

# **Friend of My Youth: Stories Study Guide**

## **Friend of My Youth: Stories by Alice Munro**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Friend of My Youth: Stories Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Friend of My Youth.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Five Points.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Meneseteung.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Oranges and Apples.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Pictures of the Ice.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Goodness and Mercy.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Oh, What Avails.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Differently.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Wigtime.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">43</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">47</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">53</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">57</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">59</a>



# Friend of My Youth

## Friend of My Youth Summary

The narrator reminisces about her dead mother and tells the story of her mother's old friend Flora Grieves. Her mother had stayed on the Grieves' farm as a young woman, teaching in the nearby schoolroom. The house was divided into two parts, one for Flora and the teacher, and one for Flora's younger sister Ellie and her husband Robert. Though Flora had once been engaged to Robert, he married Ellie out of necessity after getting her pregnant. The baby was stillborn, and all later pregnancies were also unsuccessful. Ellie was later diagnosed with cancer. While the narrator's mother was staying at the farm, a nurse was brought in to care for the dying Ellie. The narrator's mother disapproved of the nurse, thinking her selfish and uncaring, but Flora did not like to think badly of people.

The narrator's mother left the farm to get married and start her own family. One day she received a letter from Flora explaining that her sister had died and that Robert had married the nurse, Audrey Atkinson. They continued to live in one half of the farmhouse, which they renovated with modern conveniences such as electrical lighting. Flora's religion stopped her from embracing such modern trappings in her own half of the house. The narrator's mother wrote an indignant letter to Flora, sympathizing with her troubles and blaming Nurse Atkinson. Flora wrote a curt letter in response, which hurt the narrator's mother. Correspondence between them stopped.

Much later, Flora finally wrote again, expressing sorrow for the narrator's mother's illness. She explained that she had left the farm and was now living in town, working as a clerk in a store. Looking back, the narrator speculates on Flora and her story, wondering how it ended, and what sort of life Flora led after leaving the farm. As she thinks about Flora she also remembers her own mother, reflecting on how she might not have known her as well as she thought she did.

## Friend of My Youth Analysis

This is a story about change, and the gap between generations. It shows the idealism and over-confidence of youth, and how this changes with middle age as the person realizes that their views are not as radical and different as they had thought. This is the same for each generation, no matter what their values are. The narrator reflects how the values of her own youth corresponded to the changing attitudes of the time, just as her mother's did before her. Though she and her mother thought they were somehow independent of these changes, forming their own opinions about the world, they were simply stating the opinion of their time. In time the narrator's mother's views became outdated. She may have been more independent than earlier generations, but to her own child she seemed prudish and conservative. The narrator recalls how she rebelled



against this as a teenager, but that her own views are now as outdated as her mother's had seemed to her.

It was this generation gap that caused the narrator to separate herself from her mother. She realizes now that she never fully understood her mother, and that perhaps she never really knew her. As a youth she thought she knew everything her mother thought and felt, and looked down on her for her views and values. Her mother acted similarly in her own youth, idealizing Flora Grieves without properly understanding her. Whereas the mother idealized Flora as a noble woman stoically enduring suffering with never a bad thought, the narrator demonized Flora as a prudish witch and busybody, rejoicing in her air of righteous suffering and forgiveness. Neither of them knew the real Flora, and were mistaken in thinking that they could understand her. As the narrator tries to construct some kind of ending to Flora's story, she realizes that she is actually searching for her mother's story, for a sense of who she really was. She comes to realize that just as she could never know the real Flora, so she never really knew her own mother. As she contemplates the life that Flora may have led, she sees her mother "moving rather carelessly out of her old prison, showing options and powers I never dreamed she had, changes more than herself" (p26). In this way she takes the memory of her mother out of the constraints she built around it with her assumptions and judgments, recognizing that her mother was more than just what her daughter perceived her to be.

The narration of this story emphasizes the feeling of uncertainty throughout. Since it is told from the point of view of the characters' mother's daughter, many of the details are missing, characters' thoughts and motivations are a mystery, and there is a lot of distance between the reader and the main characters. The narrator is forced to speculate and try to fill in the gaps herself. What she does know is only a half-remembered and pieced together story told by her mother, who observed events with her own particular values and bias. The reader cannot be sure of anything; the characters remain mysterious and ambiguous, preventing any real judgment or blame. This narrative uncertainty also gives the story a sense of nostalgia, of looking back to a time long passed.



# Five Points

## Five Points Summary

Brenda is cheating on her husband Cornelius with Neil, a man who is working a temporary building contract on the beach. Cornelius used to work in the mine before he had an accident. Now he and Brenda run a shop that sells second-hand items, and it is here that she first met Neil. She goes to meet him in secret at his trailer, always trying to make sure she isn't seen or caught. This is where the story takes place.

Neil tells Brenda about a Croatian family who moved to the small town, Five Points, where Neil lived as a boy. The Croatian family opened a sweet shop, which their eldest daughter Maria took over the main responsibility of running. She was an unattractive girl who was desperate for some kind of relationship with boys. She started paying the younger boys to have sex with her, and they soon began to take advantage of this, blackmailing her for more money. Eventually she managed to lose all the money that the shop had made, and her family was forced to sell the shop. Her mother brought charges against Maria, but nothing could be proven about the boys.

Brenda and Neil speculate about what may have happened to Maria since, and Brenda asks him if he ever took money from Maria, which he denies. They begin picking at each other, which soon forms into an argument. Brenda leaves and begins to walk home, but Neil pulls up the car and apologizes. He admits to taking some money from Maria. When the car reaches Brenda's van, he asks her not to leave yet. She realizes that this first fight of theirs is the start of a deeper relationship, and that it will never be simply a light-hearted affair again.

## Five Points Analysis

This story explores the point when a casual affair turns into something deeper, when excitement and feelings of freedom give way to more complex emotions and difficult decisions. Up until now, Brenda has enjoyed a light-hearted, fun fling with Neil. They meet in secret, enjoy the excitement of risking everything and laugh about what they're doing. Neither of them makes demands on the other. Brenda views the affair as something that she desperately needs for the sense of freedom and excitement it brings. It makes her feel alive in a way that her tired relationship with her husband cannot do. However, in this story things suddenly get a lot more serious. This must be something that has been coming on gradually without either of them really noticing, but it takes an argument to bring these feelings to the surface. Brenda realizes that the argument is a marker of their changed relationship, since fights do not usually develop unless there are more serious feelings involved. The argument indicates that the secret meetings are no longer just fun flings, but really mean something to both people involved. In telling Brenda about Maria, Neil feels some need to confess or show her the bad parts of his past, the aspects of which he is not so proud. He then lies when she



asks him about taking money from Maria, despite intending to tell her the truth, showing that he really cares what she thinks of him. These are clear indications that he wants Brenda to know him on a deeper level, and to accept him despite his faults. In other words, he wants to develop a meaningful relationship with her.

When Brenda realizes what is going on, she feels a complicated mix of emotions. She feels happy even as the fight develops, but it is described as a "tight and private" happiness (p43). Later she expresses regret that their situation has changed, and remarks that Neil has lost some of his sheen, seeming heavier and tired. She feels the same way about herself. This reflects the fact that she has lost that simple, free and easy feeling that she treasured. In comparison to her husband, Neil seemed light and wild. In contrast, her husband is described as heavy and possessive, "like a ton of blankets." Her relationship with her husband traps her; it is possessive and forces her into the role of being his partner, rather than being herself and free. When she is with Neil, there are no such expectations or demands. Now she feels happy that the relationship with Neil is developing further, since she has grown to have real feelings for him, but it is a tight and regretful happiness, because now all the responsibilities and burdens of a deeper relationship must come too. Their relationship is no longer light and free, and she sees the same heaviness begin to fall down around her and Neil. Brenda knows that there will be difficult times around the corner, and understands that although she is happy that Neil feels more for her, things will never be the same again.

There are parallels between Brenda and Maria, the Croatian girl from Neil's story. Both embark on dangerous sexual encounters, risking shame and persecution from conservative townsfolk if they are caught. Both feel a need for sex that goes beyond the physical. Brenda compares it to a ceremony on which her life depends; she needs the feelings of freedom and release that it brings. Maria is an unattractive, quiet and responsible girl. Though the reader has virtually no insight into her feelings, the brief glimpse we are given perhaps shows desperation for excitement and freedom, just like Brenda. Maria is given a huge responsibility, to look after the shop and its finances. She has always been the trustworthy one, the plain girl who never got to try being anything else. It is likely that she felt the same need to be free of her pressures and burdens as Brenda, the same need to enjoy being a different person outside of what she was labeled. When Maria was caught she suffered shame and ruin, and her actions destroyed her family. There is a sense that Brenda's affair could end the same way, in shame, guilt and ruin. She also has the potential to destroy her family. The reader is only left to wonder what will happen as Neil and Brenda's relationship grows deeper and the two start demanding more of each other. Will they be able to continue to keep it secret and what will happen to Brenda's husband? Will Brenda's children suffer? Brenda has not yet reached the same place as Maria, but that dark future is perhaps waiting for her down the road.

This story also explores the darkness that lies under normal small-town life. The reader is shown the worst aspects of people, how they can be cruel, can blackmail others, take advantage of others' misfortunes, hold secrets and lies, destroy their own family, abandon those they love, and commit affairs behind their backs. There is always more to a person and a town than there seems on the surface, and the less savory aspects of



human nature can never be completely buried. This is reflected in Cornelius' description of the mine as a place of darkness that lies hidden beneath the town. It is black and dangerous in there, with a kind of darkness that could never even be imagined by those on the surface. This is also reflected in the descriptions of the road Brenda travels to secretly meet Neil. There are bunches of "bright, poisonous fruit," hemlock, "black pools" and a "soggy sinkhole" (p35). These are all things that might deceptively seem safe, but prove very dangerous beneath the surface. These observations of the world around her also symbolize Brenda's feelings of guilt and shame as she approaches the destination of her secret affair.



# Meneseteung

## Meneseteung Summary

This story is told by an unknown narrator who is piecing together information about the life of a 19th century poet called Almeda Roth. Although the story is exploring the past, it is told in present tense. Almeda lives in a small town on a respectable street. Her house backs onto a much poorer street, Pearl Street, with some very undesirable homes at the end near the swamp. The house next to hers is owned by Jarvis Poulter, who runs salt mines nearby. He is a widower, and Almeda has never been married. She thinks of him as a prospective husband, and the town has begun to wonder and gossip about them too.

One night Almeda is woken by noises outside her window, coming from Pearl Street at the back of her house. She hears people yelling and the sounds of violence, which get closer to her house. Then she hears the sound of something being thrown, a fence breaking, grunting and pounding, yells of encouragement, and a last cry of pain. She wonders if someone has just been murdered outside her house. She backs away from the window and falls onto the bed. She thinks she should go outside to see what happened, but she is afraid and distressed, and accidentally falls asleep again. In the morning she ventures outside and sees a body of a woman slumped against the fence, with her clothes in disarray. She thinks the woman is dead, and runs at once to Jarvis Poulter's house for help. He comes to see the body and nudges it with his foot. The woman is still alive, though obviously hysterical, and he quite roughly tells her to go home. He then tells Almeda that he will call on her later and walk with her to church, meaning that he intends to propose marriage. He has finally seen her as a prospective wife, moved by her disarrayed hair, nightdress, agitation and obvious need.

Almeda goes back into the house and tries to cope with what she has just seen. She begins to realize that the world is as full of darkness as beauty, and that it cannot be ignored. She decides to write another poem, which will celebrate the pain and violence of life as well as the better aspects. She decides to name the poem 'Meneseteung' after the nearby river, which she feels best reflects what she is feeling. She puts a notice on the door to let Jarvis know that she will not be going to church that day.

The story is ended with the local paper's announcements of the death of Almeda Roth, and later of Jarvis Poulter, which make it clear that they never got married. Finally, the unknown narrator finds Almeda's grave and speculates how she may have imagined some of the details of her life wrongly.

## Meneseteung Analysis

In this story, the poet Almeda Roth comes to the realization that life is not neat and perfect, and that it is pointless to try to hide the dirt and darkness. Before this epiphany





she admits to glossing over the messier aspects of life. She says the manure piles, boggy fields and charred stumps must be disregarded, choosing to see only the beauty of the picturesque countryside and farmhouses. She lives in a small town in 19th century Canada, a place of simple values and rural life. Women are expected to play a domestic role, and to keep themselves quiet and respectful at all times. In the town everyone likes to know other people's business, and there is mass disapproval of anything or anyone that does not conform. The local paper likes to speculate on people and their relationships, and will happily denounce anything of which it does not approve. Almeda has been looked down on a little in the past for being too interested in literature, though her 'quirk' is more acceptable now that she is an older woman. The common consensus seems to be that she should find a good man and settle down, and everyone has accepted that this will probably be with Jarvis Poulter. Almeda herself goes along with these views, and dreams of what Jarvis would be like as a husband, and how he would propose.

The attitude of the town towards its less savory elements echoes this idea. The poorer people experience disapproval, and violent behavior is hushed and ignored. The town likes to pretend that it is normal and perfect, and that bad things do not happen. Almeda's house reflects the feeling of the town. The house faces onto a respectable street, turning its back onto the poorer and less desirable Pearl Street. The story makes it clear that there is often shouting and disturbance on this street, but it is ignored by the richer people, who would rather not associate their town with such things.

However, the events of one night convince Almeda that she has been approaching life all wrong. She feels horror at the violence that happened right outside her house, and feels terrible guilt that she did not go outside to help. Jarvis Poulter is disparaging of and rough with the injured woman, telling her to go home without caring what might have happened to her. He dismisses her as a drunk, and clearly does not want to have to deal with the violence that happened so near to his house. Almeda cannot feel the same way, and she cannot stop thinking about the woman. She sees blood and violence in everything she encounters, in the drip and stain of the grape jelly, and the red flow of her period. Just like the grape jelly stain on the floor, her life is now stained by pain and darkness and cannot simply be washed clean. She suddenly begins to realize that life is full of violence and tragedy, and that it cannot be ignored or covered up. She had thought that she needed to hide dirt in her poems and show only beauty, but now she realizes that her poems must show all aspects of life, good and bad. She thinks of nature, beautiful and life-giving, but also violent and dangerous. She thinks of her mother's tablecloth, with its fake embroidered flowers that now seem false and foolish to her. They don't look like real flowers, but like a desperate attempt to capture the perfection of nature and hide the dirt. She thinks of the river, which can be peaceful, with "blissful pools under the summer trees," as well as fierce and destructive, with "deep holes and rapids" and "desolating spring floods (p70)." She decides that she must write a new poem which will celebrate all aspects of life, the good and the destructive, and she will name it after the river.

