Meneseteung Study Guide

Meneseteung by Alice Munro

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Contents

Introduction

Alice Munro's short story "Meneseteung" was published in the author's collection *Friend of My Youth* (1990). The meaning of the title "Meneseteung" is not certain: it is the name of the river that Champlain is credited with exploring, and it is also associated with the onset of the menses (menstrual flow) mentioned in section V. The story, like many of Munro's works, was based on her love of the history of rural Ontario, Canada, where she grew up. When one first reads the story, it might appear confusing. Munro employs an outside narrator, who jumps back and forth in time from the 1800s to the 1980s. This narrator includes external sources of information—such as newspaper clippings and excerpts from books—that interrupt the flow of the story and disorient the reader, and, at the end of the story, the authenticity of the narrator is called into question, which can make some readers question the point of the story. Yet, when one digs deeper, the reasons for these seemingly jarring narrative devices, which are another trademark of Munro's writing, become clear. Through its complicated structure and the use of a questionable narrator, "Meneseteung" ultimately explores many themes. As a result, Munro's story can be enjoyed on many levels. One can read the story as a historical piece, examining the life of a Canadian frontierswoman who lives in a male-dominated society and who encounters the baser aspects of the human experience. One can also concentrate on the narrator, who is reconstructing this tale by using historical bits of information and extrapolating to cover the gaps. Finally, one can focus on Munro herself and the author's attempts to describe the narrative process. A current copy of the work can be found in the paperback version of *Friend of My Youth*, which was published by Vintage Books in 1991.

Author Biography

Munro was born on July 10, 1931, in the small town of Wingham, Ontario, in Canada. Her father owned a silver-fox farm on the outskirts of the town. The author began writing stories as a teenager during her lunch hours at school because it was too far to walk home, as other students did. Since writing was not looked upon favorably in the small town, Munro never showed her writing to anybody, but she has described these early works as passionate stories, full of horror, romance, and adventure. Munro did well in school, and in 1949 she earned a scholarship to the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario.

In 1951, Munro married James Munro, and the couple moved to the city of Vancouver, British Columbia, on Canada's west coast, where the author concentrated on raising a family, including Sheila (born in 1953) and Jenny (born in 1957). Munro also secretly began to write stories again, drawing on her experience in rural Ontario for many of them. In 1963, the couple moved to Victoria, British Columbia, where they opened a bookstore together and, in 1966, had another daughter, Andrea. Two years later, in 1968, Munro published her first story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, which won her immediate critical and popular attention— as well as the Governor General's Award for fiction in 1969. In 1971, Munro published *Lives of Girls and Women*, an interconnected collection of stories.

Munro's relationship with her husband deteriorated, and, when they separated in 1972, she moved back to London, Ontario, with her two younger daughters. During the 1974-1975 academic year, Munro served as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario. In 1974, Munro also published *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, her third collection of short stories. In 1976, Munro's divorce from James Munro became official. The same year, she married Gerald Fremlin, a geographer, and the couple moved to Clinton, Ontario, about twenty miles from the author's childhood home of Wingham.

Munro has been consistent in her writing career, publishing a story collection every three or four years. In 1978, she published *Who Do You Think You Are*?, which was also published as *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose* (1979). From 1979 to 1982, Munro traveled throughout Australia, China, and Scandinavia, but this did not interrupt her publishing pattern. In 1982, she published the collection *The Moons of Jupiter*, which was followed by *The Progress of Love* (1986). The same year, Munro was awarded the first Marian Engel Award, which is given to a woman writer for an outstanding body of work. In 1990, Munro published her seventh book, *Friend of My Youth*, which included the story "Meneseteung."

Unlike many authors who write both novels and short stories, Munro continues to focus solely on short fiction. Munro has also published the following collections: *Open Secrets: Stories* (1994), *The Love of a Good Woman: Stories* (1998), and *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage: Stories* (2001).

Plot Summary

I

The first section, like all of the other sections of "Meneseteung," starts out with a short piece of poetry by Almeda Joynt Roth, a nineteenth-century woman. The narrator, whose gender is never noted, gives some background about the publishing details of Roth's one and only book, *Offerings*, and then gives a description of Roth herself, based upon a photograph that the narrator is looking at in the front of the book. The narrator quotes from the preface of the book, which gives a short history of the poet's life, including her family's move to the frontier of Canada West (modern-day Ontario) and the death of her entire family. Roth talks about her love of poetry, which she turned to because she lacked the skill for other crafts common to women of her time, such as crochet work. At this point, the narrator takes over the story, giving a list of the various poems that are in the book, most of which are about nature or family.

II

The second section begins with the narrator talking about Roth's life in 1879, following her parents' death, when she lived alone in their house on Pearl and Dufferin streets. The narrator compares the home to the modern-day home, indicating that she is in the same area of Ontario as she relates the story. The narrator gives details about the daily life in Roth's small town, which the narrator read in the *Vidette*, the local newspaper. Some details include the fact that school is only in session four months out of the year, which leaves adventurous boys with time to harass others or otherwise get into trouble. One person whom the boys continually harass is a woman nicknamed Queen Aggie, a drunk whom they dump into a wheelbarrow and roll all over town. The narrator paints a picture of danger, noting the confidence men, thieves, and other disreputable types that inhabit the town. They are particularly prone to hanging out at the end of Pearl Street, which is farthest from Roth's home.

III

This section introduces the character of Jarvis Poulter, who arrived a few years ago and who lives two lots down from Roth. Poulter is a widower who is known for his tendency to take water and coal supplies, in an attempt to save money. This fact is alluded to in the *Vidette*, which, according to the narrator, spreads rumors and innuendos that would be libelous in today's newspapers. Poulter came to the town seeking oil but discovered salt instead and has become a wealthy businessman. Poulter and Roth are seen speaking together about his business, prompting a thinly veiled note in the *Vidette* that indicates they may be a couple. The narrator talks about the fact that Roth is not quite an old maid and that she is thinking she would like to marry Poulter but, as is proper for the times, is waiting for him to make the first move to indicate his interest. The narrator

says that Roth does not want a man whom she has to mold as other women mold their husbands. Roth waits anxiously for a sign of Poulter's interest, but, at the same time, she would be disappointed if they were to go out on a countryside date, because she could not reflect on nature in silence as she usually does.

IV

The narrator says that Roth takes sedatives that her doctor has prescribed for sleeplessness but avoids nerve medicine drops because they give her vivid dreams. The doctor believes that Roth needs to be more active and that her problem would be solved if she got married. She decides one day to make some grape jelly, and when she goes to bed, the grape pulp is still straining. She wakes up to noises outside and realizes they are coming from the rowdy denizens of Pearl Street. She tries to ignore them but thinks she hears somebody being murdered. She plans to go check it out but falls asleep before she can get up the nerve to go. She wakes at dawn and in her halfawake state dreams she sees an imaginary bird that tells her to move the wheelbarrow. This word, which seems odd at first, recalls the wheelbarrow used by the youths to transport Queen Aggie.

Indeed, when Roth looks outside, she sees that there is a woman pressed against her fence, who Roth assumes is dead. In a panic she runs out of her house in her nightclothes and fetches Jarvis Poulter to come and help her with the dead woman. Poulter is at first annoyed and gets even more callous when he sees that the woman on Roth's fence is not dead but merely passed out from drinking too much. The woman's animal-like behavior shocks Roth and makes her feel sick, as does Poulter's callous behavior. Poulter, on the other hand, likes the vulnerability that he has seen in the desperate Roth and finally asks her to accompany him to church.

V

When Roth gets back to her house, she realizes that part of her sickness is from the bloating of premenstruation. She decides that she is not well enough to go to church and leaves a message for Poulter on the front window stating this. She makes herself some tea and adds several drops of nerve medicine. The medicine affects her, making the room around her seem to come alive. In her delirious state, Roth starts to think about poetry and has the wish to create one poem that will contain all of her experiences. She is so caught up in her delirium that she does not notice the grape juice bin over-flowing, and she is so far gone that she does not think anything is real anymore.

VI

Unlike previous sections, the final section is told entirely through two *Vidette* clippings and some present-day commentary by the narrator. The first news clipping describes the mental decline of Roth and her death, which the newspaper suggests was due to

harassment by youths like those who used to harass Queen Aggie. The second news clipping describes the death of Poulter, less than a year later. In the final commentary, the narrator describes going to Almeda Roth's grave in the present day and talks about how people make connections from historical clues. Then in the last paragraph, the narrator shares a revelation, indicating that everything that has come before has also been extrapolated from historical clues and that the narrator does not know if the story really happened that way or not.

Section 1

Section 1 Summary

Meneseteung is a short story about a frontierswoman who lived in the province of Ontario, Canada in the late 1800's and whose independent spirit carves out the life of an artist in favor of the typical roles assigned to women of the time period. Each of the six sections of the short story begins with a few lines written by Almeda Joynt Roth, the protagonist of the story, which is told from the perspective of a narrator. The poems are from a book entitled *Offerings* written in 1865 at a period in time when a woman's lot is assumed to be wife and mother not an unmarried poet. The narrator comments on the photo of Almeda inside the book and describes the woman as rather plain with gray hair although she is only twenty-five at the time.

Almeda is the last surviving member of her family including a younger brother and sister who succumbed at early ages to a fever and their mother who died a year later from grief. Almeda became housekeeper and companion to her father who died a few years later leaving the family home and estate from his harness business to Almeda.

Almeda has no inclinations for domestic arts preferring instead to read, study, and write poetry about her family and her experiences living in the wilderness of Canada. One of Almeda's poems is entitled, "Champlain at the Mouth of the Meneseteung" about the false belief that Champlain sailed down the eastern shore of Lake Huron and landed at the mouth of the river. Almeda loves nature and much of her work is devoted to the forests and gardens of her native Canada.

Section 1 Analysis

The story begins from the perspective of a narrator who is never identified and acts as a curious observer of the history of Almeda's life. The observations of Almeda portray the young woman as a dour spinster with little social interaction since the death of her family. Ironically, Almeda's independent lifestyle, which is perceived to be unusual during her life, would be applauded in the 1990's when the narrator writes about her. Almeda has assumed none of the traditional roles expected of women in the late 1800's and is considered to be eccentric and unusual in her home town.

Section 2

Section 2 Summary

In this section the narrator fills in more of the details of Almeda's life in 1879. Almeda lives in the home built by her father and the town is filled with people under the age of fifty because no one any older would want to come to an unsettled area. As in any town there are undesirable areas such as the Pearl Street swamp where the underprivileged people live and where gangs of boys roam the streets looking for trouble. Almeda is always careful to conduct herself with propriety and notes that the sight of the swamp from her window in the morning is really quite lovely with the mist surrounded by all the tall majestic trees.

Section 2 Analysis

Almeda's social status is validated in this section as she is removed from the undesirable elements of the town and maintains her distance physically and socially. The author wants to make the distinction of the classes those who roam the streets in poverty and neglect and those like Almeda who do not understand any other than a privileged lifestyle as evidenced by Almeda's perception of the disease-ridden swamp as lovely in the morning light.

Section 3

Section 3 Summary

In a house two lots away from Almeda lives a man named Jarvis Pouter who arrived a short time ago. Jarvis is a widower and his house reflects his completely masculine lifestyle. Although Jarvis is a respectable businessman who makes the bulk of his money through his salt mine excavations he is also known in the town for taking water from the town pump and for picking up random pieces of coal at the train tracks for his home fuel use.

Jarvis walks Almeda home from church on Sunday mornings and the local newspaper the *Vidette* prints speculations about their courting. Everyone in town assumes that this is Almeda's wish since it has been five years since the publication of her book and she is still of a marriageable age. Unfortunately, Jarvis has given no indication of any romantic inclinations and Almeda keeps her distance so as not to appear foolish.

Almeda, however, cannot stop hoping that Jarvis will ask to walk her to church some evening but he never does. Jarvis also does not walk Almeda to church on Sundays as that would give the incorrect impression of courting but when he does escort Almeda home on Sunday mornings, which is quite proper she is aware of the soap and tobacco smells clinging to his jacket.

Almeda thinks about the married women she knows and how they discuss molding their husbands to their own liking. Although she's appalled at the thought she would still like Jarvis to show her some sign of romantic intentions. Almeda has to admit to herself though that if Jarvis were to ask her to take a ride in the country she would be conflicted as she would like to go but would regret his being there as she could not properly absorb the beauty of the land and the wildlife in the silence she cherishes.

Section 3 Analysis

Almeda suffers from the pressures of society to marry. Although Jarvis seems to be a suitable prospect, her own compass guides her to maintain her independent life. Almeda listens to the married women discuss their husbands and cannot imagine herself in their roles, but tries to project an aura of availability with Jarvis so that she may experience what women are supposed to in the form of marriage and reliance on a man. For Almeda men are incurious creatures deprived in their lack of imaginations and Almeda really has no time for such austere existence. She has no need for companionship but still feels the societal pull for her to do the proper thing and marry while she is still of an appropriate age.

Section 4

Section 4 Summary

Almeda visits her doctor because she is unable to sleep. The physician, thinking she would be better if she would marry, prescribes more housework and exercise to tire her out by the end of the day. There is also a bottle of nerve medicine, which Almeda has tried only once because of the wild dreams it stirs in her. Almeda throws herself into cleaning her house, spending time at the church, helping friends with wallpapering, and baking exquisite cakes for special occasions.

One day Almeda decides to make grape jelly, which will make nice Christmas gifts but she starts the process too late in the day and must leave the hot cooked grapes to drain in a cheesecloth bag overnight. Finally collapsing on her bed Almeda drops off to sleep only to be awakened a short time later with a feeling of threatening anxiety. As Almeda listens she can hear the sounds of angry people who seem to be coming closer to her house.

Almeda finally rises and sees a man beating a woman who collapses at Almeda's gate. Stunned by this visual assault Almeda falls back into her bed and debates the best course of action falling asleep in the process. When she wakes in the morning Almeda remembers the events of the night before and looks out the window to see the body of a woman slumped at the gate.

Wrapping a shawl about her shoulders, Almeda proceeds outside to look at the disheveled woman soiled by her own bodily functions. Almeda is shocked by the woman's primal state and can barely contain her own nausea. Assuming the poor woman is dead Almeda runs to Jarvis' house for help in assessing the situation. Jarvis quickly surmises that the woman is not dead but drunk and kicks her with his boot telling her to go home where she belongs. Jarvis sees the vulnerable side of Almeda who is dressed in her nightclothes with her hair undone and suddenly considers her suitable for marriage. He decides to court her beginning with walking her to church this morning.

