Chapter Five

Patches of Pathos

Could the angler hook all the fish
  though the pond with them abound?
Would all the seeds sprout
  though fertile the soil is?
Could there be pearls
  in all the shells that open?
Would every baby born
  find life here?
Does the lotus bloom
  in every muddy pond?
Does every hand held to beg
  fill with food?
Would the night not come
  though the sun does rise every morn?
Would all the dreams come true
  that sweeten the mind?

(Ambai, Antimālai 70-71)

The attempt here is not to show Ambai and Alice Munro to be pessimistic in their outlook on life; it is rather to point out the patches of pathos that seem to be woven into the fabric of their texts. In their portrayal of life one could feel the surge of sadness that underlies it. There are pensive poets in both the authors sensitizing them to "The still, sad music of humanity" (Wordsworth, "Tintern" 93). Their skill in
the use of pathos is seen in their handling of certain situations and characters. It evokes in their readers sad responses and leads them to muse over the tragic ironies and transience of life. Ambai and Alice Munro are profound thinkers who are sensitive to the painful predicament of the less fortunate in society. One could hardly capture the pathos of life without personal knowledge or experience of it in one's own life. The authors here have transmuted into the pathetic passages of their texts some of the pangs and throes that they have suffered in life. A comparatist could discern numerous parallels of thought and feeling as the Indian and Canadian female attitudes towards men and matters are transferred to the fictional plane by the two writers.

The moments of revelation experienced by the heroines in their stories quite often create consciousness of loss rather than consolation or compensation. "Ciğakukaļ," both title the lead story of Ambai's first collection and provide a clue to the meaning of the revelatory moment at the end of the story. The ironic title of Alice Munro's first collection, "Dance," indicates the strains of pathos running through the stories in it. The dancers here are far from happy as their world is overshadowed by disability, decay, disillusionment or death. Karen
Smythe says that most of the stories here are concerned with the passage of time and human responses to it. Munro's characters consistently confront the significance of death: a parent is often mourned . . . lost loves are frequently lamented as well.

(Figuring 112)

In her interview with Graeme Gibson, Munro says that her writing has to do with her fight against death, "the feeling that we lose everything every day, and writing is a way of convincing yourself perhaps that you're doing something about this" (243). Elizabeth Waterston writes of the title story:

"there is a poignant picture of Miss Marsalles, a music-teacher--old, poor, strange, simple-hearted, hopeful--going through the absurd and pathetic ritual of a recital and a tea-party, still believing in a possible miracle of music. (72)

The gloomy world of the hostess here is peopled with handicapped children and sick, "sexless" spinsters who are marginalized and despised by the rich and snobbish segment of society (Munro, Dance 214). The fashionably dressed teacher is in their sight no more than a "fancied-up courtesan" (217). The poor pitied woman lives with her older sister who has been confined to her bed ever since her stroke. One remembers her
existence only during this June party. One sees many unhappy and isolated maidens in the Munrovian world. The loneliness of the spinsters here could be discerned in the teacher's anxiety to get together her pupils and to socialize with their parents during this annual party. The decline in the number of the takers for her lessons and the thin attendance at this partly coupled with the reluctance of the people to attend it and their uneasiness and gossip before the programme starts intensify the gloom of the atmosphere. The gap between married people and spinsters is brought out in the sarcastic comments of the guests on every aspect of the party. The teenage narrator sees in Miss Marsalles "a character in a masquerade" (217). Her mother, Marg French and Mrs. Clegg, pity her plight and talk about her as if she were a "headstrong child" (219). In her younger days at Rosedale the married women used to be embarrassed by the dubious nature of the spinster's income which helped her to buy her pupils presents on such occasions. This kind of talk about the teacher has not been heard since she moved first to Bank Street and then to Bala Street. It is now "crude and unmannerly to discuss" (216) it now that she is "getting too old" (211). Her present residence represents her drab and oldish phase of life. Her life at the Bank Street might signify the latter part of her youth which is rather obscure. Rosedale stands for the
prime of her life. One wonders if the two spinsters here, as well as the two aunts of Milton Homer in "Who," Nichola in "Moons," Flora in "Friend," and Miss Johnston in "Open," remain single because of sexually disagreeable incidents in their girlhood days.

Miss Marsalles has been evidently waiting for some important arrival. The heat of the place is "particularly dreadful down here" making the invitees more impatient (219). At last the children begin the musical programme. It is during the narrator's turn to play the piano that the "eight or ten" children from the Greenhill School arrive led by a red-haired woman. The appearance of the mentally retarded children silences and surprises the normal people. The "heavy, unfinished features, the abnormally small and slanting eyes" of the disabled children upset the narrator's mother and others in the room. They resent the presence of the strange children who they think could be sometimes "quite musical" but they are repelled by them although they vainly try to resist their repulsion (221). They instinctively ask, "What kind of a party is this?" (222). It is when a girl of the narrator's age from the Greenhill School plays a piece of music called "Dance of the Happy Shades" and fills the whole place with "unemotional happiness" (224) that all the guests are diverted (222). They cannot deny her ability now but they consider it to be "useless, out-
of-place." No normal person really wants to talk about the talent of such a girl. It is appreciated by the teacher to whom such people with such talents are "acceptable but to other people, people who live in the world" they are not. Miss Marsalles is ecstatic to see that "at the very end of her life she has found someone whom she can teach--whom she must teach--to play the piano. . . ." One really finds her "light up with the importance of this discovery" (223). There is bitterly ironic censure throughout society's attitude towards single women who live in solitude seeking now and then the delights of life that they usually try to do without. The reader is left with the feeling that the miserable in life alone could see into the hearts that bleed.