The last lines of the story completely shake up the reader's perception of Almeda's life. The narrator reveals that he or she does not actually know everything about Almeda's



life, and was merely speculating about certain aspects. The narrator does not know if she took medicine or made grape jelly, and by extension the reader can wonder whether Almeda ever had this epiphany about life or not. It is possible that the narrator is projecting his or her own feelings into this story, and using Almeda to convey her own attitude to life. We do not know if Almeda felt bad about the injured woman on Pearl Street, or whether she really considered Jarvis Poulter a potential husband at one point. The narrator has pieced together this story from extracts from the local paper, and from Almeda's book of poetry, leaving gaps and unanswered questions. This narrative uncertainty adds a mysterious and ambiguous air to the story. Nothing is certain, and the reader must always wonder what really lies underneath what they have been told. This narrative style compliments the ideas held in this story and throughout Alice Munro's collection, that life and people are always uncertain, ambiguous and changing, never neat and simple, and that there are rarely any straight answers to be found.



# Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass

## Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass Summary

Hazel is a widow in her fifties, who has decided to travel to a town in Scotland where her husband Jack sometimes stayed in his youth, during the war, before he met Hazel. She stays at the same hotel where he secretly met a young girl called Antoinette. She meets Antoinette, but she does not seem to remember Jack. She also meets Antoinette's friend Dudley Brown, to whom she seems to be romantically attached. Hazel explains that she wishes to visit Jack's aunt, Margaret Dobie. Dudley Brown offers to drive her there. However, it is Antoinette who drives Hazel, claiming that Dudley has too much to do, and insisting on leaving early. She then takes her time getting to Miss Dobie's house.

When they do arrive, Hazel meets Judy, Miss Dobie's housekeeper. She is a young woman who became pregnant as an unmarried girl. Because such a thing was looked on very badly at the time, she had gone to live with Miss Dobie, away from other people's gossip and disapproval, and raised her daughter there. Judy is dressed up nicely and seems upset to see Antoinette instead of Dudley. Miss Dobie does not remember Jack at all, but talks freely about Judy and her problem. She then recites a poem about a girl called Janette, whose lover was taken away by the fairies. Janette had to hold on to the boy no matter what shape the fairies turned him into, eventually winning him back to be her baby's father. This poem clearly has a double meaning, since Miss Dobie seems to be directing it at Judy and Judy is very uncomfortable. Before they leave, Hazel tells Judy that she thinks Dudley would have come if he could. On the way home Antoinette is sick, and Hazel puts her to bed when they reach the hotel.

While Hazel and Dudley eat dinner, Hazel tells him about the visit and the poem, and he recites the whole poem just as Miss Dobie had done. He asks after Judy and her daughter. Hazel speculates on which woman has the greater claim to Dudley, thinking it terrible that he should abandon Judy and not know his daughter, but also unfair that Antoinette should suffer. She then thinks about what it means to be happy in a relationship, and remembers her own husband.

## Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass Analysis

Hazel traveled to Scotland with the intention of learning more about her husband and his past, but soon finds herself caught in the middle of the tangled relationship of three strangers. Dudley intends to use her as an excuse to visit Judy, but Antoinette foils that plan by taking Hazel herself. At Miss Dobie's house, Hazel's company is used as an excuse for the old woman to recite a poem which clearly holds a double meaning. The intention seems to be to embarrass or lecture Judy by reminding her of her past. Hazel thinks she understands what is going on and tries to comfort Judy, but the girl is bitter



and sad. On the way home, Antoinette is sick and Hazel takes over the driving, putting Antoinette to bed when they reach the hotel. Dudley tries to get information out of Hazel about Judy and the child, then recites the same poem Miss Dobie had. Hazel understands that Dudley must be the father of Judy's child, and that Judy still hopes that she can somehow win him back. She also sees that Antoinette loves Dudley, and is suffering because she knows he has an attachment to Judy through her child. Hazel is in the uncomfortable position of seeing these private details of other people's lives, without being familiar enough with them to be fully taken into their confidence. Like the reader, she is an observer left to come to her own conclusions.

What Hazel finally does conclude is that Dudley is giving a kind of happiness to both women. What he gives them is hope, or as Hazel puts it, something on which to concentrate. Both can imagine that they will one day get through to him, break through his tough, non-committal exterior and make him realize that he loves her alone. Hazel sees this hope as a form of happiness. She reflects that in searching for her husband and trying to understand more about who he was, she is also finding happiness. This can be compared with her earlier thoughts about married life, remembering life as a kind of routine, and her husband seeming still and ghostly. The only time in Hazel's memories that her husband seemed animated or happy had been when he was younger, or talking about the war. Perhaps what Hazel is trying to say is that it is striving towards things which makes people happy, and that when everything is safe, comfortable and neat, boredom and dissatisfaction set in. Hazel's own dissatisfaction manifested in the form of a nervous breakdown in her thirties, during which she describes feeling "fear and unfocused grief" (p83). This anxiety was relieved when she started looking at college catalogues. She also describes leaving a part of herself behind, the part that belonged to Jack. By this she means that she stopped focusing on marriage and domestic life in order to give herself a new challenge. This brought her new happiness for awhile. Now she visits Scotland in order to strive after Jack, as she would not let herself do in life, bringing her a different kind of happiness. Hazel is saying that people need some purpose or goal, or some hope or excitement for which to live in order to be happy. This can come in many forms, sometimes unexpected.

This might seem like an odd idea when applied to Judy and Antoinette, neither of whom seems particularly happy. However, Hazel is saying that in having an aim or goal, they have a sense of purpose. This could be compared to a good story. Films, TV and books tend to focus on struggle or conflict, the beginnings of a relationship, or some drama between lovers. Once the happy end has been established, the story is over. This is because happiness and comfort are boring; it is the struggle and the hope that are exciting. Hazel applies this idea to life, theorizing that everyone needs something to strive towards. The recurring theme of the poem about Janette, her lover and the fairies emphasizes this idea. The messy situation with Judy and Dudley has been transformed into something dramatic and poetic, a story of excitement and bravery. The story of Janette is a story of a woman struggling to literally hold on to the man she loves, just as Judy and Antoinette are both metaphorically trying to hang on to Dudley. It is the struggle that makes the story interesting and exciting, and perhaps it is this struggle that brings each woman some form of happiness. In other words, perhaps they need and

want this struggle, even if they do not know it themselves. Whether Hazel is right or mistaken in this belief, or too forgiving of Dudley, is ultimately up to the reader to decide.



# Oranges and Apples

## Oranges and Apples Summary

Murray is the son of the local department store owner in a small town. He inherited the store from his father but lost it due to financial troubles and bad business decisions. He is married to Barbara, who used to work in the store when she was younger. They now own a holiday resort with cabins for tourists, which Murray built while Barbara handled the finances. Beyond managing the resort and doing the cooking, Barbara likes to sit and read. She has never had any ambitions to go to college or get a career.

Now Barbara and Murray are driving to the doctor to get the results of a test. Barbara has found a lump in her backside and thinks it may be cancer. As they pass an old farm, the story goes into a flashback about a Polish man called Victor who once came into Murray's store looking for work clothes. Murray and Victor soon made friends. Victor had moved to Canada with his English wife to open a riding school. Before that, during the war, Victor had been a pilot in the Polish Air Force, which was attached to the British Royal Air Force. He was shot down over France but escaped with the help of the French Underground, after which he was sent to Turkey to help people who were escaping through the Balkans. When Murray introduced Victor to his wife, Barbara claimed not to believe this story. Victor began to visit more and more as his relationship with his wife deteriorated. He feared she was trying to poison him, so Murray offered to let him sleep in the abandoned caretaker's apartment at the back of the store.

One day Murray came home and saw his wife sunbathing and Victor watching from the apartment window. He was sure that his wife was putting on a deliberate show for Victor. After this he felt that the pair treated him with extra kindness and sympathy, and was convinced that there was something between them. One cold night he insisted on Barbara going over to Victor's with extra blankets, setting the two up for the affair he thought was inevitable. When it didn't happen he asked if Victor didn't want her, and she insisted that they never talk about it. Victor moved out and left the town the next day, and life went on as normal for Barbara and Murray.

Now Murray waits on the beach steps as Barbara comes to tell him the results of her test. She says that she is fine, that there is nothing to worry about and that it will all be okay. They see a balloon on the beach with a card attached, written by a schoolboy. It claims that his favorite book is *The Last of the Mohicans* but Barbara says this is clearly a lie.

## Oranges and Apples Analysis

This is a story about lies and paranoia. The interesting thing about the story is that it may contain many lies, or may contain none at all. We do not know if Victor really was a war hero, if he was shot down in France or sent to Turkey to help refugees escape. We



do not know if his wife was really trying to poison him. We do not know if Barbara was attracted to Victor or not, or if he liked her. We do not know if they ever had an affair or even thought about having an affair. We do not know what happened when Barbara took blankets to Victor, or why he left the next day. Finally, even though Barbara claims the child who sent the balloon is lying about his favorite book, we do not know this for sure. This ambiguity helps add to the sense of paranoia that runs throughout the story, drawing the reader into sharing in Murray's uncertainty and anxiety. Who is telling the truth and what is really going on beneath the surface? The story offers no easy answers, and it is no accident that the final word of the story is 'lie.'

Murray's paranoia is the central theme of the story. He jumps to enormous conclusions with very little evidence. He sees his wife sunbathing in the garden and Victor watching her with binoculars. It seems obvious that Victor is behaving badly here, but it is certainly not clear whether Barbara is putting on a show for him as Murray imagines. Murray's anxiety then causes him to see guilt and pity in everything his wife and friend do. He imagines all kinds of emotions and betrayal lurking beneath the surface of their normal lives. However, the reader is given very little to back up Murray's conclusions. Victor is described at various points as a striking and very good looking man, yet Barbara is bookish, indifferent, and not particularly passionate. Nor does she seem to like Victor very much. Perhaps Murray feels insecurity over his wife's lack of passion and imagines that she must be dissatisfied with him. Perhaps Murray fears becoming old and outdated, as he did with his store. He went on a frenzy of renovation, desperate to modernize it, but lost touch with the feel and desires of the town and ended up destroying his business. Perhaps he is now placing the same fears and feelings of inadequacy on his wife, and looking for someone else to blame. Murray seems to be a man who fears change above everything else.

Murray's paranoia causes him to assume that he has already lost his wife, and he even goes so far as to try to set up an affair. He insists that Barbara take over extra blankets to Victor's flat, then sits at home and drinks over what he sees as her inevitable betrayal. When she comes straight home he assumes it must be because Victor didn't want her, and asks her that. She angrily declares that they will never talk about it. This could be taken in several different ways. Perhaps Barbara did try to seduce Victor but he refused. Maybe he did not want to have an affair with a married woman, or did not want to betray a friend. Perhaps he simply did not find her attractive enough. Barbara's angry response may reflect her embarrassment over this. Alternatively, perhaps Victor tried to seduce her but she refused him, shocked that he would think she might betray her husband. Perhaps she never encouraged Victor at all, or perhaps she did but never meant it to go so far. It is also possible that neither tried to seduce the other, but Barbara is simply angry with Murray for even thinking it possible, and so refuses to discuss it. The reader will never know the truth.

At the end of the story, Barbara reassures Murray that she does not have cancer. Her actual words, however, could refer to his fears that she had an affair. She tells him that it wasn't anything bad and that "there isn't anything to worry about" (p135). Privately, he thinks how he doesn't want her to disappoint him again. This could mean that he still believes she betrayed him, or that he blames her for even giving him reason to doubt



her. Alternatively, perhaps a part of him wanted her to have an affair. She is bookish and boring, showing little passion. Earlier he had remarked how he hated it when she dressed alluringly because it seemed to suggest a passion that wasn't there. Perhaps he secretly wanted something more from his wife, something exciting that he could blame and hate her for, rather than the cold, indifferent relationship they have. Finally, the last line of the story once again raises doubts, as Barbara says "that's a lie" (p136). She is referring to the child's choice of his favorite book, but perhaps the words carry two meanings. They remind the reader that anything they have read could be a lie, and that nothing is ever certain. Whether Murray has been convinced or not, the reader is still left only with paranoia and doubt.





# Pictures of the Ice

## Pictures of the Ice Summary

Austin Cobbett is the retired minister of the church in a small Canadian town. A divorced woman called Karin is helping him to pack up his belongings for a sale, before he moves to Hawaii to marry his fiancée, Sheila Brothers. Karin had helped nurse Austin's first wife, who is now dead. Austin wants to give the money he makes from selling his belongings to Lazarus House, a place where people with addictions or other problems can go to turn their life around. It had been called Turnaround House when Austin ran it, but now it has been taken over by Brent. Brent is Karin's ex-husband, who stayed at Turnaround House for awhile to break his drinking habit. Brent became a born-again Christian and forced Karin to choose between her marriage and giving up smoking and drinking. She left him, and has hated him ever since. She considers him to have stolen Turnaround House from Austin. Austin was shifted out of the church at the same time, and Karin believes this is because Brent persuaded others that they needed a more ferocious kind of preacher.

On the Monday of Austin's last week there is a snowstorm, and Karin thinks about how her baby died in a snowstorm. She had told Brent that the baby had a temperature, but he ignored her and said it was nothing. Later he picked up the baby and realized it was very hot, but there was no way to get to the hospital in the storm. The baby died of meningitis. Karin is sure he would have died no matter what, but Brent is insistent that it was their fault. Now, after the storm, Karin takes Austin to the lake to take photographs of the shapes left in the ice. He says that he wants something to show people in Hawaii.

The day before Austin is due to leave, Karin answers the phone. A man from Shaft Lake tells her what time Austin will be picked up at a place called Thunder Bay, and that they have found him a trailer in which he can live. He says they have not had a minister there in a long time. Karin then calls Austin's daughter Megan to reassure her that Austin will be fine. When Austin comes home she sits with him and plays along with his lie. She asks him to leave an address to send the photos, and he says to hang on to them until he writes to her.