Section 4 Analysis

The crass side of human nature arrives literally at Almeda's doorstep with the drunk and beaten woman but also in the form of Jarvis' cruel behavior toward the woman. Almeda is repulsed by both sights, which greatly assault her sensibilities. Almeda's sheltered existence does not allow her to discern that the woman is drunk and not dead but the brutality the woman endured is nauseating and something Almeda has never witnessed. Compounding this horrific scene is Jarvis' callous attitude toward the woman and Almeda knows instinctively that she is no longer interested in him.

Section 5

Section 5 Summary

Almeda is relieved when Jarvis finally leaves so that she can go to the privy where she realizes that part of her ill feeling has been brought about by menstruation. Almeda posts a note for Jarvis on the front door to tell him that she is not well and will stay at home to rest today. Almeda puts a few drops of the nerve medicine into the pot of tea she has brewed and sits in the dark house and listens to the carriages taking people to church. Almeda can even hear Jarvis' step on her porch and hears him retrieve the note and retreat down the sidewalk without disturbing her.

All day Almeda sits in the house drinking tea with nerve medicine and realizes that she has never in her life spent a full day in her nightclothes until today. Almeda tries to focus on the furnishings in the dining room where she sits on the floor and throughout the day watches the items so that she can be a part of any alteration they may undertake. As she sits Almeda thinks that she may begin to write again and how wonderful it would be to write one amazing poem, which would obliterate all the others.

The nerve medicine has put Almeda into a state of delirium and she cannot react properly when witnessing the overflowing grape juice, which has now stained the kitchen floor and is running everywhere from the hanging cheesecloth bag. It is in this condition that Almeda decides that the name for her poem will be "*The Meneseteung*," which will symbolize the channeling of all the brutal and unpleasant aspects of life, which will then flow away as the river of the same name.

Section 5 Analysis

Ironically, the nerve tonic, which is primarily prescribed for married women, catapults the spinster Almeda into a state of higher creativity and even more independence. The delirium she experiences as a result of the medicine does not calm her but enervates her to create her best work yet. It is only after leaving the world of propriety, which she struggles to maintain through her delirious state that she can project that her life's work truly is to write, and she is at last content.

The author uses much symbolism in this section with Almeda's concept of channeling her hurt and pain into a poem, which will flow like the Canadian river for which it will be named the *Meneseteung*. The *Meneseteung* also has a close word association with the word menses and is significant for the menstrual flow, which Almeda experiences at the same time as this creative and psychological breakthrough.

Section 6

Section 6 Summary

Almeda's story is now complete and the last section lists her obituary in the local paper stating her death in 1904. Jarvis' obituary is also shown with his death following Almeda's by a few months. The narrator ends the story by describing her visit to the Roth family gravesite in order to find Almeda's grave, which she does only after much searching. The narrator feels that there are not many people in the world curious enough to make the effort to discover the clues to make connections with people in history. People may make the wrong conclusions from what they find and the narrator may have made the wrong conclusions about Almeda.

Section 6 Analysis

The author leaves the reader with the thought that lives continue to flow throughout time as the Meneteseung River flows through her beloved Canada. The time and events between the narrator's discovery of Almeda's book and the uncovering of her gravesite are purely fictional as devised by the narrator herself. The narrator admits to the possibility of her errors in telling Almeda's story but Almeda's is just one of thousands of women who have lived in this part of the country and it is fair to assume some things but in the end life continues to flow and each individual Almeda may not really matter.

Characters

The Doctor

The doctor gives Almeda "bromides and nerve medicine" for insomnia. He advises her to do housework and to exercise but not to read. It is his opinion that "her troubles would clear up if she got married," despite the fact that he prescribes nerve medicine most often for married women.

The Narrator

The narrator is a person of unspecified gender who relates the tale of Almeda Roth, the story inside Munro's short story, but who admits at the end that he or she is not sure the story happened that way, since he or she has guessed on many of the historical details. The narrator's presence is most noticeable at the beginning and ending of Munro's story. In between, the narrator gradually fades into the background, and the story focuses more and more on specifics in Roth's life that the narrator could not possibly know, such as Roth's thoughts during individual events. At the end of the story, the narrator visits Roth's grave, where the authenticity of the story is called into question.

Jarvis Poulter

Jarvis Poulter is the initial love interest of Almeda Roth in the narrator's story. Poulter, a widower, arrived a few years before the main action of the story takes place. He lives two lots down from Roth and has only shown casual interest in her, talking with her on occasion but never making a formal show of interest, such as asking her to walk to church with him or accompany him on a trip to the countryside. Poulter has become rich through a number of businesses, most notably salt mining, but he still has the tendency to collect coal from alongside the railroad tracks and take water from the public pump. When Roth comes to him early one morning in a panic, telling him about the dead body against her fence, Poulter realizes that the woman slumped against Roth's fence is merely drunk and roughly makes the woman leave. Attracted to Roth's desperate vulnerability, Poulter asks her to church, but Roth ultimately refuses, and the two never pursue a relationship. Poulter dies less than a year after Roth.

Queen Aggie

Queen Aggie is the nickname for a drunk woman who gets harassed by youths who roll her around in a wheelbarrow before dumping her into a ditch.

Almeda Joynt Roth

Almeda Roth is the main character in the narrator's story. Roth is a historical figure whose life the narrator is reconstructing through old news stories and clues, such as the nickname on Roth's gravestone. In the beginning of the narrator's story, Roth is a respectable woman who has become famous in her small Canadian town for her book of poetry. Roth yearns to marry Jarvis Poulter, an idea that the rest of the town supports. Even Roth's doctor, who prescribes nerve medicine to help Roth with her sleeplessness, says she would be much happier if she were married. When Roth sees a drunk woman — who she presumes is dead—slumped against her fence, she appeals to Poulter for help. The woman is not dead, and Poulter treats her roughly. Poulter, who has been, up until this point, uninterested in Roth, now is drawn to her vulnerability, but Roth is turned off by the callous way that Poulter has treated the drunk woman, and she rebuffs his interest and retreats into the vivid delirium induced by her nerve medicine. Her mental health declines, and she meets her death after being harassed by youths in much the same way that Queen Aggie was. Because the narrator is guessing at much of Roth's life, the reader is left to guess how much of the story is true.

Themes

Roles of Women

Through the use of a sleuthing narrator who tries to re-create certain aspects of the life of a historical figure, Munro's story examines the expected place of women in Roth's society. While the *Vidette* claims Roth's poet status as a town asset, the narrator notes that "There seems to be a mixture of respect and contempt, both for her calling and her sex." In the nineteenth century, when Roth's story takes place, the expectation is that a woman will marry, have a family, and live to support her husband, none of which Roth has done. When the *Vidette* speculates about the prospect of Roth and Jarvis Poulter getting married, the newspaper says, "She is not too old to have a couple of children" and "She is a good enough housekeeper." In the minds of the townspeople, this is enough incentive for a man to marry her. The narrator further speculates about why Roth may have been passed over, using the *Vidette* article as a starting point: "She was a rather gloomy girl—that may have been the trouble." Beyond this depression, which Roth fell into after the death of her entire family, the narrator also surmises that it might be her vocation that has kept her an old maid: "And all that reading and poetry—it seemed more of a drawback, a barrier, an obsession."

Marriage is also viewed as the cure-all to many of women's problems, even when this logic does not make sense. For example, when Roth's doctor prescribes medicine for her sleeplessness, the narrator says that the doctor thinks she will not have this problem if she gets married. "He believes this in spite of the fact that most of his nerve medicine is prescribed for married women." Women are portrayed as weak and in need of men, as when Roth panics and rushes over to Poulter's house for assistance with the drunk woman. When she does this, it is the first time Roth has acted like a typical woman of her society—as opposed to the poised, confident woman that Poulter has known in the past, qualities that have not attracted him to her. "He has not been able to imagine her as a wife. Now that is possible." The narrator says that Poulter is "sufficiently stirred" and posits that it is most likely due to Roth's "indiscretion, her agitation, her foolishness, her need." Yet, as the narrator indicates, women are not powerless in marriage, and one of their primary roles in this era is "creating their husbands" by "ascribing preferences" to them. "This way, bewildered, sidelong-looking men are made over, made into husbands, heads of households." Roth cannot see herself doing this, which further separates her from the society in which she lives.

The Human Experience

The narrator's story also explores the darker aspects of the human experience. Although the tale starts out with Roth ignoring the most realistic parts of humanity, preferring to look at life through rosetinted glasses, the incident with the drunk woman forces her to come face to face with the dark side of human nature, and she sees humans as little more than animals. When Roth first sees the woman, she thinks of her

in animal terms: "Almeda can't see her face. But there is a bare breast loose, brown nipple pulled long like a cow's teat, and a bare haunch and leg." This bestial style of language continues when Poulter examines the woman and "nudges the leg with the toe of his boot, just as you'd nudge a dog or a sow." Roth's association of the woman with her base, animal nature becomes complete when the woman lifts her head, which is covered with blood and vomit, and begins to bang it against the fence. "As she bangs her head, she finds her voice and lets out an openmouthed yowl, full of strength and what sounds like anguished pleasure."

Though the description of the woman blatantly indicates the raw, animal nature of humanity, other aspects of the story underscore dark elements of the human experience in more subtle ways. For example, throughout the story readers hear about incidents of violence, such as when the youths harass Queen Aggie or strangers, or when the fight takes place on the street outside Roth's fence. "And the people around are calling out, 'Stop it! Stop that!' or 'Kill her! Kill her!' in a frenzy, as if at the theatre or a sporting match or a prizefight." Besides murder, the story gives a litany of examples of ways that people die or become ill, so that, by the end of the story, Roth is so disillusioned with the human experience that she associates it with death. Following the incident with the woman, when Roth is locked away in her house, she hears everybody walking to church and thinks of them in morbid terms: "Tombstones are marching down the street on their little booted feet, their long bodies inclined forward, their expressions preoccupied and severe." At this point, long before the nerve medicine has started to affect her sense of reason, Roth has given up on humanity. She locks herself away, and, as the last news clipping indicates, she never fully rejoins human society, instead choosing the comfort of living in an imagined reality.

Style

Point of View

The narration in "Meneseteung" is complex. At first it seems to be a typical third-person-omniscient point of view, one in which an outside narrator is given the ability to tell the story from the point of view of any character. In this viewpoint, the narrator can also move between time periods, as necessary, to tell the story. This differs from the third-personlimited point of view, which limits the telling to the perspective of a limited number of characters, usually just one. Beyond this basic structure, however, the narration in "Meneseteung" features another aspect that gives it greater complexity than the average third-person-omniscient story. The story uses an unreliable narrator, a narrator whose story cannot be trusted for some reason. This fact becomes most evident at the end of the story when the narrator says, "I may have got it wrong. I don't know if she ever took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don't know if she ever made grape jelly." By referring to two specific facts from the story that play a large part in the story's plot and then posing the idea that these events might never have happened, the authenticity of the narrator's entire story is called into question.

The Narrative Process

Point of view is one specific narrative aspect that Munro uses to shape her story, but, through her narrator's questionable storytelling methods, Munro also explores the narrative process itself—the actual process of creating a story. At the beginning of the narrator's tale, the story seems quite straightforward, and readers might suspect that they are going to hear a historical account of Roth's life. Though this happens to some extent, readers also learn more about the narrative process, an idea first introduced when readers are told about Roth's love of poetry. "From my earliest years I have delighted in verse and I have occupied myself . . . with many floundering efforts at its composition," Roth notes in the preface of her book. Then the narrator discusses some of Roth's poems, listing their titles and basic themes in a straightforward manner, as if the narrator is cataloguing the poems. The style of the narrator's storytelling at this point is very factual and to the point, with little embellishment.

As the narrator digs deeper into Roth's life, however, the narrator sheds objectivity and begins to dig into the narrative process, creating a life for Roth that may have never existed. In the process, readers are taken along for the ride, thinking that they are hearing a historical account but in the end realizing that they have been duped and that the narrator has actually been creating the story while telling it to the readers. Munro also explores the narrative process through the specific ways she has her narrator describe Roth's delirium: "Soon this glowing and swelling begins to suggest words—not specific words but a flow of words somewhere, just about ready to make themselves known to her. Poems, even." This passage, and the ones that follow it, on the surface serves as a description of what goes through Roth's head during her delirium. Yet this

language also attempts to describe the mystery of a writer's inspiration, the mental rush that suddenly makes connections in the writer's mind, leading to the formation of an original thought and ultimately to a literary work, such as the poem that Roth tries to create in her delirium.

Setting

The setting of the story is also extremely important to the narrative. The story is set in two different time periods, the late 1980s, when Munro is writing the story, and the mid-to-late 1800s, mainly 1879 when the main action of the story begins. This time change is important. More than a century has passed since the time of the story events, so the story cannot be simply told; it must be reconstructed from historical accounts. For this to happen, somebody has to be motivated enough—as the narrator is—to do the historical legwork. The narrator notes this quality of historical stories at the end of "Meneseteung" in a general comment about researchers: "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."

Yet, while the story bounces back and forth between two time periods, the place does not change. In the narrator's time, the story takes place in modern-day Ontario, which, when Almeda Roth and her family moved there, was known as Canada West. The use of the same physical setting helps to add authenticity to the narrator's story since the narrator can cite specific details about the town in Roth's time and compare them to details that can be seen in the narrator's own time. For example, the narrator talks about Roth's house: "The house is still there today; the manager of the liquor store lives in it." Since the house physically exists and is not just a figment of the narrator's imagination, it becomes one of the solid, factual details that anchors the story. Comparisons such as this also add to the effectiveness of the story. In 1879, the house is owned by Almeda Roth, who, in the beginning, is the picture of virtue. In the narrator's time, it is owned by somebody who sells alcohol, which in Roth's time was viewed as a vice. The contrast is intentional on Munro's part, as it helps to underscore the mental deterioration that Roth undergoes in the story.

Historical Context

In "Meneseteung," Almeda Roth's family moves to "the wilds of Canada West (as it then was)" in 1854, as Roth notes in the preface to her poetry book. This simple statement is anything but simple when looked at in a historical context. In fact, the Roth family move is representative of a greater population shift that was taking place in Canada. As in the United States, this immigration was due in part to the establishment of railways and roads, which provided mass transportation into desolate areas. Yet, while Americans' version of moving west generally meant California and other states in the far West, moving westward for Canadians often meant moving to Canada West. The designation of this area, which is today known as Ontario, as "west" may appear to the modern reader to be somewhat of a misnomer, since it is located north of the American Midwest, not even half of the distance across the vast country of modern-day Canada. But in this time period, much of western Canada was still undeveloped, and one did not have to travel too far to reach the frontier.