One often finds both the writers "In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts / Bring sad thoughts to the mind" and finds that they are pained to see "What man has made of man" (Wordsworth, "Lines" 3, 4, 8). The first story of Ambai's first collection, "Cūriyan," portrays a sad scene of utter devastation wrought by war. At the start of the story, one sees a mother and her five-year old son walking across a burnt-out field. It is for the first time that the boy has come out into the open. The distraught woman goes in search of her daughter who has apparently been kidnapped to be raped by an American soldier. She finds the body of her
daughter lying under a big bush in a dishabille. The repressed brief of the woman finds release only through her silence.

Her elder son is a soldier obviously fighting the imperialists. Asked when the war will come to an end, he sarcastically says that years later an American specialist will come when there is nothing of life left here and the place is scattered with skeletons and dead trees. Then he will call for the ending of the war as no one is left to be crushed. Subsequently, scientists, students, and teachers will come here and a new world will come into existence with multi-storey buildings. Then a bigwig will come to inaugurate it. As the huge building is opened, the skeletons and bones will come out thundering terribly. The picture of the post-war scene and the prospect of what is to happen fill the mother with greater sorrow and terror. What seem to be completely destroyed by imperialists will come back to life in all their fury to wreak vengeance. The prophecy sounds probable as all the foes of the invaders live hidden underground with their schools and factories for production of armaments and their other normal activities.

"Day" is one of Munro's early stories packed with pathos. Martin observes:

If there is a weakness in the story it is that Myra is too helpless and pathetic; her
case comes close to that of passive suffering that finds no vent in action, which was deplored by Matthew Arnold and Yeats. (39)

There is a sad day at the narrator's school here, when the teacher formally stops calling Myra's name for attendance when she has not been to school for a few weeks. One of the girls named Gladys Healey breaks the news that Myra is sick in hospital with leukaemia. The teacher makes all the pupils write her a letter wishing her quick recovery. Later some of them are chosen to visit Myra on the twentieth of March to celebrate her birthday, which really falls on the twentieth of July.

The girls visiting Myra in hospital and making her feel proud of the presents and the celebration of her premature birthday with the candles on a cake are vividly and wistfully described. The teacher asks Myra to thank each girl for her gift. It is when the narrator is thanked that the reader learns the name of the narrator, Helen. When the buzzer sounds, all the girls are taken out but Helen is called back by her for a special gift. The tragic gloom of her future is shown here. Helen is told that she could play at her place when she comes back from hospital in London where she is to be taken. Karen Symthe says that the story was "originally titled 'Good- bye, Myra'" (Figuring 118). Munro seems to have hit upon the present title as the brevity and fragility of life are better
suggested by it.

In "The Time of Death" the reader has the haunting image of the little Benny being scalded to death and the cool nine-year old singer, Patricia, breaking down when the scissors-man appears evoking in her the memories she has striven hard to bury deep down in her mind. One finds in Leona Parry the desperate desire of the despised mother to see her daughter to succeed in life as a western singer. Patricia, her little daughter, has the potential to be a musical prodigy. It is to clean her mother's dirty kitchen that Patricia boils water which accidentally scalds her retarded brother. Overwhelmed by grief, Leona blames her and refuses to see her. The girl keeps her cool, "If someone cried she did not notice; with her it was as if nothing had happened" (Dance 97). It is at their neighbour McGee's house that Patricia and the other two children stay for the night. George and Irene are visibly sad at what has happened and might happen. McGee tells them that the burnt child has been taken to hospital. But Patricia asserts, "I never in my life heard of anybody that died of a burnt skin" (96). She retains the same composure even when Mrs. McGee reports the next morning the death of the boy. George and Irene react emotionally to the news but Patricia bottles up her feelings. When they are taken to a store to get them shoes, Mrs. McGee and the man at the
store see how dirty George and Irene are. Patricia is seen to be very clean in her habits and very attentive to her appearance.

The mother recovers from her terrible sense of loss and realizes that life has to go on in spite of calamities. She says, "What's life? You gotta go on" (98). She now resumes her role as Patricia's patron in response to the invitation from the Maitland Valley Entertainers. It is in the first week of November when the scissors-man with his cart comes walking along the highway that one sees the iceberg in Patricia melt. Karen Smythe comments:

It is only after Patricia's hysterical reaction to the sound of scissors-man's "unintelligible chant, mournful and shrill"--a metonymy that reminds her of Benny, since the man's name (Bram) is one of the only two words he knew how to say--that her pathological grieving process begins. . . .