Karin is left with the pictures of ice that Austin took. She sends one to Megan, one to Austin's son Don, and one to Brent, with no notes attached. She wants to make them wonder. The first sentence of the story mentioned that Austin was drowned in a boating accident on a lake, but the reader is not told anything more about his death at the end.

## Pictures of the Ice Analysis

It is unclear by the end of the story exactly how or why Austin died. The reader is given a brief sentence at the very beginning of the story that informs them that Austin died in a boating accident in a lake that he had never mentioned before. This is extremely vague



and ambiguous. The reader is left to wonder whether he really did die in a boating accident, or whether this is a cover-up for suicide. What was Austin even doing out on a lake that he had never mentioned before? There are three possibilities as to which lake is being referenced. Perhaps it is the lake where Karin and Austin took pictures of the ice, somewhere in driving distance of their small town of Logan. If so, this is most likely Lake Huron. In this case, Austin may have returned to the lake for its memories, or to be alone and think, and met with an unfortunate accident there. He may have seen it as an appropriate place to end his life. Alternatively, the lake could be the mysterious Shaft Lake where Austin was apparently planning on moving. The man on the phone to Karin had indicated that he would be living in a trailer there and acting as minister to the local community. Finally, it could be another lake that was never mentioned, something personal to Austin that was kept private.

Whether the death was accidental or suicide is a deeper question. In the brief glimpses of Austin's life that we are given, he seems a very lonely figure, out of touch with his town and the people to whom he once preached, with Karin as his only friend. He had Turnaround House taken from him, and the people of his congregation turned against him, demanding a flashy new minister. Austin often seems weak, tired and old, such as when he seems so fragile in the ice, or when he drinks whiskey as a precaution against weakness from the cold. He seems like a man who has come to the end of his days, no longer useful or wanted, grown old and outdated. He resorts to a lie in order to be allowed to leave with dignity, and to stop people from feeling sorry for him. This could be a man on the brink of suicide. However, he is also a man of god, making suicide as a final option seem less likely. He also saved Brent from suicide years earlier, which would make his own death tragically ironic if he was now driven to the same despair by Brent himself. Whatever the reason for Austin's death, it is made all the more tragic by our brief glimpse into his last proud and lonely days.

Austin's quiet, calm and kinder approach to religion can be contrasted with Brent's new-found fervor. Austin takes his responsibilities as town minister very seriously. He sees his role as one of care-giver as well as teacher. He nurses Brent to health and helps him quit his addiction to alcohol. He takes Karin into his home to care for his wife even though, as Megan suggests, he did not necessarily need a live-in nurse. In doing so, he gave Karin a place to escape her marriage and a purpose beyond simply existing and hating her husband. He gave her something to care about again. Even though Turnaround House was taken from him, he does not bear a grudge, and will donate all the money from his sale to it. His lies about Sheila and Hawaii may allow him to hold on to some dignity, but they also help ease and reassure others that he will be okay. He does not want to be a burden on anyone, or cause his children or Karin to worry. Everything that Austin does is to care for and help others. He sees this as the most important aspect of his religion, rather than mentioning God all the time or being excessively preachy. Brent, by contrast, has latched onto Christianity almost as a new kind of addiction. Karin sees him approaching it with the same attitude he approached drinking before. He is passionate about it, and thinks a minister should preach with fervor rather than quietly with their own kind actions. Brent wants religion that is flashy, exciting and all-consuming, and because of this seems to have completely missed the point.



At the end of the story, Karin looks at the pictures of the ice that Austin took. She feels his presence in the images as a kind of ghost, non-existent because he was taking the pictures, but still there behind the lens. She describes him as blank, but bright. This is a little how he was at the end of his life, rejected by his town and the people, without a real place in the world. He was blank and unimportant, but still shone bright with a kind personality and a determination to not be pitied. He left his mark on Karin too, whom he helped by giving her a feeling of acceptance and a new sense of purpose. She decides that she will leave the town soon too, but first she wants to leave a mark, something mysterious to make people wonder. Austin had created a fake new life, a mysterious fiancée and a glamorous new place to live, and in the end had made people wonder. She decides to do the same with the pictures of the ice. She will send them to Austin's children and to Brent, to make them wonder and see that everything in life is not simple. In this way she will leave both her and Austin's mark in their lives.



# Goodness and Mercy

## Goodness and Mercy Summary

This story is set on a ship that is traveling from Montreal to Britain. On board are June Rodgers (nicknamed Bugs), and her daughter Averill. Bugs used to be quite a well known opera singer. Now she is dying, but wants to hide this fact from the other passengers. A professor on board seems to have taken a shine to Bugs, despite his much younger wife, but she finds him rude and irritating. Meanwhile Averill has attracted the attentions of an artist, whom she finds equally annoying. They befriend a middle-aged woman called Jeanine, who claims to be taking a holiday on her own away from her husband, something she says they do regularly. She is looking for a man with whom to have an affair, and Averill suggests the captain. Jeanine, however, has no luck trying to seduce him.

Each night Averill goes out on deck and sits silently, before walking over to the rail and telling herself a story in her head. Sometimes she sings a hymn in her head the sound of which she likes. She often sees the captain taking a walk on deck at night, but he does not disturb Averill or give any indication of seeing her.

One night Jeanine gives a party in her cabin, which Bugs is too ill to attend. At the party Jeanine confesses that she lied, and tells Averill that her husband left her for another woman, and that now she is trying to live for herself a little more. The captain then tells a story about two sisters who once traveled on the boat. One sister was ill, and the other used to sit alone on the deck at night. One night she called to the captain to tell him her sister had died. He helped her wrap up the body and throw it into the sea for a sea-burial. She then guiltily confessed to him that she had withheld an important injection from her sister. He reassured her that her sister would have died soon anyway and that she spared her more pain. She then went over to the rail and sang a hymn. At this point Averill sings her hymn, and the captain is surprised that it is the same one. Averill is secretly amazed that the captain told the story she had created each night in her head, except that in her version he kisses her hand or makes love to her.

Bugs died in Edinburgh two weeks later, and Averill flew her body home to Canada. She met a man on the plane, married him, and was eventually divorced. She met another man and married him when she became pregnant. She never saw the captain again.

Another ending follows this one, taking the reader back to the boat. Averill accepts the captain's offer and takes his hand, feeling her skin flicker at his touch. It is not clear whether this is given as an alternative ending, Averill's daydream, or a flashback to a real event on the boat.



## Goodness and Mercy Analysis

This is a very wistful and dream-like story. The reader cannot be entirely sure what is real and what is only imagined. How is it possible that Averill could have created a story in her head that really happened to the captain? Perhaps the captain's story was never really true, but rather a story he told himself in his head, just as Averill did each night. Perhaps he fantasizes about Averill just as she fantasizes about him. He may have told the story simply because it was on his mind, or as a way of telling Averill how he feels and what he desires. How could he know what hymn she sings silently to herself in her head? Perhaps she sings it aloud without realizing that she is doing so. Perhaps he never heard her sing, but when she does sing at the party it is just how he imagined it would be. When he tells her story, Averill is amazed and lit-up with the knowledge that he shares something with her, that he could somehow connect with her that deeply. Does the captain feel the same way, or is it merely a big coincidence? Perhaps Averill is getting carried away, and imagines that a story about a girl in a similar position to herself is actually supposed to be about her. The reader is not given enough information about the captain to understand properly what is going on, and Averill herself seems unreliable and dreamy.

For Averill, the boat at night takes on a magical quality, becoming a wonderful dream-world in which she can lose herself. She escapes from the other people and their needs, which connect her to the real world, and instead sits alone on the deck creating imaginary stories in her head. For her, the captain fits into this magical night-time world. He is another escapee from the banalities and annoyances of the day. She views him as a man with no glittering layers that she must remove to get to the real person, with no demands or flattery. In this way, she separates him from the other people on the boat, all of whom seem to have some kind of agenda or lies or pretense. She likes that he does not feel the need to disturb her, even though he must know she is there. She creates a story that involves the two of them, in a place where she does not need to feel any connection to the real world. As she sings in her head it is like "a barrier set between the world in her head and the world outside" (p169). At the end of the story the real world is brought sharply back into focus. Averill's life is summed up in a few brutal sentences that cover two marriages, a divorce and a child. This is contrasted with an alternative end, one that stops the story with the captain's invitation and touch. The latter is a more magical ending than the short reality of Averill's life, which does not appear to be particularly romantic or special. It is the magical ending that Averill treasures and longs to embrace.

The line between imagination and reality is blurred, and nowhere more so than at the end of the story. We are given a brief summary of Averill's love life after leaving the boat, but this feels rushed and unsatisfactory. After the amazing revelation at the party, the reader wants something to happen between the captain and Averill. It seems as though the story is incomplete otherwise, and it is hard to believe that such a deep connection could exist between two people for no reason. However, after the brief conclusion about Averill's life, the reader is once again taken back to the boat. Is this a rewind to a scene after the party, where Averill accepts the captain's offer to walk her back to her room?



Perhaps it is another version of Averill's story, told in her head. Perhaps it is a dream, or Averill's hopes or regrets long after the voyage was over. Perhaps it is offered to the reader as an alternative ending. This is left deliberately ambiguous in a story where dreams cannot be easily separated from reality. Is Averill's life, with its two marriages, divorce and child, any more real for her than her romantic dreams, and her skin flickering as the captain's hand touches hers goodnight? This is Averill's happy end.



# Oh, What Avails

## Oh, What Avails Summary

This story, told in three parts, explores the life of Joan Fordyce. The first part deals with Joan's childhood. Joan's brother, Morris, was injured when he was four years old after falling on the prongs of a rake. He is now blind in one eye and wears glasses with one smoky lens to hide the injury. They all live in a large, old house that is falling apart in places, with some rooms boarded up. Joan's mother likes to watch the townspeople, make jokes about them and give them nicknames, and the whole family shares in this activity. There is a girl who lives nearby called Matilda, who Joan almost hero-worships because of her beauty. One day Matilda's mother, who they call Mrs. Carbuncle, comes over and tells Joan's mother that no-one has asked Matilda to the school dance, but that she will force her daughter to go alone anyway. Joan's mother bullies Morris into going over to invite Matilda to the dance, but Mrs. Carbuncle brings him straight home and cruelly says that their family is not that desperate.

In the second part of the story, a grown-up and married Joan visits Morris. He still lives in Logan but she has moved away to live with her journalist husband. Their mother is now dead. Joan is not happy in her marriage and plans to have an affair with a geologist she once met called John Brolier. She helps Morris sort through their mother's old things, and is surprised to hear that he sometimes accompanies Matilda to formal affairs. Matilda ran away to marry the man she loved, who turned out to be a bigamist. She moved back home, but is still in love with him. She takes Morris out with her when she is expected to have a date, and he understands that she wants nothing else from him. After visiting Morris, Joan goes to see John Brolier.

In the third part of the story Joan is older and divorced. She and Morris are going to plant flowers at their mother's grave. They are accompanied by Morris' bookkeeper Ruth Ann. On the way they see Matilda, whose hair has gone grey and she no longer takes care of her appearance. Ruth Ann thinks she is a little crazy, and says she just wanders around the streets now. Three years ago at a dance, Matilda had suddenly shown interest in Morris, inviting him to dinner. Morris had lost interest in her, however, and did not go. Morris and Joan now remember a poem that their mother used to say when she saw Matilda.

## Oh, What Avails Analysis

Joan's life has been strongly affected by her childhood with her mother. As a young girl she lives in a large, old house that is falling apart, with peeling wallpaper, dead birds, mice droppings and a funny smell. Many of the rooms are boarded up, the wooden doors between the living room and the dining room are closed, and there is a partition between the side hall and the front hall. The shutters are drawn, and there is stained glass in the window by the door, so thick it can hardly be seen through. Everything



about the house is oppressive, cut off from the rest of the world. Joan's mother is a living reflection of her house. She shuts herself away from other people, thinking them boring or stupid. She jokes about them and gives them nicknames, or attaches poems to them. Everything she does separates herself and her family from other people, dividing them off from the rest of the world. Joan says that her mother taught them that they were special, giving them the belief that they were better than everybody else. She taught them to watch the world and judge it, to laugh at it and criticize, and to think of themselves as somehow better. The stained glass through which Joan looks out at the world is symbolic of this attitude. It changes the colors of the world, distorting what she sees. It is no coincidence that the main color in the glass is red. Joan looks at the world through a red lens, seeing beautiful plants and colors changed to a blood red, a sinister, oppressive view. Ironically, although Morris literally looks at the world from behind a smoky lens, his view does not seem to be as discolored and depressing as Joan's.

Joan's childhood had a strong affect on her. In later life she still looks at the world and other people and sees inadequacies or mundane lives. She sees other people as stupid or pointless, still thinking herself somehow special as her mother taught her. It is this view that seems to lead to her affair, since she is desperate to be someone special again, rather than another boring housewife. We can see this in the way that she views home-making with distaste and refuses any of her mother's old things, as she explains that she could not think where to put them. John Brolier, however, gives her a chance to be special again. He pays special attention to her and makes her feel intensely wanted. This is clearly something she no longer feels from her husband. As she waits for John's letter she can feel excited and special, with her own secret that none of the boring townsfolk around her know or could imagine. She still separates herself from everyone else, just as her mother taught her to do.

Much later, when Joan is older and divorced, she still sees the world as if through the red stained glass. Now she remarks that things she sees around her only seem to her like rubble, pointless debris cast up from everyday lives. She sees the world changing and notices only the pointlessness in it. She feels that she cannot see the world as a collection of things "all connected underneath," but as "a useless variety of passing states" (p208). Her life is not special, and drifts away and changes as easily as everything else in the world. No change is permanent or significant. Thanks to her childhood of separation and judgment, she is not able to feel connected to others or to the world.

It is not only Joan's childhood that has contributed to this view. The small town in which she lives, Logan, is just as bad in many ways. Joan saw how the rest of the town treated Matilda, simply because she was beautiful, and that Matilda had to find ways to disguise her beauty in order to fit in. Matilda's mother cruelly dismissed Morris as a "deadeye dick," something that Morris seemed to have been expecting. We are told that the townspeople are proud that one of their own married a famous person, but that in general they disapprove of the journalist's wit, finding it cynical. It is clear that the people of this small town can be just as judgmental and opinionated as Joan's mother. Logan, as other small towns throughout this story collection, has an oppressive and conformist



atmosphere. These small towns are places in which people are afraid to stand out and be different, and in which the fear of persecution and rejection are ever present.



