Walker Brothers Cowboy Study Guide

Walker Brothers Cowboy by Alice Munro

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Alice Munro is one of Canada's most renowned contemporary writers. Since the publication of her first volume, *Dance of the Happy Shades* in 1968, she has produced several important short story collections. Munro has been called a regional writer because many of her stories are set in rural Ontario during the Depression era, where Munro grew up, and evoke a bygone time of hardship and deprivation. Within this world, however, Munro's central characters often hold on to their sense of wonder and mystery about the world around them, as does the narrator of "Walker Brothers Cowboy." The family of the narrator—a young girl—has lost their fox farm, and her father has been forced to take a job peddling patent medicines, food flavorings, and poisons to the farmers who live in Ontario's backcountry, but the girl still looks deeply at the ordinary world and finds enchantment in it. Like many of Munro's works, "Walker Brothers Cowboy" also explores such universal themes as isolation, identity, and maturation.

Munro further delves into these issues in her collection *Lives of Girls and Women,* again from the point of view of the narrator of "Walker Brothers Cowboy." This return to the narrator—Del Jordan— allows interested readers to more closely examine and follow one girl's path to maturity, and observe how her unique way of looking at the world influences the choices that she makes. "Walker Brothers Cowboy," however, also stands alone as a fine example of Munro's skill as a writer and her concerns as a woman.

Overview

"Walker Brothers Cowboy" tells of the journey of a young girl as she travels along with her father on one of his outings as a salesman for Walker Brothers. The story, told in the first person narrative, begins with the father and daughter walking through their town and follows them as they drive through the countryside, stopping along the way at the home of one of the father's old loves, and then returning home again.

Author Biography

Alice Munro was born in Ontario in 1931. She grew up on the outskirts of the town of Wingham, in a setting much like Tuppertown, as described by the narrator in "Walker Brothers Cowboy." As a teenager, Munro began secretly writing stories during her lunch hour because writing was considered a strange activity for a girl. Munro felt a sense of alienation when she began to write, and was self-conscious about her early stories—which she later described as intensely romantic.

In 1949, Munro left home to attend the University of Western Ontario on scholarship. In 1950, her first published story, "The Dimensions of Shadow," appeared in the university's student publication. Upon her marriage in 1952, Munro ended her formal education. She and her husband moved to Vancouver and, two years later, to Victoria to open a bookstore. It was around this time that Munro began to write from her own experience, exploring characters and situations found in her native region of southern Ontario.

While raising her children, Munro continued to write and sold a few of her stories to be aired by the Canadian Broadcast Corporation. Over the next twelve years, she wrote the stories that appeared in her first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades.* This volume, published in 1968, won the Governor General's Award—Canada's highest literary award— the following year. The stories in this collection are autobiographical in origin. Like Ben Jordan, Munro's father—to whom the collection was dedicated— had a fox farm in the 1930s, and Munro grew up very poor.

In the early 1970s, Munro and her husband separated, and she moved to London, Ontario, with her daughters. By then a respected author, she was given a position as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario. Over the next few years, she published several more short story collections.

In 1976, Munro remarried and moved to Clinton, Ontario, just a few miles from the town where she grew up. She continued to publish award-winning fiction that drew critical praise, both in Canada and abroad, and traveled extensively to lecture on fiction and the writing process.

About the Author

Alice Munro was born in 1931 in the small Canadian farming town of Wingham, in southwestern Ontario. She spent her entire childhood in Wingham, until she received a scholarship to the University of Western Ontario. While at the university, she met James Munro, and left school before graduating in order to marry him. The Munros raised three daughters and for several years ran a bookshop in Victoria; they eventually divorced. In 1972, Munro returned to Ontario and obtained jobs at universities to support herself while she was writing. During this time, she met Gerald Fremlin, a geographer. They decided to move back to the rural area where they had both grown up and take care of their respective parents. They imagined staying in the area for a year or two; at present, the couple still resides in the rural community.

Munro never intended to be a shortstory writer. Rather, she began writing short stories because she never had time to write anything longer. She got used to the format and has never looked back. She has said that she do[es]n't understand where the excitement is supposed to come in a novel, and I do in a story. There's a kind of tension that if I'm getting a story right I can feel right away, and I don't feel that when I try to write a novel. I kind of want a moment that's explosive, and I want everything gathered into that.

She has different methods for accessing her imagination for story writing. One method is that she gets the beginning of a story from a memory, an anecdote. However, that anecdote gets lost and is usually unrecognizable in the final story. She gives an example: "Suppose you have—in memory—a young woman stepping off a train in an outfit so elegant her family is compelled to take her down a peg, and it somehow becomes a wife who's been recovering from a mental breakdown, met by her husband and his mother and the mother's nurse whom the husband doesn't yet know he's in love with. How did that happen? I don't know."

Munro follows a traditional method for composing her work. She does one or two drafts long hand before she approaches a computer. A story might be done in two months, beginning to end, and ready to go, but it is more often "six to eight months, many changes, some false directions, much fiddling and some despair" before a story is ready for publication. She writes everyday unless it's impossible, and she begins writing when she wakes up, writing for about two or three hours.

When Munro was young, her literary heroes were Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, and James Agee. As time has passed, she has come to greatly admire John Updike, John Cheever, Joyce Carol Oates, Peter Taylor, and, especially, William Maxwell. William Trevor, Edna O'Brien, and Richard Ford also rank high on her list of influences.

Before writing the Short Stories, the collection of stories in which "Walker Brothers Cowboy" first appeared, Munro published quite a few short story collections: Dance of the Happy Hours (1973), Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You (1974), The Beggar

Maid (1979), The Moons of Jupiter (1983), The Progress of Love (1986), Friend of My Youth (1990), and Open Secrets (1994). Munro is a threetime winner of the Governor General's Literary Award, Canada's highest award given in the literary arena; the Lannan Literary Award; and the W. H. Smith Award, given to Open Secrets as the best book published in the United Kingdom in 1995. Her stories have appeared in The New Yorker, the Atlantic Monthly, The Paris Review, and other publications. Her collections have been translated into thirteen languages.

Plot Summary

The story begins with the narrator describing a walk she takes with her father down to the banks of Lake Huron. They walk through town, passing the neighbor children, whom she does not know. They pass a deserted factory, a lumberyard, and junkyards. They enter a vacant lot that serves as a park where they sit and look at the water. Farther down, the narrator sees the part of the lake they used to visit before the family moved to Tuppertown from Dungannon. By the docks, instead of the farmers and their wives dressed in their Sunday best, they meet tramps, for whom her father rolls a cigarette. Her father tells her how the Great Lakes were formed, after the ice from the Ice Age retreated. The girl finds it impossible to imagine when this time existed—when dinosaurs roamed the earth. She can't even imagine when Indians lived around the lake. She reflects on how short a period of time an individual inhabits the earth.

The story changes scene, and the narrator talks about her father's job as a salesman for Walker Brothers. He goes from door to door in the back country, selling shampoos, medicines, teas, and poison. In Dungannon, the family had a fox farm, but they went bankrupt and were forced to move to Tuppertown, where her father found this job. The girl's mother is clearly unhappy with their new poverty, and more so, with their fall from the dignity of owning a business to their status as the family of a "pedlar."

Usually on these summer afternoons, the girl's mother dresses her daughter and herself up for a trip to the grocery. Today, however, her father invites her mother to drive in the country with him; she has a headache, and he thinks the fresh air might do her good. The mother explains that going with him on his sales calls is not what she had in mind, but the father ends up taking the girl and her younger brother. He tries to convince the mother to come, but she won't.

Driving to the backcountry, the family sings songs that the father makes up. The father stops at the farmhouses along his route while the children stay in the car. He drives farther and farther away until they are no longer in his territory. Eventually, he pulls into a lane where a woman is picking up the wash from the grass. He gets out of the car and announces himself as the Walker Brothers man. When the woman looks up, it is clear she recognizes him. He introduces her to the children as Nora Cronin. She brings them into the house where they meet her old, blind mother, with whom she lives. The old woman recognizes the father by his voice and says it has been a long time since they saw him.

Nora goes upstairs to change clothes, and when she returns, she is dressed up and is more sociable. She makes orange drinks for the children. The former friends catch each other up to date on their lives. The father says he has only been working for Walker Brothers for a few months, and she tells him about her two sisters, whom he remembers from when he was younger and used to come visit Nora. Eventually, Nora's mother falls asleep, and they move to the front room even though the father suggests that the children go and play outside.

In the front room, the girl realizes that Nora is Catholic, and she has never been in a Catholic person's house. She remembers that her grandmother and aunt always say of the Catholics, "They dig with the wrong foot."

Nora pours herself and the father a whisky, which the girl is surprised to see him drink. The father tells stories about his sales travels, at which Nora laughs heartily. Then he sings his made-up songs. Nora puts on a record, and she and the girl dance, but when the father refuses to dance with her, Nora takes the record off.

Nora invites them for supper, but he says they can't stay, the children's mother will worry. Nora invites him to visit again and to bring his wife. Then the father tells Nora where they live, but Nora doesn't repeat the directions.

On the way home, the girl knows, without being told, not to mention the whisky or the dancing to her mother. Her brother wants the father to sing, but he won't. They drive back to Tuppertown in the darkening afternoon, in silence.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The story takes place in late summer in and near Tuppertown on Lake Huron in Canada. The time is the 1930s. Tuppertown is an old grain port that has clearly seen better times. The story is told by a young girl whose family has recently moved to town from the country where their fox farm suffered a financial collapse.

As the story opens, the girl and her father take an after-dinner walk down to the shore of Lake Huron. They leave behind her mother and little brother. The mother is busy remaking old clothes into new ones for the girl to wear on the first day of school. The brother is very young and has already been put to bed on the screened-in porch. As the girl and her father leave, he calls out to them to bring back some ice cream, but the girl tells him in an offhand manner that he will be asleep by the time they return.

The way to the lake takes the father and daughter along a shabby street through town. There are ice cream signs on the sidewalk in front of small stores. In parts of the street, maple tree roots have grown under the sidewalk, heaving it up and cracking it. The girl thinks they look like crocodiles in the dirt yards of the houses along the way. The father sometimes greets the people sitting outside on their porches. The girl does not know any of these people because her mother makes her stay in her own yard with her brother. The mother says the boy is too young to leave the yard and the girl must watch him. Although this means that she cannot play with the other children in the neighborhood, she does not really mind. She watches them doing the same sorts of things she does, like writing in the dirt with a stick.

They walk on past the houses, a boarded-up factory and a closed lumberyard to where the sidewalk ends. The way to the lake becomes a sandy path through what the girl describes as nameless weeds to a vacant lot. The girl describes the lot as a park because it has a bench with a missing slat where they can sit and look at the water. The water is always gray in the evening light; there are no colorful sunsets and only a dim line of the horizon to be seen.

Further down the shore there is a sandy swimming beach with a lifeguard's chair and floats marking the safe swimming area. There is also a sort of pavilion where farmers and their wives go to socialize on Sundays in their best clothes. The girl remembers that she and her family used to visit this part of town before they lost their farm. They would visit a few times each summer and go down to the docks to see the old grain. She wondered how these old worn-out boats ever made it across the lake.

Sometimes, when the girl and her father pass the docks on their after-dinner walks one of the tramps from around the docks will come up and talk to her father. She is afraid of the tramps so she does not pay attention to the conversation, but she hears her father

tell the tramp that he too is hard up and then offers to roll him a cigarette if he wants one.

When they reach the shore, the father tells his daughter about how the Great Lakes were formed. He tells her ice came down from the North to cover the flat plain that had been there. He tells her the ice pushed into low spots on the plain and then shrank back toward the North Pole, leaving its traces in the depressions it gouged out of the earth. The depressions that were filled with ice then became the Great Lakes. He presses his hand, fingers spread, into the ground to illustrate his point but his hand does not make much of an impression on the hard ground. He tells her that the ice had more power behind it than his hand does.