(Figuring 117)

The two authors movingly portray the images of their mothers as they fictionalize them. Ambai's story, "Pilāciṭik" and Munro's "Peace," give the reader portraits of two mothers--one widowed without a house of her own and the other denied the "resources of love" at home and treated callously like a captive in hospital (Munro, Dance 199). The mother in the Ambaian
story puts on a facade of contentment and roams with her figurines of divinity as she is unable to stay long either with Dhanam in India or Bharathi in the States. In her letter to Dhanam, Bharathi, her sister, writes of their mother:

As I got back from work the day before yesterday, she was singing of "being in a trackless jungle." When she sang of "flowers in the heart with the fragrance of embers" and of "falling tired," Dhanam, I burst into tears leaning on the door. ("Pilācitik" 23)

When her landlord pressed for vacation of the house a month after her husband's death, Dhanam asked her, "What decision have you made, mother?" There is pathos in her reply, "What can I say? See what plight your father has left us in. I pleaded with him to get us a house. He said getting one built was unnecessary bother. Leaving me thus to struggle for a place . . ."

(24).

When she goes to live with Dhanam, her lack of peace is sensed by her sensitive daughter. Her plight is symbolized by the awkward placement of her old Veena (lute). Dhanam writes to Bharathi thus, "She could live in my house or yours. But she would suffer. She would tell lies to hide her misery. What she needs is not merely a place to live in, but a place under her control" (27). Here is a mother who has not denied her
daughter their due share of space. Yet the gulf separating the world of the mother with her traditional values and the realm of the daughters with their unconventional ways of life is forcefully focused. The daughters possibly respond with sympathy to her need for an independent place in proportion to her concern for their welfare. The mother in the Munrovian story patently fails to see the youthful aspirations of her daughters and the gap separating her generation from theirs.

The struggle for autonomy between daughter and mother turns out to be tragic for Helen, the Munrovian heroine, who has to carry the burden of guilt throughout her life. Memories of the narrator's past life crowd in upon her as she visits the scenes of her childhood on her return to her house after her mother's death. The painful picture of her invalid mother being relegated to a corner of the house as something old and "gothic" is recovered. Her mother thirsted for love and comfort, but her daughters had no "resources of love" left for her unlike the daughters in the Ambaian story (199). The plight of the mother of Helen and Maddy in hospital became really pathetic as she slipped out of the place and tried to run away. The pathos gets intensified as one hears how the fleeing patient was pursued, brought back and confined to her bed with a board nailed across it to prevent her escape. There
is poignancy in the words of the hospitalized woman and Aunt Annie's admonition to Helen:

And she said, Aunt Annie ask Maddy to take me home again or I'm going to die. She didn't want to die. Don't you ever think a person wants to die, just because it seems to everybody else they have got no reason to go on living. So I told Maddy. But she didn't say anything. She went to the hospital every day and saw your mother and she wouldn't take her home. Your mother told me Maddy said to her, I won't take you home. (207)

Martin calls the world depicted here "a realm of latent tragedy" (40) Helen retrospectively feels, "We should have let the town have her; it would have treated her better" (Dance 195). She poignantly recollects how she and Maddy "took all emotion away from" their "dealings with her, as you might take away meat from a prisoner to weaken him, till he died" (199). The plight of Maddy and the pathos of her life could be discerned when she asks Helen why she could not have her share of the pleasures of life. As the glass bowl slips out of Maddy's hands and smashes on the floor, one senses what it portends--the wreck of her own life.

It is in her second collection of linked stories, Lives, that Munro introduces some of the poor and
pitiable persons who evidently have their counterparts in the suburbs of Huron County where the author was brought up. Among them the most memorable figure is Uncle Benny, a thirty-seven year old man, living alone on his own farm. All that he does is as odd as his story of Sandy Stevenson. His strange tale of the man haunted and hounded by the ghost of his wife's ex-husband lingers in the memory of every reader. His desire to marry is really aroused when Del's father teases him about a woman with "Two thousand dollars in the bank" (Lives 8). The next day he answers an ad in the tabloid obtained through the mail and marries "Madeleine! That madwoman!" as Del characterizes her (23). The woman's brother at Kitchener is only too happy to get rid of her with her eighteen-month old daughter, Diane. There is a blend of humour and pathos in the description of how cautiously he writes the letter with Del's assistance, borrows her father's car, gets himself new clothes for the first time, brings the bride round and is dejected by her violent tempers. How stories of the woman are spread and how finally she runs away taking with her some of his things supposedly in a panel truck are all pictured. His vain efforts to trace the fugitive woman and take away from her the poor baby that he loves have tragic dimensions. The world of Uncle Benny is one where tragically bizarre things happen: "FATHER FEEDS TWIN DAUGHTERS TO HOGS,"
"WOMAN GIVES BIRTH TO HUMAN MONKEY," "VIRGIN RAPED ON CROSS BY CRAZED MONKS," "SENDHS HUSBAND'S TORSO BY MAIL," as his paper reports (4). One would wonder if Madeleine is the teenager who loses her virginity on the cross and is left cracked in the brain for life. In Munro's place Ambai would overtly make Madeleine out to be the victim of the licentious monks. There are in Lives several patches of pathos that move one. Mitch Plim, living in Del's neighbourhood, is crippled up with rheumatism and is taciturn. His wife, who used to work in a brothel, does not speak much either. Their house seems to represent for Del mystery and evil. The two idiots on Flat Roads are Frankie Hall, who lives with his brother, and Irene Pollox, a dreadfully frightening figure who chases children. Del is afraid of Irene Pollox's house as well. Del pictures her as a "drunken rooster" (6). The suffering of the poor and miserable here seems to remain inarticulate. They mourn in silence while they are mocked by their neighbours.

