CHAPTER FIVE

PARADIGM OF SOCIETY VIS-A-VIS SELF

There is no 'pure art', which is a simple evasion, and art has to be always serious with a social commitment.

Sartre.

Commitment turns out to be inescapable for artists who are fully conscious of their sociological mission, though there may still be several authors who insist on the superiority of the school that stands for art for art's sake:

If literature is not everything it is worth nothing. That is what I mean by 'Commitment'. It wilts if it is reduced to innocence, or to songs. If a writer's sentence does not reverberate at every level of man and society, then it makes no sense. (Raymond 201)

Viewed from such a perspective Porter and Munro are committed writers as they tend to question several sociological issues especially those akin to the patriarchal ones. To K.Chellappan, a comparative study, more than anything else, makes mutual illumination of the literary virtues of works of art possible:
Comparative Literature as a study of literature independent of ethnic, linguistic and geographical boundaries has been a liberating and humanising force on literature itself by breaking the boundaries and focussing on the unity of human creativeness underlying the diversity of the literary events. But it is much more than a search for sameness or oneness by juxtaposing texts. It has provided a wider perspective by making mutual illumination of literature possible. (1995, 1)

A close scrutiny of the fictional art of Katherine Anne Porter and Alice Munro reveals the fact that each of them has been profoundly influenced by her respective social milieu. Porter’s novels present her society as a structure divided into classes, in which distinct primary and secondary sociological groups maintain their exclusive values. For instance, Porter’s characters often tend to be gregarious members of a social group who believe in their own distinctive values, and attach considerable importance to what the other members in their group may say about any particular action they may be inclined to take. By and large, Munro’s characters are pronounced individuals, hailing from a relatively
urban sociological background, revealing frequently a greater degree of isolation.

Porter's significant short stories, like "A Day's Work" and "He", are built around a Texas setting. Quite often Porter shows a tendency to use her experiences in the South, to create a fictional art which discloses truths that are universal. What is 'regional' in her fiction invariably lends vitality, colour, variety and depth to the characters on her canvas. A sound grasp of her associations with the region and intimate familiarity with sociological structures of the region, considerably enhance her understanding of the characters associated with it.

Although Porter, most certainly, relishes the energy and excitement of the twenties, she refers to it also as:

a period of grotesque dislocations in a whole society when the world was heaving in the sickness of millennial change [. . .] we none of us flourished in those times, artists or not, for art, like the human life of which it is the truest voice, thrives best by daylight in a green and growing world, a world, in other words, not in the throes of confusion. (qtd. in Brink 19)
For Andrew Lytle, "the southern legend of happy life on the farm was anything but legendary" (202), and in "The Hind Tit", he makes a forthright call for a pastoral society based on self-sufficient small farmers, untainted by new fangled inventions like tractors and economic concerns, like money and profiteering. He describes a day in the life of a yeoman farm family, from early morning rising chores to evening folk singing and get-together, in vivid terms. During the day everyone labors, happily secure in his or her roles and responsibilities. The period of leisure is equally enriching; as healthy as the family meals and as joyful as the communal sing-songs. The complementary combination of traditionalism and modernism on the farm is, purely and positively, pastoral. In a sense, "It is a war to the death between technology and the ordinary human functions of living" (Lytle 202). Laura Krey, one of the contemporaries of Katherine Anne Porter, in her novel, "And Tell of Time", depicts the perpetuation of a system of paternalistic enslavement, eventhough slavery had been officially ended by the War that southerners could neither forgive nor forget. Krey even sees in the planting season, an image of immemorial certitude:

Then, every year when the plowing was over, she would watch the negroes dropping gray,
furry cotton seed into the pliant ground. Something in the scene, something in the warmer, ruddier light of April always reminded her, then, of the long sequence of aeons in which men had planted seed in rich soil, receiving it back, in due time, a hundred fold increased. As she watched the unhurried figures moving along the furrows, there would fall over her spirit the same deep calm that possessed her on clear winter evenings, when she caught a glimpse of black branches moving across a pale, opaline sky. Planting and growth, she told herself, sun and shadow, wind and rain, cold and warmth, had endured and would endure, regardless of any individual's brief pitiful life; and past, present and future would always merge in a ritual of seed time and harvest shared by all mankind. (659-60)

In the eyes of Krey, the contemporary vital black men and women become "figures", forming an integral part of the 'decor' of the scenery and landscape, and in tune with its rhythm of seasonal cycles. The description besides revealing certain Freudian overtones, renders Krey's presentation grossly embellished and
undoubtedly voyeuristic, hence implying a distant perspective.