The father tells the girl that the lakes are relatively new compared to the age of the earth, and this information makes her uncomfortable. She does not want to think of such big changes. She is horrified at how short a period of time humans have to be alive on earth, but she perceives that her father is at peace with this idea. She suddenly realizes that even he, who seems to have been in the world as long as it has existed, was not alive at the beginning of the century, nor did he know a time when there were no cars or electric lights. She does not want to think about the enormity of time or the changes wrought by irresistible forces. She wants the world to stay the same forever, just as she knows it, with the lake having always been a lake with a beach and a town.

The father has a job selling products for Walker Brothers. His route takes in the rural areas around Tuppertown. Walker Brothers products include fruit concentrates for making soft drinks, medicines, tonics, shampoo, spices, rat poison and liniment, among the other things that farm households might need. To amuse himself while driving his route he makes up songs about the job and the things he sees.

The girl's mother sees nothing amusing about these songs, which she calls peddler's songs. To her they are only another indication of how far down the social ladder the family has fallen. She is having a difficult time adjusting to life in town, and she takes no comfort in the fact that many people are in the same situation, having suffered serious financial reversals. She does not see that her husband is lucky to have a job at all. She only speaks to one of her neighbors, a woman she also considers to have lost social status because she was a schoolteacher who married the janitor. The mother does not see that her family's situation is not unique and represents part of a national problem. She believes that fate has forced her to live among poor people in a bad part of town, and none of the house's amenities like the claw-footed bathtub, nor any of the town's offerings, which include restaurants, movie theaters, and a Woolworth's store, can distract her from her sense of shame at being there.

The mother tries to maintain what she believes to be her rightful social position. When she goes grocery shopping in the afternoon, she dresses up in a navy blue dress, white shoes and a white straw hat. She curls her daughter's hair into ringlets and makes her wear a large hair ribbon, and when they walk down the street to the store she makes a point of acting like a lady, in contrast to the other women in their loose, worn

housedresses. The girl hates these outings and even hates the sound of her name when her mother says it out in public.

Sometimes they bring back a brick of ice cream from the store as a treat to share with the little brother, but they must eat it all at one time because they do not have a refrigerator. Her mother tries to engage the girl in conversation about their previous life on the farm, prodding her to remember specific things and events. The girl pretends to remember less than she really does because she does not want to be trapped into feeling things she does not want to feel.

The mother suffers from terrible headaches and has to lie down until they pass. She likes to lie on the porch and look up at the tree branches, pretending she is back on the farm. Her husband tries to convince her to go with him for a drive in the country to get some fresh air to relieve her pain, but she knows that what he is really offering is only a ride with him as he travels his sales route.

On one occasion when she turns down his invitation, he decides to take the children with him instead. The girl is excited at the prospect of getting out of town. After getting her little brother ready she watches her father put on his salesman's outfit, complete with white shirt, light slacks, a straw hat, and pencils clipped to the shirt pocket. He loads suitcases filled with bottles into the back of their old Essex car. The girl notes how different it is to go out with her father. She does not have to curl her hair or scrub her knees to go with him. There is no need to pretend anything.

They take a shortcut out of town, and the father starts to sing a song he has made up about himself. He calls himself the "Walker Brothers Cowboy" in the song. It has lines about how he wants to be on the Rio Grand and about how he got his route because the previous salesman died. As they pass the Baptist Camp he makes up a song about how all the Baptists on down in the Lake Huron water getting their sins washed away. The little boy looks out the car windows for the Baptists but says he cannot see them, and his father says again that they are down in the lake.

The car leaves the highway, taking dirt roads that lead further into the empty flat countryside and to the farmhouses at the ends of their lanes. The girl observes deep black pine shade in the bush lots behind the houses, "like pools nobody can every get to." The blinds of the houses are drawn against the heat. The houses often have doors on the second story that open out onto nothing. The father says that those are doors that sleepwalkers use, and the girl feels foolish for realizing too late that he is joking. Her brother says anyone who used the doors would break their necks. The narrator notes how much she associates the 1930s with this type of farmhouse, this kind of afternoon, and with her father's straw hat, bright tie and Essex automobile.

Some of the cars in the farmyards are operational, but others are junk, stripped of their doors and seats. There are no living things to be seen in the yards except dogs. The father speaks gently to the dogs as he walks past them up to the door. He uses one voice to calm the dogs and another, cheerier one when he begins his salesman's pitch.

When he goes inside a house, the children must wait in the car for him, wondering what he does inside.

Sometimes, when trying to entertain his wife, the father will pretend that she is one of his farm clients. He goes into his pitches for various products and remedies. Eventually, he makes his wife laugh, even though she thinks some of his talk is uncouth, and she assures the children that he is only joking, that he actually is too much of a gentleman to say such things.

The drive along the sales route goes from one sad farmhouse to another, and the children get hotter and hotter in the car. They see no other children or any men in the fields. The girl tries to amuse herself and her brother with a game of "I Spy." She has to use colors because he is too young to recognize letters, and it is difficult to find colors beyond the gray of dilapidated buildings, the brown of the yards, and black and brown of the dogs. She looks for new colors in the worn patches of painted surfaces on the cars or doors, sometimes finding purple, maroon, or yellow. Her brother says these colors are not fair, and the game quickly deteriorates.

At one house, after the father walks up to the door, whistling and calling out to the inhabitants, he finds no one home. Just as he is picking up his suitcases, a window opens upstairs and a white pot is emptied over the sill. While the window is not directly over him, some of the contents of the pot splash onto him. He carries his suitcases back to the car, no longer whistling, and drives off. The girl tells her brother that the pot was full of pee, and the little boy thinks this is very funny and laughs about it until the father asks him not to tell his mother what happened because she will not see the joke. The boy asks if he will put it in a song, and the father says he will try.

After a while, the girl notices that they are not going down any more farmhouse lanes nor do they seem to be headed back toward home. She asks if they are still in her father's territory and he says they are not. Her brother notices how fast they are going, and in fact, they are bouncing hard through dry puddle holes, and the bottles in the suitcases rattle and gurgle "promisingly." Eventually they do go down another lane and stop in front of an unpainted farmhouse that is "silver in the sun." The girl asks why they are stopping here if it is not in the territory, and her father says she will see.

A woman is gathering wash set out in the sun to bleach and dry in front of the house. She stares at the car when it pulls up and asks if they are lost. The father says no, he is the Walker Brothers man. The woman tells him that someone else is their Walker Brothers man and that he had just been there. Then she recognizes the father as an old friend from long ago. Seeing him is something of a shock to her, and it takes her some time to recover. She apologizes for how she looks and expresses amazement at the children in the car, that they are his. The father asks how she has been and if she has a husband hidden in the woodshed somewhere. She jokes that if she had a husband that is not where she would keep him. She invites them into her kitchen, which is cool, simple and clean. Her mother, old and blind, is sitting there when they come in. The old woman asks her daughter, Nora, if they have company. Nora tells her that it is Ben Jordan. When she asks if he has been out of the country because they have not seen

him in so long, Nora answers "aggressively" that he is married now and that he has brought his children with him.

The girl is excited to meet her first blind person. She notes that the blind woman's eyes are closed, with sockets that are sunk into shapeless hollows. From one eye comes what she calls a miraculous silver tear.

Nora leaves them visiting with her mother while she goes to change her clothes. When she returns she is wearing a flowered crepe dress and Cuban-heeled shoes. She smells of cologne. Nora offers to make them cool drinks and reaches for her bottle of Walker Brother orange syrup to do so. She and Ben, the father, talk about old times. He tells her how he lost his farm, and she fills him in on news about her sisters. While they talk Nora's mother falls asleep, and Nora suggests that they move to the front room so they will not disturb her.

Ben tells the children to go outside and play, but the girl wants to stay inside and investigate the interesting things in the front room. There is a pump organ, a gramophone and a picture of the Virgin Mary on the wall. The girl realizes then that Nora must be a Roman Catholic. Her family has never known any Catholics well enough to visit their houses so she is intrigued at this new development. She remembers how her grandmother and aunt used to talk about Catholics and imagines what they would say about Nora; they would say that she "digs with the wrong foot," the girl speculates.

Nora takes a bottle out of the top of the organ, telling Ben she does not like to drink alone. She pours a drink for herself and for Ben. The girl remembers that her mother once said that her father did not drink whiskey but now she sees that he does. As they drink, Ben entertains Nora with his stories about selling for Walker Brothers. He even describes the recent incident involving the chamber pot, and Nora laughs hard at his story. He sings her the songs he makes up along the road, and she thinks they are very funny too. Nora suddenly realizes that the little boy is studying the gramophone and tells him she will play a record for him. She chooses one that she and Ben used to dance to when they were young. Nora begins to teach the girl to dance. The girl is happy to learn and is having a good time. Nora tries to get Ben to dance with her several times, but he refuses. Then he says they should be going. She invites them to stay for supper, but Ben says the children's mother would worry. He tells her he will come again if he gets the chance, and he gives her directions to their house in town, inviting her to visit them. Nora does not write the directions down, though. When they leave, she touches the car's fender, her hand making "an unintelligible mark in the dust."

On the way home, the father buys licorice instead of ice cream and shares it with the children. The girl knows he is using it to hide the smell of the whiskey. She understands that she is not to mention the visit to Nora to her mother. Her little brother asks his father to sing one of his songs, but the father says he is "fresh out" of songs. He tells him to watch for rabbits instead.

As the father drives, the girl understands that she has seen an important part of his life that she had not known about before. She feels it fading away and taking all the magic of the afternoon with it. The changes she observed in her father during the visit to Nora disappear as they approach Tuppertown, where the sky again becomes the even gray it always was on summer evenings by the lake.

Analysis

The major theme in the story involves change: the long slow change wrought by irresistible forces over time, the uncontrollable changes that affect people's lives and the imprints that such changes leave behind.

The story the father tells his daughter about the forming of the Great Lakes represents the major metaphor for change and its impact. The ice coming down from the North over the flat plain, gouging out places that are later filled with water and become lakes, is a strong force that imposed unstoppable changes on the land. In the same way, the Depression of the 1930s made significant changes in the lives of many people, forcing the characters in the story to move into town from the country, forcing the father to take a sales job instead of running his own farm, and prompting the mother to take on a life of pretense that makes her ill. Later on in the story, the idea of unstoppable forces that change the landscape is reprised when the reader discovers that Ben's mother disapproved of Catholics and that this was the likely reason for his leaving Nora. His mother is a force stronger than he is in this situation, and she imposed this change on his life.

Other important symbols in the story include the use of water imagery, hollows and depressions formed by water or illustrating the lack of water, and ice cream. The repeated mention of ice cream represents the domestication of the primal force of the moving ice that changed the land. In illustration of such domestication, there is Ben, the father, who is no longer the mover of his own life, the narrator's mother who must pretend to continue a social status she no longer has, and Nora, who has become the caretaker of her family. To soften the blow of a force's reduced strength, the cooling ice in ice cream represents a treat during the hot summer, just as the father's job supports his family, the mother remakes old clothes into new ones and Nora maintains her family farm.

The fact that the story takes place during the Depression reflects the idea that strong forces, in this case economic forces, make impressions on the world. The "hollow" made by the financial downturn was evident in people's lives.

Ben's sales route takes him over flat dry land. He brings liquids in bottles to the parched farmhouses. Liquid also has a negative connation when he receives splashes from the chamber pot, but it prompts him to visit Nora for the first time in years. On the way to her house, the bottles in his suitcases "gurgle promisingly," indicating that something good could come of this. Nora offers them "drinks," salvation contained in the element of

liquid, a concept first mentioned in the father's song about the Baptists washing their sins away in the Lake Huron water.