In the 1850s, the whole of modern-day Canada was still referred to as British North America—a collection of colonial provinces that was under British sovereignty. This governing arrangement changed in the 1860s, thanks to a large political movement that culminated in an event known as the Confederation. The push for confederation, which essentially united the disparate colonies into one political region, began for many reasons. Many leaders sought union as a way to overcome political differences and make it easier to pass legislation and accomplish other governmental duties. With each province separate and watching out for its own interests, it was hard for British North America to evolve and compete with other countries, most notably its southern neighbor, the United States, which was quickly becoming a world power. Economics also played a large part in the Confederation. Some visionaries realized that by unifying they could open up even more railways, which would lead to more immigration to desolate areas, which ultimately would lead to a stronger, more populous British North America—one that could compete with the United States.

British North America's troubled relationship with the United States provided another impetus for confederation. Although the two regions had enjoyed a thriving trade relationship, the American Civil War (1861-1865) threatened to change that. During the war, Britain had supported the American South in various ways, and so British North America was guilty by association—even though many of its citizens were against slavery to the point that some volunteered to fight on the side of the American North. So, distancing itself from Britain seemed like a good idea to British North America, which did not want to lose valuable trade dollars or get on the bad side of the powerful United States. From Britain's perspective, separating itself from its colonies in British North America also seemed like a good plan, since the vast territory was expensive to maintain and protect and the money that Britain made off the territory did not justify keeping it within its control. So, on July 1, 1867, the British Parliament passed the British North American Act, which officially severed the country's control of British North America—from that point on known as the Dominion of Canada. Although Britain was

no longer in control of the Canadian territories, the new dominion was loosely affiliated with Britain and did not achieve full autonomy until 1982.

As expected, the Confederation led to even greater immigration into the frontier lands in Canada West, which was renamed the province of Ontario. As Munro's story demonstrates, life in these wild Ontario lands was dictated by extremes. The attitudes expressed by the townspeople in the story are indicative of the rigid morality that held sway in Canada during much of nineteenth century— a social attitude that was embraced by certain segments of the population in Britain. Because Canada was first ruled by Britain and then remained affiliated with it after the Confederation, the region tended to adopt many of the social customs of its parent country. This rigid morality often expressed itself in a focus on marriage and family—including the proper, dependent role of respectable women— and conservative sexual attitudes, like those expressed by the townspeople in the story.

But in Roth's town, as in areas of Britain, this code of morality was not followed by all. On the other extreme, there were violence, crime, and other forms of disreputable behavior. In fact, Roth's geographic location, on the border between the good and bad sections of the town, gives her a vantage point from which to view both the moral, good acts and the violent, terrible acts that often took place simultaneously in frontier towns.

Critical Overview

When *Friend of My Youth* was published in 1990, it was a critical success. As Judith Timson notes in her 1990 essay on the work, it "was an instant literary event not only in Canada but also in the United States, where the writer and her work have garnered rave reviews." Many of these rave reviews, including those that Munro earned for *Friend of My Youth*, are due to Munro's unconventional style. Anne Boston, in her 1990 review of the collection for *New Statesmen and Society*, remarks on Munro's "fine disregard for convention," saying that the author "spins her narratives decades back and forwards, gathering lifetimes and whole groups of characters into the space of 20 pages." Specifically, Boston notes that the use of a present-day narrator to tell a historical story gives "Meneseteung" "added depth and distance."

Besides the temporal span of her works, critics also cite Munro's ability to combine fictional and realistic elements in unique patterns. In a 1986 essay about Munro's fiction for *Queen's Quarterly*, George Woodcock calls this "a tension between autobiography and invention which she manipulates so superbly that both elements are used to the full and in the process enrich each other." Some critics note that the realistic elements of Munro's fiction take on near photographic qualities. "Details of place are strikingly, almost photographically evoked," Carol Shields says in her 1991 review of *Friend of My Youth for London Review of Books*. Likewise, Woodcock says, "The photographic element in her presentation of scenes and characters as visualizable images is an essential factor in her writing."

Besides favoring Munro's use of photographic descriptions, critics also praise her unconventional use of realistic elements such as the news clippings she employs in "Meneseteung." "Munro has gone a long way toward reshaping the short story for her purposes, or rather unshaping it," Shields says. She references Munro's use of "newspaper articles, old letters, and, very often, seemingly random anecdotes beaded on a thin string of narrative." Timson speaks about the effect of these added elements, especially in a work like "Meneseteung." "It is a tricky work because parts of it, including excerpts from Roth's book of poetry and her obituary, suggest that she was a real person, brought to life from some dusty newspaper clippings." But as Timson notes, the entire story—clippings, poetry, and all— was fabricated by Munro.

Because Munro tends to take her reader back and forth through time and uses realistic elements in much of her fiction, disorienting the reader and sabotaging the flow of her stories, some critics refer to her works as plotless, though not in a bad way. In her 1986 entry on Munro for *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Catherine Sheldrick Ross says, "Instead of plots, Munro's work offers arrangements of materials that shift our perceptions of ordinary events and make us see the ordinary in an extraordinary way." Ross, like many critics, believes that Munro's intentionally plotless works force readers to examine the specific, realistic details of the stories, in an attempt to make them "recognize and acknowledge discoveries" about their own selves. In addition, critics note that there is a silent elegance in Munro's seemingly haphazard stories. "As much is omitted or hidden as left in; and things are rarely what they seem," Boston says.

While critics note that all of the stories in *Friend of My Youth* share these universal qualities of Munro's writing, some have singled out "Meneseteung," for various reasons. For example, though Munro has always been fascinated by the narrative process, a fascination that permeates many of her stories, Shields says that "Meneseteung" is about fiction itself, "the materials that go into a narrative, the how of a story rather than the what." Critics also note the complexity of the story. In her 1990 review of *Friend of My Youth* for the *New Republic*, Mary Jo Salter calls "Meneseteung" "the most ambitious story in this volume." Citing Almeda's vision, Salter says it is "one of the most inspired moments in any of these extraordinary stories."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Munro's use of external elements to enhance the narrative impact of "Meneseteung."

When one first reads "Meneseteung," it may seem as if Munro is as delirious as Almeda Roth, the nineteenth-century woman and main character in the narrator's story who succumbs to the blissful escapism of drugs by the end of the tale. Munro seems to indulge her every whim in the story, merging back and forth between two radically different time periods, including a narrator that calls into question the very authenticity of her own tale, and, most noticeably, inserting bits and pieces of historical information into the narrative, such as newspaper accounts and photographs. As Carol Shields says in the *London Review of Books*, "Munro has gone a long way toward reshaping the short story for her purposes, or rather unshaping it. Strange bits of the world go into her work: digressions of every sort." Shields also notes the "seemingly random anecdotes beaded on a thin string of narrative." Yet, nothing in Munro's work is random, including these external, historical elements. Rather, these devices serve several purposes.

The first and most noticeable effect of these external elements is that they jar the reader and disrupt the flow of the story, slicing the narrative into distinct and separate episodes. This episodic narration works against a reader's natural tendency to look for the organizing pattern, or plot, in a story. Most humans instinctively crave this order, which is one of the reasons why traditional, well-constructed stories, stories that are bundled up into neat packages with clear themes and a coherent structure, bring so much enjoyment. But, as in much of Munro's fiction, there is no organizing, cohesive structure to "Meneseteung." In her entry on Munro for *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Catherine Sheldrick Ross notes the effect of the plotless style that Munro uses, saying that it forces readers to look at the events in a different way: "Instead of plots, Munro's work offers arrangements of materials that shift our perceptions of ordinary events and make us see the ordinary in an extraordinary way."

Munro discusses the ordinary in many of her stories, including "Meneseteung," which includes long descriptions about the nineteenth-century frontier town in which Almeda Roth lived. "Only the main street is gravelled; the other streets are dirt roads, muddy or dusty according to season. Yards must be fenced to keep animals out." This is just one detail in a lengthy passage that also discusses what kinds of animals are in the town and the different types of droppings that these animals leave, which make "ladies have to hitch up their skirts." The story gains authenticity from these near photorealistic descriptions that the narrator uses. But these details, as the narrator says, are based upon accounts from the newspapers of the time. "I read about that life in the *Vidette*," the narrator says. This sets up the idea that the narrator is using the newspaper accounts to re-create Roth's story.

From the very beginning, the narrator uses the newspaper in this way, as one of the main sources for her historical facts. In the first two sections of the story, the narrator

tells the story almost entirely through factual sources such as the *Vidette* and the *Offerings* book that Roth published, which includes a publication date and a photograph of the author— lending the narrator's story even more authenticity. But at the end of the second section, the narrator merges into a more subjective role while shaping the story, re-creating Roth's thoughts—something that the narrator could not possibly know from newspaper accounts or even from the preface to Roth's book. "Almeda sleeps at the back of the house. She keeps to the same bedroom she once shared with her sister Catherine—she would not think of moving to the large front bedroom." In the third section, the narrator's re-creations get even more into the mind of Roth, and they also quote specific, private conversations between Roth and Jarvis Poulter.

Now, in a normal story, readers understand that narrators, as a rule, can go inside the heads of fictional characters and present their thoughts as necessary, which is an essential technique for telling the story. But Munro does not set up "Meneseteung" like a traditional, fictional story. The historical accounts make it seem as if it really happened. Judith Timson notes this effect in *Maclean's*, saying that the story "is a tricky work because parts of it, including excerpts from Roth's book of poetry and her obituary, suggest that she was a real person, brought to life from some dusty newspaper clippings." But, as Timson notes, "the whole thing, including the poetry, is out of Alice Munro."

Since Munro's narrator largely fades into the background as the story progresses, readers may not make these connections and realize that the entire story is fabricated. Yet Munro does provide clues that foreshadow, or predict, the story's ending. These clues include specific sections of the story that discuss the manipulation of truth. For example, in the third section, a clipping from the *Vidette* talks about Jarvis Poulter's tendency for stealing coal and water. This leads into a discussion of Poulter's background, which is the subject of many rumors in the town. Many of the townspeople believe that Poulter's wife has died in some horrible fashion. But, as the narrator says, "There is no ground for this, but it adds interest. All he has told them is that his wife is dead." Just as the townspeople are starting with a simple fact and adding on extra details to spice up this anecdote, so is the narrator— with the entire story. The narrator, when talking about how Roth views the countryside as she composes a poem about it, examines this idea of reality versus fiction and further foreshadows the ending. "The countryside that she has written about in her poems actually takes some diligence and determination to see. Some things must be disregarded." In other words, in the name of art, Roth observes the world but changes specific details that do not fit into the theme or feeling that she is trying to achieve in her poetry. Again, the narrator does this, as well, while re-creating the story of Roth.

At the end, the narrator realizes that the story, as it has been told, may be inaccurate: "I may have got it wrong. I don't know if she ever took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don't know if she ever made grape jelly." This narrator, like many of Munro's narrators, discovers the limitations in telling a story. As Katherine Mayberry notes in *Studies in Short Fiction*, "Eventually, most of Munro's narrators, both primary and secondary, come to recognize, if only dimly, the imperfection and inadequacy of their medium." Yet, in seeking out the gravestone of Almeda Roth, the narrator sees that it says "Meda," which

confirms the narrator's supposition that this name, from Roth's poetry, was Roth's nickname. Getting this fact right gives the narrator a sense of accomplishment: "I thought that there wasn't anybody alive in the world but me who would know this, who would make the connection."

That, ultimately, is Munro's goal with the story— getting readers to make their own connections. By deliberately making the story lack a cohesive plot and feeding story content to readers in detached, episodic blocks, as well as by questioning the authenticity of her own narrator, Munro forces readers to focus on the details. As Ross notes:

We say, yes, that is how life is; we recognize and acknowledge discoveries about our deepest selves. And this recognition is the purpose of the author's journeys into the past, undertaken with compassion and determination to 'get it right,' to get down the tones, textures, and appearances of things.

In the case of "Meneseteung," these appearances can be misleading or downright false. But whether these appearances are truth, fiction, or somewhere in between does not matter, since even in a story that never really happened, readers can find elements that resonate with their own lives.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "Meneseteung," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #2

Remy is a freelance writer in Pensacola, Florida. In the following essay, Remy examines the narrative use of stereotype in "Meneseteung."

Like many other Alice Munro stories, "Meneseteung" explores the biases and obstacles an independent woman must face while living within a provincial culture. Almeda Joynt Roth, the story's protagonist, is a poet, the author of "ballads, couplets, [and] reflections" that are often sentimental, if not morose, in tone. In piecing together the many facets of Roth's biography, the narrator takes a view of the poet that is no different from that of her contemporaries during the latter half of the nineteenth century, a perspective that eventually leads to questions regarding the story's content. At first glance, Roth appears to fit the stereotype of the mad, tormented artist, the bohemian who lives her life with blatant disregard for convention. Relying upon a single volume of published poems and a few tidbits of information garnered from the archives of the local press, the narrator seems to confuse Roth's actual life with one imagined, thus proving to be an unreliable source of information as she perpetuates this stereotype for the reader.

From the beginning of the story, the narrator, for reasons unknown, adopts the identical mores and attitudes Roth struggled against during her lifetime. In examining a copy of *Offerings*, Roth's only published collection of poems, the narrator exhibits the same "mixture of respect and contempt" that the townspeople display toward Roth "both for her calling and for her sex—or for their predictable conjuncture." The artist, a solitary figure, is simultaneously revered and despised for being independent, for living outside the traditional roles established for a woman. The narrator outlines this difference by describing a photograph of Roth and by citing passages from a brief family history which the poet includes in the preface to her book. There are traces of a grudging respect in the narrator's tone as he or she—the narrator remains nameless throughout the story, though at times the narrator's opinions appear to be feminine—describes Roth's physical characteristics and mode of dress and uses them to speculate about the poet's life. The narrator begins by describing Roth's physical attributes, especially a "streak of gray hair plain to see," which emphasizes an unusual combination of youth and maturity in a woman of "only twenty-five." The narrator goes on to describe the poet as "[n]ot a pretty girl but the sort of woman who may age well, who probably won't get fat." After delivering this rather backhanded compliment, the narrator attempts to fathom the poet's personality with the aid of a few sartorial clues. "It's the untrimmed, shapeless hat, something like a soft beret, that makes me see artistic intentions," the narrator declares, "or at least a shy and stubborn eccentricity, in this young woman, whose long neck and forward-inclining head indicate as well that she is tall and slender and somewhat awkward." As intuitive as these observations are, they nevertheless amount to conjecture. Neither Roth's book nor her photograph offer any confirmation of what the poet's life was actually like. A stereotype has taken root that will flower by the story's end.

The narrator's imagination takes flight as she begins to piece together Roth's biography. Simultaneously, the narrator, who, based upon the above comments, may well be

Roth's biographer or a graduate student researching a thesis, makes observations that distinguish Roth from her contemporaries yet relegate her to the ordinary and commonplace: "From the waist up, she looks like a young nobleman of another century. But perhaps it was the fashion," the narrator says dismissively. The narrator, like the townspeople of more than one hundred years earlier, regards Roth with admiration and, perhaps, a dose of envy. The combination of the two emotions at times makes it difficult for the narrator to distinguish between fantasy and reality, thus placing her account of events in doubt.