Katherine Anne Porter's essay "Noon Wine: The Sources," describes the southern scene of her childhood, in the following manner:

[. . .] heavy tomatoes dead ripe and warm with the midday sun, eaten there, at the vine, the delicious milky green corn, savory hot corn bread eaten with still warm sweet milk; and the clinging brackish smell of the muddy little ponds where we caught and boiled crawfish - in a discarded lard can and ate them, then and there, we children, in the company of an old Negro who had once been my grandparent's slave, as I have told in another story. (CE 471)

Porter's grasp of the reality of the surrounding landscape, is raw, intimate, sensuous, and eminently pastoral. But significantly, she too seems to take the institution of slavery for granted.

The southern cotton novelists of Texas wrapped most of their ideas about race in gauzy, cotton rhetoric derived from romantic and pastoral traditions. For instance, in the words of Nevin O. Winter,
when the bolls have unfolded, and the pure white flow of the bursted pods greets the eye everywhere, the cotton fields of the Black Waxy Belt are a beautiful sight. In places they spread out almost as far as the vision reaches old white-haired negroes, looking like "Old Black Joe", and the comical little pickaninnies toil side by side all day long in the burning sun. (218)

To most of the southern writers of the time who were whites - the landscape had an irresistibly sensuous appeal and they were all equally oblivious to the prevalence of gross imbalances in the sociological scenario of the contemporary society.

Porter’s extremely candid but naive account of the relationship of Sophia Jane and Nanny as recounted in her story, "The Journey", makes an interesting reading. As a child, Sophia Jane had seen Nanny on the slave auction block. In fact, she calls the black girl a "little monkey" (CS 334), and her father 'bought' Nanny for her. This little black girl has been kept in Porter’s family in continuous domestic service since her childhood, during and after Slavery. It comes as a
real shock to the heirs of Sophie Jane, to discover how much labor Nanny ("Aunty") had contributed day after day, for decades, by way of adding to their domestic comfort.

Even more significantly, Southern society, in Texas or in Georgia, if anything, was through and through class-ridden, that is, social stratification fossilized, not based upon the individual's ability or accomplishment, but on birth, race and sex. Many of Porter's stories explore the nuances and privileges of class. The pressures of class in a stratified society can be easily felt in her story, "Noon Wine".

The desire for social approval within the primary group, is also strong among the good country people of the South. Porter's story, "He", focuses on the hard scramble for existence of Texas farmers, while it also highlights the fact that it is more difficult for the poor and disadvantaged to express love, than it is for the privileged few.

Porter's "A Day's Work" paints a picture of a shiftless, passive, ineffectual male, squandering about the family's resources. As a result, he finds his marriage taking him nowhere. Here, the Texas readers of Porter's time, may grasp at once, the correlation between
a doomed marriage and the danger associated with poverty, while the northern readers of Porter's time would have remained in relative terms, strangers to such a situation, for they could live amidst plenty. Significantly, divorce in the south, proves to be a luxury for the poor Hallorans. Thus, even marriage as an institution does not come off in good light in Porter's fictional art.

Further, Porter studies the life of the rural folk of Texas in depth, in "Noon Wine" and "He". The stifling of the rights of the individual before the expediency of communal safety, is tellingly brought out in these stories.

In sharp contrast, Alice Munro's fiction is preoccupied with the assertion of the principle of individualism. Perhaps the quest for individuality is a fate Canada shares with several other post-colonial nations. It may be safely affirmed that most of Munro's stories present certain very familiar common traits in Canadian Literature as a whole, like

The psychological effects of a colonial past; a narrow and emotionally crippling puritanism; excessive openness to foreign influences, the general dullness of Canada and the Canadian people, 'a lack of ghosts' (Earl Birney's
phrase in 'Can. Lit.')) and the lack of an authentic history. (Keith 3)

Munro's works too overlook the cultural pluralism in her country and the striking divergences of approach with regard to a common quest for a homogeneous rational identity in Canada.

Munro, being essentially an individualist, succeeds in dramatizing with considerable expertise and insightful candour, what Simone de Beauvoir has discovered through her psychological analysis of young girls in Canada, including the subtle nuances of conflicts of adolescence in several of her short stories:

But for the young woman [. . .] there is a contradiction between her status as a real human being and her vocation as a female. And just here is to be found the reason why adolescence is for the woman so difficult and decisive a moment. Upto this time she has been an autonomous individual: now she must renounce her sovereignty. Not only is she torn [. . .] between the past and the future, but in addition conflict breaks out between her original claim to be subject, active,
free, and, on the other hand, her erotic urges and the social pressure to accept herself as a passive object. Her spontaneous tendency is to regard herself as the essential: how can she make up her mind to become the inessential? But if I can accomplish my destiny only as the other, how shall I give up my Ego? Such is the painful dilemma with which the woman-to-be must struggle. (qtd. in Rasporich 38)

Such a typical dilemma raging in the mind of young girl is presented in Munro’s "Post Card".

Munro is also justifiably critical of the materialism of a Calvinist society which compels women to play subordinate, denigrated and stylized roles. And she states the elemental truth about the nature of women through her fictional art.