Munro's use of parallelism and irony helps her to bring into focus the pathetic and the ridiculous and make the readers snigger in the midst of their sad ruminations on the ironies of life. One here recalls Martin's words, "Through paradox and parallel she achieves effects of ironic comedy, which modulate easily and naturally into pathos and tragedy" (62).
The writer sees the coexistence in life of the comic and the tragic. Del's mother, Addie Morrison, is presented as a comic as well as a pitiable representative of the female intelligentsia. It is suffering in the world that leads her to give up faith in God. She tells Del, "God was made by man! Not the other way around!" (Lives 89). There is poignancy in her realization of the marginalization of women who are likened to livestock (146-147).

When Del decides to choose a literary career, she picks on the Sherriffs to write a novel about. The pathos of their family moves her kindling her creative imagination. The Sherriff family has had its share of calamities with Marion Sherriff getting drowned in Wawanash River, her elder brother dying from dipsomania and another landing insane in the asylum at Tupperton. As she wants to avoid sentimentality, she leaves out the older brother, an alcoholic. She felt that "three tragic destinies were too much even for a book" (Lives 204). In the story, that Del carries in her head, facts are blended with fiction. Marion is turned into the sexy sister of Frankie Hall, a moron. The seducer of the heroine here is an unhealthy and scruffy man who is called "The Photographer" (205). He could not be popular as the photographs he takes turn out to be unusual or frightening as they terribly distort men, women and children in a bizarre fashion. People are
scared of him and his high square car with its black cloth roof. His disappearance leaving his car overturned beside a bridge near a creek drives Caroline to end her life with his unborn baby. After her death her brother, looking at her photograph taken in the school, sees that her eyes are white.

Del transforms not only the tragic figures in the Sherriff family but she changes and picks out certain sad features of Jubilee as well. She meets and converses with the real Bobby Sherriff, who has got back from the asylum. She is not able to connect him with her fictional character, Frankie Hall. There is a description of the scene where she sits with the tragic survivor of the Sherriff family. There she muses over what damage has been done to her unwritten novel in the head and the facts she has gleaned out of this house to construct the work. The gulf between the world of fiction and reality is glimpsed. As she looks at him more closely for a clue to his madness, she senses the subtle similarity between him with his frustrations and his counterpart in her fiction. She realizes the simplicity of life on the mundane plane and its amazing complexity at the psychological level (Lives 210). Del really turns her back upon love and sets out to compose her Gothic novel which is obviously designed to bring out the mysterious pathos of human existence.
In Ambai's "Alkāṭṭi," one sees the tragic analogue of Munro's Bobby Sherriff. The lawyer in the Munrovian character has been no more than the dream of his mother; but out of the Ambaian protagonist, Rajan, emerge ironically the pitiable poet, the despised lover and the ludicrous lunatic. He tries committing suicide every time he is disappointed in love and lands up in a mental hospital at Shahathra. He has intervals of sanity but there are no spells when he falls out of love. In his most disturbed state of mind he sees people pointing him out as a serious fool. Their index fingers seem to be pointing to him from every direction. He is the butt of ridicule for women like Swedesh. Before reading his first seminar paper, he is introduced by the professor as a man of deep knowledge who has dedicated himself to shedding light on obscure areas of history. Ironically enough, he exemplifies the adage that genius is allied to insanity.

In "Uṭampu" ("Body"), the Ambaian world, the question that Bala Reddy asks himself every time before he plays his part on the stage is, "Doesn't Lord Siva have hair on his body or did he have a clean shave just before his cosmic dance?" (Ambai 31). He dances with Indira Gupta the part of Siva or Krishna with rhythmic vitality in the hope of proving his masculinity; but he gets only a casual word of praise and hears a section of the audience mocking him. He himself sees with
anguish his feminine features. His female partner is profusely praised. He squats in a corner of the room with his chin resting on his knee and visualizes his fully masculine figure that has no deficiency in the world of fantasy. He imagines if he "had a deep voice and a sinewy body, and strutted in the streets, women would run away" from him fearing the loss of their "chastity" (32). He would have a hairy chest and limbs with the women spectators eyeing him on the stage and melting like the devotees of Lord Siva. He imagines how his wife would be surprised at his "tigerish performance in bed" (32). His invincible masculinity would be displayed in dancing as well.