# Differently

## Differently Summary

Georgia, now middle-aged and divorced, travels back to her old town to visit the husband of her recently deceased friend Maya. Maya's husband Raymond takes Georgia to see the garden that Maya had designed. Georgia remembers the events that caused her to cheat on her own husband and lose Maya's friendship.

It was Georgia's husband Ben who had introduced her to Maya and Raymond. When they visited for dinner, another couple was also there, called Hilda and Harvey. Harvey talked the entire time until he left, after which Georgia and Ben stayed on to get to know Maya and Raymond a little better. Georgia observed that Raymond loved Maya a lot more than she did him, and that there seemed to be something between Maya and Harvey. When they became friends, Georgia found out that Maya was having an affair with Harvey, and had even had an abortion when she became pregnant with his child. Before Harvey, she had left Raymond for another man but he abandoned her. Now she has affairs but will not let herself get emotionally involved.

Georgia got a job in a bookshop where she was much admired by the men who came in. One day a red-haired man called Miles came in and told her he was a diver and was arranging a treasure hunting cruise nearby. They soon started an affair, and one day told each other that they loved each other. The next time Miles was deliberately harsh with Georgia, as if trying to pick a fight to ease his guilt, because he was also married with a family elsewhere. Maya called and told Georgia that Miles wanted to come over to talk to her. Maya said she would try to sort out their fight and call back to tell her what Miles said. When Maya never called back, Georgia began to worry. She drove round to Maya's but did not see Raymond's car or Miles' motorcycle. She called Maya the next day and Maya admitted to sleeping with Miles. When Maya came to Georgia's house to apologize, Georgia ignored her and refused to speak. Eventually Maya left. Georgia left Ben and moved out several months later but never spoke to Maya again.

Georgia thinks back on these events with regret, but decides that she would do it again were she in the same position. She would not want a life like Maya's. Raymond hugs and kisses Georgia goodbye, and she leaves.

## Differently Analysis

This story focuses on one-sided relationships in which one person almost hero-worships another, loves and is devoted to them, but does not receive the same feelings from the other. Maya is loved absolutely by her husband, so much so that he will overlook past affairs and indiscretions. It is not clear whether he knows or suspects about Harvey or Miles, but he knows that she once left him for another man, and he seems to suspect something was going on between her and the gardener. His comments at the end



suggest that he did not particularly enjoy her way of doing things, her 'hippie' attitude and the way she did not like to stay in luxury on holidays. He had gone along with these things because he adored her. Georgia's friendship with Maya is very similar. She loves and almost worships Maya, seeing more than a friend in her. She sees Maya as a woman with an enviable life, almost like a mentor to guide her in her own marital problems. Georgia does not admit that Maya's affair helped her decide to have her own, but it seems obvious that Maya's influence strongly affected her in this. Georgia follows Maya's lead in other ways too. When they go out together they always go to ethnic restaurants or cafés that Maya likes. Georgia describes these as places "where you sat on dirty plush cushions... and ate brown rice with slimy vegetables" (p227), hinting that she did not enjoy them as much as Maya. She also lets Maya choose their clothes and dictate the strange little games that they play, such as dressing in long Indian dresses in the hippie restaurant and pretending to be refugees from a commune. It is clear who is in charge in Georgia and Maya's friendship. It seems that Georgia and Raymond once had a lot in common in their feelings of admiration and worship for Maya.

To a lesser extent, other characters exhibit this same one-sided relationship. Hilda adores Harvey but he does not seem to care that much for her, and was having an affair behind her back with Maya. We do not know how long this affair lasted, or how Hilda found out, but in her letter to Georgia she seems oddly forgiving and wistful. Ben's relationship with Georgia also seems one-sided. Georgia has an affair, and talks of her marriage as being like a ceremony, full of gestures and concealment. She does not seem to see much real love in their relationship, but rather a familiarity and comfortableness with each other. She feels regret for leaving Ben, but would still make the same decision again. We do not see much of Ben's feelings in all this, but Georgia makes it clear that the break-up came as a shock to him, and that she brutally delivered news of her affair. Earlier than this we saw a Ben who wanted to find a good friend for his wife and understood perfectly what kind of woman that should be. Georgia tells us that Ben always treated her as an intellectual equal, and in his conversations with Raymond he seems to love her very much.

None of the one-sided relationships in the story are fulfilling for the people involved, and all turn out badly. Harvey cheats on Hilda and Georgia cheats on Ben, then leaves him. Maya cheats on Raymond, who tries to look the other way out of adoration for her. The worse betrayal of the story, however, is Maya's betrayal of Georgia's friendship. Their friendship is something that Georgia sees as transcending their other relationships. Maya is more than a friend; she is her mentor and confidante, someone who should be with Georgia through good and bad and share all her secrets. However, Maya callously sleeps with Miles, using him as she uses every other person in her life. This is the way that Maya has always acted, and she does not expect Georgia to get so upset about it. Perhaps she expects Georgia to forgive her and continue to worship her as Raymond does. Unlike Raymond, though, Georgia will not accept this betrayal. She has different values, and cannot trust or love someone who would hurt her like that. It is ironic that Georgia experiences similar feelings to those she inflicts on Ben. Georgia does not use people like Maya does, and when Maya betrays her she cuts off the friendship. She acts similarly with Ben, telling him the truth and ending something that she sees as a 'sham' rather than stringing him along as Maya does to Raymond. We do not know if Maya felt



deep grief over losing Georgia's friendship, or if it made her think any differently about how she was treating Raymond.

Whereas Georgia managed to overcome her feelings of devotion to Maya, and can now look on Maya's life with pity and a certain amount of distaste, Raymond still seems to be helplessly in love. He does not want Georgia to leave, and even kisses her, desperately trying to regain some kind of closeness with his dead wife. Despite his new wife and his changed house, and all his protests that he is happy, it is clear that Raymond has never managed to get over the loss of Maya. Georgia sees this, and thinks back on how she and Maya hurt people in their lives. She thinks that if people knew how short their lives might be, how they would hurt other people long after their death and might never have the chance to fix things or mend broken relationships, then they would behave differently. However, she offers this answer with a "foolish stress," knowing that it is somehow "lame" (p243). She cannot offer any kind of apology or answer as to how she or Maya could have acted to avoid hurting others, and admits that if she were in the same position again she would still leave her husband. She simply wishes that things could somehow have been different.

# Wigtime

## Wigtime Summary

Anita has come home to the small town where she grew up to take care of her dying mother. She visits an old friend, Margot, and remembers the past.

Anita and Margot both grew up on poor farms. Both children had difficult childhoods, and Margot's father was abusive. They used to meet and walk through the freezing cold morning to a store on the highway, where a woman called Teresa would give them coffee. They would then get on the school bus, driven by Teresa's husband Reuel. Teresa would talk to them while they drank their coffee and tell them about herself. She had come to Canada with Reuel from Europe, as a war bride. She had suffered two miscarriages. She claimed that Reuel had not heard her calling the second time, and would have blamed himself if a customer had not found and helped her. The girls heard another story, however; Reuel had told her he wanted her to go back to Europe and she had thrown herself against a table in despair, dislodging the baby. Both girls felt a certain amount of disdain for Teresa and a secret desire for Reuel. One night Anita had terrible stomach pains and was taken to the hospital with a burst appendix. Her mother visited her and told her that Margot and Reuel were having an affair. Margot had moved out of her house and was living in town with Reuel. Teresa was still living at the store.

Anita graduated as a nurse, moved away and married a doctor. She got a divorce and later went to study anthropology, gaining a PhD. Her mother disapproves, thinking she should marry and have children. Margot married Reuel and had children with him. Then one day she got a call tipping her that he was cheating on her. She put on a disguise and a wig and went to spy on him at a campsite, where she saw him with Lana, their young babysitter. When he got home she told him what she had seen, and used it as ammo to get a nice house out of him. She still reminds him of it when she needs to do so by saying "wigtime!" Teresa drove herself mad and is now in psychiatric care.

Anita and Margot carry on talking about the past and about their lives now.

## Wigtime Analysis

Wigtime has similar themes to those of *Differently*, the story that precedes it in the collection. In both, a middle-aged woman visits her old town and remembers an old friendship. In both, betrayal is a strong theme. In this story it is Anita who visits her home town, in order to be with her sick mother. Margot finds her in the hospital and asks her to visit. This brings back memories for Anita about their hard childhood. As children, everything about their lives was centered on escape. They escaped their cold, drab, and for Margot abusive, farms when they went to school. The store was like a barricade against the cold for them, as well as being a place where they were free to relax and gossip. The town was like a barricade against the country, its buildings keeping the



worst of the cold out. School allowed the girls to escape the country, and they never wanted to go home at the end of the day. Margot longed to escape her life, and dreamed of being a nurse. In the end, she escaped by having an affair with Reuel, who took her away from her abusive home. It was Anita who escaped by becoming a nurse.

However, neither girl truly escaped their small town life. Anita met and married a doctor, and soon found herself settling straight into the life her mother had wished for her. One day she realized how little the marriage actually meant to her, and left to pursue her own goal, gaining a PhD in anthropology. It is difficult to tell whether this has finally allowed Anita to truly escape her past. Perhaps she has simply repressed it. Margot, on the other hand, is still trying to escape. She married Reuel, but never left the town, and soon found herself struggling with children in a poor household. She also had to contend with the gossip of the town, something she has found very difficult to escape. Finally, she had to deal with the emotional breakdown of Teresa, for which she must have felt at least a little responsible. On top of this, she had to deal with the fact that now Reuel was cheating on her. Instead of leaving him or trying to deal with this situation and the gossip it would produce, Margot decided to try something a little different. She used Reuel's affair against him to get what she wanted out of him. Now she has a beautiful house, with everything in it that she never had as a child. Her home is perfect, with a view of the harbor, an immaculate living room and a beautifully finished bedroom with such luxuries as a Jacuzzi and sauna. The living room is so perfect that Anita is not even allowed to enter it, but must admire it from outside. The house reflects Margot's desire for a perfect life. It stands in strong contrast to the house she lived in as a child, which was crowded and confused, with feathers everywhere and blood on the floor. Margot now tries to escape through her house, creating perfection that she can never find anywhere else. It must remain untouched however, admired from outside but not properly enjoyed. The fact that Anita cannot enter the living room also reflects the secret shame it contains, hidden under the perfection. The house had only been achieved through the betrayal of Margot's husband. Anita correctly observes that all Margot's efforts and vanity now go into her house. The house is all she has to show for her life, and material possessions are all that remain of her marriage. Everything else is a sham.

The two friends cannot understand each other. Margot cannot understand how Anita could just throw away a whole marriage when she realized that it wasn't right. She also cannot understand the point of having passing relationships without marriage. For her, a relationship is for the long haul, and she is not willing to lose Reuel and everything she built. She does not mind staying with him even if they no longer feel anything for each other and the relationship is basically a lie. The marriage is comfortable and convenient and like Maya in *Differently* she does not mind using Reuel for her own gain. She cannot imagine dropping everything to start again. Anita does not understand Margot, and how a marriage can become simply an accumulation of material goods. She cannot imagine using a man she does not love as Margot is doing. Like Georgia in *Differently* she does not believe in living in a sham marriage simply for the sake of convenience or familiarity. Anita wants to reach for something special, something for herself. She seeks happiness. Margot strives for perfection, for a model life that she never had. For both it

is a form of escape from their past and small-town life. The last sentence suggests that both are still striving for this, but that both are happy in their own way.



# Characters

## The Narrator, appears in Friend of My Youth

The narrator of *Friend of My Youth* is unnamed, but we know that she is the daughter of Flora Grieves' friend, a schoolteacher who came to live on her farm. The narrator's mother is referred to only as "my mother" throughout the story. The narrator has been dreaming about her deceased mother lately, which is what sparks memories of the story she used to tell about Flora. In telling Flora's story, the narrator begins to merge Flora with her mother in her mind. She realizes that just as she knows nothing about Flora, and could easily have got all her feelings and reactions wrong, so she knows very little about her own mother. She is forced to conclude that no-one can ever know another person completely. There will always be surprises and hidden depths.

This epiphany has come to the narrator too late, and she regrets that she could not have tried to know her mother better, instead of assuming that she had her figured out. She looks back on the confidence of youth with the wisdom of middle age and realizes how wrong she was in her self-assuredness. She imagined that she was being radical and different in her values and beliefs, but in fact she was just following the trends of the time. Now she realizes that these trends always change, and that today's radical youth will be tomorrow's conservative parents. Now that she understands this she can look back at her mother with a less critical eye and try to understand her. In trying to understand her, however, she realizes that she never really can.

## Flora, appears in Friend of My Youth

The image the reader gets of Flora Grieves is tainted first by the narrator's mother's bias, then by the narrator's own views. As such, the reader is very far removed from Flora's feelings, and we cannot get a very accurate sense of who she was. Instead, we must assess her from the story that others tell about her.

Flora is a very conservative, puritanical woman who does not embrace change lightly or easily. She will not accept modern conveniences, because her religion (Cameroonian Christianity) forbids them. She sticks to the values and rules with which she was raised, obeying her father and church without question. Due to this, we might expect her to be a very hard, cold and boring woman, but in actual fact she is a very forgiving and pleasant woman. The narrator's mother finds her to be a true friend, and is devoted to her. She sings her praises, and is outraged with the way life and other people treat her. In the narrator's mother's story, Flora comes across as a saint who struggles on through a number of hardships, who never casts anyone out of her house despite two deep betrayals.

The narrator gives an alternative view, saying that when she was younger she thought of Flora as an attention-seeking prude. She thought that she secretly loved her





sufferings, since they allowed her to appear as a gracious martyr. The narrator particularly hated Flora for her lack of passion and denial of sex, seeing her as a kind of anti-woman in this regard. Flora's kind of stoicism and abstinence angered a teenage girl anxious to break free of her own mother's boundaries.