For instance, in "The Peace of Utrecht", the masquerade of being female gets most acutely exposed. Munro herself has explained that the story came after her mother’s death.

The clothes which are central in the story are those of the dead mother, the "peach-coloured bed-jacket", the "brocades and flowered silks" (DHS 205);
These are sad, even beautiful tokens of a life, but important talismans too, of the materialism out of which the old aunts, in their web of sisterhood, had woven their lives.

Munro also depicts in her art the rural and semi-rural women of South Western Ontario, with their distinctive folk cultures. The authenticity of their dialect and behavioural mannerisms are ensured, through Munro’s exacting ear and pen. This distinguished group are descendants of a long standing Irish-Scottish Protestant settlement in Ontario. Their customs and cultural attitudes, particularly their Irish heritage, are reflected in all their meticulous detail through the character of Myra in "Day of the Butterfly". Their dialect and behaviour, if anything, are explicitly suggestive of the primitive.

According to Mary R. Beard, traditionally rural women in Canada have been known as, country producers, all working […] at the home, garnering harvests, cooking meals, minding offsprings, caring for the sick beside their own hearths and answering calls from a far, […] carding, dyeing, shaping clothes, blankets, rugs, transforming flax and wool
into sheets, towels, garments, household
decorations and comforts, spinning as they
Guard the flocks by day, knitting as they lead
them to shelter by night, conceiving designs
for textile ornamentation, embroidering,
comparing work with neighbours, judging art,
training maidens in domestic crafts [. . .]
endlessly washing [. . .] mending, combining
and recombining old clothes into new with
fancy stitching. (10)

Munro discusses in detail the relationship between
the American South and her own country in an interview
with Mari Stainsby:

Munro: If I’m a regional writer, the region
I’m writing about has many things in common
with the American South.

Mari Stainsby: Your area is South Ontario?
Munro: Rural Ontario. A closed rural society
with a pretty homogeneous Scotch-Irish racial
strain going slowly to decay. (Munro 1971, 29-
30)

In fact, several of the characteristics of the
American South corresponds to the aspects of rural
Ontario. Respect for the family and a sense of the past,
are two of the important features, common to both the societies.

The central issue in most of the short stories of Katherine Anne Porter consists in the struggle of the human individual to cope with evil.

"Noon Wine" is a simple direct story. Thompson, a farmer in Texas, hires a hard working handyman, Helton who brings his farm to prosperity in nine years. Suddenly a stranger calling himself Homer T.Hatch comes looking for Helton, saying that the latter is an escaped mental patient who had once killed his own brother. When Hatch tells Thompson that he intends to take Helton back to North Dakota in order to collect a reward from the police, Thompson inadvertently kills Hatch with an axe, even as he aims a deadly blow at Helton. At the end, although acquitted of murder, Thompson spends a good deal of time explaining his innocence to his neighbours but no one believes him. In the end, out of dejection Thompson commits suicide.

Commenting on this work, Don Graham says that it is "the tragic story of a vain and foolish man named Royal Earle Thompson who destroyed himself because, in the Socratic sense, he did not know himself" (64).
The above comments can be only partly true for Thompson, who may be called at the most, simple impulsive and naive, and not in the least vain. In fact, Thompson attempts to ingratiate himself far too much, with his neighbours, placing an undue emphasis upon what other people will think of him; upon his reputation as opposed to character. It is this misplaced emphasis on false values which causes his fall. In the above story, Hatch too plays on this sensitive nature of Thompson and tells him:

Now a course, if you won't help, I'll have to look around for help somewhere else. It won't look very good to your neighbours that you was harboring an escaped loonatic who killed his own brother and then you refused to give him up. It will look mighty funny. (CS 255)

The above passage shows that though Thompson knows that Helton has been perfectly harmless for nine years, he is still afraid of what the neighbours will think of him, once they learn that he had been harbouring an escapee from an asylum. The resulting violence in the story is somewhat unexpected, but Hatch too gets killed by sheer accident.
After the tragic death of Hatch, Thompson and his wife drive at about sunset. When she returns home she feels alienated and just as she is about to enter the house, feels unbearably claustrophobic:

Life was all one dread, the faces of her neighbors, of her boys, of her husband, the face of the whole world, the shape of her own house in the darkness, the very smell of the grass and the trees were horrible to her. There was no place to go, only one thing to do, bear it somehow - but how? She asked herself that question often. (CS 257)

Significantly, it is the question with regard to what the people will think about their father and family alone, that disturbs the mind of Thompson’s children too:

"Anybody say something?" asked Herbert.
"Nothing much, you know how it’s been all along, some of them keeps [sic] saying, yes, they know it was a clean case and a fair trial and they say how glad they are your papa came out so well, and all that, some of ’em do, anyhow, but it looks like they don’t really take sides with him." I’m about wore [sic]
out, she said, the tears rolling again from under her dark glasses. "I don't know what good it does, but your papa can't seem to rest unless he's telling how it happened. I don't know" (CS 258).