Nora's house is described as silver instead of gray like the other farmhouses. They drive over empty puddle holes to get there. These images of these holes are echoed in the language describing the hollow eye sockets of Nora's blind mother, but her eye provides a "miraculous" silver tear. The use of the word "miraculous" is used to emphasize the fact that Nora is a Roman Catholic and to represent an enchantment potentially available in this visit. Nora represents what might have been; she brings color into the lives of the father and his children in contrast to the grayness surrounding the family in Tuppertown. Their search for color, or novelty, is represented in the children's game of "I Spy" where the girl looks at worn patches in paint for new colors.

The father is called by name during the visit at Nora's. Before that, in his "real" life he has no name, only the names of roles he plays. He is a "father" or the "Walker Brothers man." Nora calls him "Ben," understands his jokes, and laughs at his stories. He does not feel he must hide things from her as he does from his wife. She does not make him feel like a failure.

Nora made an impression on the father's life, but his mother said she "digs with the wrong foot," meaning she was the wrong religion. Her "digging" was not appropriate, but it left a hollow in his life nonetheless. When Ben and the children leave Nora's house that afternoon, she touches his car, but leaves only an "unintelligible mark" in the dust. This reflects the small effect she has on his current life and echoes the image of the father pressing his hand into the hard dirt by the lake as he tried to illustrate how the ice formed the Great Lakes at the beginning of the story. He says the ice had a stronger force behind it than his hand does, meaning that he is at the mercy of the various forces in his life, just as Nora must accept the forces that impact her life.

At the end of the story, they drive back to town, receding from Nora and the effect their visit has had on her, and submitting to the gray lives they have there, instead of continuing the magical "silver" afternoon they had with Nora.

The narrator of the story has glimpsed the reality of adult lives. She sees that their lives are subject to strong forces and that individuals themselves represent strong forces on the lives of others. The impact of these forces leaves "gouges" and "hollows," the emptiness that can mark a life, but the forces also recede after a time, and life goes on by adapting to the changes and filling up the hollows as best it can.

Characters

Nora Cronin

Nora is an old girlfriend of the narrator's father. She lives with her old, blind mother in a farmhouse. She has never married, a fact that causes her some bitterness. However, she still demonstrates a zest for life, chatting happily and dancing with her visitors. Nora is unlike many people the narrator has met; for one thing, she is Catholic. But the narrator is drawn to her, despite a certain coarseness of appearance (as typified by her profuse sweating, fleshy bosom, and the dark hairs above her lip).

The Father

See Ben Jordan

Ben Jordan

The narrator's father is a man who does his best to keep up the spirits of his family, despite their recent financial hardships. His tenaciousness is indicated by his holding onto the family fox farm until it was impossible to keep it any longer. Now, he uses that same quality to try and make the best of his new job as a "pedlar." He makes up songs to amuse himself and exaggerates what happens on his job— even the more unpleasant incidents—to make his family laugh. His visit to Nora demonstrates that he, like his wife, feels drawn to the past.

Mrs. Jordan

The mother continually expresses her discontentment with the present status of her family. She denigrates her husband's job, refuses to allow her children to play with the neighbors' children, and overall finds nothing redemptive in their present life. She lives in the past, fondly recalling prior days of tranquility and greater wealth, and she tries to draw her daughter into these fantasies. The mother also resists any attempts at enjoying her life, such as when her husband tells funny stories about his sales calls, but occasionally even she can't help but laugh.

The Mother

See Mrs. Jordan

The Narrator

The narrator is a preadolescent girl who lives with her father, mother, and younger brother. She demonstrates a level of maturity beyond her years. She is responsible and insightful. She also is finely attuned to what goes on around her. She notices the subtlety in words and expressions and uses this information to better understand the people around her.

The narrator has a close, companionable, and trusting relationship with her father. She is able to learn important lessons from her father even while she understands that he has failed the family in significant ways, particularly economically. By contrast, the narrator has a much more difficult relationship with her mother. She sees through her mother's pretensions and is embarrassed by them. Partially because of this comprehension, the narrator is unable to respect her mother. She continually resists her mother's efforts to form an alliance, instead tacitly empathizing with her father and his values.

The narrator's relationship to people outside of her family is not made clear in the story. However, it seems that she is fairly isolated from her peer group both because of her mother's snobbism and because of her own maturity.

Setting

Ms. Munro was born, lives in, and largely writes about the same part of the world— rural southwestern Canada. This is also the setting of the novel, in Tuppertown, "an old town on Lake Huron, an old grain port." The town is bordered by good farming land, and the lake—Lake Huron— provides a kind of ritualistic wildness that is reflected in the people, though only in subtly defined ways. While people tend to go about their business and greet one another in a ritualistic manner, there is the sly hint of discomfiture running through the veins of the story that belies complacency.

The narrator and her father walk to the lake together quite often, but the trip they take on the day in which the story takes place is beyond the bounds of the quotidian; her father takes her and her brother to the home of an old lover, far off the beaten path of his Walker Brothers' route. The road grows wilder and more sparsely populated as they careen down it, driving faster than usual.

We are backing out of the driveway with the rising hope of adventure, just the little hope that takes you over the bump into the street, the hot air starting to move, turning into a breeze, the houses growing less and less familiar as we follow the shortcut my father knows, the quick way out of town.

The characters are very rooted in the place where they live. As the narrator and her father walk down to Lake Huron, her father tells her the story of how the Great Lakes came into existence. He describes the way the ice pushed into the plains that had once spread across the land now occupied by the lakes, and how the ice later shrunk and left the indentations of the lakes. The creation story is a jumping point for the narrator to consider her place in the world, and she quickly grows overwhelmed by the sheer age of the earth, and her relatively tiny span of time upon it. She considers the issues but shuts the thoughts off as quickly as they arose: "I do not like to think of it. I wish the Lake to be always just a lake, with the safe-swimming floats marking it, and the breakwater and the lights of Tuppertown."

Munro also uses the setting to define the encroachment of poverty upon the town.

As the narrator walks from her house to the lake, she describes the scenery in such a way that makes it clear that the town where her family lives has undergone a recession.

Many of the farmers in the area lost their farms. Her own family lost an entire fox farm. She notes that the family used to live in an area called Dungannon, and that when they lived there, they used to go to the area of town where farmers and their wives arrived in their Sunday best at a "long dark-green building, like a roofed veranda, called the Pavilion." As she walks along with her father, she notices a factory that has boarded-up windows, and the tramps hanging about the docks where "grain boats, ancient, rusty, wallowing, mak[e] us wonder how they got past the breakwater let alone to Fort William." Even the skies are somber and broken, cracked with gray cloud cover.

Social Concerns

Narrated by the voice of Ben Jordan's daughter, Munro's story revolves around the Jordan family after they have lost their business operating a fox farm and Mr. Jordan is forced to work for Walker Brothers as a door-to-door salesman during the Great Depression. Yet the underlying social concern really seems to be about the family's ability to cope with change, and whether Ben Jordan's son and daughter will use this calamity as a lesson with which to make a rite of passage to adulthood.

On the surface, Mr. Jordan appears to be able to handle his reduced circumstances far better than Mrs. Jordan. Mr. Jordan has been able to face the uncertainties of life with humor and kindness. He jokes with his daughter about making sure that the lake is still in its place and makes light of his own job. At the same time, Mr. Jordan confers a sense of the timelessness of life through his discussions with his daughter about dinosaurs and the formations of lakes.

In contrast, Mrs. Jordan has great difficulty coping with her changed financial circumstances. While Mr. Jordan ventures out on new paths by finding a new job and braving new territory as a Walker Brothers salesman, Mrs. Jordan remains limited to the confines of her own home. She is unwilling to go out on country rides with her family, claiming that the heat makes her feel sick, or that she does not want to be far away from town. While her husband has taken on an undesirable job to make ends meet, Mrs. Jordan remains stuck in the past.

She only speaks to one neighbor whom she feels is of her class, and when she and her daughter go shopping, she insists that her daughter wear fine clothing, dressing her like a lady and making her stand out when compared to all of the other people who wear their clothes loose and without belts, unashamed of their reduced status.

It is also interesting to note how Mr. and Mrs. Jordan's different reactions to hard times impact their marriage—and their interaction with the world. One senses the strain between Mr. and Mrs. Jordan as Mr.

Jordan tries to attenuate the burden of their financial position on his wife. He makes up songs about being a Walker Brothers salesman, which Mrs. Jordan dismisses as a pedlar's song. Similarly, the smaller crea ture comforts, like milk in bottles, movie theatres, and a restaurant hold no magic for Mrs. Jordan; she is inconsolable about the family's financial state. Yet, this attitude tends to remove Mrs. Jordan more and more from the world. She cannot empathize with others and becomes increasingly withdrawn. The fact that Mrs. Jordan cannot be grateful that her husband has a job during this time is indicative of her own limited view of the world. Indeed, as their daughter explains, "[her] mother has no time for the national calamity, only ours . . . and the only way to take this as she sees it, is with dignity, with bitterness, and no reconciliation."

In this manner, a familial financial setback has really exposed other, larger issues between Mr. and Mrs. Jordan. Yet it is clear that while Mrs. Jordan would rather hang on

to her depressed state, Mr. Jordan still attempts to expose his children to a more well-rounded view of the world. Whenever he can, Mr. Jordan takes his daughter and son on rides with him as he sells his wares, showing them a broader world and teaching them how to treat others with respect.

Social Sensitivity

Munro writes about a poor family. This is never specifically spelled out; rather, she constantly hints at the family's situation through the narrator's descriptions of family doings and their relationships with the outside world. In the first paragraph, the reader learns that a new school year is about to begin, and that the narrator's mother "has ripped up for this purpose an old suit and an old plaid wool dress of hers, and she has to cut and match very cleverly and also make me stand for endless fittings, sweaty, itching from the hot wool, ungrateful." The young girl is unhappy with the state of things, and is just aware enough of the state of affairs to describe it in disdainful terms that lets the reader know that their lack of money is a source of some soreness.

As the narrator and her father walk into town, they pass by the homes of families whose children the narrator's mother does not allow her to play with. Despite their poverty, the mother constantly recalls the days when the family lived in relative prosperity, and the narrator adjusts to her mother's prejudices by putting up an emotional front. Her mother claims that the narrator cannot play with the other children because her brother is too young to play, and the narrator must watch over him. The narrator justifies the situation in her mind:

I am not so sad to watch their evening games because the games themselves are ragged, dissolving. Children, of their own will, draw apart, separate into islands of two or one under the heavy trees, occupying themselves in such solitary ways as I do all day, planting pebbles in the dirt or writing in it with a stick.

As children so often do, the narrator learns to work within the parameters she is given, justifying where necessary to make sense of the disparity between her desires— to play with others—and the rules that are set out for her.

The narrator is keenly aware of adults' treatment of children as extraneous. When her mother is feeling unwell, and declines her husband's offer to go out on one of his Walker Brothers sales trips, her father offers to take both of the children with him to "'give [her] a rest.'" The narrator follows her father's statement by asking what there is "about us that people need to be given a rest from? Never mind." She is frustrated to be treated as something from which one needs a rest, and then in a quick change of momentum, she cuts the reader off from that line of thought, as though she assumes that the reader, too, is adult, or does not question this consideration of children. Her frustration surfaces again when her father is talking with Nora, and her father asks the narrator and her brother if they want to go outside and amuse themselves. "Amuse ourselves how?" the narrator retorts, though it is unclear whether she asks the question aloud. In any case, she decides to stay in the room, and her father does not balk at her, so it would seem that she has gained at least some ground on the threshold of adulthood.

Techniques

Alice Munro's style of writing, like her subject matter, is fairly plain on the surface, yet contains many subtleties. "Walker Brothers Cowboy", like the bulk of her literature, occurs in rural Canada. In this particular story, the mundane nature of a depression era small town suggests, initially, an equally bland populace. From this initial assumption, however, the reader is ultimately shown that, far from being colorless, Ben Jordan may have quite an interesting past. Munro does not go far enough to allow the reader to speculate on the type of relationship Nora and Ben shared. Instead, the reader is left to experience the same sense of revelation as experienced by the daughter.