This ambivalent attitude, fueled by gossip and hearsay, also extends toward Roth's social life, which is a source of much speculation for both the townspeople and the narrator. Citing entries in the *Vidette*, the local paper that includes "sly jokes, innuendo, [and] plain accusation" as it maintains an insular stance against outsiders, even those like Roth whose family helped settle the town, the narrator mistakenly assumes that there must be a romantic link between Almeda Roth and Jarvis Poulter, her neighbor, based upon the simple fact that she is single and he is a widower. Why, asks the narrator, has Almeda remained unmarried for so long? Apparently unaware that she has adopted a preconceived idea of what the poet's life *should* be like, the narrator suspects that Almeda remains unmarried because she possesses a gloomy disposition and is weighted down by too many burdens, especially after the loss of her family. Rather than have Roth conform to the stereotype of the reckless hedonist, the narrator molds her into that of the "tormented artist," one who suffers dutifully for her art.

Furthermore, in a passage that reveals the narrator's adoption of Victorian attitudes about what a woman's literary ambition should be, Roth's poetry is regarded as more of a hobby than a vocation, an aimless activity to keep her mind occupied until her grief subsides.

> And all that reading and poetry—it seemed more of a drawback, a barrier, an obsession, in the young girl than in the middle-aged woman, who needed something, after all, to fill her time. Anyway, it's five years since her book was published, so perhaps she has got over that. Perhaps it was the proud, bookish father encouraging her?

When Almeda's insomnia requires treatment by the local doctor, she is advised not to read or study; exercise and hard work are the proper antidotes for a nervous disposition. According to the narrator's account, one told through the kaleidoscope of history in which truth and myth play upon the imagination in equal measure, the doctor believes that a majority of Roth's preoccupations would disappear if she married. It is ironic, therefore, that the doctor believes this "in spite of the fact that most of his nerve medicine is prescribed for married women."

The narrator, grasping firmly onto the stereotype of the promiscuous, single woman, lets her imagination soar as she confuses the personal qualities of one character with another. After describing an incident whereby a drunken woman, whom Almeda naively mistakes for dead, is found near Almeda's home and revived by Jarvis Poulter, the narrator ignores the plight of the fallen woman and instead seizes the opportunity to elaborate further upon Roth's life, transferring the drunken woman's lewd character to

that of her protagonist, a projection that only compounds the narrator's unreliability. Like one of the village women gossiping at the well, the narrator imagines that circumstance has freed Almeda and Jarvis from all social constraint and that they will act upon their desire.

As soon as a man and a woman of almost any age are alone together within four walls, it is assumed that anything may happen. Spontaneous combustion, instant fornication, an attack of passion.

The scene remains vivid for the narrator, yet there is no record that the event actually took place as described in the story. Echoing the spirit of the times, the narrator's imagination quickly moves from erotic confinement to the less provocative scene of the couple walking to church together on a bright Sunday morning. The next logical stage in the development of the couple's relationship, the narrator suggests, is courtship and marriage.

Having brought Roth fully to life in her imagination, the narrator describes her protagonist as remaining at home, claiming infirmity, when the offer of an escort finally does come. Unlike the townspeople of Roth's day, the narrator understands that Almeda is much too independent a person to take the trouble to mold a man, especially one as ambitious as Jarvis, into a husband. The poet fails to conform to one stereotype, yet this does not prevent the narrator from having Roth embody another. "Almeda Roth cannot imagine herself doing that. She wants a man who doesn't have to be made, who is firm already and determined and mysterious to her. She does not look for companionship. Men—except for her father—seem to her deprived in some way, incurious." Though her image of Roth changes constantly, the narrator seems intent on having her conform to a prescribed idea of what an artist's life should be—in this case, that of the loner who, like a celibate taking religious orders, has sacrificed her life for art.

Even though the narrator seems to understand that Almeda Roth was a complex individual, an author who assiduously practiced her craft as a vocation and not as a hobby, the narrator nevertheless subscribes to the fallacy that the poet found inspiration for her greatest poem, "Meneseteung," not through careful observation and the calculated juxtaposition of ideas but through the use of sleep medication. Just as Coleridge is said to have used opium to inspire one of his greatest compositions, "Kubla Khan," so too does the narrator imagine Roth using sleep medication to recreate the "deep holes and rapids and blissful pools," the "grinding blocks of ice thrown up at the end of winter," the "desolating spring floods" that arise from the eponymous river. The narrator imagines that all of Almeda's anguish, sorrow, and ambivalence is "channelled" into the poem, creating a river of emotion that rushes from her psyche down through the tip of her pen.

Indeed, by subscribing to the romantic notion of the poet being an afflicted soul who must seek inspiration through intoxicants or else risk being forsaken by the muse, the narrator, relying upon a biased conception of the writer's life, discredits Roth's artistic achievement. While the poet may well have been under the influence of medication to relieve her insomnia and the nervous condition that, as the narrator supposes, made

interaction with Jarvis Poulter so difficult, this in no way undermines the task Roth must undertake of harnessing her thoughts and feelings to meet the linguistic and structural demands of composing verse. "The name of the poem is the name of the river. No, in fact it is the river, the Meneseteung, that is the poem . . ., " observes the narrator, aware that the poem, with its full title "Champlain at the Mouth of the Meneseteung," exploits the popular but untrue belief that the French explorer Champlain landed at the mouth of the river while sailing down the eastern shore of Lake Huron. Thus, by undermining her narrator's reliability, Munro underscores the way that myth, as exacerbated through ignorance and gossip like that spread by the *Vidette*, can be mistaken for truth. Munro dispels the stereotype of the mad poet who, through revelatory hallucinations, makes the world anew. The narrator acknowledges Roth's actual state of mind toward the end of section V:

For she hasn't thought that crocheted roses could float away or that tombstones could hurry down the street. She doesn't mistake that for reality, and neither does she mistake anything else for reality, and that is how she knows that she is sane.

The poem endures, though any biographical aspects related to it remain pure speculation.

Confronted by the reality of Roth's poem, the narrator's perspective changes toward the end of the story as she searches for one last physical clue that will confirm her idea of what the poet's life was like. No longer does she rely upon conjecture and innuendo to imagine Almeda Roth's life but instead seeks a tangible reminder of Roth's relationship to her family, whose members frequently appear in her poems. With Roth's sole volume of poetry in hand, the narrator, who has stood in a cemetery the entire time she has related her account of Roth's life for the reader, removes grass and dirt from the flat stone that marks the poet's final resting place. "Meda" reads the placard that completes the family plot, and the narrator immediately establishes a relationship between Roth's nickname and the child being called out to play in "Children at Their Games." The narrator realizes that this gravestone is the one connection between Roth and her poetry that actually captures a "trickle in time." Everything else that the narrator has previously thought and felt about Roth's life amounts to nothing more than guesswork. The narrator's account thus far has proved unreliable. "I may have got it wrong," the narrator admits at the end of the story. "I don't know if she ever took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don't know if she ever made grape jelly."

Through the use of an unreliable narrator, "Meneseteung" quietly argues that literature be taken on its own terms, that its ability to achieve success as an enduring work of art does not rely upon aspects of the author's biography or circumstances that are mere interpolations of the reader's desire. As the narrator's experience aptly demonstrates, the relationship between the poet's life and work is much too subtle to accommodate romantic notions of creativity.

Source: David Remy, Critical Essay on "Meneseteung," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Smith suggests that for Munro's female protagonist Almeda the wilderness is less dangerous than the human maledominated garrison.

In a well-known passage in *The Empire Writes Back*, the authors define one of the central problems in the literature of 'settler colonies' as that of the "relationship between the imported language and the new place." This need to find an appropriate language to deal with the reality of new landscapes in settler colonies (such as those in North America, Australia and New Zealand, where Europeans formed independent societies out of colonies originally subservient to the metropolitan, colonial power) is of a different order from the cultural assertions of colonized societies in Africa and Asia. In those colonies, the differences between the indigenous culture and the imposed colonial culture were always obvious:

Whatever the particular nature of colonial oppression in Africa or India, and whatever the legacy of cultural syncretism, the differences confronted as a result of colonialism were palpable []. In the settler colonies, however, difference from the inherited tradition and the need to assert that difference were felt equally strongly.

An interesting development of the need to assert the differences in settler realities is the possibility of later writers from those cultures re-investigating the earlier, established models of settler myth. Do the long-established literary or cultural mythologies of settler difference adequately reflect the differing realities of current writers in settler countries, even as they look back on the settler past that has been inscribed as their authentic, nonmetropolitan cultural identity?

The assumptions of settlers who first asserted a distinctly autochthonous reality can be seen by later writers to be devices that obscure uncomfortable aspects of settler culture while highlighting what makes it different. Edward Said has consistently argued that the way European explorers and colonizers depict otherness is only partly an attempt to understand or describe that different reality; it is also, invariably, an attempt to manage, contain, control it. Said discusses Western, colonizing habits of representation and the counterassertions of colonized peoples about creating a mythic, indigenous reality in opposition to that imposed on them. While not directly related to the practices of settler cultures, his comments are relevant to the non-belligerent attempts of early settler mythologizers (who did not have to fight wars of liberation) to assert cultural independence. Discussing the "constructions" of "insurgent 'natives' about their pre-colonial past," he writes:

This strategy is at work in what many national poets or men of letters say and write during independence or liberation struggles elsewhere in the colonial world. I want to underline the mobilizing power of the images and traditions brought forth, and their fictional, or at least romantically colored, fantastic quality.

In discussions of the literary ethos of the settler culture of Canada, representations of the wilderness or the bush, and refuge from them in concepts of survival or the garrison, are commonplace constructs. In *Strange Things* (originally given as lectures at Oxford), Margaret Atwood links these motifs to the practice of an equally celebrated Canadian cultural icon, Alice Munro. Atwood discusses the mystique of the wilderness, particularly the North, in Canadian imaginative writing. She discusses patterns of Canadian reflection on the wilderness/ North, and the different ways writers depict either the malevolence or the neutrality of that vast expanse. In passing, she comments on the difference between the perspective of male writers (with their male protagonists) and that of female writers (with female protagonists): "If the North is a cold femme fatale, enticing you to destruction, is it similarly female and similarly fatal when a woman character encounters it?" The continuing obsession with the North in the Canadian psyche is one of her constant themes; it is this obsession that leads her to relate her own interest in the wilderness motif to contemporary urban life. And it is to Alice Munro that she turns for oblique explanation of her own focus. Atwood writes:

The fourth lecture is called "Linoleum Caves," a title suggested by a sentence in Alice Munro's *The Lives of Girls and Women* "People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable— deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum." I was intrigued by the contrast between the domestic linoleum and the natural and potentially dangerous cave, and in women-in-the-north stories there is often such a contrast—sometimes with the linoleum being the more treacherous feature.

The surface ease of Atwood's writing is, as always, deceptively straightforward. The well-known passage quoted from Alice Munro introduces elements of the "amazing and unfathomable" alongside those of the "dull" and "the domestic"—all concepts that intrude with increasing urgency in Munro's later work. But it is Atwood herself who raises the question of which is the more "treacherous" or "dangerous"; domesticity (with "linoleum" suggesting a certain kind of economically strained, or at least not lavish, domesticity) or the wilderness—hostile or otherwise. And it is Atwood who typifies, as Canadian, Munro's trait of idiosyncratic juxtaposing or combining of the wild and the domestic; the tamed and the untameable; the decorous and the depraved. Atwood recalls a complaint made in Oxford by a young Canadian about her subject-matter for the Clarendon lectures:

I should not be talking about the North, or the wilderness, or snow, or bears, or cannibalism or any of that [. . .]. these things were of the past, and [. . .] I would give the English a wrong idea about how most Canadians were spending their time these days.

It was "the literature of urban life" that this particular young man thought Atwood should be discussing in Oxford in the 1990s. Atwood's reply—as a by-product—recognizes the unique quality of Alice Munro's imaginative perspective on modern urban life:

I said I thought the English had quite a lot of urban life themselves, and that they didn't need to hear about it from me [. . .]. Given a choice between a morning spent in the doughnut shop and a little cannibalism, which would you take—to read about, that is? Alice Munro of course could handily work in both—but as a rule?

To posit as specifically Canadian an overriding awareness of the wilderness, or at least of natural hostility, is not far removed from familiar statements about survival or the garrison. The new element in Atwood's comments in *Strange Things* is the different uses to which male and female Canadian writers may put their common subconscious access to a mythology of the wild-at-thedoor. Alice Munro seldom writes about the far North, but the settler origins of the culture she knows and explores form a substratum in her fiction. And the restrictions on her female protagonists of that early world are almost invariably more intense when created by humans than are those afforded by the roughing-it-in-the-bush motif of frontier literature.

The way the ethos of the past, whether distant or recent, permeates her protagonists' attitudes is a distinctive feature of her created world. And it is in this regard that her questioning is most consistent: how subjective are those memories and to what extent have they been sanctified as part of an imaginative need to create a special kind of mythologized experience of wilderness life in order to manage it and tame it emotionally?

Because her technique is often ironic, the bleakness in Munro's references to the distant frontier past can be muted in deadpan narration of events or customs. In "Meneseteung," the perspective moves between an almost celebratory, historical reimagining of the growing prosperity of a frontier town and a straight-faced depiction of its human nastiness; the latter quality created implicitly in a narrative whose tone remains bland.

The spinster-protagonist, Almeda Joynt Roth, is an amateur poet whose derivative verses treat conventional subjects. The European context of a poem dealing with a gypsy encampment outside town typifies the conventional struggle of a colonial writer to find an indigenous topic, let alone an indigenous language. But mingled with such literary sources are elements derived from Roth's own experience—a poem by her depicts the children's game of making angel wings in the snow, an explicitly Ontarian experience, even if the Victorian manner of reflection is borrowed:

White roses cold as snow
Bloom where those "angels" lie.
Do they but rest below
Or, in God's wonder, fly?

The sentiments may be borrowed, but the children's angels are indigenous.

A reflection on what is indigenous forms the topic of some of the protagonist's poems. "The Passing of the Old Forest" lists and describes the trees cut down in the original forest as well as providing "a general description of the bears, wolves, eagles, deer, waterfowl." This is wilderness-writing in content, although the tone of all her poems is drawing-room poetic. An instinct to define the local is more pronounced in a companion piece, "A Garden Medley," which is a "catalogue of plants brought from European countries, with bits of history and legend attached, and final Canadianness resulting

from this mixture." Final Canadianness would be the goal of the most dedicated postcolonial settler-poet.