On one occasion, the Thompsons even pay a visit to the neighbouring family of McClellans only to explain their own role in the sad episode:

They drove in, and asked a little cotton-haired boy if his mamma and papa were at home. Mr. Thompson wanted to see them. The little boy stood gazing with his mouth open, then galloped into the house shouting, "Mommer, Popper, come out hyah. That man that kilt Mr. Hatch has come to see yer!" (CS 263).

Ironically, with every new effort he takes to ensure his neighbours' goodwill, the situation gets worse. For instance, the McClellans tell him to his face that if he had not been guilty, he wouldn't strain himself so much in order to enlist their support or sympathy:

My, you must be a purty sorry feller to come round worrying about what we think, we know you wouldn't be here if you had anybody else
to turn to - my, I wouldn't lower myself that much, myself. (CS 263)

Yet this is the chorus-like audience, the highest court in this dramatic conflict depicted in the story, to which Thompson feels like making his appeal. To be an individual in such a situation, is almost impossible.

On another occasion, Thompson wakes up from his sleep at night, and frightens his wife into a faint. His sons rush to their bedroom and Thompson sees the distrust writ large even in their eyes. Now he understands that he has lost the trust of his family; he is utterly alone with the strange destiny which has overtaken him.

Finally, having failed to convince this world around him and his own family, Thompson sits back against a fence with a lantern and a pad on his knee, moistens the pencil and writes:

Before Almighty God, the great judge of all before who I am about to appear, I do hereby solemnly swear that I did not take the life of Mr.Homer T.Hatch on purpose. It was done in defense of Mr.Helton [. . .]. This is the only way I can prove I am not a cold blooded murderer like everybody seems to think. (CS 268)
Porter's "A Day's Work" is the story of Halloran, who gets dismissed from his job in a grocery store, two years prior to his retirement, ostensibly, on account of his depression, but in reality, because his employer simply wants to avoid paying him a pension. Halloran earns money by washing and ironing. He grows particularly bitter because he had wanted to take to politics with his mentor and friend, McCorkery, but his wife would have none of it.

On his visit to a bar Halloran accidentally runs into McCorkery. He grows even more depressed when he imagines what might have been his own fortunes, after witnessing the prosperity of his own political boss, and gets drunk, throwing away the whiskey bottle at the end. In contrast, McCorkery remains calm while dealing with Halloran and sends him home in a taxi, having quietly slipped some money into the latter's hands.

This story also highlights the pressure exerted by the society on the individual. For instance, Mrs.Halloran is worried as to "what the neighbors would say" if they came to know about her daughter's strained relationship with her husband, on account of his growing interest in politics. But Halloran is confident that somehow, things will be all right:
"She's no troubles at all, her man's a sharp fellow who will get ahead if she'll let him alone," said Mr. Halloran. "She's nothing to complain of, I could tell her."

[...]

"You needn't tell the neighbors, there's disgrace enough already," said Mrs. Halloran. (CS 389-90)

Mrs. Halloran advises her daughter over telephone to put up with her own horrible marital life, for the sake of their neighbours:

[... the woman has to do right first, I'm telling you," said Mrs. Halloran into the telephone, "and then if he's a devil inspite of it, why she has to do right without any help from him." Her voice rose so the neighbors could get an earful if they wanted. (CS 391)

This story also depicts Porter's favourite theme, namely, how families compete with one another, in climbing the ladder of political success:

Mr. Halloran, his ears standing up for fear of missing a word, thought how Gerald J. McCorkery had gone straight on up the ladder with Rosie; and for every step the McCorkerys took upward,
he, Michael Halloran, had taken a step downward with Lacey Mahaffy. They had started as greenhorns with the same chances [. . . ] but McCorkery had seized all his opportunities [. . .] Rosie had known how to back him up and push him onward. (CS 392)

Once, when Mr. Halloran returns home in a drunken state his wife starts beating him: "Whack, down came the towel again. 'That is for the half-dollar', she said 'That's for your drunkenness -''" (CS 405).

At last, after having received some money from McCorkery who found her husband a job in his firm, she calls her daughter from a public telephone booth, to announce, for all the neighbours to hear, that Halloran has secured a job:

"Is that you, Maggie? Well, are things any better with you now? I'm glad to hear it. It's late to be calling, but there's news about your father. No, no, nothing of that kind, he's got a job. I said a job. Yes, at last, after all my urging him onward [. . .]. It's clean enough work, with good pay; if it's not just what I prayed for, still it beats nothing, Maggie. After all my trying [. . .] it's like a miracle" (CS 406).
The job offered to Halloran is made much of by his wife, in order that she can demonstrate to her daughter, before all her neighbors, at least the value of persistence in a miserable marriage.

The short story, entitled "He", is one of Porter's finest creations. In this story she portrays how a mentally incompetent person functions within a family and in society.