His fantasy momentarily relieves him of his agony at the possession of hardly any visible symptoms of manhood. When the dance programme arranged falls through, Baskaran collects his things and takes his leave saying they will photograph Ramakala who has "atleast beauty to delight them." When Bala Reddy is left alone in the room, there seem to be "invisible whips in the room beating every part of his body with their lashes and drinking blood" (34-35). He thinks of how the audience just stare at the woman on the stage while art is stamped out into the background. Ramu's chat with him confirms his conclusion. As a boy he would go all the way to Thiruvadikai from Panruti, not to offer worship to the presiding deity or the goddess
there, but to gaze at the statue of Lord Nataraja out in a corner of the corridor there clothed in a tiger's skin with the expression of his emotions through the medium of dance. His wish to learn Bharatanattiyam infuriated his father who asked him whether he was a woman. It was the desire awakened by the "tiger-skin wearer" that made him run away to master this art. The painful situation in the present makes him look back wistfully for a moment. What saddens him on this reluctant return to his home is the reaction of his wife Lalitha, as he asks her "Will you watch me if I dance?" She just smiles but her eyes fall on his "unbottoned chest." Although she does not look at the rest of his hairless body beneath, her mind conceives of it. One reads, "Silently he walked into his room and poured out a drink of whisky" (37).

"Ottawa" of Munro's third collection shows that the memory of the narrator's mother has been for her something of a load that she could never shed. She is the most tragic figure here with her visible symptoms of parkinsonism. The story consists of a series of little pictures that have poignant patches. The narrator remembers here a trip made in childhood with her mother and sister to the place where her mother was born and brought up. Her mother's cousin, Aunt Dodie, lives in comparative poverty. Her life is overshadowed by a tragedy--she was jilted when she was all prepared
to get married. She refers to this jilting during the narrator's stay with her as if it were a notable disease. The narrator recalls her mother telling her of how her cousin used to weep at nights though she laughed away her painful experience in the daytime. The narrator's mother would recount the story of a family which "has everything money could buy but their only son was an epileptic, or that the parents of the only person from" their place who had attained fame as a pianist, Mary Renwick, had felt that "they would give all their daughter's fame for a pair of baby hands. . . . Luck was not without its shadow, in her universe" (Something 182).

Munro's "Bardon" of Moons effectively illustrates the factuality of Shelley's words, "We look before and after, / And pine for what is not" ("Skylark" 86-87). The story begins with a kind of flash-forward fantasy on a "lifelong dream-life" of a housemaid (Moons 128). This flight to fantasy shows the narrator's frustration in the world of real life. The narrator is a middle-aged woman who is poignantly conscious of the loss of her youth before the fulfilment of her need for love and sex. She knows that a woman's splendour drops at a certain stage and gaudy make-up really seems absurd. A woman is then not inside what her clothes announce her to be. She looks back on different scenes of the past when she had briefly experience with her lover, X, in
Australia an ecstatic liaison. The memories of her life with X initially delighted her, "I was swimming in memories, at first. Those detailed, repetitive scenes were what buoyed me up." They later turn out to be painful as they "stir up desire and longing, and hopelessness, a trio of miserable caged wild cats . . ." (143). She begins to see the gulf between fact and fantasy.

The story, "Araikkul," shows how the pangs of poverty could drive a woman to sacrifice her daughter's youth and happiness for opulence. The terrible plight of a man who loses his sanity and gets shut up like a beast and tortured is delineated. Rangamma, the help of the wealthy family agrees with anguish to the marriage of her daughter with the insane son of her employer. The terrifying scenes that he makes there and the terrible punishment meted out to him are vividly portrayed. The woman bought to be his "unravished bride" looks on helpless until one day she summons courage to stop the man's father from torturing him.

The tragedy climaxes when the father starts using gruesome violence on the man. How the doctor is called in and how devotedly she takes care of him sitting in his room for the first time with his head in her lap and stroking his hair and caressing his forehead get beautifully described. The brief moments of kindness
and love that the man experiences at the hands of his wife are pictured. It is the intensity of her compassion that leads her to withdraw medication and allows him to die without further misery. There is seen to be no difference between man and dog when they go mad. What the heroine here does is a sort of euthanasia.

"Aṟaikkul" of Ambai finds an echo in the sad story of Flora's sister, Ellie, in Munro's "Friend." Ellie could be called the "woman inside the room" when she gets confined to her bed with miscarriages and stillborn babies after her shotgun wedding with Robert Deal, the fiance of Flora. Ellie's apparent punishment for lust continues with one miscarriage after another and long agonizing spells of fainting fits and sickness. It all leaves Ellie a crosspatch nagging her sweet and angelic sister who bears her personal misfortunes with no complaints and behaves, as they say, "like a saint."

