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“From Jubilee to Jupiter:  
Space in Alice Munro’s Fiction”

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*For George*



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# Introduction

Without any doubt, Alice Munro is one of the finest contemporary Canadian writers of short fiction. In total, she has published fourteen short story collections and has received numerous prizes and awards, most notably the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013. Yet, until today, the short story seems to have a fairly negative reputation as a form of literature, simply due to the fact that it is physically short. As a consequence, at the beginning of Alice Munro's writing career, only very few theorists were interested in her stories. However, as noted by Hunter, "Munro is to be considered a great writer *in spite of* the fact that she *only* writes short stories" (165). As her stories show, short does definitely not mean flat, easy or unimportant.

When scanning the MLA for articles about Alice Munro, one receives more than five hundred results. Especially after receiving the Nobel Prize, she has attracted an outstanding number of theorists who have analysed particular aspects of her short stories, such as moves forward and backward in time, typical characters and topics which she deals with, and particular stylistic methods she applies, such as paradox and parallel. Hence, interest in the work of Munro has faced a tremendous increase over the last few years. What most of these publications have in common is that they praise the extraordinary depth and the literary fine-tuning of Alice Munro's stories.

When reading Munro's short stories, there is one particular aspect that immediately sparked my interest, namely the setting Alice Munro has chosen for most of her stories: south-western Ontario, Canada. More precisely, her stories typically revolve around small-town life in this particular region. However, hardly any theoretical articles I consulted offered a closer exploration of the role of setting in her stories. Moreover, those critics who examined space in more detail were exclusively concerned with Munro's early fiction.

Theorists dealing with Munro's later work, i.e. her stories from the nineties and the beginning of the twenty-first century are mostly interested in her choice of topics, such as feminism, adultery or rape. This indicates that her work has not only attracted literary critics, but also theorists from other fields, such as philosophy, culture and feminism. Yet, I hypothesize that in her earlier as well as in her later fiction, setting should not be neglected, as it plays a crucial role throughout all of her stories.

Therefore, I decided to dedicate my diploma thesis to a detailed examination of space in Alice Munro's fiction.

## **Research questions**

Generally, it is said that in short stories, there is not a lot of physical space for a detailed elaboration of certain aspects such as biographies of the protagonists, or a closer analysis of their personality. Similarly, it is sometimes claimed that short stories do not have enough room for details about space in the fictional story. Thus, there are parallels between physical space and fictional space in the short story. Yet critics seem to agree that Alice Munro is very much an exception to this argument. Despite the limited length in short stories in general, Munro presents a very clear and detailed image of space to her readers.

In my paper, I am not only interested in how Canada, or rather, south-western Ontario, is represented in her stories, but also which methods Munro uses in order to make her readers familiar with the settings she has chosen for her stories. In other words, I wish to examine how she translates space into words and what picture this transfers to her readers. Moreover, a focus will lie on the importance of setting in relation to the plot of her stories. Hence, I will try to see what atmosphere space creates in her short stories and in how far this atmosphere mirrors the occurring action or the protagonists.

Many theorists argue that Munro's fiction has changed considerably over the years, not only as far as her characters are concerned, but also in terms of writing techniques. This is not surprising, regarding the fact that her professional writing career stretches over sixty years. For example, several critics observe that her work has become far more complex and experimental. However, it is interesting that her choice of space did not really change. With very few exceptions, her stories are still set in south-western Ontario; indeed, Munro has often been criticised for this fact. Therefore, I want to prove that even though the space might be similar, her stories are not 'all the same'. Furthermore, I want to show that there is far more to analyse about space in her work than simply the fact that the majority of her stories are set in Ontario.

## Structure

To begin, I would like to clarify some terminological aspects; thus, I will offer definitions of some of the key terms which are the essential basis for my further analysis, namely space and setting, in addition to other important concepts that are closely connected to these two terms. As the focus of my thesis is on how space is represented in Alice Munro's fiction, it is also necessary to shed some light on the status of space in short stories in general. Further, I will provide an overview of several different theoretical approaches connected to the analysis of space and setting in literature in order to demonstrate what functions space fulfils and how these functions can be interpreted. Several concepts such as 'realemes' and the deictic shift theory will be defined and critically questioned. Finally, I will also analyse the extent to which perspective and focalization play a role in connection to space.

The second chapter will then be focusing to the application of all these concepts on the work of Alice Munro. Thus, all the definitions will be supported with examples found in her short stories. The following chapters are then all dedicated to a close analysis of my research questions. For that purpose, I will start with a semantisation of space in Munro's stories in order to see how these elements function in concrete stories, as Ontarian small towns are not the only recurring image in her work.

In chapter 4, I will summarise the most frequent stylistic features which occur in relation to setting, such as the emphasis placed on change, addressing all senses or poetic language. This serves as a transition to chapter 5 in which I investigate the effects of her literary methods. Hence, I want to see which effect space has on the particular stories as well as on the readers and which atmosphere is conveyed. Lastly, I will consider in what way her depiction of space fits into different genre classifications, namely realism, gothic, documentary and romantic.

# 1. Some basic considerations about space

## 1.1 Definitions

### 1.1.1 Problems of defining space

Before examining Alice Munro's short stories in detail, it is necessary to first discuss some basic theoretical aspects about setting, or more generally, space, in narrative. As also noted by Fielitz, every story has to take place at a particular time and at a particular place (116). Time and place are thus prerequisites for any narrative, of any kind as they influence the living conditions as well as the opportunities for action of the characters. However, defining the concept of space is not that straightforward, even though it is an omnipresent issue in literature.