Almeda's interest in defining her connection to European roots exists side-by-side with an inability to create an indigenous style that is neither derivative nor romanticized. The title of the story itself, "Meneseteung," is taken from one of her poems, which epitomizes her penchant for mythologizing her environment. The narrator of the story gives this description of the poem: "'Champlain at the Mouth of the Meneseteung' [. . .] celebrates the popular, untrue belief that the explorer sailed down the eastern shore of Lake Huron and landed at the mouth of the major river." This is an example of Southwestern Ontario frontier myth. In it, the district's pioneering past is derived from the romantic voyage of a great European explorer, opening up its wilderness. The land of the noble adventurer is shared—through the use of the 'Indian' name of the river—with untroubled aboriginal people. From this idealized beginning, the later cosmetic historicizing of Almeda's nineteenth-century frontier town can develop.

The narrator of "Meneseteung" both speculates on life in Almeda's town and recounts the events recorded in contemporary issues of the *Vidette*. This mixture of the imagined ("perhaps petunias growing on top of a stump") and the recorded ("I read about that life in the *Vidette*") offers a shifting focus under the surface ease of the swiftly moving account of the ethos of the settler town, which explicitly resembles Northrop Frye's garrison:

it's not going to vanish, yet it still has some of the look of an encampment. And, like an encampment, it's busy all the time—full of people [. . .]. full of the noise of building and of drivers shouting at their horses and of the trains that come in several times a day.

Here is the positive element of frontier myth: the wilderness driven back by human enterprise and determination. Mr Jarvis Poulter, the widowed businessman who interests Almeda, epitomizes the virtues of wilderness-into-profit; his salt-extraction enterprise is not only successful, but also uses technology to bring natural riches to the surface. In an area which is really "a raw countryside just wrenched from the forest, but swarming with people," he embodies the official values of the settlement, and they have all the elements of Victorian puritanism and taboo that (as cultural baggage carried well into the twentieth century) provide the restricted ethos from which Munro's twentiethcentury protagonists attempt to break free.

But the reality of the frontier town is two-sided. Human endeavour can be seen in heroic terms; the wilderness is receding, prosperity is evident, decorous social norms are being established. At the same time, there is a norm of atrocious behaviour. The list of accepted acts of viciousness is endless: "Strangers who don't look so prosperous are taunted and tormented [. . .]. Be on your guard, the *Vidette* tells people. These are times of opportunity and danger. Tramps, hicksters, shysters, plain thieves are travelling the roads." Those who taunt and torment strangers are children, the boys of the town who "rove through the streets in gangs" and always pick on the weak or the socially unacknowledged ("strangers who don't look so prosperous"). The frontier idyll is at its least convincing in their treatment of the frailest in the encampment, its defenceless

women: "one day they follow an old woman, a drunk named Queen Aggie. They get her into a wheelbarrow and, trundle her all over town, then dump her into a ditch to sober her up." These elements of the settlement culture are presented in such a matter-of-fact manner that they appear on the surface to be part of the romance of imperial development.

Just as Almeda's penchant for romance disquali fies her from coming to terms with the raw side of life at the end of Pearl Street, so a romantic reading of these opening historical re-creations (by the narrator) of life in Almeda's town mask the rawness of the place; a rawness in which the town boys' treatment of Queen Aggie foreshadows their treatment of Almeda in old age when she has become a social oddity, conspicuously incapable of conforming to the decorum expected of her. In recording her death, the *Vidette* reports:

She caught cold, after having become thoroughly wet from a ramble in the Pearl Street bog. (It has been said that some urchins chased her into the water, and such is the boldness and cruelty of some of our youth, and their observed persecution of this lady, that the tale cannot be entirely discounted).

According to the narrator, who controls access to both imagined and recorded events, the latter account in the *Vidette* dates from the twentieth century (1903) rather than the nineteenth (1879 is adduced as the date of the near-miss with Mr Poulter). The change in mood is reflected in the disapproval of the behaviour of "our youth" in 1903, whereas the same behaviour has been neutrally recounted by the narrator in an imaginative recreation of the frontier town in 1879. When Mr Jarvis Poulter's death is recorded in the *Vidette* of 1904, however, the celebration of the pioneer spirit of enterprise which he is seen to have epitomized is on a par with the implicit enthusiasm for the energy of the frontier town of 1879 in the narrator's account. He is described as

one of the founders of our community, and early maker and shaker of this town [. . .] [who] possessed a keen and lively commercial spirit, which was instrumental in the creation of not one but several local enterprises, bringing the benefits of industry, productivity, and employment to our town.

By this time, the frontier virtues have been codified.

Almeda cannot cope with either the decorum of the town or the raw side revealed in a Saturday night squabble-and-fornication on Pearl Street. While her own house faces on Dufferin Street, which is a street "of considerable respectability," her back gate opens onto Pearl Street, which degenerates block by block to the last "dismal" one: "nobody but the poorest people, the unrespectable and undeserving poor, would live there at the edge of a boghole (drained since then) called the Pearl Street Swamp."

I will not belabour the obvious imagery of what the society "faces" and what it "backs onto," but it is worth pointing to the unrelenting nastiness in the presentation of the human values of the frontier town. The poorest people are unrespectable and undeserving, and that's that.

Human constructs defeat Almeda on both levels. She cannot digest the rawness of the Pearl Street scene (which Mr Poulter can move aside with his shoe) and she is entrapped in the straitjacket of official social decorum: for Mr Poulter to walk with her to church (as opposed to walking her home from church) would be a sign of "a declaration." Her retreat into the romantic fantasy world of her poems, seen as a "drawback, a barrier, an obsession in the young girl," becomes for the middle-aged woman a way to "fill her time." And what fills her verses is the myth-building fantasy of an early 'Canadianness' composed of plants and bears and a great explorer's visit to her part of the world, to the total exclusion of Pearl Street, the cause of her turning away from normal social life and her final dowsing in the bog.

As Atwood suggests, it is not the wilderness that is fatal in this experience of a woman on the frontier. A similar inversion of the relative safety offered by the wild or the pioneers in it occurs later in "A Wilderness Station." A reworking, from many viewpoints, of the tale of a colonial bride sent to a remote Ontario site in the mid-1800s, the epistolary narrative constantly captures—without authorial comment—the unthinking objectification of the young woman as commodity in the wilderness settlement. The wilderness *per se* is in fact relatively friendly to its bride. After her husband's murder (by his brother) she is safer—in her eyes— roughing it alone than remaining in contact with her brother-in-law, whose own guilt could be revealed by her.

It is not only the guilty brother who frightens the widow/bride, however. Even the friendly neighbours are a threat because of possible social censure. The shame of her position is an equally important element in her choosing the solitude of the wilderness over social contact with its settlers. Annie has been beaten, and does not want her past or present vulnerability exposed:

Mrs. Treece came and tried to get me to go and live with them the way George was living. She said I could eat and sleep there, they had enough beds. I would not go. They thought I would not go because of my grief but I wouldn't go because somebody might see my black and blue, also they would be watching for me to cry. I said I was not frightened to stay alone.

This is not the conventional plight of a woman widowed in the bush. The threat has in fact been turned inside out, and social life is the most menacing element in Annie's shocked condition. The point is made relentlessly. Annie stops sleeping in the house "where he could find me." She writes: "the flies and mosquitoes came but they hardly bothered me. I would see their bites but not feel them, which was another sign that in the outside I was protected." Those outside the immediate circumstances of Annie's plight can only explain her apparent abnormality in social terms. The conventional stresses of frontier life are judged to have affected her disposition. Letters from "good" males like the ailing Presbyterian minister in the region from which Annie flees, and the dutiful Clerk of the Peace in the village to which she flees, embody conventional attitudes toward women-on-the-frontier. The letter-writers cannot understand the nature of her plight and inscribe an inaccurate myth of frontier-woman problems as they fumble their way around the truth of her predicament. The bewildered Reverend McBain (who,

as a mate, is consumed by a frontier fever whereas Annie lives on to old age) ponders on her apparent insanity:

It may well be that so early in the marriage her submission to her husband was not complete and there would be carelessness about his comfort, and naughty words, and quarrelsome behaviour, as well as the hurtful sulks and silences her sex is prone to. His death occurring before any of this was put right, she would feel a natural and harrowing remorse, and this must have taken hold of her mind [. . .].

Mr James Mullen writes back with the views of a country doctor:

His belief is that she is subject to a sort of delusion peculiar to females, for which the motive is a desire for self-importance, also a wish to escape the monotony of life or the drudgery they may have been born to.

This rewriting of the wilderness myth is not an end in itself. Munro is not merely re-interpreting the reality of settler culture. The plight of both Annie and Almeda embodies the value-system underlying the reactions of subsequent generations of Munro female characters to their parochial world. That world may cease to be part of the wilderness, but as a settled Victorian colony or a shabby-genteel mid-twentieth-century Dominion, or the liberated, Trudeau-era 'world-class' province, its puritan roots, patriarchal and materialistic, inform the existential predicaments of Munro's women. When the irrational and the unpredictable erupt—with increasing frequency—into the lives of the protagonists in Munro's later volumes, those flashes of quasi-insanity are almost without exception revealed in the context of the suffocating conventions of either nineteenth-or twentieth-century Ontario.

Annie's temporary retreat into an outdoor life to escape the threats of her society is seen as a kind of madness in the wilderness station. Almeda is accepted as "odd" once she retreats from the twin nightmares of Pearl Street and Mr Jarvis Poulter's respectable physicality. When Munro's contemporary protagonists attempt to escape the confines of their society, they themselves frequently see it as madness. The origins of this quite explicable turning to the non-rational are what Munro reveals in her re-imagining of the settler roots of their Ontario culture. . . .

Source: Rowland Smith, "Rewriting the Frontier: Wilderness and Social Code in the Fiction of Alice Munro," in *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Fiction in English*, edited by Jacqueline Bardolph, Rodopi, 2001, pp. 77-90.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay excerpt, Howells argues that Munro reconstructs a member of the Canadian female literary tradition with Almeda, a poet who escapes from the confines of what society expects of her into the "the wilderness space of her imagination."

'Meneseteung' presents Munro's contribution to the feminist re-visionary project of reconstructing a female literary tradition by recovering the work of forgotten women writers. As Canadian critic Carole Gerson remarks in her essay on the disappearance of so many nineteenth-century Canadian women poets' names from twentieth-century anthologies,

Tired of being cheated of recognition by the literary establishment, the early Canadian woman poet has deviously begun to re-enter our literature in fictional form, in Carol Shields' *Mary Swann: A Mystery* and Alice Munro's 'Meneseteung'.

Munro's story about a fictive nineteenth-century woman poet who lived in the small town of Goderich in southwestern Ontario pays attention to issues highlighted by feminist critics, such as social assumptions about femininity, women's domestic roles as daughters, wives and mothers, and also to the dualities experienced by women artists whose creative powers conflicted with conventional feminine expectations. The American critic Mary Poovey's study of eighteenth-century literary women *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* provides the focus for my discussion of Munro's exploration of that double role and its disruptive effects on a woman's life that her story becomes a critique of nineteenth-century Canadian colonial society and its attitudes to women and to 'poetesses' in particular. Yet precisely because it is a fiction and not a piece of literary criticism Munro is free to invent her character's life story, combining psychobiography with local history of place as well as a recognition of her own role as narrator. She is also free to highlight those topics which interest her most: the traditional Canadian trope of women and wilderness, issues of gender, sexuality and female bodies, and crucially women's pleasure in writing—be it history, fiction or poetry.

This story has an apparently decorous oldfashioned structure, beginning with a scrupulous account of the (fictive) historical evidence available, as the narrator describes the book of poems which she finds:

Offerings the book is called. Gold lettering on a dullblue cover. The author's full name underneath: Almeda Joynt Roth. The local paper, the *Vidette*, referred to her as 'our poetess.' (*FMY*)

The book, published 1873, has the author's photo as frontispiece as well as a preface giving details of her life. The photo is described in detail, as are a selection of her poems, stanzas of which are used to introduce each of the six sections into which the story is divided. Almeda's life and her poetry would seem to conform to colonial constructions of middle-class femininity with her family's pioneer history, her role as unmarried housekeeper for her widowed father, and her poems on conventional

Victorian subjects like childhood, death and landscape; as Munro says, they are 'poems about birds and wild flowers and snowstorms' (FMY).

Yet there are striking oddities here: first the mysterious title of the story, and then Almeda's ambiguous challenge to gender construction in her portrait where she looks like 'a young nobleman of another century' as well as her fascination with heroic exploration narratives in a poem called 'Champlain at the Mouth of the Meneseteung'. (This is where we realise that the story's title is the ancient Indian name for the Maitland River, at the mouth of which Goderich is situated.)

Munro foregrounds the documentary evidence for her historical reconstruction, where in addition to the book of poems she refers to old photographs of the town and to reports in the local newspaper. (Curiously, the *Vidette* was the name of the local paper in Munro's home town of Wingham in 1883, though the name of the Goderich paper in this period was the *Signal Star*.) She pays attention to the town's economic and material development in the late nineteenth-century with the coming of the railway, local industries, sawmills and brickyards— all typical features of raw new towns built on the edge of the Canadian wilderness. The *Vidette* also supplies a skeleton outline of Almeda's life story after the publication of her single volume: her prospects of marriage to the respectable citizen and Civil Magistrate, Jarvis Poulter, followed by a brief news item on her discovery of a drunken woman's body near the back of her house, and then a gap of over twenty years till the notices of Almeda's death in 1903 and of Jarvis Poulter's in 1904. Apparently they never married. Munro's narrative effort is dedicated to filling in these gaps and to constructing a logic behind scraps of newspaper gossip. Only the first and last sections are set in the present, so forming a frame for the imaginative reconstruction of a woman's relation to place and to poetry, for this is the story of Almeda's transformations from sentimental poetess into romantic wilderness visionary and town eccentric.

Munro's story is a playful mixture of fact and fiction, an imaginative re-visioning of history. Just as Goderich is not named though easily identifiable from its situation on Lake Huron and its salt wells discovered in 1866, so I believe that Almeda is 'partly real' rather than 'wholly invented', as Claire Tomalin speculated in her review of *Friend of My Youth*. I would suggest that Almeda's shadowy parallel be found in the forgotten nineteenth-century poet Eloise A. Skimings (1836-1921), a native of Goderich and known locally as 'the poetess of Lake Huron'. Her photo appears in the Huron County Museum in Goderich as it does on the frontispiece to her one book of poems, *Golden Leaves*, published by Signal Press, Goderich, in 1904. Like Almeda's *Offerings*, the book also has a pale-blue cover with gold lettering on it. Her poems, many of them addressed to persons who had presented her with flowers (like 'a double golden petaled tulip' or 'gold and crimson water lilies') are full of Victorian sentimentality, though one of them is about 'the proud Maitland River' and another 'Reminiscence of Early Days' begins remarkably enough with the phrase 'friend of my youth' in its first line:

Friend of my infancy, friend of my youth,
Thou are just the same to me
As when we roamed adown the glassy slopes

Of old Huron's rippling sea.
(*Golden Leaves*)

Skimings (known in her family as the diminutive 'Eliza') was unmarried too, though looking through her letters I could find no trace of a Jarvis Poulter figure. Indeed, their 'life stories' would appear to have been different, though both are buffed in Goderich cemetery. However, these sketchy similarities grounded in local history provide fascinating glimpses into Munro's fictional transformations of real material.