The imaginative empathy of Ambai and Alice Munro is sometimes so comprehensive as to encompass even animals in agony. Ambai's story, "Ottaka Ėavāri" ("Camel ride"), is a pathetic portrait of the plight of a camel that is brought to Mumbai from the desert for the livelihood of a Ram Singh or a Lakkan Singh. It is used for pleasant rides on the seaside or to carry devotees during the journey for immersion of Ganapathy.
idols on the last day of Vinayaka Chadurthi (a festival held in honour of Vinayaga, the elephant headed God). One gets a glimpse of how this desert ship carries its master and his folks across the barren land. Its milk is used to nourish children.

The narratorial voice here comes from the female resident of Mumbai but she belongs to Tamil Nadu. It was during one of her motorbike rides that she saw an aimlessly wandering camel with an injured nose. It seemed to stand there like "the humiliated Soorpanaga," the sister of Ravana in Rāmāyana. Men would bore its nose to dominate it and drag it by a rope. It reminded her of the story of how a free woman, living in the jungle, was subdued with a nose-ring and how she later came to look upon it as an ornament. The narrator remembers how her own nose-jewel came to be worn. When her man's folks insisted on her wearing it, she wanted it to be put on his own nose. But later she had to wear it. She passed down the memory lane on the street connecting Juhu-Villa Park and Versova.

None of her efforts to save the poor animal through SPCA officials bore fruit. One evening she happened to see the heart-rending sight of the camel in its terminal misery. It was a mere bag of bones. It did not drink the water or eat the dates offered to it by the people pitying it in its last moments. It only cried in a weak tone. It was Yamuna, the mendicant
hermaphrodite, who genuinely sympathized with the dying creature. Her abuse of the people responsible for the sad end of the beast seemed to go up to the clouds urging them to proclaim to the whole world the misery suffered by it.

In "Boys" of Munro's Dance, one is told how horseflesh is secured for the foxes reared by the girl-narrator's father. Her father and his eccentric assistant, Henry Bailey, would fetch old or useless horses, sometimes keep them for some time, and then shoot them dead and cut them up for the purpose. There are moving passages in the description of the way the two horses named Mack and Flora are used and then killed and cut up for the food of the foxes. The reader is told:

One Saturday we went out to the stable and found all the doors open, letting in the unaccustomed sunlight and fresh air. Henry was there...

"Come to say goodbye to your old friend Mack?" Henry said. "Here, you give him a taste of oats." He poured some oats into Laird's cupped hands and Laird went to feed Mack. Mack's teeth were in bad shape...

"Poor old Mack," said Henry mournfully. "When a horse's teeth's gone, he's gone. That's about the way."
When the narrator asks Henry whether they are going to shoot him, he starts to sing "in a high, trembly, mocking-sorrowful voice, Oh, there's no more work, for poor Uncle Ned, he's gone where the good darkies go" (Dance 120). The narrator induces her brother to hide in the barn and watch the shooting of Mack. She says:

My father raised the gun and Mack looked up as if he had noticed something and my father shot him.

Mack did not collapse at once but swayed, lurched sideways and fell, first on his side; then he rolled over his back and, amazingly, kicked his legs for a few seconds in the air. At this Henry laughed, as if Mack had done a trick for him. (122)

When they kill Flora, the mare, the narrator finds it difficult to bear it. She opens the gate instead of closing it and so lets Flora out to live an hour or two longer. "I opened it as wide as I could. I did not make any decision to do this, it was just what I did" (125). The contrastive attitudes of the girl and the boy are strikingly brought out as Laird says with masculine pride, "We shot old Flora . . . and cut her up in fifty pieces" (127).

Munro in some of the stories tries to get through to the reader the intensity of the pathos of senility and isolation. Her "Spelling" in Who pictures the sad
plight of the diseased and the decrepit. The state of the senile and senseless Flo, the one-time eager consumer of neighbourhood and school scandals and skilful teller of tales, excites both pity and laughter. Rose, the protagonist, remembers how when any woman around the town was not in her proper mind, Flo knew it or sensed it. Now she is the victim of the malady that she used to detect in others. When a woman is taken to the County Home, she is given a bath and a haircut. There are several things which usually get removed from the matted hair, "a dead bird or may be a nest of baby mouse skeletons" and other odd things (Who 174). Flo's queer habits make the situation tragically ludicrous. She takes the kitchen of her house for the store and her step-daughter, Rose, for a customer. She does not recognize Rose and says, "Rose is away." At other times she thinks Rose is the lady sent to look after her. She tells her that she has no money to pay her. She now has the habit of "sticking her bottom lip out, when she" is "displeased or perplexed" (175). She uses two canes now to walk. It is now after a gap of two years that Rose has come to visit Flo. Flo's neighbours wrote to her that she was no longer in a state to look after herself. A similar letter might have been sent to her own son, Brian, who merely made enquiries of the County Home through his secretary, but it is Rose who gets her admitted there. The insane
woman's insolent humour could be seen when Rose describes the home, the people in it and hands her a mobile from the Crafts Centre there. Flo quickly quips, "Stick it up your arse" (181). She retains her humour in her new phase of life as well and prides herself, for instance, in the end on having fifteen gallstones taken out for her to carry home.