The narrator does not still seem to hold on to this assessment of Flora. Instead she concludes that it is impossible to say who Flora really was or what she felt. Flora's answer to the narrator's mother's pitying letter shows a sense of pride and dignity, and her move to town shows that she could embrace modernity after all. Flora, it seems, was capable of surprising everyone, and it is this that causes the narrator to conclude that her mother may have had her own surprises.

## **Brenda, appears in Five Points**

Brenda is a woman who feels trapped and stifled in her marriage. She feels the need for an affair, not simply for the physical pleasure, but for the emotional release it brings. When Brenda is with Neil she feels a sense of freedom she does not get from her marriage. With Cornelius she takes the role of wife and mother, and cannot express herself beyond this. When Cornelius makes love to her he feels heavy, as they are both weighed down by all the responsibilities and burdens that come with married life. In contrast Neil seems light and wild. He is not tied down by responsibilities, and Brenda owes him nothing. They are free simply to enjoy each other's company, and Brenda can feel like she has something beyond her married life. The similarity between the men's names emphasizes how each man plays a different role in Brenda's life. Cornelius is the older man, the one to whom she owes things and to whom she is tied. Neil is the younger version, with a lighter name, freer attitude and sense of fun. With one she shares a life, family and home. With the other she shares a freedom and a part of herself that is lost in her marriage.

Brenda feels terrible guilt and shame for her affair. She finds the wait and the traveling to meet Neil tortuous because she is so afraid of discovery. She dreads the gossip and reactions of the townsfolk, and fears how her affair might affect her family. However, with Neil she shows a side that is more adventurous, even reckless. She laughs about how daring she is, and holds these memories as precious secrets. They are proof that the Brenda who is married to Cornelius is not the only Brenda that exists.

When Brenda feels the relationship between herself and Neil becoming serious, she dreads what this change will mean. She feels a tight kind of happiness, pleased that their relationship is deepening and enjoying the slightly painful feeling of love blossoming. At the same time, however, she misses the sense of freedom and care-free attitude that they once had. She knows that things can never be the same again, and that soon new responsibilities will start to creep into her life. Neil is no longer simply a fun diversion, but has become another man to whom she is deeply and irrevocably attached. As such, he loses a little of his sheen for her, and seems somehow heavier and tired. Brenda sees the change in their relationship before Neil does and knows that things will only get more difficult from this point forward.



## **Maria, appears in Five Points**

Like Brenda, Maria needs the illicit sex that she is getting, not simply for the physical feeling, but for the emotional release and freedom it brings. Like Brenda she feels trapped by what others need her to be, and tied down by responsibilities. She has the shop forced on her, something at which she is good but by which she does not necessarily want to be defined. Maria is known by everyone as a quiet responsible girl, but there is more to her beneath the surface. She longs for a sense of freedom, to escape her responsibilities, to be wild and rash and different. She seeks sex for the thrill it brings, and for the sense of being able to escape herself and be a different person for a while. It is likely that she also feels a need for the attention and physical closeness which she cannot otherwise get.

Like Brenda, Maria fears discovery. She knows that if she is found out she will lose everything, and her anxieties grow with each day as the boys demand more and more money. When her secret finally does come out, her whole family is ruined and her mother turns against her. She stands as a warning to Brenda, and provides a glimpse of the ruin that could also be in Brenda's future if she continues her affair.

## **Almeda, appears in Meneseteung**

Almeda is a 19th century middle-aged woman and poet living alone in a small town. She is looked down on a little by the townsfolk for her interest in books and poetry, though this is deemed more acceptable in middle-age than it had been in her youth. It seems to be the general opinion of the town that she should get married, and even the doctor recommends this as a cure for her anxieties. Almeda accepts this view, anxious to conform to the values of the town. She sets her eye on the bachelor living next door, Jarvis Poulter. She fantasizes about marrying him, and what married life might be like. Although her house backs onto a bad street, she tries to ignore the violent things that happen on it, taking the same attitude as the rest of the respectable members of the community. In her poetry she expresses a similar view, ignoring anything unpleasant and messy to express the beauty and tranquility around her instead.

This all changes when a violent crime is committed right outside her house and a woman is beaten and left in her back yard. She feels terrible guilt for leaving the woman and not seeking help, and the next morning runs to Jarvis. Jarvis moves the woman along, dismissing her as a poor drunk with whom he and other respectable folk should have nothing to do. He does not care what may have happened to her, finding such things distasteful. Almeda cannot do the same. She is horrified by his attitude, and her feelings of repressed fear and guilt, as well as her anxieties, are only heightened. When he leaves, she rushes indoors and is overwhelmed by the pain and suffering she has seen, which drives her into a kind of hysteria. She has an epiphany, realizing that darkness is a part of human life as well as a part of nature, and that pain and suffering cannot be simply ignored. The distasteful aspects of life must be included in her poetry as well as the beautiful. She can finally cope with her fear and anxiety when she



compares the darkness in the town to the violence of nature. This event completely changes her attitude to the town and its values. We do not know if she continues to think of Jarvis as a potential husband, but her death notice in the local paper makes it clear that she never married. It seems likely that other things now occupied her mind, and that Jarvis lost his appeal the night he chose to ignore the beaten woman's pain.

Despite this insight into her life, Almeda is as mysterious to the reader as Flora in *Friend of My Youth*. The narrator admits to not knowing anything about her, and so her feelings and motivations might not be accurately portrayed.

## **Hazel, appears in *Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass***

Hazel is a middle-aged woman who has traveled to Scotland in order to find out more about her deceased husband and the time he spent there. She wants to get a feeling of connecting with him again, but instead finds herself thrown into the middle of strangers' lives and problems. She is an impartial observer, and so is in the same position as the reader, able to see both sides of the story and make her own judgments. She is sharp and observant, quickly picking up on Antoinette's, Dudley's and Judy's feelings, and guessing at the secret they are sharing. At first she is inclined to think badly of Antoinette and Dudley and feel sorry for Judy, but after further thought she begins to view the situation differently. She shows compassion for both women involved, and a unique form of understanding. She sees Dudley providing each woman with her own form of happiness. He gives them both something to strive after, something to give their lives purpose and meaning. She relates this to her own life, remembering how she once suffered a nervous breakdown, and how having a goal to pursue helped her get out of it. In fact, this is exactly what she is doing right now, striving to find out more about her husband so that she feels she has some kind of purpose and connection. Her breakdown came because she felt isolated and tied down in the role of Jack's wife, with nothing for which to strive and no goal to pursue. In her view, the faint hope that they might win Dudley prevents a similar thing from happening to Antoinette and Judy. It prevents despair.

## **Antoinette, appears in *Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass***

Antoinette loves Dudley but knows that he has a child with Judy. She attempts to prevent him from seeing Judy and his child whenever she can, and being faced directly with the situation makes her feel physically ill. The reader is given the impression that she would rather ignore Judy and try to forget that part of Dudley's life. The fact that she prevents him from seeing Judy suggests that she knows there is still something between Dudley and Judy, and that she can never be the sole object of his attention and love. She does not want to have to deal with this fact. However, Antoinette is not painted as the jealous and cruel lover who will not let her man see his child. Hazel points out that the situation is just as unfair to Antoinette. Why should she be denied the man she loves simply because of this earlier attachment? Hazel also observes that in



keeping Dudley from Judy, Antoinette is also sparing him pain. She sees that Antoinette is a calmer and more forgiving woman than Judy, who will turn her head from an occasional visit. Judy, on the other hand, is passionate and fiery and would cause Dudley terrible guilt and suffering. Antoinette's calmer acceptance of the situation shows how deep her feelings for Dudley must be, since she is shown to be quite a proud woman, taking great care with her appearance. She also seems friendly and compassionate with Hazel.

## **Murray, appears in Oranges and Apples**

Murray is a man who fears change, but is also terrified of being left behind. This has happened to him once before, and he is determined not to be humiliated again. When modern change began to creep into the small town where he lives, he renovated the store that he had inherited from his father. However, he went too far and the store became a joke, something that was trying too hard to be fresh and fashionable. He became the laughing stock of the town and was forced to sell the store. Now he fears the same rejection and humiliation from his family. He becomes convinced that his wife is cheating on him, seeing Victor as a fresh, new and interesting potential lover for his wife, and seeing himself as the rejected older model. His paranoia grows daily as he imagines their love affair, and reads double meanings into everything that they do or say. He feels betrayed, despite having no real evidence that his wife is cheating on him, only his constant fears. He actually goes so far as to set up a situation in which he expects her to cheat, almost happily pushing the affair towards a resolution. He wants the end to come so that he can stop looking and feeling like a fool, but at the same time he imagines a future in which more humiliation is heaped on him. He sees himself visiting Victor and Barbara and being forced to make small talk, rather than hating and avoiding them. It seems that he cannot imagine anything but pain and ridicule in his life.

When Barbara does not cheat he cannot understand it, and seems to hold suspicions long afterward. At the end of the story, he expresses disappointment, perhaps because he still believes there had been an affair, or perhaps because a part of him wanted there to be a break-up, and wanted a legitimate reason that would leave him as the injured party. Perhaps he wanted there to be a reason for his wife's seeming lack of passion, and found it easier to imagine betrayal than that their relationship was simply that dull. In the end the reader never finds out the truth, and we will never know if Murray was simply very paranoid, or very perceptive.

## **Barbara, appears in Oranges and Apples**

Barbara is Murray's wife and potentially Victor's lover, though the reader never learns whether she cheated on her husband or not. She is quite a cold woman with whom it is not easy to get along. She does not make friends easily, and takes little interest in anything except reading. She has very little passion for anything in life. She likes to read but sees no point in college, has no desire to get a job, and seems to be content living a fairly monotonous life. Murray reveals that she also has little passion for him during sex,



and that he hates it when she wears seductive clothes and it seems like a lie. Murray worships Barbara, but at the same time does not really seem to understand her. It is possible that Barbara finds solace in Victor, and a level of understanding that she does not get in her marriage. It is possible that she finds all her excitement and passion with him. However, it is just as likely that she is simply not interested in that kind of excitement, and that her lack of passion for Murray is a character trait rather than an indication that she does not love him. Barbara is as suspicious and critical of Victor as she is of everyone else in the world, and she seems quite a stand-offish person who believes herself better than everyone else. Whether this is simply an act to hide her feelings for Victor, or the plain reality, is up to the reader to decide.

## **Victor, appears in Oranges and Apples**

Victor is a Polish man who came to Canada with his English wife after the war. He claims that he fought in the war, was shot down in France and escaped, and that he traveled to Turkey to help escaping refugees. Barbara claims not to believe these stories, but the reader is given no real indication of whether he is lying or not. Victor is tall and handsome and draws a lot of attention from the townsfolk. He seems quite a glamorous person compared to the rest of the town, and is intriguing because he is so different. He quickly makes friends with Murray, and is shown as a generous, gentle man who has a sense of humor. His relationship with his wife is not good, and deteriorates throughout the story until he convinces himself that she is trying to poison him. This is an odd conclusion, and in this regard he comes across as just as paranoid as Murray. Perhaps the isolated yet claustrophobic feeling of the small town breeds such paranoia and fears.

Victor certainly seems to be attracted to Barbara as he watches her with binoculars while she is sunbathing. Murray is convinced that Barbara is aware of this and putting on a show for him, but if she is not then Victor's voyeurism is disturbing. Victor also seems to enjoy being in her company and likes to visit whenever he can, though it is just as likely that it is Murray he is coming to see. When Barbara takes blankets over to Victor's flat, nothing happens between them. This could be because Victor does not want to get involved with a married woman, or because he feels guilty about betraying his friend Murray. Alternatively, Barbara may have rejected his advances, or there may not have even been any advances from either of them. The reader is not given enough information about Victor to form a solid opinion of him, and we never see anything from his point of view. He is a very ambiguous villain, and perhaps not even a villain at all.

## **Karin, appears in Pictures of the Ice**

Karin is a woman whose life has been torn apart by a bad relationship with an abusive man. Her ex-husband Brent treated her badly, did stupid things when drunk, and eventually cast her out unfairly after a religious conversion. It is also possible that he is responsible for the loss of their child, though Karin is adamant that the baby would have died anyway. She repeats this to herself several times, as if trying to convince herself



that it was not her fault and that she could have done nothing to save him. This indicates the terrible guilt with which she lives every day. She tries to repress it, but a simple snow-storm is enough to drag up painful memories. She also hates Brent with a passion that she does not show in any other aspect of her life. Her life is filled with bitterness, and she has no purpose other than to hate Brent. She feels isolated from the rest of the townsfolk and completely let down by everyone.

Her suffering is ignored by everyone but Austin, who helps her by giving her friendships, as well as a sense of purpose beyond hating Brent. First he gets her to look after his dying wife, then he asks for her help in getting ready to leave. Karin learns to appreciate another person again, and through Austin she decides to get her life back on track and leave the town.

## **Austin, appears in Pictures of the Ice**

Austin is the perfect example of Christian virtue. He is the minister of the small town in which he lives, and embraces his values in every aspect of life. He believes in preaching by example, taking a calmer and quieter approach to his religious duties than the new minister that Brent and the other townsfolk want. Austin treats every person with kindness, helping Brent despite what he did to him, helping Lazarus House even though it was taken from him, and finding ways to help Karin despite his own problems and his dying wife. He refuses to think badly of people, despite the rejection that the townsfolk show him. When contrasted with Brent's fervor, which is likened to his alcohol addiction, and the over-zealous method of preaching that the townsfolk are willing to treat Austin so cruelly to get, Austin's brand of religion seems truer to the real message of Christianity.

Like Karin, Austin is an isolated figure who has been rejected and ignored by the rest of the town. His life has crumbled down and he has lost everything that had been important to him. However, he refuses to lose his pride and dignity. He makes up the story about Hawaii in order to leave with his dignity intact, and refuses any help or worry from his children. He wants to fool the world into thinking that he cannot be brought down so easily. Karin sympathizes with this, and does not destroy his lies. However, in the end Austin is found dead in a lake. Despite his attempt to keep his cheerfulness and dignity, he still died cold and alone. Was this an accident or suicide? The audience will never know for sure.