Almeda's story conforms to nineteenth-century convention with its descriptions of traditional feminine occupations and domestic spaces. However, her house has a double view for though its frontage is on the respectable main street, its back windows overlook a very poor quarter and a patch of undrained bogland, the Pearl Street Swamp. The wilderness is still there on the edge, and Pearl Street with its drunken disorder and violence marks the borderline of settlement beyond which glimmers the pristine wilderness. Almeda can see it like a mirage from her bedroom window:

She can see the sun rising, the swamp mist filling with light, the bulky, nearest trees floating against that mist and the trees behind turning transparent. Swamp oaks, soft maples, tamarack, bitternut. (FMY)

Almeda Roth in her late thirties is still encased in her Victorian image of the 'proper lady', and her romantic aspirations are restricted to thoughts of marriage with Jarvis Poulter. Wanting a hero, she believes that he with his uncompromising masculinity would fulfil her desires:

She wants a man who doesn't have to be made, who is firm already and determined and mysterious to her. She does not look for companionship. (*FMY.*)

Yet even as she decorously fantasises marriage and dreams of the public trappings of courtship like a drive with him into the country, a note of ambivalence creeps in for she knows that this relationship would interfere with her imaginative life and her labours of poetic composition: 'Glad to be beside him. . . . And sorry to have the countryside removed for her—filmed over, in a way, by his talk and preoccupations' (*FMY*). Almeda's landscape poetry (as we can tell from the quoted passages) is sentimental fabrication and highly selective of its raw materials; the countryside that she has written about actually takes 'diligence and determination to see'. In the way she measures loss as well as gain in her romantic fantasy we have a hint of Almeda's 'shy and stubborn eccentricity' which cannot easily be accommodated within conventional femininity.

This delicately nurtured feminine world is split apart by the incident of the drunken brawl and the woman's body against her back fence reported in the *Vidette*. For once, violence and carnality intrude into Almeda's consciousness on a hot summer night:

It's as if there were a ball of fire rolling up Pearl Street, shooting off sparks . . . yells and laughter and shrieks and curses, and the sparks are voices that shoot off alone (*FMY*).

Almeda hears confused sounds of a man and a woman fighting, followed by 'a long, vibrating, choking sound of pain and self-abasement, self-abandonment' which in her innocence she interprets as murder but which are really the sounds of sex. When next morning Almeda goes out and finds the woman's body still there, she is so upset by the sight that she runs barefoot in her nightgown to ask for Jarvis Poulter's help. In his worldly wisdom he takes one look at the body, prods the bare bruised leg 'as you'd nudge a dog or a sow' (*FMY*) and shoos the woman home like an animal, rather coarsely remarking, 'There goes your dead body' (*FMY*). Though Almeda feels sick enough to retch, seeing this female body and how it is treated by men (including Jarvis Poulter) she suddenly becomes aware of her own sexuality through an odd sympathetic connection below the level of consciousness, just as paradoxically Poulter becomes aware of Almeda's sexuality as well. Now he makes the declaration which is tantamount to a marriage proposal: 'I will walk with you to church'—and she refuses him.

Her body becomes the site of resistance, and returning home she finds that she has begun to menstruate, so she locks herself inside her house and ignores Jarvis Poulter's knock at the door. Instead, she takes a dose of her nerve medicine (probably based on laudanum) with a cup of tea and spends the day in 'perfect immobility' sitting enclosed in her overdecorated colonial dining room. The only sound she can hear is the '*plop, plop*' of the grape juice falling from its swollen purple cheesecloth bag into a basin beneath, for she had started to make some grape jelly the evening before. This is Almeda's crisis, possibly diagnosable as a minor nervous breakdown though also possibly as a sign of her strange liberation—or through that state of drug-induced hypersensitivity Almeda finds access to her poetic imagination once more where 'Everything seems charged with life, ready to move and flow and alter. Or possibly to explode' (*FMY*). She begins to conceive a new poem which will 'contain everything', with all her former sentimental subjects supplemented by 'the obscene racket on Pearl Street' and the woman's body, as she makes the leap beyond sentimentality into a new world of imaginative excess where everything overflows and merges— history and prehistory, domestic details, her own unspeakable body fluids, the grape juice now over-flowing and staining her kitchen floor. Together they form a river in her mind to which she gives the ancient name 'Meneseteung':

The name of the poem is the name of the river. No, in fact it is the river, the Meneseteung, that is the poem— with its deep holes and rapids and blissful pools under the summer trees and its grinding blocks of ice thrown up at the end of winter and its desolating spring floods. (*FMY*)

Almeda slips out of the safe spaces of home into the wilderness space of her imagination, escaping from the orthodox feminine role through writing—or rather, imagining writing—a new kind of visionary poetry about the Canadian wilderness which is beyond words: 'a flow of words somewhere, just about ready to make themselves known to her. Poems, even' (*FMY*). Munro is situating Almeda within the tradition of English-Canadian women's wilderness writing. However this vision seems to spell the silencing of Almeda for we hear no more of her till the *Vidette* record of her death from pneumonia caught, ironically enough, after being chased by some louts into the Pearl Street bog. (Again, as Margaret Atwood claimed in *Survival* or 'Death by Landscape' the

wilderness has claimed another of its victims.) The newspaper refers to her as a '*familiar eccentric, or even, sadly, a figure of fun*' (*FMY*). Almeda has become an outsider in her own town, though the obituary goes on to restore to her the femininity and poetic reputation ('*with a volume of sensitive eloquent verse*') which she has plainly abandoned. Whether Almeda ever 'found' herself, having succumbed to the ambiguous spell of the wilderness we do not know; all we witness in this reconstruction is her moment of cutting loose from Victorian conventions. Rather like Aritha van Herk's heroine in *No Fixed Address*, crossing over the frontier into wilderness territory makes it impossible to send back any messages at all.

The story ends with a return to the present as the narrator records her researches in the graveyard where she manages to find Almeda Roth's stone, marked with the one word 'Meda', in its place beside her parents and brother and sister in the family plot, unearthing it by 'pulling grass and scrabbling in the dirt with my bare hands' (*FMY*). Evidently the contemporary narrator shares the historian's impulse to rescue obscure details from the past and to make connections, though in the last paragraph she seems to wish to withdraw from responsibility for the story she has just told, admitting she has made up the details of Almeda's life by inference only:

And they may get it wrong, after all. I may have got it wrong. I don't know if she ever took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don't know if she ever made grape jelly. (*FMY*)

It is that final disclaimer (absent when the story was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1988 but added to this version) which foregrounds Munro's own hidden agenda as a woman writer, for the image of the swollen cloth bag full of grape pulp, the plop of the juice into the bowl, and the immovable purple stain on the kitchen floor when the basin overflows, provide the real connection between the story fragments. This connection highlights not femininity and 'the proper lady' but femaleness, linking a woman writer's domestic tasks with her menstrual flow and the purple bruise on the drunken woman's naked haunch, so making visible the unspoken hidden connections which unite all women regardless of social class or historical time. We may even see such imagery as Munro's version of *écriture feminine*, a way of writing the biological rhythms of the female body and so moving through metaphor beyond the body into the spaces of imagination, for grapes (even when made into jelly) carry connotations of the Bacchantes and their orgiastic worship of Dionysus, an ancient European female wildness as untamed as anything to be found in the Canadian wilderness. This emphatically fictive element of the grape jelly is the attribution of the contemporary narrator, so that her revisionist project recovers a great deal more than the name and voice of a forgotten nineteenth-century poetess. It uncovers connections (or should we say 'makes the connection'?) between women's bodies and writing within the subjective spaces of wilderness, reappropriating Canada's most popular cultural myth as the elusive site of the female imagination. . . .

Source: Coral Ann Howells, "On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: *Friend of My Youth*," in *Alice Munro*, Manchester University Press, 1998, pp. 101-19.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay, McCarthy contends that Almeda chooses "marginality, rather than having it imposed upon her by the Victorian patriarchy."

Alice Munro's short story "Meneseteung," which Clare Tomalin has described as "the finest and most intense" (quoted by Redekop, *Mother*) of the stories collected in *Friend of My Youth* (1990), recounts a narrator's attempt to "see" someone in the past, and like a number of other contemporary fictions by Canadian women—for example, Carol Shields' *Small Ceremonies* (1976), Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman in the World* (1983), Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool* (1986) and *Changing Heaven* (1990), Katherine Govier's *Between Men* (1987) and Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988)—seems to present such vision as an enabling precondition for living through the present; for in all these works, it is the historian, more than the history, who comes to matter, and the narrator, for whom the historical narrative is the way into and out of history, who most commands our attention.

E. D. Blodgett has observed that the narrator in Munro's fiction "so often represents the problem of knowing." In "Meneseteung" this "problem" is embodied in the figure of Almeda Joynt Roth, a genteel lady-poet of the mid-Victorian era living in Munro's fictionalized southwestern Ontario. Interpolating between a few "facts" gleaned from the town newspaper, and extrapolating from a reading of Roth's book of poems, Munro's narrator constructs a version of the other's life which becomes an envisioning, as she imagines Almeda's thoughts and feelings one August weekend when an incident in her back yard leads her to become what the paper describes as "a familiar eccentric."

"Meneseteung" is interesting as well because the author herself has told us what we should see in it. Munro has written that she consciously set out to create in Almeda a poet-figure in a small Ontario town "out at the edge of Victorian civilization," in whose poetry "you get a sense of claustrophobia and waste" ("Contributors' Notes"). She gave the character "just enough [talent] to give her glimpses, stir her up" and "wanted her to have choice." Munro describes Almeda at the end of the story as "half mad but not, I thought, entirely unhappy." Recent critical discussion of the story has taken its cues from Munro's statement of her intentions. What I want to suggest, however, is that "Meneseteung" is a story in which what we see may be something quite other than, perhaps even contrary to, what the author commands us, and that recent critical views of Almeda have ignored the significance of the "glimpses" the character experiences during that August weekend, as well as the "choices" that she may be seen to make. In particular, I want to suggest that Almeda, as a result of her back yard experience, *chooses* eccentricity: she elects marginality, rather than having it imposed upon her by the Victorian patriarchy represented by the town paper, because she intuits in the peripheral world of the Pearl Street Swamp the centre for her life that she (or, as we shall see, the narrator, *for* her) had been unconsciously seeking. For to consider Almeda-as-eccentric as a figure of marginal-peripheral womanhood is to see her exclusively from the point of view of the patriarchal centre, a viewpoint that by the end of

the story is as "dis-arranged," to use Lawrence Mathews's term for Munro's structural technique, as it is discredited.

Critical Essay #6

Almeda's house, as a symbol of the past, presents a conventional twentieth-century view of the nineteenth century. The Freudian intersection ("Joynt"?) where Father Roth (Wrath?) has built his house is the conjunction between the respectable and the rejected, the conscious and the unconscious, the superego and the id. The front "faces" on the respectable and patriarchally-named Dufferin Street, but the back windows "overlook" the ironically and female-named Pearl Street, the world of "the unrespectable and undeserving poor." Almeda lives at this intersection carefully locking and unlocking her doors and gates only to be, like Joyce's Mary, "surprised . . . in the rere of the premises" (Joyce). The symbolic significance of the house's location is in its both/neither relation to the opposed worlds. Its position marks the inevitability of its inmate's need to choose, and when, at the end of section II, the narrator imagines that Almeda has refused to sleep in her father's "large front bedroom," preferring instead to sleep "at the back," where "she can see the sun rising, the swamp mist filling with light, the bulky, nearest trees floating against that mist and the trees behind turning transparent," we are given a proleptic glimpse of Almeda's ultimate choice of redemptive female eccentricity over confining patriarchal respectability.

It also needs to be emphasized that it is the narrator who imagines this refusal on Almeda's part. Munro's now well-known description of her understanding of a story to be "like a house" because "it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way" ("What Is Real?") suggests that, as a metafiction, the relations between the narrator, the character, and the author in this story are a complex series of mirrorings in which identities slide into each other, are interchangeable. The narrator in "Meneseteung" gradually merges with the character, Almeda, an other whose temporal displacement in another century is crossed out as the narrator "crosses over" to her by means of her empathetic re-visioning. In this sense, the "story" of "Meneseteung" is the narrator's "dreaming-back" to the nineteenth-century woman in order to dream her forward into her own contemporary consciousness, a consciousness which identi fies the other's eccentricity as her mystery and her saving difference.

The symbolism of place in "Meneseteung" radiates outward from Almeda Roth's house, but the house is just one of the symbols of the past in the story that the narrator is trying to recover. This recovery is achieved, with the irony and skepticism that attend all Munro's moments of recognition, as the narrator moves from the external view of Almeda Roth provided by the historical record to an internal view which comes with her imaginative merging with the character. In this process, the narrator seeks to connect the Almeda Joynt Roth whom she encounters in the local newspaper, the *Vidette*, with "Meda," who is her "dream" of another Almeda, based on the name she discovers in the book of poems. The Almeda of the *Vidette* is the eccentric spinster whose shelf-life expires 22 April, 1903, a life as closed and unknown to the townspeople as her book of poems. No less external is the initial view of the narrator, looking from the twentieth cenutury to the nineteenth, as if through the wrong end of a telescope, and seeing a life

small and alien, inviting the *Gestalt* of stereotype—yet another madwoman in the century's attic, a victim of patriarchal oppression.

The inside view of Almeda is the narrator's dream of Meda, and the "plot" of the story is the project of freeing this imaginative ancestor from the patriarchal stereotype. Meda is not the spinster-eccentric, the failed phobic poet and madwoman suggested by Munro, but the "other" hidden within Almeda yet, paradoxically, there for all to see. The character's middle name encloses the "joy" the narrator's fantasy searches for in her dream of that other's life, and encodes the narrator's imaginative project of connecting objective, "historical" details and subjective dream. As much as Munro's story may suggest the authorially-imposed version of Almeda as half mad, it also suggests that she chooses her eccentricity, ironically, as a way of escaping the cyclopic social eye of the patriarchy and the identity it would assign her. The narrator's dream of Almeda's transformation one hot August weekend releases the character into a "floating independence" that moves her beyond the world of her ominous neighbour, Jarvis Poulter, beyond the gravity of the *Vidette's* conventions, which would fill her pockets with stones to pull her to the bottom of the social stream.