Literary Qualities

Munro chooses a first person narrator to tell the story in "Walker Brothers Cowboy." What is most interesting about this narrator is her precocious nature. She is young, and thus does not necessarily comprehend all the actions and words that the adults do or say, but she has a keen sensation of the import of events. Thus, while Munro is careful to invest her description of what she is experiencing with only as much understanding as would realistically be available to the faculties of a young girl, she is a perceptive young girl. This allows Munro the freedom to have her young narrator comment on the events happening in the story. For example, after stopping at the home of one of her father's former girlfriends, the narrator understands the significance of her shared experience with her father.

My father does not say anything to me about not mentioning things at home, but I know, just from the thoughtfulness, the pause when he passes the licorice, that there are things not to be mentioned. The whisky, maybe the dancing. No worry about my brother, he does not notice enough.

Again, at the close of the story, the narrator reflects on the events of the day as she and her father and brother return to Tuppertown.

So my father drives and my brother watches the road for rabbits and I feel my father's life flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kind of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine.

Clearly these are the thoughts of a mature person, and Munro thus allows the writer-narrator to impinge upon the thoughts of the child-narrator. Striding between the writer and child character proves very effective, specifically because Munro has created a young girl, wise beyond her years, who is able to morph into the role of the author's muse. In fact, it seems almost as though the young girl is reciting her story from an older age, but telling it as though she were in the present.

It is clear that Munro loves language; she moves easily between the simple tones of the narrator's speech to the more complex language of her thoughts. While driving along with her father, the narrator tells the following:

I notice in a little while that we are not turning in any more lanes, though it does not seem to me that we are headed home.

"Is this the way to Sunshine?" I ask my father, and he answers, "No, ma'am, it's not." "Are we still in your territory?" He shakes his head. "We're going fast," my brother says approvingly, and in fact we are bouncing along through dry puddleholes so that all the bottles in the suitcases clink together and gurgle promisingly.

Munro's deft use of language allows readers of all proclivities to be engaged; the young adults reading the story feel the energy and desires inherent in traveling along with one's father as he does his work; the adult perspective provides lovely shades of meaning within the context of a relationship between a woman and a man; and the vivid depictions of the country life will likely interest readers of all genres. The more specific the moment Munro describes, the more lyrical her language becomes. For instance, she has her narrator describe the part of their journey in the car with her father and brother:

One yard after another, then, the old cars, the pumps, dogs, views of gray barns and falling-down sheds and unturning windmills. The men, if they are working in the fields, are not in any fields that we can see.

The children are far away, following dry creek beds or looking for blackberries, or else they are hidden in the house, spying at us through cracks in the blinds. The car seat has grown slick with our sweat. I dare my brother to sound the horn, wanting to do it myself but not wanting to get the blame. He knows better.

The picture is vivid, both inside the car and in the surrounding environment. Munro swiftly trades off between the internal vortex of the family and the outside world, daring the reader to find a clean break between the two. A family is a microcosm of the world at large, at once a separate entity, and a swallowed up piece of a Venn diagram of that same world. It is impossible, Munro seems to say, to separate the events and emotions flowing through a family unit from what happens in the community in which the family exists. Interspersed throughout the story are such mental photographs of the landscape, of the texture of the relationships between the narrator and her mother, father, and brother, and of the everyday lives of the characters in the story. It is clear that Munro has a strong affinity for the central Canadian farmland communities in which she places her stories, and this affinity lends a truth and depth to "Walker Brothers Cowboy" that is palpable to the reader.

Thematic Overview

One of the themes of the story is the movement from childhood to adulthood, a key component of which is acceptance of change. Mrs. Jordan attempts to shield her children from the changes brought on by the depression. She only allows her son and daughter to play by themselves in the yard, and not with other children. She further sets her daughter apart from the general populace by forcing her to wear damp ringlets and white shoes, in contrast to other children her age, whose parents are too concerned about making money to bother with matters of appearance.

Yet the Jordans' daughter demonstrates time and time again that she is ready to break away from her mother's cloistered world. Her father serves as his daughter's mentor in this regard. When his wife is trying to fit their daughter into old clothes that do not suit her, it is her father who takes her down to "see if the lake is still there". He encourages contact with the outside world through his own readiness to speak to strangers on the street and through his lighthearted treatment of misfortune.

The daughter is more than willing to learn from her father about his viewpoint in life.

Although she still fears change (for she still wishes that the lake, like all things in life, should remain a lake, with safe-swimming floats marking it), she is willing to venture out into the world with her father and accept, through his eyes, that change does occur.

The daughter truly begins to separate from her childhood when her father takes both her and her brother out on one of his sales routes. Before leaving, Ben Jordan invites his wife to rejoin the world, enticing her by telling her that "what you need is some fresh air and a drive in the country."

Yet she rejects both her husband's job as a salesman and their collective financial reality, stating that she has a headache and that she would prefer to "lie [there] with [her] eyes closed". When the daughter leaves with her father, she rejoices that she can leave with her "knees unscrubbed [and her] hair unringleted".

Mr. Jordan drives his children far out into the countryside, past old houses and desolate areas ravaged by the depression.

During the course of the drive, the daughter becomes exposed to the truth of poverty and of many realities other than her own relatively comfortable circumstance. One such reality is that not everyone welcomes her father's arrival. At one house, the residents refuse to come to the door when Mr.

Jordan knocks and try to throw urine on him to make him go away. The matter-offact manner in which Mr. Jordan reacts to this assault demonstrates to his daughter that rough treatment is to be expected and should be taken in stride.

In contrast to the daughter, the son, perhaps because he is younger, cannot discern things in the same fashion. When Mr. Jordan sings a humorous song about Baptists being down by the lake, the son fails to see it as a joke, and literally expects to see Baptists. Later on, the son sees only humor when his father is almost pelted with urine and fails to recognize the painful insult his father just suffered.

While the trip along the route with her father provides the daughter with many adult lessons, it is her encounter with Nora Cronin, presumably an old girlfriend of her father's, that firmly places her in an adult realm. When Mr. Jordan veers off his traditional route, his daughter questions him as to why they are leaving his assigned territory. He responds that she will soon understand where they are going and why. Ultimately, they end up in front of a small house in which Nora Cronin and her mother live. Although Nora does not immediately recognize Ben Jordan, her exclamation upon recognition is sufficient to inform the daughter that this is not an ordinary business encounter. Nora's behavior, one of repressed emotion and some underlying pain, is indicative of a past relationship.

Presumably, this is one of the daughter's first opportunities to meet a woman different from her mother. While her mother wears traditional clothes, Nora Cronin goes upstairs and changes into a lavish dress drenched in numerous colors. This dress belies the colorlessness of Nora's existence and indicates the passion that she possesses.

Nora's body is also that of a mature woman— introducing the idea of sexuality to the daughter. Nora's "arms are heavy and every bit of her skin you can see is covered with little dark freckles like measles. Her hair is short, black, coarse and curly, her teeth very white and strong." Accompanying her vivid persona is the smell of cologne and a playful voice that hints at a different past.

The daughter also sees later that Nora Cronin has a far more optimistic disposition about their circumstances, congratulating her father on having a job instead of taking the gloomy outlook adopted by her mother.

Later, when the daughter is dancing with Nora, she smells Nora's own scent mingling with her cologne, again providing a sexual overlay to the encounter.

The most significant thing that Nora provides for the daughter's passage into adulthood is a greater appreciation of the depth of adult relationships and circumstances.

Through her brief encounter with Nora, the daughter realizes that things are not always as they seem. While Mrs. Jordan had informed her daughter that her father never drank whisky, the daughter witnesses her father drink whisky as if it is something he used to do with regularity. Through this experience, the daughter then realizes that her father had a life before her mother that involved different habits and people. Yet the daughter also has enough maturity to realize that she should not feel resentment for his past— and that she should not mention the afternoon's events to her mother. In contrast, the son has not even realized that anything out of the ordinary has occurred.

As the family heads back home, the reader realizes that in that afternoon, the daughter has made the crossing from child to young adult. She realizes that her father is a complex individual, someone with a past and a deep character. She "feel[s] [her] father's life flowing back from [the] car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary, and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and instances you cannot imagine."

Themes

Poverty

"Walker Brothers Cowboy" takes place in Canada in the 1930s, a decade when that country— like so many others around the world—was feeling the drastic effects of the Great Depression. It is clear that the narrator's family's monetary circumstances have been adversely affected by the world events. The narrator makes reference to a time when her father owned his own business, a silver fox farm. Though they were poor then, "that was a different sort of poverty." Now the girl's father is a "pedlar," indicating that the family has come down in the world.

The mother's actions in the story most clearly show the poverty of the family, but details do as well: the mother has to alter her old clothes to fit her daughter; the family now lives in a poor neighborhood; and, when visiting Lake Huron, they are now on the side where the tramps can be found, instead of at the Pavillion, where the farmers can be found dressed in their Sunday best. Though the narrator makes it clear that living in the town has certain comforts that they did not have on the farm—indoor plumbing, sidewalks, milk delivery, and Woolworths—the mother sees no virtue in their new life.

When the children and their father drive through the back country, the girl witnesses a more desolate kind of poverty than that of her own family. The roads aren't paved, the farmhouses are unpainted, the cars are old, and the families use chamber pots. Nora's kitchen is "threadbare" and the front door is broken.

Despite the physical poverty of this "flat, scorched, empty" land, the visit to Nora's farm reveals that there exists spiritual richness despite material poverty. Nora may be dressed in a dirty smock—unlike the narrator's mother, who dresses in her best—but she knows how to make something of what life offers her, even if it is only a brief visit from a former boyfriend. Nora's embrace of music and dance—symbols of good times—is in marked contrast to Mrs. Jordan's dour demeanor.

Pride

Mrs. Jordan's pride, as well as her anger, at the family's new station in life is evident. She deeply resents having "come down in the world." She dislikes their neighborhood, which is filled with other poor people. The only neighbor she will speak to is another woman who has also come down in the world—"a schoolteacher who married the janitor." She will not even let her daughter play with the children in the neighborhood. The neighbor women dress differently from Mrs. Jordan; they wear aprons at home and housedresses for the store, but these dresses are "torn under the arms." Mrs. Jordan, by contrast, wears a good dress, a slip, and freshly whitened shoes. She also enlists her daughter, whose hair she fixes in curls, in putting on this show of gentility for the neighbors. She is determined to be a *"lady* shopping," and for this effort, she puts on a

voice "high, proud, and ringing, deliberately different from the voice of any mother on the street."

The mother's damaged pride further manifests itself in her inability to be consoled by any comforts that can be drawn from living in a town, such as the convenience of nearby stores and flush-toilets. Her pride also keeps her from seeing beyond her own circumstances even though millions of other Canadians shared such poverty throughout the 1930s. As the narrator relates, "my mother has no time for the national calamity, only ours."

Mrs. Jordan's resentment of their new life keeps her from finding any joy in it. Her husband, whom she points out is a "pedlar," continually tries to brighten her spirits with stories of his travels, but only unwillingly does she laugh. On the day that the story takes place, he has tried to convince her to come for a drive, as the fresh air is bound to help her headache, but such an outing is not the mother's "idea of a drive in the country."

Memory and the Past

Memory and the past are central themes in this story. The narrator introduces these themes in the opening section, which does not take place on the same day as the rest of the story. In this section, the narrator contemplates the timelessness of Lake Huron, which is near their home. She has a hard time imagining bygone times in the area and realizes what a short space in history each individual occupies.

Memory and the past also figure throughout the main story. The mother's inability to reconcile herself to the present is due to her idealization of the past. She tries to recreate their life in Dungannon, going back many years to the "leisurely days before my brother was born." She is not able to keep from mentioning those days. The narrator pretends to remember far less than she actually does, "wary of being trapped into sympathy or any unwanted emotion"—clearly, unlike her mother, she is doing her best to adapt to their new situation.