## **Averill, appears in Goodness and Mercy**

Averill is a young woman weighed down by her responsibilities to her dying mother. She must nurse her and stay with her in her sickness, and a part of her guiltily longs to be free. She is also used to her mother claiming all the attention, and seems fairly happy to blend into the background. She enjoys being on her own, but still longs for something that will make her as special as her mother, and for one person at least to share a connection with her. She is used to taking the backseat to her mother's story, talent and



fame, and now longs for her own romantic story to come true. She creates a fantasy in which the captain comes to her after her mother dies and makes love to her. She sees him as a kindred soul, wandering the deck alone at night. She sees him as a man who also rejects the ordinary life of the day, and the petty problems of the people onboard, and longs for something more like her. When the captain tells his story she is overwhelmed by the possibility that he somehow understands her dream, and really does share something with her. For just one night her romantic dream comes true. However, her real life does not go according to her story. Her mother dies in Britain and she returns to Canada. She marries and divorces, becomes pregnant and marries again, and never sees the captain again. Whether she ever shared anything with the captain or whether it was all in her head is left deliberately ambiguous.

## **Joan, appears in Oh, What Avails**

Joan's life has been deeply affected by her mother. In childhood she was taught that she was special, and to expect great things in life. She was made to feel that she was better than everyone else, and enjoyed mocking and judging other people with her mother. She lived in a house separated and barricaded from the rest of the town, and she often looked out at the world through the red stained glass next to the door. This colored her view of the world in more ways than one, making everything seem sinister, dull or depressing. In later life, she is still colored by this view. She looks at the rest of the world as rubble, and does not feel any connection to it or to anyone else. She is disapproving of most other people, and still feels that she is in some way special. She is dissatisfied with a normal life and a normal husband and home. She wants more passion and excitement, feeling that she has not yet found that special relationship that will make her feel excited and important. She certainly does not like being defined as the wife of a man more famous and important than herself. She starts an affair, and when she realizes that she is not happy as a housewife she breaks up the marriage. Towards the end of the story, when she looks back from middle-age on her life, she still does not seem happy, and she still cannot see that it is her warped view of the world, inherited from her mother, that makes her unhappy.

## **Morris, appears in Oh, What Avails**

Morris grew up with the same attitude as Joan, but was affected differently by it. Instead of feeling like he could have whatever he wanted in love, he pursued money. He does not mind unfairly getting money out of people, even his own sister, and this is perhaps because he also remembers being told that he is special, and somehow better than other people. However, Morris' view of the world is not as bleak as Joan's. Ironically, though he literally looks at the world through one smoky lens, he sees it more clearly than Joan. He is happy to accept his place in it, and can live fairly content with a normal life. He also does not seem to judge others as harshly as Joan.

Like Joan, he idealized Matilda. Unlike Joan, he never got over his worship of her, and still loved her even when she could only think of her ex-husband. He found something to



admire in her determination and faithfulness, in her obsessive love for another man. When she finally gave up on this, it was as if she gave up on herself too, and she lost her shine for him. Instead of winning her over, she only turned to him after she had already given up. Ironically, when she is finally ready to accept him as a potential lover, he no longer loves her.

## **Matilda, appears in Oh, What Avails**

Matilda also grew up with a difficult mother. Her mother insisted on making a big deal out of Matilda's beauty, and showing it off to the world. Matilda, like Joan and Morris, must have been constantly told how she was special, and better than other people. Matilda's mother demonstrated this fact when she sent Morris home, saying that her daughter was not desperate enough to go to the dance with a "deadeye dick". Unlike Joan, however, Matilda abandoned her beauty as soon as she could. She did not want to be special, because being special meant being different and alienated. She tried to make herself look like other people and fit in, tired of being judged and persecuted based on how she looked. However, her love was still a disaster, since her husband turned out to be a bigamist. She longed for him for her whole life, eventually abandoning her appearance and giving up hope. She is proof that being 'special' can be a burden that only leads to isolation, dissatisfaction and suffering.

## **Georgia, appears in Differently**

Georgia is another housewife who realizes too late that she does not actually love her husband. She married him when she was young, in a time when women were expected to marry and take on the role of housewife and mother. When her friend Maya teaches her that she can expect more in life, she begins to feel more and more dissatisfied. She longs for excitement and a sense of freedom, and to explore who she is beyond simply being Ben's wife. Now she looks back on the affair and the split with a little regret, but a determination that she would not have stayed with Ben if she had to do it again. She is a person who values truth, and will not even consider living in a sham marriage. Ironically, she feels the pain of being betrayed just as she betrays her husband, and it is this that shows her how wrong it is to inflict such pain daily. She would rather end something that is not working than live a lie. She also shows herself to be a very proud woman who cannot respect her friend once she has betrayed her. She cuts Maya out of her life and will not consider forgiving her. This is because Maya had meant a great deal to her, but she had obviously not been held in the same regard. She cannot stand that Maya simply used her as she used everyone else in her life.

## **Maya, appears in Differently**

Maya becomes the friend and mentor of Georgia, but does not have as much feeling for Georgia as Georgia has for her. She considers herself a free spirit who can do whatever she likes in life to make herself happy, and so thinks nothing of using others. She uses





her husband for comfort and support, but does not love him, and seeks physical pleasure in affairs. She does not care that she is inflicting constant pain on her husband, who knows of her affairs but worships her too much to leave her. Unlike Georgia, she has no problem living a lie.

## **Raymond, appears in Differently**

Raymond is the husband of Maya and clearly worships her. When she dies he is lost and distraught, and though he has married again it is obvious that he cannot stop thinking and talking about Maya. When Georgia comes to visit he seizes the opportunity to revisit the past and in doing so reconnect with Maya. He hints that he suspects Maya of having an affair with her gardener, but he does not seem to blame her particularly. He is bitter that he could not mean everything to her, and has been left with a big hole after her death. He shows the damage that has been left behind by Maya's selfishness.

## **Anita, appears in Wigtime**

Anita grew up on a farm near a small town. It was a difficult childhood in a poor house with lots of siblings, in cold, harsh weather. She walked to school through the biting cold with her friend Margot. Both of them enjoyed school for the escape it brought from their farms, but both dreaded it for the fear of humiliation, rejection and gossip. Both longed to escape their small-town life. Anita held secret feelings for Reuel, the man who drove the school bus, but did not know that Margot also liked him. When Margot began an affair with him, Anita was shocked and felt betrayed in a way. She felt that Margot had managed to escape whereas she was left in the same life. She trained to be a nurse and managed to leave that way, but felt like it was second-best. She would secretly have liked the romance of being swept away by Reuel.

However, when she looks back on her past and sees the life that Margot has, she realizes that Margot never actually escaped at all. Margot still lives in the same town, faced with the same gossip, and her only happiness comes from trying to build the perfect home that she never had. In contrast, Anita managed to find a goal that was hers alone, and gain a sense of purpose beyond small-town life. She gained a PhD, and now her future is still entirely open and filled with possibilities. Margot's is closed off. Like Georgia, Anita also considers a sham marriage worthless. She cannot understand how Margot could stay with Reuel after he betrayed her.

## **Margot, appears in Wigtime**

Margot managed to escape the farm where she grew up as well as her abusive father when she began an affair with Reuel and went to live with him. At the time, she felt that she was romantically swept away and saved from suffering but, in fact, she never escaped her small-town life. She was quickly tied down by the responsibilities of children and family, and soon found herself in the same position as Teresa when Reuel betrayed her with a younger girl. Unlike Anita, however, she does not mind living in a



sham marriage, and will happily put up with the lies in order to build her perfect home. Her perfect home is only perfect on the inside, however, and seems more like a model than reality. The beautiful rooms cannot be entered or touched, but must be admired from outside. Margot's life now seems sad and desperate, a far cry from what a jealous Anita had imagined.

## **Teresa, appears in Wigtime**

Teresa is the war-bride of Reuel, who traveled to Canada from Europe with him. She owns a store on the highway outside town, where Margot and Anita used to stop for coffee on their way to school. Teresa is the woman who is damaged by Margot and Reuel's relationship. She is left alone, cast aside and forgotten. Reuel is all she had, and she had tried to hold desperately onto him even when it had been clear that their relationship was failing, long before he had become involved with Margot. Teresa puts all her energy into loving Reuel and is left with nothing when he leave her. Unlike other characters in this collection, she does not recover and learn to pursue her own goals, but falls into hysteria and is driven mad. Now she can no longer distinguish fantasy from reality.



## Objects/Places

### **Lake Huron, appears in Friend of My Youth, Five Points, Meneseteung, Oranges and Ap**

Many of the stories are set in the area around Lake Huron in Eastern Ontario, in small rural towns. This is country that can suffer extremely cold weather and harsh conditions, which reflects the suffering and pain of the various characters' lives.

### **Logan, appears in Five Points, Pictures of the Ice, and Oh, What Avails**

Five Points, Pictures of the Ice and Oh, What Avails are all set in this small town in Eastern Ontario, in the country around Lake Huron. Logan is a small place where one person's business is everyone's business. Gossip is prevalent, and it is hard for characters to avoid people they may not wish to see. There is a claustrophobic feeling to the town, as well as one of isolation due to the harsh weather that can occur. It also appears to be a fairly conservative town in which people are easily cast out or ridiculed if they do not conform.

### **Walley, appears in Oranges and Apples, and Wigtime**

This is a small town near Logan in which the stories Oranges and Apples and Wigtime are set. Whereas Oranges and Apples is set inside the town, Wigtime explores the surrounding countryside, which appears to be a poor place where living is tough. The country people are looked down on by the townsfolk, who laugh at their less sophisticated ways. The town is happy to embrace change, but will not accept anything that is over the top, such as Murray's renovations to his store. Gossip is common, and the people of the town will judge anyone who does not conform to their values.

### **The Meneseteung River, appears in Meneseteung**

The Meneseteung is the river that runs near the town in which Almeda lives, and flows into Lake Huron. A popular but untrue belief says that it was first explored by Champlain. Almeda focuses on this story in one of her poems. Later, she associates the river with the violence and darkness that runs under the surface of the town, and in human nature. She notes how the river can also appear calm in places, but rage and run dangerous in others.



## **Logan's Salt Mine, appears in Five Points**

Brenda's husband Cornelius works in Logan's salt mine, which stretches for miles under the lake. Explosions are set to dislodge large slices of salt. One day Cornelius is nearly killed when fixing the bolts to the roof ready for the explosion. There is a problem with the hydraulics in his lift and he is nearly crushed against the ceiling, sustaining a back injury. Cornelius talks of the mine as a vast world of its own, with a darkness beneath the surface like no darkness in the world above. Salt mines, perhaps even the same one, also appear in Meneseteung and Oranges and Apples.

## **The Five Points Confectionary, appears in Five Points**

The confectionary in Five Points is the sweetshop that the Croatian family opened when they moved to the town. They trust their elder daughter Maria to run it and manage the books. Maria starts to use some of the money to pay younger boys for sex. When they begin to blackmail her she uses more and more of the money until the business is destroyed. Her family is forced to close the shop.

## **Philiphaugh, appears in Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass**

Philiphaugh is a small Scottish town in the Scottish Borders. Hazel visits Philiphaugh in order to learn more about her husband's past, since he had often visited this area when on leaves during the war. She stays in the Royal Hotel, run by Antoinette, a woman who had been Jack's lover long ago and is now in a troubled relationship with a man named Dudley. Philiphaugh is the home of Hazel's husband's relative Margaret Dobie, whom Hazel visits during her stay. There she meets Judy, Mrs. Dobie's housekeeper, who had a child with Dudley when she was young and unmarried. Philiphaugh, like the Canadian towns in this collection, is a small, close-knit place with conservative values.

## **The Store in Walley, appears in Oranges and Apples**

The general store in Walley is owned by Murray. It was started by his grandfather, and passed on to him after his father died. Murray does not particularly like running the store, or know much about business, but he tries hard. He renovates the store when modern changes start to come to the town, but goes a little too far and becomes a figure of ridicule. He loses money and is forced to close the store. He lets Victor move into the small caretaker's apartment at the back of the store.

## **Lazarus House, appears in Pictures of the Ice**

Lazarus House was once called Turnaround House and had been run by Austin, the minister of Logan, to help people with serious problems or addictions turn their lives



around. He helps cure Brent's alcoholism, and Brent becomes devoutly religious. Brent soon takes over running the house and pushes Austin out. He renames it Lazarus House, wanting a more Christian name. Lazarus was a man in the New Testament brought back to life by Jesus, and so it is an appropriate name for a recovery house that gives people a second chance at life. However, the name change also reflects the different religious attitudes of Brent and Austin. Austin shows his religion through kind acts and good deeds rather than preaching. Brent is full of fervor for his religion and is anxious that it should be pushed and preached whenever possible. For Brent it is words that matter, and for Austin it is deeds.

## **The Ship, appears in Goodness and Mercy**

In Goodness and Mercy, Averill and Bugs travel on a ship from Montreal to Britain. It does not seem to be a very large ship, since there is only a small collection of characters aboard. Like the small-town settings in the collection, the ship has a very isolated feel, and is very claustrophobic. People and gossip cannot be escaped, and there is only miles of sea on every side.

## **The Fordyce House, appears in Oh, What Avails**

This is the house where Joan and Morris grew up with their mother. It is a large, old and very unmanageable house for such a small family with little money to spare. Many of the rooms are boarded up, with partitions between the side and front hall. The house is heated by two stoves. There is a stained glass window by the front door, through which Joan often looks out at the town. When Joan and Morris have both grown up and moved out, Morris sells the house.

## **The Stained Glass Window, appears in Oh, What Avails**

Joan used to look out through the stained glass window near the front door in her house. The glass contained mainly red, and so her world was colored in sinister or ugly tones. This reflects the attitude she learned from her mother, that she is somehow special and should judge the rest of the world. This attitude, like the glass, has colored her perception of life ever since.

## **The Bookshop, appears in Differently**

Georgia begins to work in a bookshop several evenings a week. During the summer her husband leaves on his annual cruise and she is left alone with her children. She enjoys the sense of freedom and clarity that working in the bookshop gives her. She also enjoys the many admirers that she attracts there. It is at the bookshop that she meets Miles and begins her affair.



## **Teresa's Store, appears in Wigtime**

Teresa owns a store on the highway near Walley, where Anita and Margot stop on their way to school each morning. They see the store as a barricade against the cold, and enjoy drinking coffee or hot chocolate while they wait for the school bus. Here they also listen to Teresa's stories, and wonder how much is made up of lies or wishful thinking.