At the end of section II, the narrator has moved inside the house, beyond the realm of public knowledge of Almeda represented by the *Vidette*, to begin to see with the character's eyes. This merging continues in section III as the narrator imagines Almeda's feelings about Poulter, a widower who has prospered from developing a technique for extracting salt from underground. Poulter clearly belongs on Dufferin Street, and though he is considered "An eccentric, to a degree," his eccentricity is his miserliness. Almeda's is her imagination, and the contrast between them is evident when he tells her how his wells bring up the salt from beneath the earth. She alludes to "The salt of the earth," and then imagines "a great sea" covering the land long ago. Poulter is not interested in this kind of speculation, but Almeda's intuition of "the ancient sea" is what eventually leads her to the Pearl Street Swamp, just as it is her imagination which warns her against a future with Poulter.

Pearl Street, the narrator remarks, is "another story." But that other story is the story that is told, the story of the other that Almeda represents for the narrator, the "Meda" submerged in Almeda, and that the swamp-woman represents in the story for Almeda herself. This mysterious woman from Pearl Street, the swamp angel who turns up at Almeda Roth's back door, leads Almeda to a breakthrough rather than a breakdown because the marginal world of Pearl Street, with its apogee of exclusion, the swamp that "No decent woman" would dare approach, is not periphery but alternate centre. Because of the symbolism of place in the story, this significantly unnamed woman may be seen, to use Catherine Ross's metaphor, as an emissary from the lower world, a world Almeda has been conditioned by the world of her father to abhor (see Ross, "'At least part legend'"). The significance of her anonymity is, perhaps, that the patriarchy excludes her from its privilege of recognition because of the threat she poses to it, but also that her escape from the "public record" is itself evidence of her eccentric freedom, her slipping back to the "swamp" beyond patriarchal control. For the Pearl Street Swamp is an image of a wilderness or "wild zone" which demarcates woman's potential freedom, as well as her actual exclusion, from patriarchal order. Father Roth functions in

the story as a compact symbol of Victorian patriarchy: "a harness-maker by trade, but a cultivated man who could quote by heart from the Bible, Shakespeare, and the writings of Edmund Burke." As "housekeeper to [her] father," Almeda is harnessed by her sense of love and filial duty. As the voice of the Bible, Shakespeare, and Burke, he embodies the culture that, as "poetess," she seeks to enter, but which already entombs her. Almeda appears to be a thoroughly submissive woman, selfdeprecating, apologetic, obedient. But this is not the Meda whom the narrator goes on to imagine, and what she discovers this weekend may be understood as a knowledge against the Father, the beginning of a life of defiance which the patriarchy labels as "eccentric."

Almeda's attraction to Jarvis Poulter is partly her need to replace the dead father. She misses the harness of female service, "misses . . . her father's appreciation, his dark, kind authority." When she imagines Poulter coming to her bed, "a fit of welcome and submission overtakes her, a buried gasp." The narrator imagines Almeda wanting Poulter to walk her to church on Sunday morning, but when he does offer, following the scene in the back yard, she rejects him, locks the door and posts a sign she does not want to be disturbed. For the experience has left her "trembling, as if from a great shock or danger." And it has been both: the womanbeast on all fours is a sign of her own "buried gasp" of womanhood, and Poulter's banishment of this messenger back to the swamp from which she came is a sign of the danger he represents to Meda.

Critical Essay #7

The narrator's account of Almeda's dreamlike experience in which she witnesses a violent sexual encounter involving a Pearl Street couple outside her bedroom window is the climax of "Meneseteung." Awakened by the "fracas," she goes to the window and immediately sees "Pegasus . . . straight ahead, over the swamp." Below, "It's as if there were a ball of fire rolling up Pearl Street, shooting off sparks—only the fire is noise." What she hears pouring from the man's and woman's mouths are the voices of the swamp: "a rising and falling howling cry and a steady throbbing, lowpitched stream of abuse that contains all those words which Almeda associates with danger and depravity and foul smells and disgusting sights." She hears all the words she has never used in her verse, the anti-poetry buried within her polished and civilized confections, a "gagging, vomiting, grunting, pounding. Then a long, vibrating, choking sound of pain and self-abasement, self-abandonment, which could come from either or both of them." As she senses a quality of performance about the scene—"it is always partly a charade with these people"—Almeda becomes a spectator at the mystery play of her own unconscious.

She falls back to sleep but awakens into a profounder dream the next morning when another symbolic emissary appears to her: "She thinks there is a big crow sitting on her windowsill, talking in a disapproving but unsurprised way about the events of the night before. 'Wake up and move the wheelbarrow!' it says to her, scolding, and she understands that it means something else by 'wheelbarrow' —something foul and sorrowful." When she goes out to inspect what appears to be a dead body against her back fence, she finds that "Spiders have draped their webs over the doorway in the night, and the hollyhocks are drooping, heavy with dew." Framed by the drooping sticky flowers she sees "a bare breast let loose, brown nipple pulled long like a cow's teat, and a bare haunch and leg, the haunch showing a bruise as big as a sunflower. The unbruised skin is grayish, like a plucked, raw drumstick." The latter image makes it clear that the man called Poulter will know how to deal with this invasion of the elemental, and when Almeda fetches him he "nudges the leg with the toe of his boot"; then "a startling thing happens. The body heaves itself onto all fours, the head is lifted—the hair all matted with blood and vomit—and the woman begins to bang this head, hard and rhythmically, against Almeda Roth's picket fence. As she bangs her head, she finds her voice and lets out an openmouthed yowl, full of strength and what sounds like an anguished pleasure." "'Far from dead,' says Jarvis Poulter": unimaginative patriarch that he is, he could not understand the full meaning of his words; on an unconscious level the more imaginative Meda does. This woman is Life in all its obscene splendour. She is an other Almeda must acknowledge. "'There's blood,' says Almeda as the woman turns her smeared face." Poulter discounts it. "'You stop that, now,' he says. 'Stop it.'" He means the yowling but it is as if he is ordering her to stop the blood. When Almeda goes back into her house, she discovers that she has started to menstruate. Poulter sends the woman on her way and says to Almeda, "'There goes your dead body,'" again unconscious of the meaning of his words; for, far from being a "farcical resurrection"

(Redekop, *Mothers*), this swamp angel points the way out of her death-in-life for Almeda, announcing the end of a cycle which is also a beginning.

In her kitchen, "The grape pulp and juice has stained the swollen cloth a dark purple"; Almeda's "abdomen is bloated; she is hot and dizzy." "*Plop, plup*, into the basin beneath. She can't sit and look at such a thing." It seems a parody of her own body. Earlier, the rhythmic dripping "remind[ed] her of the conversation of the crow," in which she was ordered to "'Wake up and move the wheelbarrow!"' Again, if we remember that all of this is the narrator's imagining, then the crow-messenger may be as much a figure of narrative desire as of the disapproving patriarchal conscience. It is the narrator who wills Almeda to leave the *camera oscura* of her repressed self, to overcome her fear and enter the body of life outside the prison of the father's house. The "wheelbarrow" is her "dead body" (as long as she remains an inmate of the father's house) waiting to be taken up and possessed by her. In what follows, Almeda becomes hypersensitive to all the patterns she sees around her, "For every one of these patterns, decorations seems charged with life, ready to move and flow and alter." She spends the day trying to "catch" this flow and altering—"to understand it, to be part of it." Because she is a poet, "Soon this glowing and swelling begins to suggest words—not specific words but a flow of words somewhere, just about ready to make themselves known to her." And then she imagines the "one very great poem that will contain everything and, oh, that will make all the other poems, the poems she has written, inconsequential, mere trial and error, mere rags."

At this point, as Almeda "wakes up," in a sense, to the vocation of her body, the narrator in effect imagines the Victorian Almeda Joynt Roth into the twentieth century, for the poem she imagines her wanting to write is a modern, if not even modernist, poem of encyclopedic scope, of contraries and contradictions held in equilibrium, in the meaningful but fictive order of a constellation. Grape juice, menstrual blood, words—all flow into the image of the river, the Meneseteung, which Meda sees as the symbol and subject of the poem she needs to write. Carrington considers "this equation of menstruation and artistic creation [to be] deeply ironic . . . because menstruation signals the absence of conception—the lack of new creation" (*Controlling the Uncontrollable*). But I think this imposes the same patriarchal construction of woman upon Munro's character that the story shows her to escape. To interpret menstruation as "the absence of conception," and thus "creation," is to subscribe to definitions of creation/presence that we are now so sensitive to as ideological instruments of patriarchal oppression, and to fail to see how Munro, in this instance, "write[s] from within a woman's body without trapping that body inside old symbols" (Redekop, *Mothers*). Almeda's menstrual flow can be considered a "hopeful sign" because it signals a release from the false pregnancy of her hopes of marrying Poulter. Even from the patriarchal point of view, Almeda's menstruation can be taken as a sign of her continuing fertility, her potential to create future presence, rather than as a sign of past failure. Munro's story shows Almeda to triumph by escaping such definitions: her life after this weekend is a life of eccentric creativity, a self-fashioning secret to herself and beyond the prying phallic eye of the patriarchal *Vidette*. And finally, can we not see the menstrual flow imagined by the narrator as her attempted "connection" with the ancestor/character, the woman's

"period," "this trickle in time making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish" that she describes in the closing lines of the story?

Almeda's "unresisting surrender to her surroundings" would seem madness from Jarvis Poulter's point of view, who represents the forces that would control the uncontrollable, in Carrington's terms. But is madness what we see? It is the narrator who is imagining this experience and who, as Almeda becomes Meda in that imagining, feels that the surrender "is alright. It seems necessary." This moment can be seen as the transformation of Almeda's loneliness into the pleasure of Meda's independence. To echo Yeats, when Almeda becomes Meda she recovers a radical innocence and learns at last that her happiness is self-delighting, self-appeasing, and self-affrighting. It may also be seen as the ultimate moment of identity between the narrator and the character. When she says that Almeda "cannot escape words. She may think she can, but she can't," it is the narrator's words she cannot escape because, of course, Almeda is nothing but the *narrator's* words. Almeda discovers her identity as Meda, as river daughter, as the narrator completes her invention. Nor is she Munro's version of the modernist Eliots's Thames Daughter, who "can connect / Nothing with nothing." Meda's is a vision of liberating connection, of hope rather than despair.

To read this moment as the beginning of madness is to opt for "another story" altogether. The narrator emphasizes that Meda "hasn't thought that crocheted roses could float away or that tombstones could hurry down the street. She doesn't mistake that for reality, and neither does she mistake anything else for reality, and that is how she knows that she is sane." "No need for alarm," the narrator cautions, but who is she reassuring? Is she "speaking" as narrator or "thinking" as the character? The swamp ultimately kills Meda, but that is only how the *Vidette* would understand her death. She dies from pneumonia, which developed from a cold caught "from a ramble in the Pearl Street bog." But why not see joy and freedom in that "ramble"—the freedom that eccentricity marks in opposition to the centre?

In the narrator's dream of Meda, the nightworld night-town of Pearl Street and its obscene but fecund life-forms flood the erstwhile ark, the safely fenced and locked house of her father. When Poulter, after shooing the Pearl Street drunk from Almeda's garden, says to her, "'There goes your dead body,'" he unknowingly points her in the direction of her freedom, just as the faint, ironic echo of the communion words suggests how that freedom will be achieved. The rough beast Poulter rouses in her yard slouches off to the Pearl Street world Almeda has always looked at from her back windows. In the next few hours, Almeda comes to recognize her repressed connection to that world. It is a breakthrough rather than a breakdown. Poulter's name suggests his fairy tale-like identity as keeper and killer, and, as Almeda becomes Meda, she seems to recognize this, realizing that the poem she must try to imagine, the "one very great poem that will contain everything," must contain "the obscene racket on Pearl Street and the polished toe of Jarvis Poulter's boot and the plucked-chicken haunch with its blue-black flower." The latter image recalls the drunken woman in her yard whom Jarvis drove away. Were Almeda to marry this man she would end strung up by the feet, plucked and bloodless, in a marriage of convention, and this is what she turns away from, choosing instead the dreaded "swamp" of her imagination and independence and the mask of eccentricity.

Critical Essay #8

In "Meneseteung" Munro's representation of the past as a variety of texts—poetic, journalistic, photographic—waiting to be read and rewritten by the present facilitates the dissolution of the narrator into the character, which is the most important feature of the story's form; it also sanctions the convergence of the external reader with the narrator in a way that evokes the interpretation of Meda's breakdown as a liberation and triumph, contrary to the authorially imposed interpretation of the episode as signifying madness and failure.

The photo of Almeda described in section I represents a distant, silent past that looks out at the present, like Eurydice, waiting to be recovered. This Orphic disinterring of the dead woman continues as the narrator reads/quotes/writes Almeda's Preface to her book of poems. The story exemplifies the pun in the subtitle of Neuman and Kamboureli's *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*. The narrator's dream of Meda Roth *corrects* the *Vidette* version of Almeda Roth's life. When Almeda writes in her Preface that "I have occupied myself" with the effort of writing poetry, the phrase connotes more than the Victorian obsession with the immorality of idleness and the necessity of keeping busy. There is the sense that her writing has been an attempt to fill in an "unoccupied" space, a blankness in her sense of self. This returns as well upon the frame story, the narrator's "writing" as a filling in of an emptiness, a gap she wants to connect. Her remarks at the end of the first section about the forgotten knowledge of poetry, the mystery of masculine and feminine rhymes, link the character and the activity, a forgotten woman and a forgotten art, as a composite "mystery"—in the sense of an enigma (*mysterium*) and of a craft (*misterium*)—the character's identity and the narrator's activity.

But while Almeda's poetry in the story would seem to be crucial to the narrator's act of recovery of the symbolic foremother, I am not sure that it functions in a "positive" way. In my understanding of her fictive career/chronology, Almeda's only book is published in 1873, the year after her father's death. While this might suggest we interpret the poetry as an expression of her newfound independence, the "facts" would suggest that the poems were all written while Almeda was daughter/housekeeper to the patriarch. The narrator wonders (facetiously, for she is adopting the tone and viewpoint of the *Vidette*), "Perhaps it was the proud, bookish father encouraging her"; and in her Preface to the book, Almeda herself describes her writing as if it were a supplement/compensation for her inadequacies as a housekeeper; the book's title, *Offerings*, further implies a dispossessing humility. Also, I do not get the sense from the narrative that the poetry continues after the weekend in 1879 when the experiences that alter Almeda occur, and perhaps this silence is another ironic mark of her triumphant escape: she refuses to be the patriarchally approved "poetess," approved so long as she sings from within the gilded cage of the Victorian construction of the feminine. Moreover, it seems that "Meneseteung," the "one very great poem that will contain everything," remains unwritten as a Victorian poem—until, of course, the narrator presents its prose substitute, a late twentieth-century short story, an act which in itself confirms the paradoxical recovery/over-writing of the Victorian foremother by "the writing daughter."