"He" is the idiot son of Whipple, a poor farmer. The personal pronoun, capitalized throughout the story, is the only "name" by which the boy protagonist of the story is presented. Mrs. Whipple, a woman particularly susceptible to self-delusions, is also morally blind. She cannot come to terms with the harsh reality around, and her own personal failure as a mother. Instead, she is very much obsessed with what the others would say. However, Mrs. Whipple's constant preoccupation with what the others might think of her does not, in any way, controvert her unequivocal love and concern for her child:

Life was very hard for the Whipples. It was hard to feed all the hungry mouths, it was hard to keep the children in flannels during the winter short as it was: "God knows what
would become of us if we lived north" they would say: keeping them decently clean was hard [. . .].

Mrs. Whipple was all for taking what was sent and calling it good, anyhow when the neighbors were in earshot, "Don't ever let a soul hear us complain," she kept saying to her husband. She couldn't stand to be pitied. "No, not if it comes to it that we have to live in a wagon and pick cotton around the country," she said, "nobody's going to get a chance to look down on us" (CS 49).

When a neighbour, for instance, suggests that she prohibit her retarded son from scamppering about a top tree because the boy cannot be fully aware of the risk involved, Mrs. Whipple, almost screams out at the neighbor: "He does know what He's doing! He's as able as any other child! Come down out of there, you!" (CS 50-51). However, when her son finally does reach the ground, she can hardly keep her hands off him, for acting like that before people, a grin all over His face despite her profound anxiety over him:

"It's the neighbors," said Mrs. Whipple to her husband, "Oh, I do mortally wish they would keep out of our business. I can't afford to
let Him do anything for fear they'll come nosing around about it" (CS 51).

However, nothing prevents the insensitive neighbours from commenting on the situation plainly among themselves:

"A Lord's pure mercy if He should die," they said. "It's the sin of the fathers," they agreed among themselves. "There's bad blood and bad doing somewhere, you can bet on that" (CS 49-50).

Ironically, however, the neighbours take care of what they tell the Whipples, face-to-face: "He's not so bad off. He'll be all right yet. Look how He grows!" (CS 49-50).

Once Mrs. Whipple decides that one of the family's suckling pigs be served up to her brother's family, when they come on a visit. This is an extremely improvident act, given her own family's precarious financial condition. To her angry husband, who does not approve of slaughtering a valuable pig for a mere family dinner, she exclaims:

"It's a shame and a pity we can't have a decent meal's [sic] vittles once in a while when my own family come to see us," said
Mrs. Whipple. "I'd hate for his wife to go back and say there wasn't a thing in the house to eat." My God, it's better than buying up a great chance of meat in town. There's where you'd spend the money! (CS 51-52)

Mrs. Whipple also worries about what the neighbours will say of the manner of dressing with regard to "He": "My Lord, look at you now after all my trying! [. . .]. Get off that shirt and put on another, people will say I don't half dress you!" (CS 52-53).

In another incident Mrs. Whipple's prayer as she watches her son lead the bull, speaks of her attempts to manipulate events in order to safeguard her own image rather than the life of her son:

Mrs. Whipple stopped calling and ran towards the house, praying under her breath: "Lord, don't let anything happen to Him. Lord, you know people will say we oughtn't to have sent Him. You know they'll say we didn't take care of Him. Oh, get Him home, safe home, safe home, and I'll look out for Him better! Amen" (CS 56).

In her own personal life, Katherine Anne Porter had tasted extreme grief, caused by poverty:
After the civil war, the Porter fortunes gradually declined, the nadir being [sic] reached its peak after Katherine Anne’s mother’s death. When the family shifted and stayed with Grandmother Cat Porter, they lived a hand-to-mouth existence and the neighbours even sent the Porter’s children clothes that their own children had outgrown. Katherine Anne always felt ashamed of being an object of charity. These circumstances are truthfully reproduced in "He", especially in Mrs. Whipple’s attitude against charity. (qtd. in Chandra 86)

Mrs. Whipple also suffers from a dread of being referred to as "White trash" (CS 86), which is what the poor Southern whites were actually called: "We’re losing our hold" said Mrs. Whipple. "Why can’t we do like other people and watch for our best chances? They’ll be calling us poor white trash next" (CS 56).

During one winter near Christmas, 'He' falls on the ice, and thrashes about in a fit. The Whipples keep the boy at home for a time, but the doctor tells them that they must take Him to the country home. Mr. Whipple, oppressed by his poverty, is relieved, but Mrs. Whipple is concerned with only how the neighbors
would look down on them for turning to charity for survival: "We don't begrudge Him any care, and I won't let Him out of my sight," said Mrs. Whipple. "I won't have it said I sent my sick child off among strangers" (CS 57).