The scene at Nora's farmhouse also relies on the power of memory. Nora instantly recognizes the father, as does Nora's mother, who recognizes him solely by his voice. Further, Nora's reception of B en Jordan is influenced by her recollection of the romance they once shared. From time to time, her voice betrays her bitterness and anger, though whether this stems from not marrying Ben Jordan or not marrying at all is unclear.

Style

Point of View

"Walker Brothers Cowboy" is told in the first person narrative voice, meaning that the events of the story are narrated from the point of view of a single character—in this case, an unnamed, preadolescent girl. Athough all the ideas, impressions, and observations are filtered through her, her remarkable perception provides a full and rich picture of the community in which she lives, the people who populate it—particularly her parents—and the economic woes that face the nation. The narrator allows her prior experiences, as well as what she sees in other people, to influence her telling of events. Thus, she accurately portrays her mother as a woman whose pride undermines the unity of the family, and her father as a man who tries his best to maintain the family's optimism despite their reduced circumstances.

Setting

The story takes place in a small town in Ontario during the 1930s. At that time, Canada was suffering the effects of the Great Depression. The poverty of the time is reflected both in the narrator's neighborhood and in the recent bankruptcy of her father's fox farm. The cumulative effects of this economic downturn are alluded to in the narrator's recitation of the family's financial troubles:

Up until last winter we had our own business, a fox farm.... Prices fell, my father hung on hoping they would get better next year, and they fell again, and he hung on one more year and one more and finally it was not possible to hang on any more, we owed everything to the feed company.

Much of the story, however, is set in the backcountry surrounding the town of Tuppertown. This region also suffers from impoverishment. The land, which the narrator describes as "scorched," seems to offer little sustenance to the people who work it. As the narrator notes, "The men, if they are working in the fields, are not in any fields that we can see." The backcountry houses are unpainted and have no indoor plumbing. The setting lacks color: the buildings are gray, the yards are brown, and the dogs are black or brown. The only color the narrator notes is the "rainbow patches" on the rusty old cars. In some ways, this bleak landscape reflects the narrator's homelife, which may have material comforts but lacks emotional vitality.

Structure

The story is divided into two sections: the first section is short, and the second makes up the bulk of the story. The first is general and reflects certain abstract ideas while the second is concrete and details one specific event.

In the first section, the narrator establishes the theme of the fleetingness of time and existence, as well as hinting at the transformation that her family has undergone. The first paragraphs of this section show how the narrator and her family are set apart from their neighbors and no longer occupy the social position they once did. Their social comedown is indicated by their viewpoint of the lake— sitting in a vacant lot on a bench that is missing a slat—as well as the tramps who approach them. The last paragraph of this section brings up more abstract ideas—that, as a human, each individual only occupies this earth for a minute period of time, yet each individual seems to think it is a long time. As the narrator writes, "[e]ven my father, who sometimes seems to me to have been at home in the world as long as it has lasted, has really lived on this earth only a little longer than I have, in terms of all the time there has been to live in." The narrator also finds it impossible to imagine when dinosaurs walked this region, before even the Ice Age that formed the Great Lakes, or when Indians lived along the banks of the lake. Her meditation on time sets the stage for her mother's longing for the past—explored in greater depth in the second section—as well as her father's nostalgic visit to Nora, the girlfriend of his youth.

The second section of the story is more concrete, and the author has the opportunity to flesh out the abstract, general ideas that she has raised and play them out against flesh-and-blood characters and real situations. This section further clarifies the family's economic situation and the interpersonal relationships that have resulted from the loss of their farm, as well as exploring her father's own view of the past.

Historical Context

Canada During the Depression

When the New York stock market crashed in October 1929, Canada almost immediately felt the effects of what would become a worldwide depression. The United States soon reduced Canadian exports to one third of the pre-depression amount. This act had a drastic effect on the Canadian economy, as Canada sold 40 percent of its exports to its southern neighbor. For instance, the number of cars manufactured from 1929 to 1932 went down from 263,000 to 61,000. Canadian wheat farmers were also undersold on the world market by competitors in Argentina, Australia, and Russia. Coupled with reduced wheat purchases by European countries, this caused the price of wheat to plummet from $1.60 a bushel in 1929 to 38 cents only two years later. Other sectors of the Canadian economy were affected by the slump in wheat, such as the railroad and farm machinery industries. In other parts of Canada, the fishing and pulp industries suffered severely.

In 1930, Canadians voted in a Conservative government. Conservative party leader Richard Bedford Bennett, a wealthy lawyer, promised to bring Canada back into the world marketplace by raising tariffs and putting the unemployed back to work. The new government, however, was unable to keep such campaign pledges, and Bennett led the country in its bleakest days. Between 1929 and 1933, for instance, Canada's foreign trade dropped 67 percent. By the winter of 1932-1933, the national income had fallen almost 50 percent in just over three years.

During the depression, unemployment rates rose drastically; 400,000 Canadians, out of a population of 10 million, had no work, and a million of those employed had only part-time jobs. Parliament passed increased grants for unemployment relief and for the creation of a public works program. By 1935, 10 percent of the population was on some form of welfare.

The prairie provinces, where the economy depended on the wheat harvest, were the hardest hit overall. Between 1933 and 1937, a drought in Saskatchewan and Alberta destroyed the wheat crop. In the early 1930s, 66,000 people left their homes in Saskatchewan, or one in every four farm families. Eventually, the province went bankrupt and asked the federal government for help to pay relief. By the end of the decade, about 250,000 people had relocated from the prairie.

Other provinces also experienced great difficulties, particularly those that relied on crops or forestry. Newfoundland, which at the time was self-governing, had to surrender its government to Britain in return for financial assistance. The industrialized regions of Ontario and Quebec were affected least by the Depression.

Domestic Policies

Bennett's government also enacted laws and policies that were not centered solely on bringing the country out of the depression. In 1932, the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission was created as a publicly owned radio network. It was later reorganized as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), which had the increased power to regulate all private broadcasting in Canada.

In 1934, the government created the Bank of Canada. The new national bank was given the power to regulate the nation's monetary system. It regulated currency and credit, served as a private bankers' bank (a bank that lends money to other banks), advised the government on financial matters, and printed money.

Canada and the British Commonwealth

In 1931, the Statute of Westminster recognized the existence of the British Commonwealth of Nations in place of the British Empire. On December 11 of that year, Canada became a sovereign state. Despite this new status, Canada had no power to enact changes to the constitution. Although Canada was essentially independent, full legal autonomy was not established until 1949.

In 1932, Canada and eight other countries participated in the Commonwealth Conference in Ottawa to discuss relaxing trade barriers. Britain agreed to raise tariffs against products from countries outside of the British Commonwealth while giving Canada preference for the importation of a number of primary products. Unfortunately, these agreements and new tariffs could not offset Canada's almost complete lack of trade with the rest of Europe and with the United States.

Canada and the League of Nations

Although Canada was a member of the League of Nations (established after World War I), the country's leaders still preferred a policy of relative isolationism. In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria, provoking a world crisis. Canada followed Britain's lead—and that of other League of Nations members—and refused to initiate military action to halt the aggression. Canada believed that Japan would stop the invasion on its own accord to avoid alienating western powers, and Canada's leaders did not want to take sides for fear of losing trade with Japan.

Then, in 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia. The League of Nations decided to boycott trade with Italy. Canada's representative, W. A. Riddell, suggested adding oil, coal, iron, and steel to the list of sanctioned goods, realizing that these items were critical to a successful and prolonged Italian invasion. However, Riddell had not consulted with the new Canadian prime minister, Mackenzie King, before making this proposal. King, fearful of controversy in his country and noting that other powerful countries seemed disinclined to take any true preventative measures against Italy, dismissed this

suggestion. Ultimately, so did the League of Nations as a whole, and the invasion of Ethiopia went unchecked.

Canada Enters World War II

The King government seemed intent on keeping Canada out of foreign affairs. King praised Great Britain's appeasement policy with respect to Nazi aggression in Europe. Indeed, King met German leader Adolf Hitler in 1937 and came away convinced that he was not to be feared as an aggressor. King stolidly held to his notion that peace could be preserved. However, such delusions were destroyed when Hitler's army invaded Poland in September 1939. Britain and France quickly declared war on Nazi Germany, and one week later the Canadian Parliament also proclaimed the country in a state of war. Immediately, Canada began building up its military strength. Volunteers signed up for the armed forces and by the end of September the army had risen to 55,000 men. The first Canadian soldiers set sail for Europe on December 10, 1939.

Critical Overview

Alice Munro is one of Canada's most critically acclaimed contemporary writers. She is considered a regional writer because her fictions often focus on characters who live in rural Ontario, exploring their lives and culture. Munro has expressed admiration for regional American writers such as Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, and Eudora Welty, and has stated, "If I'm a regional writer, the region I'm writing about has many things in common with the American South.... [It is] Rural Ontario. A closed rural society with a pretty homogenous Scotch-Irish racial strain going slowly to decay." This society forms the core of many of Munro's finest story collections, including *Dance of the Happy Shades, Lives of Girls and Women,* and *Who Do You Think You Are?*

"Walker Brothers Cowboy" was published in *Dance of the Happy Shades* in 1968. Many readers found the story collection conveyed an accurate portrayal of a quasi-rural Canadian society held in the grip of the Great Depression. The fifteen stories delve into themes of personal isolation as well as social divisions. In more than one story, Munro shows the segregation of the rural people and the town people. She also explores the identities of her characters as they embark on the process of discovering or rethinking who they are. "The collection's fifteen stories dramatize the contradictions between life and death," wrote H. Dahlie in his review of the volume in *World Literature Written in English*

... between happiness and despair, between freedom and captivity.. .. The author's use of a first-person narrator in eleven of these fifteen stories emphasizes her concern with the subjective dimensions of reality, and the fact that the narrator or reflector of the action is in most cases a young and sensitive girl anticipates the shifting nature of this reality.

Critics have continued to return to this collection in the years since its publication. Some examine it in terms of the art of story writing while others focus on its evocation of Canadian society in a specific historical era. George Woodcock, a Canadian critic, wrote in *Queen's Quarterly* that "Munro offers the portrait of a distinctively Canadian society and does it in a distinctively Canadian way. Her sense of the interplay of setting and tradition is impeccable." Woodcock further declared that the

three stories of childhood, "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "Images," and "Boys and Girls," are perhaps the most important ... both for their vivid evocation of the decaying rural life ... and for their delineation of the relationships between parents and children in hard times.

"Walker Brothers Cowboy" is the collection's opening story. Writes Catherine Sheldrick Ross in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography:*

It introduces characters who, in various guises and under various names, are central figures in Munro's fiction: the female narrator, whose extraordinary powers of observation, analysis, and perception make her feel different from other people and

rather isolated; her younger brother, who does not notice things and seems to belong comfortably in the world; their father, who is a silver-fox farmer defeated by poverty during the Depression but still preserving an imaginative vision; and their mother, who yearns for gentility and in this story is a figure of exhausted energy.

Ross further finds that the story holds the "heart of Munro's vision": the tensions caused by the overlap of the world of mystery onto the everyday world.

The numerous ways in which critics have examined *Dance of the Happy Shades* clearly demonstrate the richness of the text. Stories such as "Walker Brothers Cowboy" can be appreciated on many levels. A reader can enjoy it in concert with Munro's other stories about the Jordans, or in isolation. A reader can analyze it for what it says about identity. Or, it can be enjoyed simply for the sheer art of storytelling.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the followingessay, she compares the three adult characters in Munro's story and examines their relationship to the past.