Space is an ambiguous term, and it seems that we are still lacking the necessary terminology to distinguish between certain aspects of space. Moreover, thus far, space has not attracted as many theorists as other narrative aspects, such as characters or time. Edward Soja, for example, notes that for a very long time, space has been given far less prominence than time, which he explains in further detail in his work *Postmodern Geographies* (15). Yet, as maintained by Phelan and Rabinowitz, one should not forget that "questions about setting are both important and theoretically uncomfortable" (84).

It was exactly this obvious difficulty of discussing aspects of space and setting in literature that made this topic so interesting for me. I was wondering why this is the case, and I found an interesting answer in Phelan and Rabinowitz, who define two major problems. On the one hand, they point out that it is virtually impossible to enclose the term setting as it does not only involve geographical places, but also objects which are within these places. Further, space is even sometimes equated with background in general, which is, in their view, extremely problematic. Undoubtedly, this causes problems when trying to theorise about space. First of all, there are difficulties in the distinction between setting and description. Secondly, not every detail described in a narrative must necessarily be part of the setting (see Phelan and Rabinowitz 85).

Having considered these problematic areas, I decided to first of all consult an encyclopaedia of narrative theory in order to look for a definition of space in narrative in its broadest sense. In Buchholz and Jahn, narrative space “at its most basic level” is defined as “the environment in which story-internal characters move about and live” (552). Space thus includes everything from large concepts such as the ocean or a particular country, to small places like, for example, a room in a house. Fielitz points out that with every topographical change, space can be enlarged or reduced (117).

Another aspect which is proposed by Buchholz and Jahn’s definition is that although space sometimes seems to remain in the background in literary analyses, it is definitely a highly critical aspect, as it plays a considerable role in relation to a story’s plot and its characters. Thus, these three instances, i.e. plot, characters and space, are strongly intertwined.

### 1.1.2 Space versus place

The general definition offered above will not suffice for the purpose of my thesis. First of all, the difference between space and place needs to be clarified. While *place* can be defined as the “physical, mathematically measurable shape of spatial dimensions”, the term *space* describes “these places in relations to their perceptions” (Bal 93). Thus, space is dependent on how the narrative is presented as there is a strong connection to how places are perceived, either by a character within the narrative or by the narrator.

Unlike dramatic texts, a narrative is exclusively dependent on written words. As a consequence, for the depiction of space, authors exclusively have words at their disposal. This also entails that all the details given about space follow one after the other. Accordingly, it is the task of the readers to create a ‘mental picture’ of what is described with words.

Der Leser eines Romans hat die Aufgabe – aber auch die Freiheit – der intellektuellen Umsetzung der ihm in einem fiktiven Wirklichkeitsentwurf gegebenen Daten. Es wird von ihm erwartet, dass er die ihm von der Erzählinstanz verbal vermittelten Informationen selbstständig in geistige Projektionen umsetzt. So entwirft im Idealfall jeder Leser während der Lektüre eines Romans sein eigenes Bewusstseinsbild des Geschehens mittels der ihm verbal vermittelten Details. (Fielitz 116)

Although Fielitz is reducing her arguments to readers of novels, I would argue that the task is the same for readers of other kinds of prose narrative – in our case, the short story. How well a reader is able to imagine the described space depends unquestionably on the amount of information given by the author. In a short story, this amount will of course be smaller than, for instance, in a novel.

### 1.1.3 Setting versus frame

Setting and frame are two more relevant terms which will frequently occur in my analysis. *Setting* is already a more specific term than space and refers to “the actual immediate surrounding of an object, a character or an event” (Ronen 423) in a narrative. In contrast, the category of *frame* can be defined as the “fictional place, the actual or potential surrounding of fictional characters, objects and places” (Ronen 421).

A setting consists of fictional places which make up the “topological focus” of the story; it is “the zero point where the *actual* story-events and story-states are localized” (423). A frame, on the other hand, is “the space in which the character is situated, or is precisely not situated” (Bal 94). To put it in Ronen’s terms, a frame is the “topological determination” in a narrative and can also be part of the fictional space without necessarily belonging to the “actual spatial surrounding of other fictional entities” (423). As we can see, Ronen connects the setting and frame with topology, a concept derived from mathematics, in order to explain the relationship between story and setting versus story and frame.

Ronen differentiates between three different ways of how to express frames. On the one hand, frames can be expressed *directly*, with a direct and fixed description. On the other hand, there are two *indirect* ways to describe a frame, either by reference to an object involved in the place, or by reference to an object belonging to “the frame’s boundaries” (422). If a frame is indicated directly, this usually means that the specific place which is referred to carries special importance and attention. What this refers to in practice will become clearer when analysing concrete examples of Munro’s stories in the next chapter.

If we consider descriptions of places in a narrative, it is of course also relevant to see in how far these places correlate with the characters or the action. Once again, I would like to refer to a useful distinction brought up by Ronen. According to her analysis, frames can be *open* or *closed*, depending on whether movement is possible within the frame or not. Bal here uses different terms for exactly the same concepts, namely *dynamic* and *steady* space. Furthermore, Ronen distinguishes between *personal* and *impersonal* frames. In contrast to an impersonal frame, a personal frame “carries a mark or imprint of a character; it carries the concrete physical indication [...] of a private domain” (431).

