected region becomes a symbol of the world at large, a microcosm which reflects the great world beyond. As Thomas Hardy chooses Wessex (the land of West Saxons), William Faulkner chooses the Yoknapatawapan Conty (based on his home region Lafayette County, Mississippi) R. K. Narayan chooses Malgudi (the imaginary name of his South Indian town where he was born and brought up), Flannery O’Connor (American South) and Eudora Welty (American South) Munro chooses Huron County, in south-western Ontario. Although she chooses her region, and write about a lot of places, she continued to set stories around this part of the world. The authors for whom she has expressed most admiration are regional writers of the American South – Flannery O’Connor, Carson McCullers, and, especially Eudora Welty. She has said in an early 1970s interview with Struthers: “If I’m a regional writer, the region I am writing about has many things in common with the America South --- [It is] Rural Ontario. A closed rural society with a pretty homogenous Scotch –Irish racial strain going slowly to decay” (Struthers, “South” 29). Reacting to the questions of the interviewers that she is a regionalist, Munro responds to them:

I just always feel there’s more to be discovered about this place. I don’t ever have to think that I’ve finished with it,
with it, with the changes in it and the things I know about it. I don’t like to be described as a regional writer. I’m annoyed sometimes when people think I write about a sort of idyllic life or a sort of pastorale, because I’m seen as someone who writes about small towns in the country. It almost seems to be accident that I write about those people, because I know their houses, and I know certain things about their lives. But I don’t think of them as particularly different from people you might find elsewhere in the world. It’s just something I do without thinking about it. Nearly everybody I write about lives in a place where I have once lived. So maybe I’m not very good about imagination --- except that I once did a story about Albania, and I enjoyed that a lot. But usually I don’t choose anything exotic. I might like to, but there’s always something else that I have to do first that isn’t exotic at all.

(A conversation with Eleanor Wachtel, 22-JUN-2005)

Commenting on her regionalism Dan Schneider observes:

---Munro shares some of the insular ‘regionalism’ that infects the work of American writers like Flannery O’Connor or William Faulkner –although she is not as heavy – handed as O’Connor. She is more like America’s Eudora Welty although her tales are less brocaded and ornate. Yet, they are
dull, as she seems to be obsessed with her own ideas of her past, like too many workshop writers of the present but her biggest flaw is that she simply is predictable. As is too often the case, many readers mistake dull writing for realism, rather than understanding artistic realism’s heart is the ability to distill banalities from the few peaks of incidental poesy that occur daily. (*Selected Stories* by Alice Munro, 1997)

In *NBCC Features Review* (Jan-26-2010) Brooke Allen comments on the region of Munro:

“---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). Munro’s protagonists come from both ends of the social spectrum, and they are of every age: in fact in a couple of these tales, “Fiction”, and “Free Radicals”, the author Kaleidoscopes different periods of her characters’ lives together in a long view one seldom sees in short fiction. And in “Some Women”, a close- to- perfect piece of work, she demonstrates her facility with the child’s – eye – view of adult life, a technique originally made famous by Henry James’s *What Maisie Knew*. (Brooke Allen, Jan-26-2010)
By regional writer does not mean that Munro is merely an interpreter of rural Ontario. She says that “there’s perhaps an advantage living here of knowing more different sorts of people than you would know in a larger community” (Interview, Online 2). She further adds “the physical setting is perhaps “real” to me, in a way no other is. I love the landscape, not as “scenery” but as something intimately known” (Interview Online 2). She considers the weather, the villages and towns not in their picturesque aspects but in all phases.

In some minds, Alice Munro is a regionalist, a writer about mere “place”. To a certain extent, that is how she began, and how her publishers defined her appeal. This may be true when we consider early fictions. In her later publications, she tries to prove not a writer of mere “place”, but a person who makes us think anew of how we experience and recall the particular and unnoticed. But also must have been aware, with the intuition and clear – sightedness that mark her writing, that by the late 1960s, the age of the regional – of places with an inner climate of their own–was almost over. “Place” was going to be almost completely replaced by the suburban. Moreover, it is to be noted that her landscapes are altered not only by the passing of time but also by the shift of terrestrial perspective that comes with life –changing incidents. Such change is characteristically captured in
“Differently”, from her great 1980s collection *Friend of My Youth*, about a woman who has embarked upon her first extramarital affair:

The map of the city that she had held in her mind up till now, with its routes to shops and work and friends’ houses, was overlaid with another map of circuitous routes followed in fear (not shame) and excitement, of flimsy shelters, temporary hiding places, where she and Miles made love, often within hearing distance of passing traffic or a hiking party or a family picnic. (“Differently” 232-233)

Innumerable critics and popular reviewers alike have noted the “universality” of Munro’s fiction. This attribution of “universality” usually takes one of two forms. In the first, it insists that her fictive south-western Ontario small towns are familiar to anyone who has experienced small towns. In this case, the emphasis is on the homogeneity of places. People experience the same emotions despite their geographical differences. Linda Hutcheon says that fiction like Munro’s has the possibility of “transcending geography” (195). The second emphasis is on both the heterogeneity and the ultimate subordination of place. Coral Ann Howells writes that Munro “creates locations and characters so exactly. Yet at the same time, these stories could be anywhere —any small town” (3). The topography of a Munro text may not be
familiar to someone who has never been to Huron County, but the story gives the illusion of familiarity.