At last, Mrs. Whipple is persuaded by her husband's arguments and a neighbour offers to drive Mr. Whipple and her son on his wagon to the home. On the way, she tries to convince herself that she is doing what is best for him as well as for herself and her husband and their normal children.

The story ends with a cryptic one-sentence paragraph - with a pregnant comment on Mr. Whipple's neighbours: "They came in sight of the hospital, with the neighbor driving very fast, not daring to look behind him" (CS 58).

The last line suggests the incapacity of people to look at misery and poverty, squarely in the face, to accept the world for what it is and, ultimately, to empathize with it.

Emmons summarizes the thematic content of this story well:

People like the Whipples are deserving of [sic] sympathy, but no purpose is served in
sentimentalizing them. Inherently they are neither virtuous nor vicious, nor are they anymore contemptible than any people are when bereft of civilizing influence. If they are deserving of punishment for their failure to produce order and beauty out of their chaotic lives, the lives they lead are punishment enough. (qtd. in Tanner 104)

In the words of Jorgensen,

No one in our century has put the short story to nobler use - or to stricter discipline - than Katherine Anne Porter, and "He", a compact tragedy in the low mimetic mode of realistic fiction, is simply one of the finer instances of that fact: a classic story written "with all the truth and tenderness and severity" that Miss. Porter intended as the hallmark of all her work. (qtd. in Tanner 105)

According to Carrington,

In story after story [Munro] reiterates her underlying theme: although helplessness is inevitable, it must nevertheless be controlled. This theme is fully dramatized in the character closest to her. (212)
There is no doubt that Munro's stories portray in graphic detail, the helpless situations of the characters they present and the pathetic denouement of their crises. "Day of Butterfly" shows how social standing of parents affects the self-concept of their children. Myra's father is a vendor of fruits: "Her father sat all day on a stool by the window, with his shirt open over his swelling stomach and tufts of black hair showing around his belly button, he chewed garlic" (DHS 103).

Myra the first-person narrator, the 'victim' in the story, is a harassed and despised alien in the eyes of her neighbours. It is the teacher who, by sheer accident, causes the initial misery in the youngster's life. Myra's little brother has a tendency to wet his pair of trousers. Myra usually takes him downstairs to the bathroom. Whenever the latter is not able to get to Myra in time, it becomes Myra's turn to go and ask his teacher: " 'Please may I take my brother home, he has wet himself?' much to the fun and merriment of the entire class " (DHS 100).

On an occasion, the teacher Miss.Darling suggests in the open class that Myra should approach her with a chit on such an occasion, saying: "My brother has had an accident, please, teacher" (DHS 100).
Instantly Myra and her brother become the butt of ridicule in the school at recess, and all the efforts of Miss. Darling to control the bullying of children are of no avail.

After this incident, the children at school hound Myra with even more taunts. Thus, Myra's poor appearance and low social status make her lose caste in the eyes of her classmates. Even her turban of "oily" hair does not escape their ridicule.

At last, when Myra's teacher and classmates hear that she is dying of leukemia in a hospital, the former inspires in her students a kind of feeling akin to collective atonement, by organizing a fake birthday party for Myra in March, in case she dies before her actual birthday in July.

The girls in the class, organize the party and they decide that their gifts should exceed twenty-five cents. Helen, while handing over a tin butterfly to Myra from her cracker jack box, grazes Myra's hand and "Myra put the brooch in her pocket. She said, I can wear it on my good dress. My good dress is blue" (DHS 106).

Helen, being a snob, feels relieved that Myra would not have any occasion to wear her gift of the butterfly as she had no such blue dress. When Helen and
her friends are about to leave, Myra calls Helen and says: "I got too many things; you take something" (DHS 110).

Though Helen grudgingly accepts whatever Myra gives her, she resolves to get rid of Myra's presents, because the others would think low of her, if she accepted any of them. With the result, all the gifts her friends had left behind for Myra

[... . . .] were no longer innocent objects to be touched, exchanged, accepted without danger. I’ll give it away, I thought, I won’t ever play with it. I would let my little brother pull it apart. (DHS 110)

Significantly, the story ends with Helen, the persecutor, haunted by the image of the victim standing solitarily against the school.

According to Carrington:

There is a close connection in [Munro’s] fiction between theme and technique, between the shame and humiliation that her helpless characters repeatedly experience and the self-reflexive comments about humiliation that she assigns to the authorial personae in her stories. (14)
The narrator of Munro's "The Peace of Utrecht" embarks on a retrospective review of her relationship with, and attitude towards her mother, now dead. The helplessness of the mother is acknowledged by the narrator when she returns to the empty house after the former's demise:

I was allowing myself to hear - as if I had not dared before the cry for help - undisguised, oh, shamefully undisguised and raw and supplicating - that sounded in her voice. (DHS 198)

The passage quoted above reflects the narrator's feeling of guilt over her repressed and muted emotional response to her mother's prolonged suffering and pathetic appeal to be transferred from the hospital to their home: "'Everything has been taken away from me,' she would say" (DHS 199).