## 1.2 Elements in space

One question that might have arisen in the current discussion is which parts and elements of space are actually verbally described. Any place consists of an infinite number of elements and aspects which could potentially be referred to. To use Zoran’s words, “[a] spatial object is characterized by its being complete, full, and existing simultaneously” (313). In literature, not every single detail can be given, which is why authors must select those aspects which they consider most relevant for their readers to know. In other words, descriptions of setting in narrative are always incomplete, but the described elements should evoke a complete image in the reader’s head. Some parts “may be described explicitly, some of them implicitly, and some bypassed altogether” (Zoran 313). In which way authors arrange the elements they want to describe is their choice, as many different ways are possible.

As Ronen says, a whole “network of properties forming a fictional place” (430) exists. For example, an author can concentrate on physical properties of an object, like its size, shape or colour. Moreover, its functions as well as its boundaries might be relevant for the story. Bal assumes that objects have “spatial status” as they “determine the spatial effect of the room by their shape, measurements, and colours” (95).

It also makes a difference if space is inside or outside and if there are any circumstances which influence this fact, like weather or light. What can be concluded from these examples is that the list of such properties is virtually endless. Moreover,

we have seen that elements in space are not reduced to objects per se but can also involve light, colours, sounds or smells. We will see in the next chapter that Munro is the best example of an author who works with all her senses, not only relying on what can be seen.

Fielitz points out that space might be reduced to one country, or even to a particular region within this country, as it is the case in Munro (118). However, it is also possible that several different countries are mentioned within a single narrative, such as when characters in the narrative are travelling. These countries or regions might either be fictional or real. According to Fielitz, the smallest space which can be evoked in a narrative is a room in a house (120).

### 1.3 Types of location

There are, of course, different types of space and setting in fiction. I have already discussed the difference between larger and smaller places as well as open and closed frames. Moreover, I have briefly touched upon different locations such as landscapes, houses or cities. In *Story Logic*, Herman discusses the differences between three important types of places, which are frequently needed when describing space: *region*, *landmark* and *path*.

I would especially like to highlight the last of these three terms, since it is particularly important for the discussion which follows in the next chapters. Path is a recurring motif in Alice Munro's fiction and as argued by Herman, they make for an especially interesting analysis as they "imply a motion from one place to another and thus dynamic or emergent spatial properties of the sort of characteristics of narratives" (278). In connection to path, motion verbs play a crucial role; they indicate how characters move from one place to another. A path is the route between two different locations and, as noted by Bal, often serves to contrast these two locations and emphasize their differences. However, the movement might also be "a goal in itself" and "is expected to result in a change, liberation, introspection, wisdom, or knowledge" (Bal 96).



## 1.4 Analysis of space

First of all, it is important to note that a setting or a frame might remain the same throughout the whole story, while only being described once. Likewise, settings might also change an infinite number of times throughout a piece of fiction. In other cases, notions about space are repeated several times in order to underline the “stability of the frame, as opposed to the transitory nature of the events which occur within it” (Bal 97).

What can be inferred from this information is the relevance of considering the relation between space and time, as they strongly influence a narrative’s rhythm. For example, if we come across a longer description of a particular place, the rhythm of the narrative is accordingly interrupted. In other words, the narrator needs to make a ‘pause’ in order to describe this particular place. If “the perception of the space takes place gradually (in time),” space can be “regarded as an event” (Bal 97).

Furthermore, space can be indicated *explicitly* or *implicitly*. So far, I mostly assumed that space is explicitly referred to. This means that space is explicitly described which is usually done in descriptive pauses. A descriptive pause is characterised by a “minimum speed” of narrative and is usually used in order to provide “lucid images, particular details of setting, [...] adumbrate pivotal events, or shed light on inscrutable characters, or draw attention to important themes” (9). In contrast to that, in an implicit presentation, the reader can guess where the characters are from their actions or dialogues. In other words, the setting is evoked (see Bal 98).

Hence, space does not necessarily need to be *described*, as suggested by Buchholz and Jahn (553) but might also be *revealed*. This is also connected to the value that the author dedicates to setting. If setting is central to a narrative, one might come across rather long *descriptions* of setting, varying from descriptions of a landscape or city, to minute descriptions of single objects such as a tree or a lamp. As already briefly touched upon, Ronen also shows that space is always intertwined with the plot and the character(s), which means that descriptions of a setting or frame always depend on the situation which takes place and vice versa. However, if a writer wants to put more emphasis on the action occurring in the narrative, space will probably be evoked indirectly.

### 1.4.1 Herman's analysis

In an article from the collection *Narrative Theory*, Herman listed four questions which refer to sub-aspects that he asserts are relevant to consider when analysing space in narrative. These four questions serve as an ideal starting point for my later analysis, and are:

1. Where did/will/might narrated events happen relative to the place of narration – and for that matter relative to the interpreter's current situation?
2. How exactly is the domain of narrated events spatially configured, and what sorts of changes take place in the configuration of that domain over time?
3. During a given moment of the unfolding action, what are the focal (foregrounded) constituents or inhabitants of the narrated domains – as opposed to the peripheral (backgrounded) constituents?
4. Whose vantage point on situations, objects, and events in the narrated world shapes the presentation of that world at a given moment? (98)

### 1.4.2 Buchholz and Jahn's analysis

Buchholz and Jahn use a similar method of analysis and define four different factors which space is dependent on and according to which space can be analysed in more detail: (1) "the boundaries that separate it from coordinate, superordinate, and subordinate spaces", (2) "the objects which it contains", (3) "the living conditions which it provides", and (4) "the temporal dimension to which it is bound" (552).