In the decades since her first collection of stories was published, Alice Munro has established herself as one of the preeminent contemporary writers of the short story form. Her work has been compared to that of Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor—primarily for her skilled storytelling and her evocation of a specific region—and even the short fiction of the great Russian writer, Anton Chekhov. When *Dance of the Happy Shades* was published in 1968, it immediately garnered critical praise for its author, and she won Canada's highest literary award, the Governor General's Award. Since this auspicious beginning, Munro has produced a solid body of work that focuses on numerous themes, but she often returns to those that she raised with her earliest stories, particularly problems of identity and isolation.

"Walker Brothers Cowboy," the opening story of *Dance of the Happy Shades,* is, in the words of Joyce Carol Oates writing for the *New York Times Book Review,* "a beautiful early story." It features a young narrator, Del Jordan (though she remains unnamed in the story itself), who shows remarkable insight and sensitivity in viewing the world around her and the people who populate it. Del appears in a number of other stories by Munro, both in this and other collections, and these stories allow Munro to explore some of her most important concerns through the dynamics of the Jordan family.

"Walker Brothers Cowboy" takes place shortly after the Jordan family has lost their fox farm. They have relocated to the outskirts of Tuppertown— they are not of the town itself nor of the countryside anymore—and are attempting to forge a new life. While Ben Jordan has found a job—which is difficult in the depression years—selling patent medicines, spices, and food flavorings to the farmers who inhabit the backcountry, his wife refuses to accept their new station in life. She endures in a state of active resentment, which manifests itself quite clearly to her daughter. The story focuses primarily on one afternoon when Ben Jordan takes his daughter and son with him on his salesman's route. They visit a former sweetheart of Ben's, Nora Cronin, who now lives with her blind mother. The visit between Ben and Nora is tinged with feelings of pleasure, bitterness, and melancholy. By the time they begin the drive back home, the narrator has undergone a formative experience, one that will inevitably contribute to her maturation into womanhood.

The narrator demonstrates remarkable sensitivity for her age. The details she includes present a clear picture of the life she and her family share, as well as her parents' different ways of dealing with their economic decline. From the beginning of the story, the narrator shows Mrs. Jordan's assumed superiority over their poor neighbors. She only deigns to speak to one neighbor, another woman who has come down in the world, "being a schoolteacher who married the janitor." Mrs. Jordan even makes excuses to keep her children from playing with the neighbors' children. The only direct comment the

narrator makes about how she is affected by her mother's actions is when she admits that she is embarrassed to be seen with her mother in the town: "I loathe even my name when she says it in public, in a voice so high, proud, and ringing, deliberately different from the voice of any other mother on the street."

The narrator further subtly castigates her mother when she brings up Mrs. Jordan's "health problems." "My mother has headaches," writes the narrator. "She often has to lie down." Yet the narrator understands, and relates to the reader, that Mrs. Jordan is not actually trying to get better. Instead, Mrs. Jordan looks at the tree outside the porch so she can imagine she is "at home." Her longing for the farm, however, resides solely in her desire to return to a more genteel lifestyle. She turns down her husband's suggestion that she get fresh air by accompanying him on his route because "[t]hat is not [her] ... idea of a drive in the country." On the day the story takes place, Mr. Jordan takes the children with him to give his wife a rest. The narrator acutely but tactfully observes, "What is there about us that people need to be given a rest from? Never mind." Her dismissal of her own question shows an astute understanding that her mother's malaise stems from her insistence on lamenting the past.

Ben Jordan shows a marked contrast to his wife. He has rebounded from the loss of his fox farm to the best of his ability and found a job at a time when hundreds of thousands of people were out of work. As he tells Nora, "It keeps the wolf from the door, keeps him as far away as the back fence.'" Unlike Mrs. Jordan, Nora appreciates the importance of even a less-than-desirable job: '"Well, I guess you count yourself lucky to have the work.'" Ben also puts forth deliberate effort to make his job an amusing caper, to bolster both his own spirits and those of his family. For instance, he makes up songs about his travels, which he shares with his family; but Mrs. Jordan responds with, "[n]ot a very funny song." (Though, when her husband exaggerates stories about his day's visits, she "would laugh finally, unwillingly.") The song Ben makes up about himself, which he calls "The Walker Brothers Cowboy," demonstrates the new image he must now create of himself: like a cowboy, Ben is a wanderer in the sparsely inhabited backcountry, a balladeer off on an adventure.

On the afternoon of the story, Ben does take his children on an adventure when he brings them to Nora's farmhouse. The narrator compares Nora to the women she knows, particularly her mother. When the narrator first sees Nora, she is dressed in a dirty smock and running shoes, resembling nothing less than the townswomen Mrs. Jordan looks down upon. When Nora comes downstairs after changing her clothes, the narrator thinks that Nora's dress "is flowered more lavishly than anything my mother owns." The other physical descriptions the narrator applies to Nora are far from attractive. She notes her heavy arms, skin that is "covered with little dark freckles like measles," and coarse, black hair.

Certainly, as the narrator indicates, both Nora and Mrs. Jordan feel bitterness about the turn their lives have taken—Mrs. Jordan because she has joined the ranks of the town poor, and Nora because she is unmarried and lives a life of relative isolation. But the key difference between the two women is what they choose to make of the moments in life that *can* offer them pleasure. When Ben tells his stories and sings his songs, Nora

laughs as hard as the children do. She even laughs so much that Ben "has to stop and wait for her to get over laughing so he can go on, because she makes him laugh too." Unlike Mrs. Jordan, who is so caught up in her own needs that she does not see those of her family, Nora offers others the chance to experience joy. She plays a gramophone record for the narrator's brother. She teaches the narrator to dance, whirling her around until the girl feels "proud." At this point, Nora's unrefined physical characteristics no longer bother the narrator. She is close enough to notice the "black hairs at the corners of [Nora's] mouth," but she describes them as soft, not coarse. She sees that Nora is sweating under her arms and above her upper lip, but she is not disgusted by this. Instead, dancing with Nora, the narrator feels enveloped in the woman's "strange gaiety"—unlike her mother, Nora can make the girl feel protected and alive.

Despite the disparity between the three adult characters, they do all have a certain regard for the past. In Mrs. Jordan's case, the past is all-consuming and her longing for it prevents her from deriving any pleasure in the present. It also threatens the harmony of her family. Ben, too, is drawn to the past, as evidenced by his visit to Nora's home. He also enjoys the freedom that comes with being in her company, the whisky drinking, the unsuppressed enjoyment in his sales stories. However, he recognizes that he cannot mix his past with his present; thus, he refuses Nora's suggestion to dance and says they must return home. He still hopes to maintain an enduring connection to Nora, inviting her to drop in on the Jordan household. Nora, however, will not take him up on this invitation. As the narrator reports, although Ben tells Nora how to find the house, "Nora does not repeat these directions." Throughout the afternoon, Nora has shown both anger and enjoyment in seeing Ben again, but ultimately has no choice but to recognize that it is just an afternoon's diversion, however sincere, and that Ben will take his children and she will be alone again. As she tells Ben, "I can drink alone but I can't dance alone."

The narrator takes in these different perceptions of the past, and absorbs them into her own sense of the world around her. On the ride home, she realizes without her father saying anything, "that there are things not to be mentioned" to her mother. The course of the afternoon has added to a young girl's developing maturity. At once, she shares an understanding with her father but also recognizes that he—and the other adults—are essentially unknowable. "I feel my father's life flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon," are the words the narrator closes with,

darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary, and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine.

As E. D. Blodgett writes in *Alice Munro,* the narrator "becomes gradually aware that the past is a psychological domain that makes of those who appear so intimately ours something other and mysterious." By the end of the story, the narrator stands on the threshold of the adult world.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "Walker Brothers Cowboy," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Carrington discusses the child narrator in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" and other Munro stories.

Just as the emotional core of the group of stories discussed in chapter 2 is defined by the common element of uncontrollability shared by the key metaphors in these stories—the surfacing subterranean stream, the bursting boil, the earth-splitting quake, the erupting volcano, and the sudden irruptive violence of often fatal accidents—a second set of somewhat similar metaphors defines the emotional core of earlier stories. These metaphors associate sexuality and death with each other as a terrifying power loose in the world. This association occurs through the metaphorical definition of this power as fire or electricity. ..

In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "Images," "Boys and Girls," and the novel, Del, first as a little girl and then as an adolescent, is always the first-person narrator. The little girl in the first two of these stories, although she remains nameless, is identified as Ben Jordan's daughter, so the reader sees her as younger versions of the same Del Jordan who reappears as a fourth-grader at the beginning of the novel and graduates from high school at its end ...

The developing narrator in these stories and in the novel is concerned with coming to know the world, especially the same dark world of sexuality and death that the first-person narrator confronts in "At the Other Place." In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," the little girl is getting ready to go to school; in "Images" she is so young that she can still remember trying to fall asleep in a crib. In both of these stories, she is a first-person narrator who functions both as the protagonist in the center of what she sees as her story and as the older narrator remembering her younger self.

But in these two stories, even more than in "At the Other Place," the remembered child's innocence and ignorance push her to the periphery of the story's main action, which is what the adults are doing. This effect is less marked in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" than in "Images." The child in the first story is proud of being older and therefore more observant than her little brother, who "does not notice enough." But in "Images" she herself does not grasp the central fact of the story, that her mysteriously altered mother is about to give birth. In spite of this difference, however, the two stories have a basic similarity in their manipulation of point of view: they use not only a dual point of view but what is sometimes actually a triple one to emphasize the child's peripheral position, her innocent eye's incomprehension of the most powerful facts of life. In both stories these are the sexual facts; in the second story, the "images" also include images of death, as in "At the Other Place," and these images become metaphors of terrifying electric power.

In "Walker Brothers Cowboy" the main episode is Ben Jordan's visit to the Cronin farm, but in the introductory section his explanation of how the Great Lakes were formed leaves his little daughter appalled by "[t]he tiny share we have of time." Although muted

and indirect, this initial allusion to death is the somber background against which she then describes the emotional reactions of Nora Cronin to the totally unexpected visit of her former suitor, Ben Jordan, a Walker Brothers salesman. The narrator reports the outward details of how Nora speaks and acts but shows no real comprehension of the complicated reasons for Nora's behavior. Although the child intuitively senses that the visit to the farm should be kept secret from her stay-at-home mother, at the end she identifies as "things not to be mentioned" only that her father, supposedly a teetotaler, drank whiskey and that Nora tried to teach her to dance. In spite of the explicit thematic summary at the end of the story, the child's sense of darkness and mystery in her father's life does not include any emotional comprehension of Nora's life. Naturally the child concentrates on her sudden sense of strangeness in a very familiar figure, her own kind father, but the reader is made to see more.

Through this additional, implied dimension to the situation, Munro emphasizes the peripheral position of the child reporting the action. The child narrator reports that Nora speaks "harshly" and as if her stomach "hurt" when Jordan and his two children arrive at the Cronin farm. But the narrator does not attempt to explain why Nora, after this obviously painful initial reaction, is suddenly galvanized into action. She changes into a sheer, flowered dress, applies cologne, drinks whiskey, puts a record on the gramophone, and begins to laugh and dance with "strange gaiety." However, when the father refuses Nora's breathlessly hopeful invitation to dance with her—a temptation to which he must not yield, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the implied sexual tension between him and his sickly, over-refined wife—Nora, still sweaty with exertion and excitement, takes the record off. By the time her visitors leave, her almost hysterical excitement has turned into bitterness. The reader sees the complicated reasons for Nora's painfully confused arousal, but the young narrator in the time frame of the story does not state them. She senses that Nora's Catholicism, indicated by a picture of the Virgin in the Cronin house, was the obstacle preventing her father's marriage to Nora. But she is too young to grasp Nora's feelings of betrayal, physical loneliness, and loss, as she struggles to support herself and her blind mother on a farm during the Depression. As in "At the Other Place," the adults' sexual emotions are left unstated, but what the child at the edge of the action cannot grasp Munro lets her readers recognize and define for themselves.