In retrospect, Helen recalls her mother's humility and helplessness, in the face of a world callous to her grief:

She kept herself as much in the world as she could, not troubling about her welcome; restlessly she wandered through the house and into the streets of Jubilee. Oh, she was not
resigned; she must have wept and struggled in that house of stone (as I can, but will not, imagine) until the very end. (DHS 199)

Helen also recalls with a sense of remorse, how she and her sister Maddy had cruelly denied the warmth of human fellowship to their own dear mother in life:

But we grew cunning, unfailing in cold solicitude; we took away from her our anger and impatience and disgust, took all emotion away from our dealings with her, as you might take away meat from a prisoner to weaken him, till he died. (DHS 199)

This story also introduces the unmarried spinster aunts of Helen who represent a way of life for women which Munro looks back on, with dismay. Being childish and unfulfilled, these women live ordered, domestic lives. Aunt Annie takes Helen upstairs to show her mother's mended and still-cared-for clothes, in order to privately disclose and discuss the circumstances of her death at the hospital:

"I went up to see her", she said.

"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," [. . .] . (DHS 207)

Then she goes on to narrate how her mother tried to escape from the hospital:
"Did you know your mother got out of the hospital?"

"No," I said. But strangely I felt no surprise, only a vague physical sense of terror [. . .]

It was at night when they haven't so many nurses to watch them. She got her dressing gown and her slippers on, the first time she ever got anything on herself in years, and she went out and there it was January, snowing but she didn't go back in. She was away down the street when they caught her. (DHS 208)

The passage quoted above shows the pathetic and helpless state of Maddy's mother depicting her inner
agon and invokes the pity of the readers, even as it glances on the existential – even tragic – nature of human life as a whole.

"Post Card" by Alice Munro is the story of a department clerk Helen, jilted through an unexpected marriage of her lover, Clare MacQuarrie, whose gifts and company, constituted some of the most pleasant diversions of her life earlier, including some moments of sexual compliance.

When Helen falls in love with Clare, she wants to please him and live up to his expectations in the fond hope of marrying him:

He didn’t expect anything more of me, never expected anything, but just to lie there and let him, and I got used to that. I looked back and thought am I a heartless person, just to lie there and let him grab me and love me and moan around my neck and say the things he did, and never say one loving word back to him? I never wanted to be a heartless person and I was never mean to Clare, and I did let him, didn’t I, nine times out of ten? (DHS 135)
When Helen receives a letter from Clare during his holiday visits from Florida, she grows highly excited: "I want you to know how grateful I am for all your sweetness and understanding. Sweetness was the only word stuck in my mind then, to give me hope" (DHS 135).

When Helen's close friend Alma conveys her the shocking news that Clare MacQuarrie had married Mrs. Margaret Thora Leeson at Florida, she feels bewildered: "How could he get married in Florida, he's on his holidays?" "They're on their way to Jubilee right now and they're going to live here" (DHS 136-37).

Munro shows a singular insight in dwelling on the helpless plight of this innocent young woman, so rudely thwarted in love, by contrasting her predicament with the kindness she received from her mother's constancy and kindness in love:

Then I saw that Momma was looking at me like I was eight years old and had the measles and a temperature of a hundred and five degrees. She was holding the paper and she spread it out for me to read. "It's in there," she said [. . .]. A quiet ceremony in Coral Gables, Florida, uniting in marriage Clare Alexander MacQuarrie, of Jubilee, son of Mrs. James MacQuarrie of this town and the late Mr. James
MacQuarrie, prominent local businessman and long-time Member of Parliament, and Mrs. Margaret Thora Leeson, daughter of the late Mrs. and Mr. Clive Tibbutt of Lincoln, Nebraska. (DHS 137)

The reality of woman as the passive, victimized object down the ages, is brought out vividly through the words of Helen. Suddenly, Helen recognizes that human relationships are perilously built on quicksands of fleeting emotions and attitudes and partially perceived realities. Helen's words in the following dialogue, are tinged with an alert sense of her newly-attained realisation:

"Men are always out for what they can get," Alma said.

There was a pause, both of them looking at me. I couldn't tell them anything [. . .] I didn't relish anybody's saliva in my hair but I let him, just warning him that if he did bite it off he would have to pay for me going to the hairdresser's to get it evened [. . .]. (DHS 138-39)

Helen's mother blames only her daughter for the entire fiasco, while the latter, a typical product of
the permissive age, does not see eye to eye with her mother:

"I am an old woman but I know. If a man loses respect for a girl he don't [sic] marry her."
"If that was true there wouldn't be hardly one marriage in this town."
"You destroyed your own chance" (DHS 142).