### 1.4.3 Space in relation to perspective and focalisation

We have considered the fact that in literature, space needs to be described with words. Although the setting is evoked through the action or through a dialogue in some cases, we still receive this information from the author's words, regardless of how they choose to convey the setting. In other words, the space that is being described has to be 'read' by the audience. According to New, "[t]he observer and the observation interact to shape what is seen (in the sense of 'understood'); representation gives way to

conceptualization” (5). As a consequence, “spatial description is relative to either observers [...] or intrinsically oriented objects” (Ryan qtd. in Buchholz and Jahn 553).

Literary space is thus always subjective in a double sense, depending on who is describing the scene and who is reading and understanding it. On the one hand, space is subjective since it is presented from the author’s or the narrator’s point of view, depending on focalisation. At that point, it is also necessary to state that what is seen by the narrators does not necessarily correspond to what they tell us. On the other hand, space is also subjective as it depends on how it is interpreted or viewed by the reader. For instance, a fictional place can evoke feelings of the space being “intimate, public, solitary, conflictive, etc.” (Ronen 434).

Tuan did a lot of research on how places are constructed subjectively and coined a highly useful term, namely *topophilia*. This expression refers to “all of the human being’s affective ties with the material environment” (Tuan qtd. in Omhové 33). This term is perhaps not directly connected to perspective per se, but Tuan’s arguments about topophilia are highly relevant to this discussion. He maintains the idea that both, human beings and their surroundings are constantly influencing each other.

A similar concept has been referenced in Herman’s *Story Logic*, where he speaks of *projective locations*. The description of such projective locations in narratives strongly depends on the narrator’s attitude towards them. Moreover, the term can be interpreted as a counterpart of *topology*, which relates to an objective geographic, rather than a personal, account of a place (see Herman 280).

It is important to note that perspective also influences notions of reliability. The “readers’ decisions about the reliability of the narration” can be highly influenced, depending on “the level and the accuracy of a narrator’s account of setting” (Phelan and Rabinowitz 86). In other words, readers have to decide if they can trust the narrator or not, depending on how he or she presents a setting.

#### **1.4.4 Space and time**

At the beginning of the chapter I already mentioned that space is always closely connected to time and that both space and time are essential components of every

narrative. I have also concluded that time is mostly given more prominence in literary analysis than space due to the fact that “[l]iterature is basically an art of time” (Zoran 310). Thus, there is no clear symmetry between space and time in literature concerning their status within a narrative as well as the amount of research dedicated to them (see Zoran 310).

Whereas time in a narrative is “a transition from one type of temporal structure to another”, the situation of space is different to the extent that “the transformation from an object to a system of signs involves also a transformation from spatial arrangement to a temporal one” (Zoran 313). A particularly important concept connected to time and space is *spacetime*, or also called *chronotopos* or *chronotope*. This term was first coined by Bakhtin (*The Dialogic Imaginations*), a Russian literary critic, and describes the movement of spatial objects. Hence, not all spatial objects are static (see Zoran 314).

#### **1.4.5 Interpretation of space**

Space in narrative can be discussed from many different viewpoints. In the following sub-chapters, I will present some theories which are pertinent to the further analysis of the short stories by Alice Munro.

##### **1.4.5.1 “Realemes”**

A very common feature in literature is the use of place names, which are also called *toponyms*. In some narratives, these place names refer to existing places in the real world, while in other works of literature, authors create fictional place names. It might also be the case that within a singular narrative, the author uses a variety of both fictional as well as real toponyms. As we will see in chapter 2, Alice Munro, too, makes use of real city and street names.

Another relevant term which has been coined by Even-Zohar and is closely related to the concept of toponymy is *realeme*.

[W]hile ‘items of reality’ (such as persons and natural phenomena, voices and furniture, gestures and faces) may be ‘there’ in the outside world, in terms of

reference to them in a verbal utterance they constitute items of cultural repertoire, the repertoire of realia, or, in short – for the sake of both convenience and transparency – *realemes*. (Even-Zohar, *Reality and Realemes* 209/210)

Even-Zohar sees a connection between reality and culture and expresses his view that what we experience as ‘real’ depends on our culture. He further argues that it is not only dependent on conventions, but also on the author and on the text itself which *realemes* are included in narrative. Moreover, references can be made to this *realeme* later on in the narrative, for example by the use of deictic expressions as all these references are made within the same narrative world. These “criteria afford scaffolding for particular kinds of world construction” and make it possible to avoid constructing the story-world “from scratch.” They “determine the degree to which (and ways in which) narrative worlds can be cross-referenced with the world(s) in which they are interpreted” (Even-Zohar, *Constraints*, qtd. in Herman 99).

#### **1.4.5.2 Deictic shift theory**

The deictic shift theory has been established by several critics, amongst which the most important names are Herman, Duchan, and Hewitt. In Herman’s *Story Logic*, the deictic shift is explained as follows: “narrators prompt their interlocutors to relocate from the *here* and *now* of the act of narration to other space-time coordinates, namely, those defining the perspective from which the events of the story are recounted” (271). In other words, a movement from one place to another always takes place within the particular narrative world of the story. Undoubtedly, this is also true for movements in time.