The inmates of the home symbolize the misery and monotony of the western woman in the last and lonely part of her life. There are women in the home "whose heads drooped, whose tongues lolled, whose limbs shook uncontrollably." "Nearly all had given up worrying about whether they were wet or dry" (182). One reads on, "Bodies were fed and wiped, taken up and tied in chairs, untied and put to bed. Taking in oxygen, giving out carbon dioxide, they continued to participate in the life of the world" (183). The most pitiably memorable figure here is the old woman that the nurse addresses as "Aunty" who crouches in her crib and correctly spells the words that are hurled to her. These aged people are really in the "cages" that appear in Rose's dream.

This story strikingly compares with Munro's "Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd" in Moons where the setting is a similar old-age home. It principally portrays two eighty-year old ladies, Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd. They resume in Hilltop Home their lifelong relationship and
remember their school education and many other things they have had in common over three quarters of a century. One is here shown the bright side of youth and the seamy side of old age, senility and sickness. Mrs. Kidd's anxiety to preserve the image that her children, have of her could be seen here. It is when she is taken to the second floor by Mrs. Cross to see her cousin, old Lily Barbour, that Mrs. Kidd gets upset by the terribly sad plight of the people seen on the way. She turns around and wheels herself back to her room. Mrs. Cross, whose interests throughout have been material, is pragmatic in her perception of the plight of the people. She says, "There's nothing to get upset about. . . . They're all off in their own little world. They're happy as clams" (Moons 192).

Some of the inmates of the home here are seen to have no companions. The loneliest figure experiencing loss of everything here is Jack who has lost his faculty of speech. He was working on a newspaper. It was during his visit to his father's farm that he had a stroke and finally landed here in this speechless state. The attempts of the two ladies to communicate with him and Mrs. Cross's attempts to play the role of his nurse and comforter are seen here. His bursting into tears as he tries to speak is very pathetic. Mrs. Cross's efforts to empathize with him end in a fiasco when Jack, in a fit of frustration and fury, turns
against her and takes up with a meek friend, Charlotte. Mrs. Cross really suffers an emotional breakdown when Charlotte takes him over and wheels him out of the room. Mrs. Kidd asks Mrs. Cross not to walk back by herself and lends her wheel chair and goes pushing it upto her room. Mrs. Kidd gets so tired at the end that she sits down on the floor leaning on the wall praying that no nosey person would see her. Although tragic in content, Munro gives the story a comic closure. She here also seems to indicate that the attraction between a man and a woman could spill over into old age and last until they leave the world.

In "Wilderness" Munro employs every circumstance in the narrative to one accumulated effect of poignancy. The experiences of the heroine, Annie, from childhood to old age as an orphan at the House of Industry in Toronto through brief wifehood in the wilds of Huron and insane widowhood at Walley Gaol and Traquair seem pitiful and purposeless. It looks as if a Greek tragedy is being staged here in the Munrovian country. The use of letters in its narration adds to its pathos. It begins with the reply of the matron of an orphanage in Toronto to a letter from Simon Herron who wants to know if he could get someone there to marry him and keep house for him in the wilds of North Huron. As his letter is endorsed by his minister, she offers to comply with his request and suggests his
marrying either Miss Sadie Johnstone or Miss Annie McKillop, two eighteen-year old seamstresses. She recommends for him the hardier of the two, Miss Annie, although she has a slight squint. The second section begins after a lapse of more than half a century in the form of George's recollections in the Fiftieth Anniversary Edition of Carstairs Argus. In this analeptic fashion one is told the story of the brothers, Simon and George--how their parents died when Simon was eight and George three; how Simon was denied the benefit of education by his mother's cousin, that he worked for; and how George was taken on by a childless couple and educated. At the instance of Simon, George gave up his relatively comfortable way of life and went with him to the wilds of Huron to make their fortune on their own. They worked hard at logging and built a shanty and it was then that Simon sought the help of the matron to get married.

Simon was a handsome and husky man with a pragmatic approach. He chose Annie and brought her round with her little bridal gifts which made the place more comfortable. But before their marital life was hardly three months old, it was cut short by the sudden death of Simon. George recollects how they were chopping down a tree when a branch came crashing down and hit Simon on the head and killed him instantly. He dragged the heavy body with difficulty to the shanty
through the snow. Annie thought that the snow-covered body was a log. She received the news with resignation and calmly did all she could do to wash, cover and bury the corpse with George's help. George cast in his lot with the Treeces and married their daughter, Jenny. Annie did not stay there long but "went her own way to Walley" (Open 197). Their minister, the Reverend Walter McBain, writes a letter to the clerk of Walley Gaol, James Mullen, describing the circumstances under which Annie lost her husband and how she refused to be sheltered by the Treecers, lived alone neglecting her person and property, and how he (the minister) could not subdue her stubbornness. She developed an aversion to everybody, particularly to George and left the place after writing "on the shanty floor with a burnt stick the two words: 'Walley Gaol'" (199).