Source: Ildiko de Papp Carrington, "The Uncontrollable: A Power Loose in the World," in *Controlling the Uncontrollable: The Fiction of Alice Munro,* Northern Illinois University Press, 2001, pp. 71-73.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Woodcock discusses Munro's "documentary methods."

There is a challenging ambivalence in Alice Munro's stories and her open-ended episodic novels, a glimmering fluctuation between actuality and fictional reality, or, if one prefers it, 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 ...

Just as magic realist painters create a kind of super-reality by the impeccable presentation of details in a preternaturally clear light, and in this way isolate their images from actuality, so Munro has combined documentary methods with a style as clear as the tempera medium in painting. In this essay I propose to discuss the methods in the hope of illuminating the ends.

Alice Munro has been rightly reluctant to offer theoretical explanations of her methods, for she is quite obviously an anti-dogmatic, the kind of writer who works with feeling ahead of theory. But even on the theoretical level she is shrewd in defining the perimeters of her approach, perhaps negatively rather than positively. She once, for example, in an essay written for John Metcalf's *The Narrative Voice,* entitled "The Colonel's Hash Resettled," cautioned against attempts to read symbolism excessively into her stories. And she was right, for essentially her stories are what they say, offering their meaning with often stark directness, and gaining their effect from their intense visuality, so that they are always vivid in the mind's eye, which is another way of saying that she has learnt the power of the image and how to turn it to the purposes of prose.

Her visuality is not merely a matter of rendering the surface, the realm of mere perception, for she has understood that one of the great advantages of any effective imagist technique is that the image not merely presents itself. It reverberates with the power of its associations, and even with the intensity of its own isolated and illuminated presence. Munro herself conveyed something of this when John Metcalf, remarking on the fact that she seemed to *"glory* in the surfaces and textures," asked whether she did not in fact feel "'surfaces' not to be surfaces," and she answered that there was "a kind of magic ... about everything," "a feeling about the intensity of what is *there."*

When Alice Munro first began to write, her work tended to be undervalued, except by a few exceptionally percipient readers like Robert Weaver, because her tales of Ontario small-town life were taken to be those of a rather conventional realist with a certain flair for local colour. And realism at that time, following its decline in the visual arts, was going into a somewhat lesser eclipse in literature. Canada was becoming aware of modernism, and this meant that for a time at least writers were concerned with thematic and symbolic fiction rather than with anything that savoured of the mimetic.

Alice Munro has always been one of those fortunate and self-sufficient writers who never really become involved in movements or in literary fashions. From her start she had her own view of life, largely as she had lived it herself, and her aim was to express

it in a fiction distinguished by craftsmanship and clear vision rather than by self-conscious artifice. It was a curiously paradoxical method of self-cultivation and self-effacement that she followed, for she has always written best when her stories or the episodes in her novels were close to her own experience in a world she knew, yet at the same time she cultivated a prose from which authorly mannerisms were so absent that it seemed as though the stories had their own voices. In the process Alice Munro became, next to Marian Engel, perhaps Canada's best prose stylist.

But linked to the pellucid clarity of that voice, or voices, there was always the intense vision—and in this context I mean vision as a power of visualizing. The comparison with magic realist painters that I made early in this essay is not merely an analogical one, for Munro is always deeply concerned with describing, with establishing scenes and people clearly in the mind's eye, and as in real life, so in her stories, we establish our conception of the character of people first by recognizing what they look like and how they speak, and then, such familiarity established, proceeding inward to minds and feelings. The photographic element in her presentation of scenes and characters as visualizable images is an essential factor in her writing . . .

More important, perhaps, is the general resemblance between the kind of realism that Alice Munro developed during the 1950s and that of the early days of modernism, the kind of realism one finds not only in the early Joyce and—more lyrically expressed—in the early Lawrence, but also in their continental European contemporaries like Thomas Mann and Italo Svevo. There is the same tendency towards the *Bildungsroman,* whether manifest in a novel or disguised in a cluster of related stories; the sense of a society observed with oppressive closeness from within by someone who wants to escape; the concern for the appalling insecurities created by what was then called social climbing, and now is called upward mobility; the agonized awareness of the perils of moving through the transitions of life, from childhood to adolescence, from adulthood to age.

While Alice Munro's approach has a great deal in common with this European realism of the early part of the century that trembled on the edge of modernism, without herself going forward—as some of the modernists like Joyce and Wyndham Lewis did—from realism to the extremes of formalism, it has little in common with the kind of prairie writing that represented realism for Canadians during the decades between the great wars. Writers such as Robert Stead, Martha Ostenso and Frederick Philip Grove were concerned with the pioneer farmers and their struggle with the frontier lands of the great plains. Alice Munro was dealing with a society that had long passed out of the pioneer stage, and represented a decaying established culture rather than a frontier one. The problem of those who inhabited it was not, as it had been with Grove's characters, to conquer the wilderness without being destroyed in the process, but to escape before one had been dragged down into the mental stagnation and physical decay of the marginal farmlands of Ontario.

Alice Munro herself grew up in this background, and much of the content of her stories and novels, if it is not strictly autobiographical, does echo the experiences of her youth. Like Del Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women,* she was brought up on a farm where her

father bred silver foxes without ever prospering greatly; her mother, like Del's, was a bright, frustrated woman, whose iconoclastic cast of mind contradicted her social ambition, and who died of Parkinson's disease. Again like more than one of her heroines, Munro married and moved west to British Columbia, which gave her another terrain for her stories; also like them, she stepped out of a distintegrating marriage and returned to Ontario. In other words, she wrote of what she knew best, and while each of her stories lives within its own complete world and is not a mere mirroring of the writer's life, it is inevitable that the fictions she drew out of the intensely remembered country of her childhood should be more convincing than those she conceived in British Columbia, where she was never completely at home ...

The three stories of childhood, "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "Image" and "Boys and Girls," are perhaps the most important of this group, both for their vivid evocation of the decaying rural life a century after the pioneers of Upper Canada, and for their delineation of the relationships between parents and children in hard times.

"Walker Brothers Cowboy," the opening story of the book, takes us to a time when the silver fox farm has failed and Ben Jordan has taken up peddling the patent medicines, spices and food flavourings distributed by Walker Brothers. The story, told by his daughter who does not name herself, begins by relating this time of stress and need to the slightly better past on the farm. The girl's mother, also unnamed, tries desperately to maintain self-respect in a situation she sees as a demeaning loss of social standing, even though she lives physically better in the town than on the farm.

Fate has flung us onto a street of poor people (it does not matter that we were poor before, that was a different kind of poverty), and the only way to take this, as she sees it, is with dignity, with bitterness, with no reconciliation. No bathroom with claw-footed tub and a flush toilet is going to comfort her, nor water on tap and sidewalks past the house and milk in bottles, nor even the two movie theatres and the Venus Restaurant and Woolworths so marvellous it has live birds singing in its fan-cooled corners and fish as tiny as finger-nails, as bright as moons, swimming in its green tanks. My mother does not care.

The father, more self-contained, more ironic, finds ways to live with Depression conditions and salvage his pride. As the story opens we see him walking with his daughter beside Lake Huron and telling her how the Great Lakes were gouged out of the earth by the ice coming down in great probing fingers from the north. Clearly the girl prefers her father's company to her mother's:

She walks serenely like a lady shopping, like a *lady* shopping, past the housewives in loose beltless dresses torn under the arms. With me her creation, wretched curls and flaunting hair bow, scrubbed knees and white socks—all I do not want to be. I loathe even my name when she says it in public, in a voice so high, proud and ringing, deliberately different from the voice of any other mother on the street.

Travelling his route of the desperate dusty farmlands, Ben Jordan makes fun of his situation by improvising as he rides a kind of endless ballad of his adventures on the

road, and this becomes a kind of *leitmotiv* one day when he sets out with the girl and her brother and, leaving his Walker Brothers territory, takes them to a farmhouse where a woman who was once his sweetheart is living. The clean bare farmhouse with Catholic emblems on the walls and an old woman dozing in a corner becomes a kind of stage on which is revealed to the girl that people we know may have dimensions to their lives of which to this point we have been unaware. The sense of something theatrical and unreal and different from ordinary life is given by the fact that Ben Jordan and his old sweetheart Nora Cronin name each other, but nobody else in the story is named. The strangeness of the hitherto unknown past is framed within the nameless ordinariness of the present.

Source: George Woodcock, "The Plots of Life: The Realism of Alice Munro," in *Queen's Quarterly,* Vol. 93, No. 2, Summer 1986, pp. 235-43.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay excerpt, Dahlie focuses on "the recurring isolation and rejection pattern" in Munro's stories, identifying the "fear of disintegration of self' present in Ben's daughter.

Up to a point, it is meaningful to divide Alice Munro's characters into two categories—the secure and the insecure, or the adjusted and the maladjusted, or the accepted and the rejected—but a more than superficial examination reveals that these oppositions are quite inadequate to explain their real natures. Mrs. Munro's world is neither consistent nor readily comprehensible; and as the reader struggles with its many paradoxes, contradictions, and ambiguities, he finds himself compelled to reassess characters and their motives, and ultimately to realize that "normal" characters in the conventional sense rarely exist in this world. On the surface, much seems straightforward—family relationships, ordinary friendships, love affairs—but there is always something gnawing at the edges of our certainties, and we recognize that the basic pattern in Alice Munro is isolation rather than community, rejection rather than acceptance. And though these kinds of relationships may in part be due to rural and small-town settings, the emphasis in most of her stories is psychological rather than sociological; the ultimate despair or resignation that the reader experiences is in part the product of the sense of inevitability and immutability that characterizes the various human relationships.

It is this vision of the world and of reality that strikes one in reading Alice Munro's *Dance of the Happy Shades,* the title of which takes on an increasingly ironic note. The collection's fifteen stories dramatize the contradictions between life and death, between happiness and despair, between freedom and captivity; and the "dance" itself, as it were, frequently reflects an element of the grotesque. The author's use of a first-person narrator in eleven of these fifteen stories emphasizes her concern with the subjective dimensions of reality, and the fact that the narrator or reflector of the action is in most cases a young and sensitive girl anticipates the shifting nature of this reality. In a very real sense, the narrator stands uneasily between two positions: on the one hand, she is an active participant in, or even instigator of, the action, and on the other hand she stands apart from it as a kind of intuitive moral critic. In this ambivalent position she is not unlike R. D. Laing's "divided self": a convincing representation of the idea that a more or less permanent state of tension is both inevitable and quite acceptable.

A basic pattern in most of these stories reveals the sensitive narrator-figure emerging through her experiences to a point where she senses, even though she cannot normally articulate the fact, that a kind of moral chaos rules everything, and that one can find nothing tangible or lasting to give security or meaning to life. "Things are getting out of hand, anything may happen," the narrator reflects in the title story, and this theme of uncertainty and undefined fear is emphasized throughout the stories. In human terms, the various tensions are dramatized in situations described as.... "unconsummated relationships" which, in the words of one of the narrators, "depress outsiders perhaps more than anybody else." We would perhaps agree with this narrator—and in a very real sense the reader is the ultimate outsider in any fictional experience—but it seems

to me that this remark points to one of the many ambiguities in Alice Munro: is the unconsummated relationship as depressing as an outsider believes, or is it in fact, as far as the participants are concerned, a means of hanging on to whatever they have? R. D. Laing argues convincingly on this point when he states that "the ontologically insecure person is preoccupied with preserving rather than gratifying himself: the ordinary circumstances of living threaten his *low threshold* of security." In this light, many of Alice Munro's characters, such as Maddy in "The Peace of Utrecht," Mis s Marsalles in "Dance of the Happy Shades," or Ben Jordan in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" assume a different dimension altogether, and their refusal or inability to fulfill themselves in a manner meaningful to the outsider might not be such a defeat after all.