Herman distinguishes between the “story-now”, which refers to “the present moment in the narrated domain” and the “discourse-now”, which he describes as “a frame associated with a gnomic statement anchored in the present moment of narration” (*Narrative Theory* 100). For example, when beginning to read, readers first of all must orientate themselves within the narrative. This means, that they move from the story-now to the discourse-now.

It is important to note, however, that such deictic shifts are not always easily recognisable in a narrative. This is especially problematic when the narration is an interior monologue, as it is sometimes difficult to follow the thoughts of a narrator, which might include unexpected shifts of time and space. Accordingly, the readers are required to pay particular attention to these details (see *Story Logic* 274). As I have observed in Munro's fiction, a similar problem is evident in short stories. Due to space constraints, deictic shifts sometimes take place unnoticed. Authors of short stories thus tend to refrain from announcing shifts of space with as much detail as might be the case in a novel, for example.

#### 1.4.6 Functions of space

As noted by Bal, the function of space in narrative is twofold. There might either be a frame, as discussed before, and space stays in the background. The second possibility is that space is "thematized", which means that it "becomes an object of presentation itself" (Bal 95). In such a case, the plot itself is backgrounded for a moment, while space is put to the focus of attention. This is usually the case when the narrator wants to put particular emphasis on space.

Phelan and Rabinowitz consider space functions in a narrative from a completely different angle. They define three different *rhetorical* functions of setting: the synthetic, the mimetic and the thematic function (85). Let me briefly explain each one of them to later see how and if they occur in Alice Munro's stories. The *synthetic* function is the most fundamental of the three functions as it determines "the conditions of time and place and characters which shall make that story possible and actual" (Albright qtd. in Phelan and Rabinowitz 85). What these synthetic functions refer to in practice, however, depends on the methods used by the author. For instance, the synthetic function can be used to "signify, support, or heighten differences of various kinds" (Phelan and Rabinowitz 85) between certain settings. Contrastingly, the synthetic function can serve to establish a "certain *kind* of location – or at least put some limits on location" (86). Finally, it can also be used to either initiate a narrative or change how a narrative continues.

The *mimetic* function is more complex, and Phelan and Rabinowitz state that theorists interpret this function in many different ways. On the one hand, there are those who claim that this function rather distracts the reader from the actual plot and draw their attention exclusively to space. On the other hand, certain theorists also see this distraction as rather negative for other reasons, namely because it does not accomplish any relevant function for the narrative itself, according to them. Essentially, one can conclude that the mimetic function of setting in narrative is decorative as it aims to serve as “a window on what the reader views as the ‘real world’ ” (87).

The third function defined by Phelan and Rabinowitz is the *thematic* function. This function is the one which requires the most profound analysis. Although much detail could be focused on the complexity of the thematic function, this paper will rather consider the most relevant aspect for the analysis of Munro’s work. Most notably, the symbolic meaning of certain settings is part of this thematic function. These symbolic meanings are sometimes quite obvious, but can also be very subtle. Fielitz stresses that symbolic meaning can be found in what she calls particularly ‘empty’ spaces (123). This means that literary spaces, which are not described in a very detailed way and which leave a lot of room for interpretation, usually contain symbolism. It is exactly this emptiness, which, according to Fielitz, often mirrors a character’s situation or feelings.

## 1.5 Space in short stories

As the focus of my thesis is on how setting is presented in a particular type of narrative, namely short stories, I would like to briefly comment on the role of setting in this genre. Regrettably, there is a distinct deficit of literature available on setting or space in the short story. Yet there is one obvious aspect which is clearly different in a short story than, for instance, in a novel: while the authors of novels do not have to be concerned with spatial limitations and can hypothetically dedicate as many pages for descriptions of space as they desire, this is not quite true for the short story. As it is widely acknowledged, short story writers have to face certain constrictions, most notably the clear limitations of length. Although there is no clear agreement on the

maximum length of a short story, theorists are in agreement that the short story's most obvious hallmark is its limited length.

Undoubtedly, this fact has consequences not only for the story's plot but also for the writing style of the authors. Paul Zumthor assumes that because of its shortness, the short story has a tendency towards the general, which is also mirrored in space. According to his theory, space descriptions in short stories are fairly general rather than detailed and specific. Furthermore, he argues that, as a consequence of limited length, authors must leave out certain details by the use of ellipsis. Yet, they have to choose their formulations very carefully in order to provide the readers with enough information in little physical space. This requires special attention to every single word when reading a short story (see Zumthor 125).

Thus, due to limitations of physical space, short story writers have to deal with narratological space in different ways. In general, it can be observed that in many works of short fiction, authors do not dedicate a lot of space for the description of the literary space. However, this does not mean that literary space is less important in short stories than in longer works of fiction. Rather, in both novels and short stories, space is relevant insofar as it defines the living conditions of characters and, as a consequence, their actions and thoughts as well (see Thacker, *Writing Her Lives* 9). That is, it "provide[s] the backdrop" (Relph 46) for the character's actions. To put it in Ronen's terms, together with characters and objects, space creates a "fictional universe" (421) in the narrative. McGill says that "fiction transforms space, our awareness of it, and our relationship to it, while generating its own spaces." Put differently, space is strongly influenced by fiction and vice versa. There is always some meaning to the setting in fiction; it is never accidental.