However, Helen feels thoroughly disgusted and desperate and decides to go to the newly-wed Clare's house by car, at twenty past twelve in the night. To quote Helen,

I parked the car and rolled down the window. Then without thinking what I was going to do I leaned on the horn and sounded it as long and hard as I could stand.

The sound released me, so I could yell. And I did. "Hey Clare MacQuarrie, I want to talk to you!"

"No answer anywhere." "Clare MacQuarrie!" I shouted up at his dark house. "Clare come on out!" I sounded the horn again, two, three, I don't know how many times. In between I yelled. I felt as if I was watching myself, way down here, so little, pounding my fist and
yelling and leaning on the horn. Carrying on a commotion, doing whatever came into my head. (DHS 143)

Finally, Helen sees Clare coming out of the house:

"Helen, go on home," he said, like we had been watching television and so on all evening and now was time to go home and go to bed properly. "Give me love to your Momma," he said. "Go on home." That was all he meant to say. (DHS 144-45)

With all her noisy and childish protest of honking her car horn in front of Clare's home at his wedding night, Helen feels still terribly depressed, but soon rationalizes her hapless situation, seeking refuge in vague, existentialist terms steeped in irony:

I was looking at Clare MacQuarrie and thinking he is a man that goes his own way. It didn't bother him too much how I was feeling when he did what he did on top of me, and it didn't bother him too much what kind of ruckus I made in the street when he got married. And he was a man who didn't give out explanations, may be didn't have any [. . .]. And what about me? (DHS 145)
Wayne C. Booth quotes Kierkegaard's definition of the ironic method as that in which one asks a question, "not in the interest of obtaining an answer, but to suck out the apparent content with a question and leave only an emptiness remaining" (252).

At the end of the story, Helen is left in the ironist's questioning vacuum, simply wondering at the cruel turn of events. One of her Sunday school students dares even to counsel her:

"You're not going to bother Clare and his wife any more? Because now he's married, that's over and done with. And you wake up tomorrow morning, you're going to feel pretty bad over what you done tonight. You won't see how you can go on and face people. But let me tell you things happen all the time, only thing to do is just go along, and remember you're not the only one." [. . .] So just be a good girl Helen and go along like the rest of us and pretty soon we'll see spring. (DHS 145-46)

According to B. Pfaus, the recurring paradoxical pattern in Munro's stories, is "the dramatization of the conjunction of existential desperation and existential possibility within a total vision that is actually much closer to faith than it is to despair" (11).
At the end of the story Helen says:

Oh, Buddy Shields, you can just go on talking, and Clare will tell jokes, and Momma will cry, till she gets over it, but what I’ll never understand is why, right now, seeing Clare MacQuarrie as an unexplaining man, I felt for the first time that I wanted to reach out my hands and touch him. (DHS 146)

The following words of Sartre, the distinguished exponent of Existentialism, reflect in lucid terms, the dramatic dilemma, embedded in the core of Munro’s short story:

In the best ordered of lives, there always comes a moment when the structure collapses. Why this and that, this woman, that job or appetite for the future? To put it all in a nutshell, why the eagerness to live in limbs that are destined to rot? The feeling is common to all of us [. . .]. And to live with the feeling that life is pointless gives rise to anguish. (qtd. in Carson 29)

The comments of Susan Brownmiller on Munro’s thematic concerns in art, seem to be more gender-biased:
While Munro’s fictional construct is devious, her protest is explicit, levelled squarely at that "requirement femininity [. . .] that a woman devote her life to love - to mother love, to romantic love, to religious love, to amorphous, undifferentiating caring," while the male of the species as romantic lover moves successfully from woman to woman or maintains multiple relationships. (14)

Thus, Porter’s protagonists find safety in numbers. They are prepared to pay any cost for the sake of social acceptance, as eminently evidenced by the stories cited above. The desire for social approval within the primary group is strong among the country people in the American South. The life of the rural folk of Texas is analysed in depth, in Porter’s short stories such as "Noon Wine", "A Day’s Work" and "He". The denial of rights of the individuals in the face of expediency of communal safety, is powerfully brought out by these stories. In sharp contrast, Munro’s fiction bristles with the assertion of individualism. Perhaps the quest for individualism is a fate Canada shares with several other nations, facing post-colonial situations.

In Porter’s art only a few women experience the feeling of despair, and most protagonists are at home
with the conventions of the society in which they live. Perhaps the gregariousness they show in social life, as a whole, enables them to keep their hopes alive, and renders them essentially optimistic. In contrast, a sense of alienation and, consequently, an existentialist despair seems to threaten and dominate Munro's protagonists. That existential helplessness is inevitable and uncontrollable, can be seen illustrated in Munro's "Day of the Butterfly", "The Peace of Utrecht", and "Post Card". However, interestingly enough, even Miranda, Virgin Violeta, and Granny Weatherall in Porter experience similar moments of uncontrollable helplessness. Nevertheless it should be emphasized here that most of Munro's characters experience such a feeling of inexorable despair.