## **Margot's Harbor-View House, appears in Wigtime**

Margot's house, with its perfect exterior, harbor-view, and immaculate interiors, represents everything that she could never have as a child. It stands in sharp contrast to her abusive childhood home on the farm. She obtains the house after finding out about her husband's affair, and uses this knowledge to demand certain things from him. The house is her pride and joy, and she has meticulously decorated each room. The house seems to be her form of escape from her difficult life. However, it is built on lies and betrayal, and so is really only a beautiful illusion. This is reflected in the perfect living room that must be admired only from the outside. To enter it would be to ruin the perfection.



# Themes

## Guilt, Shame and Isolation

Repression and guilt are major themes in all of the stories in this collection. Each story has a sinister or uneasy undercurrent, some more obvious than others, as the author shows the reader the darker side of human nature. Many of the stories feature people in dark frames of mind. Some are depressed, some are paranoid, and most try to repress feelings of guilt, shame and desperation. Good examples include Murray in *Orange and Apples*, who is overwhelmed by paranoia and dread, and Almeda in *Meneseteung* who is driven into a kind of hysteria by the oppressive small town to which she belongs, and the violence and pain that the town chooses to ignore. There are plenty of stories that feature women struggling with feelings of guilt and shame brought on by acts of betrayal. Brenda in *Five Points*, Joan in *Oh, What Avails* and Georgia in *Differently* all cheat on their husbands. While all feel a strong need for these affairs as well as a sense of inevitability, they also feel a certain amount of regret and guilt, especially concerning their children. They also suffer feelings of shame brought on by living in small towns in which everyone watches everyone else closely and passes judgment over them.

Characters do not have to be engaged in affairs to feel keen guilt and regret. The narrator of *Friend of My Youth* regrets acting certain ways towards her mother in the past and feels pain that she never really knew her properly. Almeda feels guilt in *Meneseteung* for not helping the woman who was beaten up outside her house. Karin in *Pictures of the Ice* feels terrible guilt over the death of her child, which is revealed in the way she repeatedly insists that there was nothing she could do since he would have died anyway, as though trying to reassure herself more than anyone else. Averill's fantasies about the captain in *Goodness and Mercy* are accompanied by shame that she cannot save her mother, and worse, that she might actually want her to die. This is hinted at in the captain's story, which Averill feels so perfectly captures her own feelings and thoughts. In it, a woman feels grief and guilt that she allowed her sister to die. Guilt, shame and remorse follow all of Munro's characters in everything they do, and this naturally leads to an attempt to repress these feelings. This can lead to unhappiness and stress, or even to paranoia and hysteria.

All the stories are set in very small or isolated locations. Most take place in small rural Canadian towns. These are very isolated places, a long way from any big, busy cities. They have close-knit communities, in which the members are constantly watching and judging each other. In these towns, any new event is cause for gossip and the gossip is impossible to escape. It is also impossible to avoid anyone in such places, so ex-husbands and lovers, scorned friends and hated family members will always be just around the corner. These settings feel very oppressive and claustrophobic, which is only made worse by their tendency to be very conformist, leaning almost towards the puritanical. Anyone who steps out of line, questions things or does not conform will be persecuted or shamed. The fear of this is the constant companion of almost every character in this collection. The best example of this is in *Meneseteung*, where the town



gossip is ever present in the form of the local newspaper, and Almeda is constantly aware of the unspoken pain and suffering that the conformist townsfolk choose to ignore. The oppressive nature of the town even leads to a kind of hysteria in Almeda, and a buildup of fear that finally breaks free and allows her to see the darkness all around her. These small-town struggles and fears are emphasized by the natural environment, which is often harsh, cold and difficult. These are towns built around farms, which battle the weather to try to make the land habitable and yielding. The natural environment only emphasizes the cold, sometimes brutal nature of life within these towns, the struggle that the characters face each day, and the isolated, claustrophobic atmosphere. The best example of the weather matching the mood and struggle of the characters can be found in *Wigtime*.

The stories that are not set in small Canadian towns have equally isolated or closed-in locations. *Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass* is set in a small Scottish town, which also features cold weather, close communities and plenty of gossip. *Goodness and Mercy* is set on a boat sailing from Canada to England. This is another very good example of the setting reflecting the atmosphere of the story. The people on the boat are all crowded together, forced to talk and gossip and pry. This is the most claustrophobic of all the settings, and it is also the most isolated. None of the characters is capable of leaving the boat, and it is completely alone on the ocean, separated from civilization by miles of cold water. Just as the boat is caught in the middle of a journey, in transit from one place to another, so are the passengers caught in some kind of limbo or interval in their lives. Jeanine is moving on from a broken relationship, Bugs is dying, and Averill is caring for Bugs before her own life can begin. The boat emphasizes the repressed anxieties of the passengers by forcing them into a small, crowded and helpless place.

## Gothic Darkness and Fear

Alice Munro's stories have sometimes been identified as Gothic by critics and other authors such as Margaret Atwood. Important Gothic elements include remote, wild locations, framed narratives, the use of letters and diaries to bring the past back to the surface, strong feelings of repressed guilt and fear, a sense of things lying hidden under the surface of reality, a blurring of the line between reality and imagination, and the recurring theme of dreams.

Remote, wild locations are abundant in this collection. All the stories are set in very isolated and harsh environments, which are at the same time claustrophobic and oppressive. The weather is often extremely cold, and winter storms can cripple the small towns for days. There are two very good examples of Gothic settings in this collection, found in *Meneseteung* and *Pictures of the Ice*. In *Meneseteung* the brutality of nature and the harshness of the land allow Almeda to begin to understand the place of pain and suffering in the world. The physical setting reflects the darkness and cruelty in the story, and the evil that lurks in human nature. Almeda can only come to terms with the pain and her own repressed fears by looking to nature and seeing her own world reflected in the river, which is both ferocious and calm. In *Pictures of the Ice*, the cold, harsh and unforgiving nature of the town and its inhabitants is reflected in the storms





and ice. Austin wishes to escape the town, and it is no accident that he makes up a fantasy of moving to a warmer, more relaxed and less isolated place. The town almost traps him in a terrible snowstorm that Karin is afraid will prevent him from leaving. She remembers a similar storm in which her baby died. The struggles and pains of the characters are perfectly mirrored by their environment.

Many of Munro's stories feature a story framed within another story, in which the past is revisited or another character's tale is told. The framing narrative starts and ends the story, and the past is often revisited through memory, sometimes aided by letters. Memories are always subjective and often unreliable, and in many of the stories the line between reality and imagination is blurred. This is certainly the case with *Friend of My Youth* in which the narrator admits she knows little about any of the people she is recounting. She had the story from her mother, who she also admits to not knowing very well. *Meneseteung* is another good example of this narrative uncertainty, since the narrator admits to not knowing much about Almeda's life, and that some of her story comes from her own imagination. Adding to this blurred line between reality and imagination is a recurring theme of dreams. Averill creates stories in her head that the captain later tells. Have her dreams become reality or is it merely coincidence? The ending is also ambiguous; is it dream or reality? The memories in *Friend of My Youth* are sparked by dreams of the narrator's mother in which the personalities of the mother and Flora merge. In the dreams, the narrator's mother shows herself in a new light, forcing the narrator to realize that she really knows nothing about her.

Darkness and fear lie at the heart of every story in this collection. The small towns in which the stories are set appear polite, calm and safe, but the reality is quite different. Under the surface and pretenses of the town lie real pain and suffering, judgment and gossip. The characters fear shame and persecution from the townsfolk if they do not conform to the values of the town. The townsfolk will often turn their heads away from others' suffering and pretend that bad things do not happen. The darkness in human nature can be found everywhere, from betrayal and adultery to oppressive relationships, abuse and cruelty. In *Meneseteung*, Almeda comes to realize that darkness is all around her, and that she cannot ignore pain and suffering as the rest of the town chooses to do. In the story, Almeda's repressed fears and anxieties reach a fever pitch when a violent crime is committed outside her house. This stains her life, as the grape jelly stains the floor, and she will never be the same again. In *Oranges and Apples* Murray's growing paranoia infects the reader; the story is deliberately ambiguous and confusing, leaving the reader constantly unsure of who is the bad guy and who is lying. In *Wigtime*, both girls are strongly affected by their difficult childhoods and by the betrayal in their lives. Both spend the rest of their lives trying to escape their small-town lives. In *Pictures of the Ice* even the most caring and saintly of ministers can be pushed aside and cruelly dismissed until he has nothing else for which to live. In *Oh, What Avails*, Joan's life is forever tainted by her mother's pride and superiority. In many of the stories, death is an ever-present fear, one which can take young or old alike. In *Five Points* Brenda remembers how Cornelius talked about the mine as a hidden darkness underneath the town, a kind of darkness that many people would not believe possible until they had seen it. With these stories, Munro opens the reader's eyes to this darkness that lies hidden underneath the surface of all human lives.



## Betrayal and Lies

In this collection, Alice Munro explores a variety of different types of betrayal and the reasons for them. Most obvious are the cheating wives and husbands, who are often shown as seeking something beyond their marriage. This is not necessarily a purely physical thing. For Brenda in *Five Points*, it has become almost spiritual, like a ritual that must be carried out in order for her to live. She needs Neil and what he offers her, which is a sense of freedom and excitement that she can no longer find in her marriage. Partners who cheat for this reason have become trapped in their role as wife or husband and are desperate not to be defined in that way. They need something that is theirs alone, something to surprise themselves and help take them away from their box. For some, such as Georgia in *Differently* and Joan in *Oh, What Avails*, the affair is a wake-up call that the marriage is not right. Georgia calls her marriage a sham and realizes that if she could throw away her feelings so recklessly, she can no longer stay with her husband. For these women, their marriages have not been what they expected. Perhaps they had married too young or for the wrong reasons and later find that something important is missing. They realize that the feeling of safety and comfort they get from their marriage is not the same as love or passion, and it cannot act as a substitute. Many of these women marry in the 1950's or 60's, when traditional values are still upheld and it is seen as very important for a woman to marry and begin a family. Then when the freedom of the 70's comes around, women are told that they can pursue their own goals and desires and do not have to be labeled housewife forever. Many women get divorces in the 70's, tearing apart families in the process. Many of Alice Munro's characters belong to this generation of women, and she explores the emotional backlash that often follows for them.

A more complicated form of betrayal explored in these stories is the betrayal of friends. The best example of this is Georgia and Maya in *Differently* had a falling out and never spoke again. Georgia sees Maya as a mentor figure and true friend, someone more important to her than any man. Maya fails to understand that sleeping with Georgia's lover would be a terrible betrayal of her trust and friendship, since she is accustomed to using people in this way. For Georgia, relationships are to be valued and taken seriously, which is why she split with her husband after the affair. For Maya, relationships are there to be used and taken advantage of, which is why she remains in a marriage with a man she does not love, despite how cruel to him this is. *Wigtime* also explores a slightly more complicated betrayal. Neither Anita nor Margot confess their true desire for Reuel to each other, and Margot does not take Anita into her confidence about the affair. The bigger betrayal, however, is Margot's escape from her life on the farm to do something that is exciting and amazing in Anita's eyes. Anita is left to fulfill Margot's old dream to be a nurse. She has to work to escape her life, whereas Margot is chosen. Ironically, it is Anita who does a better job of escaping small-town life in the end. Margot is left with a cheating husband, stuck in the role of housewife in the same town.

A deeper form of betrayal is that showed to Austin by his own congregation and the other townsfolk. He is pushed out of his church, denied his project, and treated like an



old record with no use anymore. This is a terrible and extremely undignified way to treat someone. This is made worse by the kind and caring nature of the minister, who even now continues to try to help the town. However, Austin pulls off his own form of betrayal, lying to the town and convincing them that he is going to live in Hawaii and start a glamorous new life. This allows him to escape with his dignity and pride intact but also helps spare anyone from feeling sorry for him. When Karin finds out about the lie, she joins in the deceit since anything else would be a betrayal of his kindness to her. Ironically, Karin is one of the few characters who does not betray Austin, but this is achieved with a lie.

Lies can be found in most of the stories in this collection, but the best story in which to study them is *Oranges and Apples*. In this story, it is impossible to say who is lying and who is telling the truth. It may contain a great number of lies or may even contain none at all. The reader is drawn along with Murray's paranoia and self-doubt until we can no longer be sure what is real and what is only feared. Even the ending leaves things unclear, and the last word of the story is appropriately 'lie.'

## Change and Fear of Change

An important theme in this collection of stories is change and fear of change. This is shown as a particularly small town fear, since many of these towns seem old-fashioned and slow to pick up modern ways. Their values are conservative and the townsfolk anxious to conform. Changes are often viewed with suspicion or simply mocked. In *Friend of My Youth*, change is seen by Flora and the narrator's mother as something to be feared. Flora lives in the same house throughout her hardships, separating it into two so that she can remain there with her married sister. No matter what is thrown at Flora, she is anxious to maintain a familiarity that gives her comfort. Even the marriage of Robert and Audrey cannot compel her to cast them out or to move herself. This is reflected in Flora's religious attitudes too, which dictate a strict way of life. She refuses all modern conveniences and lives a life based on old-fashioned, puritanical values. In the end we do not know what drives Flora to change, but the narrator and her mother's attitudes to the change show how extraordinary it is. They cannot imagine Flora among the modernity of the town and automatically assume that it must be terrible for her. In *Meneseteung* too, a small town fears change, enforcing its values with gossip and scandal. Anything different is feared or ridiculed, and anything that does not conform is ignored or cast aside.

Characters do not always fear change. Some fear being left behind as the world changes. This, too, is shown as a particularly small-town fear, because growing up in such an isolated place nurtures such insecurities. In *Oranges and Apples*, Murray sees the town slowly changing and becomes anxious to modernize. He fears being old and behind the times, so overdoes the changes. The town, like the ones mentioned in the previous paragraph, do not respond well to too much change. They avoid the store and ridicule Murray. Later, the town changes again to embrace traditional elements once more, catering mainly to tourists. By this point, Murray has given up and makes it clear that he does not understand these changes. However, Murray's insecurities have spilled



over into his marriage. He fears change so much and the idea of being left behind and ridiculed again, that he is anxious not to be found out. He becomes increasingly paranoid about his wife and his friend and soon imagines a whole affair taking place. In *Pictures of the Ice*, Austin shows a similar fear. He does not want to be thought of as behind the times or having lost touch, but the town is changing and no longer wants him. He chooses to lie and create a fabricated story about moving to Hawaii in order to prove that he is not as outdated as it might have seemed.