Critics like Alan Twigg, Gibson, Busch, Jansen, Levin, Canron, Ronald Blythe and a host of others have praised Munro’s description of landscape. Very few stories are set outside Huron County. The rural Canadian landscape appears frequently in Munro’s stories. On the other hand, there are critics like Don Schneider who passed comments on Munro’s landscape. To quote Don Schneider:

Munro’s inner landscapes are merely dull, lacking all vivacity. There is no emotion that seeps through, and their very formula blurs the whole book into one long, distended gray mist or perhaps, dried and leached dirt. And we all know how difficult it is to grow anything in such soil, especially great art. (Reviewed by Don Schneider 1997)

The Ontario landscape, modest and rolling like that of the American Midwest, was transformed for us by Munro’s stories. In his article “Alice in Borderland” – A trip through Munro Country, where the writer became herself (September 2009 magazine), Charles Furan records a meeting with Munro and discusses the landscape of the past that she described in her earlier collections, and the landscape of the present that is compared with the past.
Many of the stories in Munro’s new collection begin and end in old age, arcing back to a defining incident from childhood, “I am amazed sometimes to think how old I am”, (164) the protagonist in “Some Women” declares at the start. “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” (MH 163). Munro appears not to have forgotten the past of Huron County. Although she has grown aged, she expresses her desire to return not only to the county, but to a specific period: the 1930s and 40s, when she was Alice Laidlaw walking from Lowe Town into Wingham.

Through her stories, Sowesto’s Huron County has joined Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County as a slice of land made legendary by the excellence of the writer who has celebrated it.

Tracing the trajectory of Munro’s works, this dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter I throws light on the theoretical aspect. In the inception, various umbrella terms such as “regionalism”, “the local colour”, “landscape”, “Nature”, and “Environment” have been defined and discussed. Next, follows the term “landscape”, its definition and origin of the word has
been traced. The significance of the locale in literature has been pointed out. A brief information is given about the types of landscapes, and the relation between landscape and literature. A note is written on southern Ontario Gothic, a subgenre of Canadian literature.

**Chapter II** focuses on Munro’s life and career. The chapter examines various formative influences. Review of literature indicates many-sided genius of Munro. The sub topics under purview are – rationale and significance of the study, hypothesis, aims, and objectives of the study, methodology and scope and limitations of the study. One of the formative influences on Munro is that of various southern writers such as Eudora Welty, Flannery O’Connor, Katherine Ann Porter, Carson McCullers, William Faulkner etc. It is to be noted that within the scope of a dissertation one cannot make a comprehensive study of landscape that has pervaded in all collections of stories. However, wherever it is felt significant, the researcher has taken utmost care.

**Chapter III** focuses on five collections of short stories. The sub topics under study are – introduction, “What is real?”; tradition of writing linked stories, Regionalism as a defining feature of Canadian literature, Munro as a regionalist, and the role of landscape. Some of the stories from these collections have been
analysed in the light of the theoretical context. The significance of landscape has been traced, and how Munro was a regionalist in her early work.


Munro appears to prefer the label of “regionalist” over “Canadian”. It is possible that in placing her work alongside that of the great regionalist of the American South, such as Faulkner, McCullers, Eudora Welty, and O’Conner, Munro believes that she will transcend her own Canadianness, and achieve “universal” authorial status. As Beverly Rasporich notes, regionalists, by
working out of the detail of the local colour, “can communicate the particular as universal --- they and their readers [can] be imaginatively transported into a powerfully engaging and seemingly all encompassing fictive space” (22).

To conclude, Munro’s qualities as a writer have been widely recognized. It requires a substantial research effort to unearth each aspect of her work. Every year the critical articles have been swelling into a torrent. She, like Faulkner, Hardy, Narayan, O’Connor, Welty, has left behind her Huron County. In her interview with Hancock, she has spoken about her vocation. To quote Hancock : “I will never, never run out of things to write about” (Hancock Interview). We all have reason to hope that Munro will keep this pledge, so that we will continue to have an abundant supply of stories from this versatile, supremely talented and profoundly moving writer.