What the narrator presents as Almeda's frame of mind during her breakthrough experience is very much her own in the closing lines of the story. "Meneseteung" ends as it begins with the narrator trying to see her subject in a text. She discovers the gravestone with "Meda" inscribed on it. The whole story has been the reciprocal staring of subjective narrator at narrative subject, and the uncovering of the inscription corroborates the truth of the narrator's belief in Almeda Roth's secret identity:

I thought that there wasn't anybody alive in the world but me who would know this, who would make the connection. And I would be the last person to do so. But perhaps this isn't so. People are curious. . . . You see them going around with notebook, 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.

These lines are the original ending of the story, as it appeared in *The New Yorker*, and in them the narrator describes herself and her project. She has wanted to make a connection with this figure in the past. When she quotes from Almeda's poem, "*Come over, come over, let Meda come over*," we can hear what Karen Smythe describes as the "'double voice' of fictive-elegy" (*Figuring Grief*) the character imagines her dead family calling to her to join them, but the line also speaks the twentieth-century narrator's wish to bring the dead past into the living present. Like Marlatt's narrator in *Ana Historic*, Munro's has set out to rescue a woman from the rubbish of history because that is where woman has been put. Like Laurence's Morag Gunn in *The Diviners*, she knows that the rejected is the motherlode of women's stories.

Friend of My Youth is full of stories about connecting. The title story establishes the pattern as its narrator obliquely approaches a posthumous rapprochement with her mother by imagining the life of someone in her mother's past, eventually moulding this character into a kind of oracular dream-figure who silently speaks words of ironic revelation to her:

I would have wanted to tell her that I knew, I knew her story, though we had never met. I imagine myself trying to tell her. (This is a dream now, I understand it as a dream.) I imagine her listening. . . . But she shakes her head. She smiles at me, and in her smile there is a degree of mockery, a faint, self-assured malice. Weariness, as well. She is not surprised that I am telling her this, but she is weary of it, of me and my idea of her, my information, my notion that I can know anything about her.

In Munro's fiction, the irony of revelation is not so much that nothing is revealed but that revelation does not bring salvation. In "Friend of My Youth" the vision that does not salve is the narrator's recognition that "Of course it's my mother I'm thinking of" when she dreams the other, and thus her mother comes forward to affirm her own impenetrable otherness against her daughter's selfserving designs.

The version of "Meneseteung" in the collection ends with a similar unravelment. But instead of the ironic deflation's taking the wind out of the narrator's sail, it is the reader who is left drifting in indeterminacy. The narrator thinks of others who might seek, like her, to connect past and present:

And they may get it wrong, after all. I may have got it wrong. I don't know if she ever took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don't know if she ever made grape jelly.

This "un-writes" all that has come before it. The episode with the laudanum and grape jelly is the central episode in the story in which Almeda finally connects with the world that has attracted and repulsed her all her life. But the admission is important not so much as metafictive signal as an expression that the patriarchal right/wrong, true/false views of history are not operative here. Woman's story in "Meneseteung" dares to be read by the patriarchal reader as "hysterical," but in that daring it successfully achieves its own hearing, re-writing the dismissive "our poetess" of the opening paragraph into a reclamation of a necessary ancestor. Munro herself may read the episode as the beginning of Almeda's disconnection with reality, but I feel that this goes against the spirit of the story and what is presented. Why should we not imagine Almeda, like the dream-Flora of "Friend of My Youth," listening but smiling in mockery and weariness at her author's idea of her and "her notion that [she] can know anything about her"? This not to suggest that my critical reading of the story is "truer" or "more insightful" than the writer's own understanding of her work, only that Munro's house of fiction is so complex a fabrication that there is no one view of it—critic's or author's—that sees, or seizes, it all.

We cannot discuss Almeda Roth the way we discuss other fictional characters. She does not have the fictive existence of characters whose stories are told in the third person. The form of this story—the movement in the relation of narrator to character, from differentiation to identity to what might be called internalized differentiation—forces us to be aware of the activity of fictive construction, in particular, as a process of "consolation." In her discussion of fictive-elegy, Smythe shows how "self-consciousness functions as a trope of consolation" (*Figuring Grief*). The narrator's confession to invention at the end of "Meneseteung" is part of a pattern in *Friend of My Youth* in which narrators or characters fantasize about another character's life or behaviour but admit that they will never know for sure if they understand the other character. The autobiographical (re)turn of the narrator at the end of "Meneseteung" reminds us that the story has been "about" her, as "the writing daughter" (Redekop, *Mothers*), as much as about Almeda, the absent foremother. The shifts from first-to third-and back to first-person narration, as well as the quotations from Almeda's poetry, configure the "double voice" of elegy, "the voice of the absent as well as the voice of the survivor . . . figured in the performed and performative text" (Smythe, *Figuring Grief*). The past is used in "Meneseteung" in ways that serve a feminist recovery of a lost history as well as a metafictional exploration of how narrative, like Penelope's tapestry, is as much what is unwoven as what is woven. Like the other women's works that use the nineteenth century mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Munro's "Meneseteung" also shows that these are one and the same project. Imagining/unravelling the other's past is an invention/ weaving of the present, a present that is now, and then, connected and continuous with the mystery of woman coming to possess her own presence. In this sense, Munro's inventive recollection of the past exemplifies the moral imagination which Benjamin urges in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History": "The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again"; and "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present

as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably." The centre of Munro's story is the apocalyptic flash of that "ball of fire rolling up Pearl Street, shooting off sparks," apocalyptic for Almeda as well as for Munro's narrator; for from the image cast by that moment a complex recognition begins to arrange itself, and it is in that patterned reflection that Munro articulates some of her deepest "concerns."

Source: Dermot McCarthy, "The Woman Out Back: Alice Munro's 'Meneseteung,'" in *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1994, pp. 1-19.

Adaptations

Munro's *Friend of My Youth* (1990) was produced as an abridged audiobook in 1990 by Random House Audio. It is currently out of print but is available through some libraries and used book stores.

Munro's *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage: Stories* (2001) was produced as an unabridged audiobook in 2002 by Audio Partners. It was also produced as an unabridged audio CD in 2002 by Chivers Sound Library.

Munro's *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998) was produced as an unabridged audiobook in 1999 by Chivers Audio Books.

Topics for Further Study

In "Meneseteung" the narrator creates a story by citing fictional news clippings and reconstructing the historical events this fictional paper discusses, filling in the blanks with guesswork. Pick a little-known historical event, and use the bits of information available to create your own historical short story, using your knowledge of the topic to fill in the blanks where necessary.

In the story, Almeda Roth is a female poet. While the townspeople claim her literary gifts as a town treasure, they also believe that she should give them up to get married and take care of her husband. Choose another female writer from the late nineteenth century and write a short biography about her, focusing on how her talents were received by her society.

Research the history of female painters in the nineteenth century, and compare the challenges that they faced to the challenges that Almeda faces in the story.

Draw a map of Canada, circa the late nineteenth century when the main events of the story take place. Identify the general region in which Almeda Roth lives, and, using the geographical clues in the story—as well as any relevant information from the author's own geographical background— try to pinpoint the specific area where Munro intends the story to take place.

One of the final news clippings in the story describes Almeda as having become an unusual eccentric, but, given the details, it seems likely that Almeda has gone insane. Research the history of insanity in the late nineteenth century, and discuss several methods that were used to deal with the mentally ill. For each method, try to find an actual historical example to illustrate your idea.

Compare and Contrast

Mid-to-Late 1800s: The various provinces of Canada are united into the British-affiliated Dominion of Canada in an event known as the Confederation. The move is completely supported by Britain through the British North America Act of 1867, although not all Canadian provinces agree with this move.

1980s: In 1982, Britain passes the Canada Act, which formally removes the British North America Act of 1867 and grants Canada complete autonomy from Great Britain. The Canadian government drafts its first constitution in 1982, which leads to many political battles in Canada, most notably with residents in the province of Quebec, which refuses to sign the document, worrying that the specific needs of its distinct French-Canadian culture will not be preserved by the constitution.

Today: Although Quebec has still not signed the constitution, it operates under this document, and the province is considered a part of Canada. That said, Quebec retains several distinct aspects that are influenced by its French-speaking heritage, including a different civil code and separate schools for French-speaking and English-speaking students.

Mid-to-Late 1800s: The Confederation sets the stage for immigration into the western portions of Canada. Due to bad economic times, Canadians move westward, seeking better opportunities, and also southward to the United States.

1980s: Due to a large influx of immigrants from Europe and Asia, as well as from the United States, Canada's population becomes increasingly multicultural. The overwhelming majority of these people settle in urban areas.

Today: In terms of land area, Canada is the second-largest country in the world after Russia, but it is one of the most sparsely populated countries. Despite the massive migration west in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the greatest concentrations of people are still in Ontario and Quebec, formerly Canada West and East, respectively, and more than three-fourths of the population lives in urban areas.

Mid-to-Late 1800s: Legislation is passed that restricts voting to property-owning males only, which, during the year of Confederation, equates to only about one-fifth of Canada's males. Women in Canada join the international women's movement, known as first-wave feminism, that is taking place in other areas of the world, most notably Britain and the United States. Women's suffrage becomes one of the main goals of this movement.

1980s: Despite gaining the right to vote and making other advances through the modern women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s, women still struggle to achieve equal rights in certain areas, such as the workplace and education.

Today: Some inequalities remain, particularly in the political sphere. Canadian women outnumber the men but do not have equal representation.

What Do I Read Next?

Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) depicts everyday life in small-town Ohio. This collection of short stories was noted for its subtle, understated qualities and its use of unconventional structure.

In "Meneseteung," the narrator imagines Almeda Roth in a nerve-medicine-induced delirium in which Roth locks herself inside her house and examines the wallpaper, which she thinks might move at any moment. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's famous novella *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1899), the story consists of ten diary entries by Jane, a wife who gets locked into a room. Her physician husband thinks that the seclusion will help her get over what he assumes is depression. As the story progresses, Jane increasingly relates with a trapped woman whom she envisions living inside the room's yellow wallpaper.

In Munro's first book, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), several of the female narrators possess characteristics that keep them isolated from their communities, like Almeda in "Meneseteung."

Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* (1972), a collection of interconnected short stories that some critics refer to as a novel, examines the life of Del Jordan. Del is exposed to the underworld of crime and outcasts on The Flats Road, a seamy area like the Pearl Street region described in "Meneseteung." The book explores Del's coming of age as a woman and a writer, including her experiences with sex and religion.

Several critics have noted the photorealistic qualities of Munro's fiction, including the stories in *Friend of My Youth*. In Susan Sontag's landmark essay collection *On Photography* (1977), the writer thoroughly explores the meaning of photography. Like Munro's examination of the roles of fiction and reality in the narrative process, Sontag explores the relation between a photograph and the real object that it is meant to represent, including how much truth there is in a photograph.

Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia* (1993) involves major characters from two different time periods in the same house who are involved in a mystery that takes place in both eras. Like "Meneseteung," the modern-day characters help to re-create the historical events. Unlike Munro's story, audiences see the events literally reenacted by the historical characters, as opposed to having them reconstructed through a narrator who is making educated guesses.

Munro has often been called a regional writer, and she has noted that she was most influenced by another regional writer, Eudora Welty, a woman who set most of her stories in the American South and who also focused on the mundane aspects of everyday life. *The Golden Apples* (1949), an interconnected collection of stories, features a strong female protagonist who defies the conventions of her southern society by remaining a single and independent woman. Unlike Munro's works, which are subtle

in their discussion of mythological elements and symbolism, this book, like much of Welty's work, incorporates a heavy dose of Greek mythology and symbolism.

Further Study

Bothwell, Robert, *A Traveller's History of Canada*, Interlink Books, 2001.

This brief history of Canada includes two chapters that cover the era in which "Meneseteung" takes place, including the major social and political changes. The book also includes historical maps, a chronology of major events, and lists of major political figures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination*, Yale University Press, 2000.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar originally published this groundbreaking volume of feminist literary criticism in 1979. The book offers revolutionary concepts in literary criticism about women and gives critical studies of the works of major nineteenthcentury women authors, such as Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and Charlotte Brontë. This latest edition includes a new introduction from the two authors.

Heble, Ajay, *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence*, University of Toronto Press, 1994.

Munro is known for the plotless, episodic quality of her fiction, which often does not examine ideas to completion, and, in fact, seems to purposely leave elements out. In Heble's book, he fills in the gaps in Munro's fiction, exploring the subtext behind these omissions.

Howells, Coral Ann, *Alice Munro*, Manchester University Press, 1998.

This first book-length study of Munro's work gives a comprehensive overview of the author, including a discussion of her fictional small-town Canadian settings and photorealistic descriptions.

Ross, Catherine Sheldrick, *Alice Munro: A Double Life*, ECW Press, 1993.

This first book-length biography of Munro gives a chronological overview of the author's dual development as a wife/mother and professional writer and the challenges that she faced in balancing these two roles. Ross also examines how these autobiographical elements have figured into Munro's fiction.

Thacker, Robert, ed., *The Rest of the Story: Critical Essays on Alice Munro*, ECW Press, 1999.

Thacker, the editor of the *American Review of Canadian Studies*, includes essays from leading critics that collectively give a comprehensive critical and biographical discussion of Munro and her art.

York, Lorraine, *The Other Side of Dailiness: Photography in the Works of Alice Munro, Timothy Findley, Michael Ondaatje, and Margaret Laurence*, ECW Press, 1987.

Although published before *Friend of My Youth*, York's book is still a good source for anybody wishing to examine the use of photography in Munro's fiction. The book includes a discussion of Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* as well as an exploration of works by the three other Canadian authors.

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Salter, Mary Jo, "In Praise of Accidents," in *New Republic*, Vol. 202, No. 3930, May 14, 1990, pp. 50-53.

Shields, Carol, "In Ontario," in *London Review of Books*, February 7, 1991, pp. 22-23.

Timson, Judith, "Merciful Light," in *Maclean's*, Vol. 103, No. 19, May 7, 1990, pp. 66-67.

Woodcock, George, "The Plots of Life: The Realism of Alice Munro," in *Queen's Quarterly*, Vol. 93, No. 2, Summer 1986, pp. 235-50.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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