In his reply, the Gaol Clerk confirms her arrival. He adds that her version of the events tallies with what he has given them, but it differs only with regard to her husband's death. Her deranged state of mind could be detected in her inconsistent accounts of how she fatally hit her man on the head with a rock when he threatened to beat her for spoiling his lunch. She wanted to be tried for murder and knew that she might be hanged. Her faint hope of being spared also could be discerned. She had no wish to see anybody except Sadie Johnstone. In his letter to the Gaol Clerk, the
clergyman reports George's dismissal of her version as "invention or fancy, since she was never in the woods when it happened. . . ." The clergyman, however, attributes her loss of sanity to her remorse for her "hurtful sulks and silences" and lack of submission to her husband and his death before her making it up with him (203). The doctor thinks that "she is subject to a sort of delusion peculiar to females, for which the motive is a desire for self-importance, also a wish to escape the monotony of life or the drudgery they may have been born to" (205). The doctor blames female delusions on the sensational stories and romances that women read. Annie's claim to be pregnant was thus dismissed as another delusion. She was cleared of the charge as George confirmed his version of the man's death. She was encouraged to write to her old friend, Sadie, in the hope that her real thoughts could be read. In a letter to Sadie she made the shocking revelation of how George had killed him with his own axe and how she had seen the cut while cleaning his body. She forgave him his sin and promised to hush it up.

The story seems to have much deeper meaning with different versions of the central event and multiple perspectives. There are subtle suggestions of Annie's intimacy with George. She felt betrayed when he chose to be with the Treeces. She said, "then he looked at
me for the first time in a bad way. It was the same bad way his brother used to look" (213). One could get a glimpse of George's real self and his disguised self fantasized by her when she said:

And he never said anything to me, except he would come and say things in my dreams. But I knew the difference always between my dreams and when I was awake, and when I was awake it was never anything but the bad look. (214)

Her callous and cruel husband's sudden death is a calamity that she could bear with bitter resignation but her desertion by George the very next day was a disaster that turned out to be the last straw. The story can be called a study of woman's helplessness in this world of male malevolence. Munro seems to meditate on it as she makes James Mullen write:

It must be acknowledged that this is truly a hard country for women. Another insane female has been admitted here recently, and her case is more pitiful for she has been driven insane by a rape. . . . The screams of the victim resound sometimes for hours at a stretch, and as a result the prison has become a much less pleasant shelter. (206)

The author seems to reject the perfectibility of human life or relationships as she makes Walter McBain recall
Thomas Boston's words, "This world is a wilderness, in which we may indeed get our station changed, but the move will be out of one wilderness station unto another" (204). The mood of the author here is one of disillusioned distress. One here tends to be reminded of Hardy's fiction as one discerns the tragic proportion. Harry Blamires, commenting on the suffering of Tess, says, "Responsibility for the tragic persecution of the girl is laid firmly at God's door at the end when the black flag rises over Wintoncester (Winchester) gaol" (381). Hardy concludes that "The President of the Immortals had ended his sport with Tess" (449). The responsibility for the voluntary incarceration in Walley Gaol of Annie is laid at the door of the fiendish patriarch in Simon and George Herron. Where Munro blames the male for the misery of the woman, Hardy blames the grim fate. Hardy held that there is no active intelligence, no just and loving God, behind human destiny, but that Creation is swayed by an unconscious mechanical force, sightless, dumb, mindless, and equally indifferent to either the sufferings or the joys of mankind. (270)

The Munrovan protagonist, Annie, rejects the consolations of religion offered by the clergyman, for he writes in his letter, "She stopped appearing at services. . . . . When I visited her the door was open
and it was evident that animals came and went in her house. If she was there she hid herself, to mock me" (Open 198-199). Likewise, there are unforgettably sad scenes in the story. The most memorable one is the scene where Annie sews her husband's body up in a sheet:

I had to crouch down at the sewing so I was nearly laying on the floor beside him. I sewed his head in first folding the sheet over it because I had to look in his eyes and mouth. . . . I sewed on, and every bit of him I lost sight of I would say even out loud, there goes, there goes. I had got the fold neat over his head but down at the feet I didn't have material enough to cover him, so I sewed on my eyelet petticoat I made at the Home to learn the stitch and that way I got him all sewed in. (209)

There is only momentary experience of happiness in the Ambaian as well as Munrovian world as male-female relationships are not firmly founded. The reader is obliged to conclude at the end of their stories that happiness is the outcome of sound relationship of love. Most of their male characters are either insensitive, obtuse or obdurate. Their relationships with women are mostly self-centred and sexual, or flimsy and fickle. Most of the female characters are intensely
emotional. Their sensitivity leaves them vulnerable or prone to be isolated. Reviewing Munro's stories in Open on the eight of October 1995, Sreelatha Menon remarks:

Life is sad. Make a story of it. It then reads better. That seems to be what Munro and her characters are striving after. And life certainly makes exciting reading in Munro's pen. (Indian Express 4)