## **1.6 Approaches to space in literature**

In the following section, I wish to present a small selection of different approaches which have been established for the analysis of space. First of all, I will outline some basics of earlier theories by Barthes and Greimas. The second theory is special to the extent that it builds on a connection to a different field apart from literature, namely



geography. The last two approaches are fairly modern ones and they are strongly intertwined. They put different levels of how to structure space to the foreground.

### 1.6.1 Early theories

In his work on narrative, *Story Logic*, Herman has dedicated a whole chapter to different theoretical approaches to space. Herman stresses that in earlier narrative theories, space has been given very little prominence (265). A theorist who shares this view is Tally Jr., who therefore describes spatiality as a historical concept (12). Furthermore, in some theories, descriptions of space are completely excluded, which Herman strongly criticises since he considers these descriptions an important part of the narrative.

However, according to Tally Jr. and many other scholars, the concept of spatiality has faced a considerable rise in interest in literary studies during the past few decades. He speaks of a “spatial turn” (12) that occurred, and he agrees with Foucault, who once stated that our current century is “the epoch of space” (Tally Jr. 22). However, while some critics locate this spatial turn after the Second World War, Tally Jr. stresses that there is actually no clear starting point of this development.

Roland Barthes’ theory is one of the earliest theories about space in literature. I would briefly like to present its most important aspects. Barthes coined the famous expression “informants” referring to “pure data with immediate signification” (96). This data includes elements such as the setting in which the action takes place or character traits of the protagonists. It is the readers’ job to “learn to know a character or an atmosphere” by interpreting “informants [which] bring ready-made knowledge” (Barthes 96).

Barthes’ theory has frequently been criticised for being too subtle. For instance, Greimas, who, together with Barthes, belongs to the most famous French semioticians, claimed that there is no such ready-made material which can easily be processed by the reader (see Herman 268).

### 1.6.2 The writer as a cartographer

Tally Jr. is the founding father of this approach and discovered another function of literature, namely its function “as a form of mapping, offering its readers descriptions of places, situating them in a kind of imaginary space, and providing points of reference by which they can orient themselves” (2). Thus, Tally Jr. stresses that space has a highly important and valuable function in literature. In the view of Padrón, spatial descriptions enable the readers to imagine the places where the narrative action takes place (see Padrón 258). According to Tally Jr., the act of writing can therefore be well compared to the activity of a cartographer:

Like the mapmaker, the writer must survey territory, determining which features of a given landscape to include, to emphasize, or to diminish. [...] The writer must establish the scale and the shape, no less of the narrative than of the places in it. The literary cartographer, even one who operates in such non-realistic modes as myth or fantasy, must determine the degree to which a given representation of a place refers to any ‘real’ place in the geographical world. (45)

In this context it is important to note that a map here serves as a metaphor and does not refer to a map in its traditional sense as an illustration of the topography of a country or a region. In this conception of cartography, a map does not refer to a geographic entity, but rather, consists of words (see Tally Jr. 46). Elaborated upon further, the act of telling a story itself involves drawing a map. Similarly, Tally Jr. considers plot itself as spatial, “since a plot is also a plan, which is to say, a map” (49).

Tally Jr. has also analysed Turchi’s work. According to Turchi, selection and omission are two of the stylistic key processes in literary geography (see Tally Jr. 50). At the beginning of such a process the author, just like the cartographer, must decide on the elements he or she wants to include in the narrative or map and which elements can be omitted. The author’s final aim is to make the map that he or she creates meaningful for the readers.

Moreover, through these decisions, the author more or less decides on the type of narrative. Thus, genre comes into play in connection to mapping, too. As Tally Jr. puts it, “[g]enres, like maps, are essential in organizing knowledge in such a way as to make things meaningful, and both the generic frame and the map [...] project a *world*”

(55). Furthermore, Frow emphasises the importance of genre for readers to make meaning (10). It is therefore necessary to see genres in relation to how space, time, and other elements are organised in it. It is the writer's task to provide the readers with a map which serves as an orientation for them through the text. This map helps them understand, for example, the meaning of certain places or settings described.

The term *chronotope*, explained earlier in the chapter about the relationship between space and time in literature, is relevant with regard to cartography, too. The reason of that is that both time and space can be regarded as parameters of a map, helping to organise a narrative.

A final point about cartography is that the overall goal of maps is representing reality. Again, one can recognise parallels between a narrative and a map, as, depending on the genre, some narratives, too, pursue the goal of being realistic. This is especially relevant in relation to space since authors usually try to present their settings in a way that is as close to reality as possible. However, one should not forget that reality in fiction is to be understood figuratively, as also noted by Tally Jr. (59).

In such a mapping process, it is not simply the writers who are included, but also readers. It is their task to interpret the literary map the author has provided him or her with. Tally Jr. calls this procedure "literary geography" (79). Thus, literary geography can be interpreted as the counterpart of literary cartography. In that connection, Lawrence has coined the term *spirit of place*, which refers to how readers interpret a narrative in relation to space. Hence, the spirit of place is very much dependent on how a text is read. Yet, it is of course also influenced by how a text was produced, since production and consumption are strongly intertwined (see Tally Jr. 81/85).

As we have seen from the consideration of different aspects of space in Munro, her stories prompt a critical reading of geography. McGill uses a different terminology and calls Munro's stylistic method "geographic metafiction" (103), since Munro "makes use of its [her fiction's] own spatiality to comment upon the places it evokes within its narrative, while those places in turn inform the space of the story" (103).