Nevertheless, the recurring isolation and rejection pattern in these and other stories underscores the general sense of alienation which informs Mrs. Munro's fiction. In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," for example, this pattern is established at the outset through a momentary glimpse of the children who "separate into islands of two or one ... occupying themselves in ... solitary ways." This situation is paralleled in the division within the Jordan family, particularly in the opposition between the mother and the rest of the family. An inward-turning and unimaginative person, Mrs. Jordan restricts herself to a very narrow range of experiences, deliberately closes her eyes on the realities of her world, and chooses to remain in the seclusion of her home, "always darkened by the wall of the house next door." Ben Jordan, on the other hand, knows "the quick way out of town," and travels constantly, outside his own territory. In this tendency, he finds sympathetic collaborators in his two children, particularly the daughter, who is the narrator of this story. Caught up in the tension between her father and mother, she is unable to sort out the impulses or motives of either; she is in league with her father, as it were, mainly because of the excitement provided by his travels, both within and outside his territory.

But Ben, too, is a participant in an "unconsummated relationship," not only with his wife, but also in the tentative affair he is carrying on with Nora Cronin. He can pursue this relationship only so far, in part because of restrictive social and marital conventions, but also because he knows that it cannot really work out, and because he senses that a consummated affair would in fact destroy it. Nora clearly is the real loser in this kind of relationship. " 'I can drink alone,'" she tells Ben when he refuses to dance with her, '"but I can't dance alone'"; and this is the real meaning of isolation and rejection brought down to an agonizingly tangible level. The meaning of this whole experience for Ben's daughter is not clear, though she understands enough to realize that she is to say nothing to her mother about it. Its full significance is, however, both ambiguous and frightening:

I feel my father's life flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine.

In this incipient formulation of ideas, Ben's daughter touches upon the ecstasies, the terrors, and the contradictions of existence; but the overriding idea is that of unpredictability and uncertainty. She feels isolated in time, and in this respect she stands apart from her father: "The tiny share we have of time appalls me," she muses at one point, "though my father seems to regard it with tranquillity... He was not alive when this century started. I will be barely alive—old, old—when it ends. I do not like to think of it." This fear of the disintegration of self recurs frequently in Alice Munro, and illustrates her essentially existential view of reality. In this vision, she is at times close to that of Samuel Beckett, and many of her situations evoke an echo of one of his basic questions, "How can one be sure in such darkness?"

Source: H. Dahlie, "Unconsummated Relationships: Isolation and Rejection in Alice Munro's Stories," in *World Literature in English,* Vol. 11, No. 1, April 1972, pp. 43-45.

Topics for Further Study

This story was written in the 1960s, but takes place in the 1930s. How do you think Munro's perception of her childhood years may have affected the writing of the story? Do you find this story to present a sentimentalized version of an impoverished childhood? Or does the story strike you as realistic?

Find out more about how the Great Depression affected Canadians. In light of your research, to what extent do you think what happens to the narrator's family—and the family dynamics—is an accurate portrayal?

The 1960s, when this story was written, is generally regarded as a period epitomized by the challenging of societal norms. In that sense, the 1960s were very different from the 1950s. How do you think typical readers of the 1950s and 1960s might have reacted differently to this story?

The narrator notices that Nora is a Catholic, and the father makes up a song about Baptists. How important do you think religion is in the society in which the narrator lives? Explain your answer.

The narrator's father seems to get along better with Nora than he does with his wife. What do you think might have broken up their relationship? Do you think he would have ultimately been happier with a wife like Nora? Why or why not?

Although the narrator includes many details, with the exception of the mother, she never states how the characters are feeling. How do you think the father views his life and his familial relationships? How do you think the narrator views her family and the changes they have recently gone through?

Compare and Contrast

1920s: In the decade before the depression, Canadian society is almost equally split between urban and rural. About 4.4 million people live in rural surroundings while about 4.3 million people live in urban communities. Agricultural production equals about $ 1.4 billion (Canadian) per year, and industrial production accounts for about $2.7 billion (Canadian) per year.

1990s: The Canadian population is essentially urban. 76.6 percent of the population lives in urban communities while the remaining 23.4 percent live in rural surroundings. Agriculture accounts for only 2 percent of the gross national product, and manufacturing accounts for 17 percent.

1930s: In 1929, until the crash of the New York stock market, Canada sold 40 percent of its exports to the United States. By 1931, the United States has reduced imports from Canada to one third of the pre-Depression total.

1990s: By the late 1990s, Canada is exporting $195 billion (Canadian) of goods a year. Canada's major trading partners are the United States, Mexico, South Korea, and China. In 1995, the United States, Canada, and Mexico sign the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to facilitate trade between the three nations.

1935: By the middle of the decade, 10 percent of Canadians receive some sort of public relief.

1990s: In 1995, just over 3 million Canadians receive some form of welfare.

1930s: By the end of 1932, some 600,000 Canadians out of a population of around 10 million are unemployed. One million people can only secure part-time jobs. By the end of the following year, 23 percent of the labor force is unemployed.

1990s: In 1992, 9.2 percent of Canadians aged 16 and over are unemployed. In 1999, of the 14.5 million workers aged 15 and over, about 2.7 million are only employed part-time.

What Do I Read Next?

Eudora Welty's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972) explores the bonds between a mother and daughter as reflected upon by the daughter after the mother's death.

Flannery O'Connor's collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) presents vivid characters who occupy the mid-1950s American South. Several of these stories are considered masterpieces of the short story form.

Alice Munro's story "Boys and Girls" in the collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) also features the Jordan family. It takes place on the fox farm and centers around the narrator's (Del Jordan's) realization of gender differences and the boundaries they impose.

John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) is set in the United States during the Great Depression. It traces the migration of the Joad family as they move from their farm in the Oklahoma Dust Bowl to California. A Pulitzer Prize winner, this novel did much to publicize the injustices of migrant labor in the West.

Anna Quindlen' s novel *Object Lessons* (1992) is a coming-of-age story told from the point of view of a teenage girl living in a northeastern suburb of New York City.

Carson McCullers' novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) explores the inner lives of five lonely people living in a Georgia mill town in the 1930s. The main characters are all outcast by their society because of race, politics, disability, or sensibility. It is considered the author's finest work.

Margaret Atwood' s historical novel *Alias Grace* (1996) centers on the murder of a farm family in nineteenth-century Canada. The novel is set in the same Scotch-Irish setting in which Munro grew up and in which so many of her stories take place.

Key Questions

1. Why do you think that Ben Jordan asks his daughter if she wants to go and see if the lake is still there? Why does he invent an answer for why there are doors on the second story of the houses they pass?

2. Do you think that Ben Jordan is a happy man? What about Nora Cronin?

3. Why do you think that the title is "Walker Brothers Cowboy"? Of what significance is it that Ben Jordan dubbed himself a cowboy?

4. What was Ben Jordan trying to teach his daughter by introducing her to Nora Cronin?

5. Why does Ben refuse to dance with Nora?

Topics for Discussion

1. Characterize the narrator's relationship with her father. Does it change over the course of the story?

2. What is the significance of travel to the narrator?

3. How does Munro use the first person narrator?

4. What would a typical day be like for the narrator? How does the day she describes in the story differ from a typical day?

5. Nora is a former girlfriend of the narrator's father. Describe what this means to the narrator, based on how she describes the event of going to visit Nora?

6. What constitutes lying? Do you think that the narrator feels any guilt about not telling mother about some of the events of the day she describes in the story?

7. Discuss the relationship between the narrator and her mother. Is it a conventional relationship?

8. Is the young girl narrating the story familiar to you? Is she like anyone you know? What is ordinary or exceptional about her?

9. How does Munro use place to ground her story?

10. Does the narrator have a generally trustful or mistrustful view of those around her?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What does it mean to be "poor"? What affects does it have on a family? How does it define the way they live?

2. How realistically does the author depict rural life? Could this story have taken place in real life?

3. What is it like to live in a rural area? What might be different about one's schedule and lifestyle choices than it would be for city dwellers?

4. How does the narrator feel about her father's job as a salesman for Walker Brothers? Is she proud? How much do you know about what your father does for a living? How much do most people your age know about your parents' jobs?

5. At one point, the narrator notes that "[t]he tiny share we have of time appalls me, though my father seems to regard it with tranquility." What do you think she means by that statement, and what does it reveal about how her viewpoint differs from her father's?

6. At one point in the story, the narrator asks her father what an upstairs door on a house is for, where it leads out to nothing. The father tells her it is for sleepwalkers, and she notes, "I am offended, seeing too late that he is joking, as usual. . . ." This hints that she commonly misses what her dad considers to be jokes for her. In what other ways does Munro subtly reveal the relationships between her characters?

Literary Precedents

Munro has stated that she has been influenced by many writers, including Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, James Agee, Joyce Carol Oates, William Maxwell, and John Updike. Munro's rite of passage for the daughter in "Walker Brothers" is somewhat similar to the main character's dilemma in Katherine Porter's "Theft". Porter's style is similar to Munro's in its simplicity and in the oblique manner in which the killing blow of the story is dealt. In "Walker Brothers Cowboy", the daughter's childhood does not end by some sudden, sordid occurrence such as an affair, but by a mere hint at her father's past life and a tacit agreement to remain silent about the past.

Similarly, the main character in Theft has her purse stolen—but it is not the purse that drives the story. The killing blow in this case is instead delivered via a letter, only half read by the character, hinting at the end of a relationship. It is this incident— coupled with the indifference with which the main character has treated herself—that drives the story.

Shades of Flannery O'Connor can also be seen in Munro's work. Many of O'Connor's works deal with revelations triggered during moments of stress or upheaval. In A Good Man is Hard to Find, the grandmother only realizes her interconnectedness to The Misfit as she is about to die. Similarly, the daughter in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" goes through her transformation and achieves adulthood only when finding out about her father's past history with a another woman.

Further Study

Beran, Carol L., "The Luxury of Excellence: Alice Munro in the 'New Yorker,'" in *Essays on Canadian Writing,* Winter 1998, p. 204.

This interview with Munro focuses on the intention of her fiction to relate experiences of human behavior.

Braithwaite, Max, *The Hungry Thirties, 1930-1940,* Canada's Illustrated Heritage, 1978.

Braithwaite provides an illustrated overview of Canada during the depression.

Broadfoot, Barry, *Ten Lost Years, 1929-1939,* Doubleday Canada, 1973.

Ten Lost Years is a collection of personal reminiscences from people who lived in Canada during the depression.

Carrington, Ildiko de Papp, *Controlling the Uncontrollable: The Fiction of Alice Munro,* Northern Illinois University Press, 1989.

In this article, Canadian critic de Papp Carrington discusses Munro's fiction.

Conron, Brandon, "Munro's Wonderland," in *Canadian Literature,* Autumn 1978, pp. 109-23.

In this article, Conron discusses Munro's style and technique in her early short story collections.

Munro, Alice, *"Dance of the Happy Shades: And Other Stories,"* Vintage, 1998.

A Collection of Munro's short stories.

Munro, Alice, Pleuke Boyce, and Ron Smith, "A National Treasure," in *Meanjin,* Vol. 54, No. 2, 1995, pp. 222-32.

This essay discusses Munro's short fiction that has appeared in the *New Yorker,* which the author contends has an intimate but universal appeal to readers.

Bibliography

Blodgett, E. D., *Alice Munro,* G. K. Hall and Company, 1988.

Dahlie, H., Review *of Dance of the Happy Shades,* in *World Literature Written in English,* April 1972, pp. 42-18.

Oates, Joyce Carol, Review of *The Progress of Love,* in *New York Times Book Review,* September 14, 1986, pp. 7, 9.

Ross, Catherine Sheldrick, "Alice Munro," *in Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Volume 53, Gale Research, 1986.

Woodcock, George, "The Plots of Life: The Realism of Alice Munro," in *Queen's Quarterly,* Summer 1986, pp. 235-50.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535