Change can also be viewed as inevitable. In *Oh, What Avails*, Joan begins to see the world merely as rubble, cast aside from constant changes. She cannot feel connected to this and looks on it all with distaste. Her depressing view comes from a belief that she is special, an idea given to her in childhood. She dislikes seeing the world change because it makes her seem insignificant in comparison. The narrator of *Friend of My Youth* sees change as inevitable, something that the young do not see coming but the old have learned to expect. Brenda, in *Five Points*, also sees change as inevitable, seeing it coming before Neil does. She is frightened by it but also uplifted. She knows that their relationship will never be the same again. She will miss the freedom and light-heartedness of it, but is pleased that Neil's feelings for her have developed. She enjoys the new feeling while at the same time dreading it for the harder times it will bring. Above all, the characters in Munro's stories learn that nothing can ever remain the same forever.



# Style

## Style

### Point of View

Most of the stories in this collection are told from the point of view of middle-aged women looking back on their past. In *Friend of My Youth* the story is told in first person by an unnamed narrator. The narrator relates a story that her mother once told her about a woman named Flora. There is a lot of distance between the narrator and the events she is describing, creating narrative uncertainty. The reader can never be sure if people really did feel or act the way the narrator is describing, and many things are left a mystery. This emphasizes the message of the story, that one person can never truly know another. *Meneseteung* is the only other story in this book told in first person. Again, the narrator is unnamed, but this time their whole identity is left a complete mystery. We do not know what the narrator's connection to Almeda is or why they are piecing together her life. Again, narrative uncertainty is created and many areas of Almeda's life are deliberately left a mystery.

The rest of the stories are told in third person, but will often be weighted to one particular character's point of view. Observations are therefore not neutral, but colored by the characters' feelings and experiences. For example, when Brenda is going to meet Neil in *Five Points*, the scenery along the way is described in sinister tones that seem to reflect her own feelings of guilt and shame. In *Oranges and Apples*, the telling of the story is deeply affected by Murray's growing paranoia. In *Goodness and Mercy*, Averill's observations may or may not be clouded by her own dreams and fantasies. All the stories in this collection have this in common; the reader can never be sure that what they are being told is entirely the truth. This reflects real life, since nothing in real life is ever certain, and emotions and bias can always cloud judgment.

### Setting

The majority of stories in this collection are set in small Canadian towns. *Friend of My Youth* takes place in the Ottawa Valley in Eastern Ontario. *Five Points*, *Pictures of the Ice* and *Oh, What Avails* take place in Logan, a small town on Lake Huron in Ontario. Lake Huron is one of the five great lakes of North America. Other stories set around Lake Huron are *Oranges and Apples* and *Wigtime*, which both take place in the small town of Walley. *Differently* takes place in Victoria in Western Canada. *Meneseteung* is also set near Lake Huron and is the only story set further back in time, in the 19th century. At this point, rural life in this area would still have been very hard with few modern conveniences to help. There are only two stories not set in Canada. These are *Hold Me Fast*, *Don't Let Me Pass*, which is set in a small town called Philiphaugh in the Scottish Borders, and *Goodness and Mercy*, which is set on a boat traveling from Canada to Britain.



These small town settings help to establish an isolated and lonely feeling, while at the same time being very claustrophobic. In them, it is impossible to avoid people or get away from the local gossip. Each person's business is everyone else's business, and there is a constant fear of persecution or of being shamed by the townsfolk. These small towns also tend to be quite conservative in their values, and the people will ridicule or reject anyone who does not conform. They are places where change is feared, but once things do change, the old will be callously cast out. The small town settings emphasize the isolation of the characters, their struggles and repressed fears. The boat achieves a similar feel. It is an even smaller and closed-in setting, in which the people on board are forced on each other for the whole journey with nowhere to escape and very little privacy.

The natural features and weather of the small-town settings emphasize the isolated, cold and harsh feeling of the towns and the characters. These are often hard places to live, with strong storms and very cold weather. The scenery can be beautiful, but in a very wild way that emphasizes how isolated from the larger areas of civilization they are. For example, in *Friend of My Youth*, the land around the town is described as "a scrambled, disarrayed sort of country with no easy harmony about it" (p5). It is not an easy place to live, and consequently it breeds hardy, suspicious, conservative and enduring little towns and people. The more violent and brutal aspects of nature, such as the raging rivers, snow storms and ice, reflect the violence and pain that lie under the surface of these seemingly calm and boring towns. Just as darkness is a part of nature, so it is shown as being an inevitable aspect of human life. This is a particularly strong theme in *Meneseteung*, in which Almeda learns to accept suffering by seeing the pain and darkness in nature. She connects human suffering, and the town and its troubles, to the river, which is sometimes calm, sometimes violent, and always changing.

## Language and Meaning

All the stories in this collection are full of symbolism. Nature, particularly weather, is commonly used as a metaphor for the pain and violence that are an inevitable part of life. In *Pictures of the Ice*, the harsh weather emphasizes the characters' struggles and their feelings of isolation. A snow storm traps Karin in the house when her baby is dying of meningitis, and a snow storm traps Austin inside just days before he is due to leave, threatening his escape. The storm isolates them physically, just as they are emotionally separated from the rest of the town, let down by the people they cared about the most. The ice by the lake, cold and hard and cast into peculiar shapes, reflects the changing nature of the town that makes them feel as if they no longer belong. It also represents Austin's attempt to transform himself with his lies about Hawaii. Like the ice, the lies are fragile and will soon melt away leaving Austin the same man, no longer needed and pushed out of his community. Cold, harsh weather also emphasizes the characters' struggles in *Wigtime*. Just as they try to escape and find barricades against the cold, so they try to escape their small-town lives. In *Meneseteung*, Almeda sees a connection between the violence of nature and the pain and suffering in her town. By comparing the darkness that lurks in human nature with the river, which can be rough as well as calm and is always changing, she can begin to come to terms with it. She realizes that she



cannot ignore the pain in favor of the beauty, because then the picture, or the poem, is incomplete.

Descriptions are often used to draw attention to characters' emotions and anxieties. In *Five Points*, the description of the road that Brenda travels down to meet Neil reflects her feelings of guilt and shame. There are "dangling bunches of bright, poisonous fruit" and grapevine "creeping onto the road" (p35). Even the plants hold hidden dangers and lie waiting to trip her up and expose her. In *Meneseteung*, Almeda's grape jelly begins to drip like blood all over the floor, echoing the drip of blood from the beaten woman and Almeda's menstrual blood. These images conjure thoughts of violence and pain. The stain that the grape jelly spreads over the floor is a metaphor for the stain that has begun to spread into Almeda's life, caused by the suffering that she has witnessed. She will never be the same again. In many of the stories, water imagery is used to suggest hidden depths and that things might not always be what they seem. In *Five Points*, the imagery of the mine lying dark and hidden deep under the town is an extremely effective metaphor for the darkness that lies in human nature and for the hidden evils that a seemingly quiet town will always possess.

## Structure

Most of the stories within this collection follow a similar structure, in which a framing narrative is used to introduce and end the story. The frame is usually a middle aged woman looking back on her past. In *Friend of My Youth*, the narrator thinks of her mother and remembers a story she used to tell her. She then tells this story, dipping into the past to tell us about Flora, and returning to the present in the middle of the story and at the end in order to draw conclusions. In *Oh, What Avails*, *Differently*, and *Wigtime* a woman revisits her childhood town, which draws up memories of the past. Both *Differently* and *Wigtime* use this framing narrative to launch back into the past, returning to the present again at the end. *Oh, What Avails* is a little different as it tackles three stages of Joan's life, one after the other in chronological order. The framing story in *Five Points*, unlike in other stories, is actually the main story, exploring Neil and Brenda's affair. Neil's story about Maria is given as an interesting aside that ironically becomes instrumental in forcing the change in their relationship. The framing story in *Meneseteung* is less obvious, since it is only really revealed at the end how much the narrator knows or does not know about Almeda's life. The narrator's identity is never divulged. In *Oranges and Apples*, the framing story involves Murray and Barbara driving to get her test results from the doctor. As they pass a farm, it sparks memories of Victor. The story shifts to tell us more about him and about how he is connected with Murray and Barbara. In *Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass*, a woman travels to Scotland to find out more about her husband's time there, but ends up finding out more about complete strangers. The story focuses on them, returning to Hazel's assessment of the situation and memories of her husband at the end.

In all stories with this framing structure, a sense of confusion and ambiguity, as well as digging up the past, is formed. This is particularly the case with *Meneseteung* in which the past is dragged to the surface through the use of newspaper extracts, the poet's diary and her book. It is made clear at the end of *Meneseteung* that nothing is certain,



and that the story may have been pieced together wrongly. This same uncertainty can be found in many of the stories, and this is emphasized by the framing structure. The framing structure also allows the story to be told in short fragments that hop about in time, adding to the confused and sometimes paranoid atmosphere of the story. Finally, the framing story creates a sense of closure as the story comes full circle back to the present. This can sometimes bring clarity or meaning to the story, or emphasize the fact that no meaning or clear answer can be found. Pictures of the Ice and Goodness and Mercy do not have the same kind of framing stories, but still exhibit similar fragmented structures and large jumps forward in time.

Munro's short stories are in many ways more like novels than short stories. They explore the lives and emotions of their characters in great depth, and will often cover long periods of time by hopping back and forth in time. In *Oh, What Avails*, Joan's whole life is revealed. Others focus on more specific events but still manage to fit in an extraordinary amount of background. Despite this, however, the stories do leave a lot of information out. Some things are deliberately left mysterious or ambiguous, and some characters are never given a voice. For example, in *Friend of My Youth*, the reader gets no insight into Robert's feelings and motivations. Similarly, in *Oranges and Apples* the reader only sees things from Murray's warped point of view and is never shown what Brenda and Victor might really be thinking or feeling. Munro knows exactly what information to reveal and what to leave out in order to tell her stories with the intended effect.





## Quotes

"The odd thing is that my mother's ideas were in line with some progressive notions of her times, and mine echoed the notions that were favoured in my time. This in spite of the fact that we both believed ourselves independent, and lived in backwaters that did not register such changes." (Friend of My Youth, pp. 22-23)

"My mother moving rather carelessly out of her old prison, showing options and powers I never dreamed she had, changes more than herself. She changes the bitter lump of love I have carried all this time into a phantom - something useless and uncalled for, like a phantom pregnancy." (Friend of My Youth, p. 26)

"You know that there's a whole underground system that you call 'dreams,' having nothing better to call them, and that this system is not like roads or tunnels but more like a live body network, all coiling and stretching, unpredictable but finally familiar - where you are now, where you've always been." (Five Points, p. 37)

"You can find out what real darkness is like, the darkness people on the surface of the earth never get to see." (Five Points, p. 47)

"The changes of climate are often violent, and if you think about it there is no peace even in the stars." (Meneseteung, p. 70)

"You see them going around with notebooks, scraping the dirt off gravestones, reading microfilm, just in the hope of seeing this trickle in time, making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish." (Meneseteung, p. 73)

"You can look down a street, and you can see the shadows, the light, the brick walls, the truck parked under a tree, the dog lying on the sidewalk, the dark summer awning, or the grayed snowdrift - you can see all these things in their temporary separateness, all connected underneath in such a troubling, satisfying, necessary, indescribable way. Or you can see rubble. Passing states, a useless variety of passing states. Rubble." (Oh, What Avals, p. 208)

"Maybe that he was giving them something to concentrate on. A hard limit that you might someday get past in a man, a knot in his mind you might undo, a stillness in him you might jolt, or an absence you might make him regret - that sort of thing will make you pay attention, even when you think you've taught yourself not to. Could it be said to make you happy?" (Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass, p. 105)

"Murray had to face up to being out of step, to having valued, as if they were final, things that were only accidental and temporary." (Oranges and Apples, p. 133)

"The really hard choices could be between two things you liked very much or two things you disliked very much or between things that were for some reason almost impossible to compare. There was no way to win." (Oranges and Apples, p. 123)



"People will sit and watch the lake as they'd never watch a field of waving grass or grain. Why is that, when the motion is the same? It must be the washing away, the wearing away, that compels them. The water all the time returning - eating, altering, the shore." (Oranges and Apples, p, 134)

"Brent once started on the holy road went shooting on past; he got past Austin's careful quiet kind of religion in no time and cut Austin out with the people in his own church who wanted a stricter, more ferocious kind of Christianity." (Pictures of the Ice, p. 142)

"Guilt is a sin and a seduction. I've said that to many a poor soul that liked to wallow in it. Regret's another matter. How could you get through a long life and escape it?" (Pictures of the Ice, p. 146)

"People make momentous shifts, but not the changes they imagine." (Differently, p. 242)



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the theme of betrayal in Munro's stories. Who is betrayed and why? Are there different kinds of betrayal and what are the reasons for it? Is betrayal ever justified? What is the worst kind of betrayal?

How is age represented in Munro's stories? What kind of behavior do characters of different ages display? How does age change their views and values? What do they learn from looking back at the past? Does age inevitably bring regret?

A major theme of these stories is the darkness that lies under human nature. Discuss this theme.

How does Munro use imagery and metaphor to enhance the atmosphere and meaning of her stories?

Discuss repression and shame in these stories. What causes guilt and what leads to its repression? Do characters ever feel guilty for the wrong things? Are there characters who should feel more shame than they do? Is guilt or shame ever a helpful emotion?

Discuss Munro's use of setting in the stories. Is setting ever used to reflect a character's mood or struggles? How does setting establish atmosphere? How does it reflect various themes found in the stories?

Discuss the theme of change in these stories. How does change affect small towns? Who resists it and who embraces it? Is change always feared? Can change ever be a good thing?

Narrative uncertainty features in many of Munro's stories. Discuss its use and its effect on the stories. Why might ambiguity be necessary? Is there ever a situation in which the reader knows more than the main character? Is anything in real life ever certain?

Discuss Munro's choice of main characters. What do they have in common and how do they differ? Do they share certain values? Do they behave heroically or badly, or like normal people?

Alice Munro's stories have sometimes been called 'Gothic.' In what ways might they be considered so?