### **1.6.3 Levels of structuring space according to Zoran**

Zoran wrote a highly interesting article about space theory, in which he defined three different levels of structuring space in a narrative. I would like to highlight these three types, as I find them particularly useful for the analysis of the way Alice Munro structures space in her stories. Zoran stresses that these levels are not dependent on a particular order; on the contrary, readers must move through the levels (316).

#### **1.6.3.1 The topographical level**

The first of these levels of structure is called the *topographical* level, in which space is static. Therefore, the represented world is “cut off entirely from any structure imposed by the verbal text and the plot” (Zoran 315). Thus, this level is characterised by direct descriptions although all the other textual units can help to reconstruct this level as well. The topographical structure can be compared to “a kind of map based on elements from the entire text” (316). This map is structured in terms of oppositions such as near-far, city-village, big-small etc. and does not only consist of aspects connected to a location but also to the quality of this location, like for example its colour, size or smell.

#### **1.6.3.2 The chronotopic level**

The second possibility is the *chronotopic* level. As the name suggests, the chronotopic level is connected to *chronotopos*, a term previously discussed. Thus, space is seen in connection to some kind of movement and depends on the plot, but not on the text. However, the meaning of *chronotopos* is slightly different in Zoran’s theory than in the original definition by Bakhtin. Zoran defines the term as concrete “spatial and temporal categories as movement and space” (318) rather than the relation between space and time in general.

Zoran further distinguishes between synchronic and diachronic relations. Synchronic relations describe instances of movement and rest, while diachronic relations refer to directions, axes and powers. Directions, axes and powers are specific boundaries of movement which can be individually defined in a narrative (see Zoran 319). What their individual indications mean will become clear in the practical part of my paper.

### 1.6.3.3 The textual level

The third and last level is called the *textual* level. This level indicates that a certain structure is attributed to space “by the fact that it is signified within the verbal text” (315). This last type is “the most immediate” one for “the world still retains several of the structuring patterns of the text” (315). Zoran has defined several important characteristics of this level. Most importantly, the writer has to select language for describing space. Language can be clear or vague, specific or unclear. As already discussed, space in literature is characterised by the necessity of certain gaps, meaning that some details are not expressed at all.

A further important aspect to consider in connection to the textual level is the linearity of the narrative. Space must be structured and ordered, which, of course, has certain consequences for the text. The perspective plays a role, too, especially in the contrast between *here* and *there*. This opposition happens on two different levels: “between the spatial location of the act of narration and the ‘world’ as a whole; and, within the ‘world,’ between things perceived at a certain instant as in the foreground and those perceived in the background” (322).

### 1.6.4 Units of space according to Zoran

Another theory proposed by Zoran is related to categorising units of space. This way of analysis is closely connected to the levels of structuring above, yet the focus is a slightly different one. He divides space into several different categories. The largest possible unit of space is a *scene*, which further consists of several smaller units; the classification of such a scene depends on the level of structuring.

Let me first of all consider the topographical level. On this level, Zoran classifies a scene as a *place* which is “a certain point, plane, or volume, spatially continuous and with fairly distinct boundaries” (323). On the chronotopical level, a scene is described as a *zone of action* which depends on the “proportions of the event taking place within it” (323). It may of course be the case that several events are happening simultaneously, or, on the other hand, it is also possible that only one event is happening. Finally, on the textual level, the discussed scene is called a *field of vision*.

In contrast to a zone of action, a field of vision is not dependent on an event but can “encompass any spatial unit” (324). Zoran makes reference to the opposition between *here* and *there*, arguing that the field of vision refers to the *here* whereas the fields of vision before and after that particular moment refer to the *there*. He uses a telephone conversation as an example, explaining that the focus can lie on the one participant in the conversation, or on the other one, or on both of them.

## 2. Aspects of setting in Alice Munro

Zoran writes that Munro's fiction is "space-oriented" (314), an observation that I absolutely agree with. Space undoubtedly plays a highly important role in her stories. The following chapter will offer a practical account of what has been discussed in theory so far. My aim is to analyse Munro's stories on the basis of the theoretical concepts defined in the first chapter.

### 2.1 Setting and frame

Let me first illuminate the difference between setting and frame in general. I consider the definitions of these two terms by Bal and Ronen rather vague, which necessitates further consideration. The meaning of frame becomes evident in the following example taken from "Royal Beatings": "There was Hanratty and West Hanratty, with the river flowing between them" (*Selected Stories* 99). This is a general statement which the narrator makes about two different fictional places, without specifying the relation of these places to herself or to other characters in the story. Nevertheless, one can assume that these places make up the surrounding of the characters in the story. Thus, Hanratty and West Hanratty, as well as the river which separates the two, can be described as the frame of the story.

As we have seen in chapter one, in Ronen's theory, setting is evoked as a specific type of frame, or rather as a sub-category of frame. Consequently, when speaking of frames in my analysis, these frames might also refer to setting. Yet I would like to clarify the difference between these two terms, as in my later analysis of Munro's space, the focus will lie on setting. One can speak of setting as the "topological focus" (Ronen 423) of a story in the following passage of "Royal Beatings": "People who came to the store were mostly from the houses around. Some country people came too, on their way home from town, and a few people from Hanratty, who walked across the bridge" (100). In contrast to the other example mentioned above, the place mentioned in this sentence is directly connected to characters of the story. The "actual immediate surrounding" (Ronen 423) in this passage is the store, whereas the "houses around",

“the bridge” and “Hanratty” are part of the frame. These places are potential rather than immediate surroundings.

### 2.1.1 Direct and indirect frames

As far as the different ways of expressing frames discussed in the first chapter are concerned, they are all manifested of them in Munro’s fiction. First of all, I will analyse the difference between direct and indirect frames. In order to do so, I would like to refer to the following example from the story “Vandals” for the first type. The sentence “Bea and Ladner [...] were in Toronto waiting for Ladner to have an operation” (*Open Secrets* 275) is clearly a direct identification of frame. The narrator refers to a particular place, namely Toronto, and explains that the two characters are there for a special reason, namely Ladner’s operation. Thus, we have a concrete place and a concrete purpose for being at this place.

The second example I chose is from the story “Vandals” as well, and occurs when Ladner describes another character’s (Liza’s) house: “There is a mess in the kitchen – spilled cereal on the floor, puddles of milk souring on the counter” (290). This is an example for what Ronen calls an indirect identification of frame, as this is a description of objects within the fictional space. In this case, one can argue that the kitchen is part of Liza’s house. Furthermore, the floor and the counter are again objects within the kitchen. In other words, the frame is evoked through reference to objects within it. Although the narrator does not explicitly mention that Ladner is talking about the kitchen of Liza’s house, readers probably assume that “the counter” is referring to the kitchen counter and that the “puddles of milk” are to be found in her kitchen, rather than in her bathroom, for example.

The third category defined by Ronen is also referred to as indirect frames, yet in the sense of referring to the frame’s boundaries. In a scene from “Nettles”, the narrator describes the place where she grew up: “Our farm was small. It was small enough for me to have explored every part of it” (*Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* 158). This description indicates that there is nothing more to explore for the narrator at their farm since she already knows every single detail about it, as she further explains: “and every part had a particular look and character, which I could not



have put into words” (158/159). The fact that she knows about every little detail of their farm can be considered as boundaries of the frame.

A slightly different example, which also fits into the category of indirect frames, and in which boundaries are invoked, is the following taken from “Heirs of the Living Body”: “All the blinds were down, to keep out the afternoon sun” (*Lives of Girls and Women* 66). The fact that “the blinds are down” means that there is no natural light in the house and that one cannot look out of the windows which also encloses the frame.

### **2.1.2 Personal and impersonal frames**

The next distinction I would like to make is the one between personal and impersonal frames. The following two examples taken from “The Flats Road” highlight the differences between these two categories. The first sentence mirrors the attitude of the narrator’s mother towards their home: “The Flats Road was the last place my mother wanted to live” (*Lives of Girls and Women* 10). This is clearly a personal frame, as it shows the mother’s feelings about their home.

It is a bit more difficult to find an example of an impersonal frame, as nearly all of the frames in Munro’s stories are in some way connected to a personal indication. Most stories give a very personal account of her characters, so if we come across frame descriptions, they are usually personal. Moreover, I consider the borders between personal and impersonal frames rather vague.

The example for an impersonal frame that I chose is also from “The Flats Road.” In this scene, the narrator, Del, writes down the address of her Uncle Benny: “The Flats Road, Jubilee, Wawanash County, Ontario, Canada, North America, The Western Hemisphere, The World, The Solar System, The Universe” (14). One could argue that this is a personal frame as it is the address of a character. However, there is not really any “concrete physical indication [...] of a private domain” which is, according to Ronen (431), the hallmark of a personal frame. Thus, one knows that this is the address of Del’s uncle, but there is no information about the house itself, only about where it is situated.

### 2.1.3 Open and closed frames

Finally, I would like to refer to the difference between open and closed frames according to Ronen, or steady and dynamic frames, as they are called by Bal. In general, both concepts can be found in Alice Munro's short stories. Open frames are most notably evoked in her descriptions of landscape. Munro frequently describes wide fields and is also very often mentioning the Great Lakes, or the Wawanash River. This certainly indicates possible movement and openness. An example would be a passage from "Princess Ida:"

We drove through the country we did not know we loved – not rolling or flat, but broken, no recognizable rhythm to it; low hills, hollows full of brush, swamp and bush and fields. Tall elm trees, separate, each plainly showing its shape, doomed but we did not know that either. They were shaped like slightly opened fans, sometimes like harps. (*Lives of Girls and Women* 77)

Words like "separate", "plainly", and "opened" emphasise this feeling of openness. Trees, "each plainly showing its shape", points to the opposite image of a forest. While a forest would rather suggest restriction and limitation, the isolated trees point to a panoramic view and lots of space. Their shapes of "harps" and "slightly opened fans" reinforce this rather idyllic image once more. Furthermore, the fact that the narrator is saying that they were driving through the country, without indicating where they are going or for how long, suggests a large, open space, as well.

In contrast, the houses in which Munro's characters live are undoubtedly closed frames. I would like to mention one extreme example from "Heirs of the Living Body", which represents such a closed frame: "The house was full of people pressed together, melted together like blunt old crayons, warm, acquiescent, singing. And I was in the middle of them" (*Lives of Girls and Women* 64). In this description, the protagonist, Del, does not even talk about individuals in the house, but sees them as "melted together" and herself being "in the middle of them" without being able to get out of the house. This arouses feelings of being restricted and not being able to move, or, going even further, could evoke the impression of agoraphobia.

## 2.2 Different aspects of analysis

### 2.2.1 Change of setting

As discussed in chapter two, a setting or a frame might stay the same throughout a whole narrative even though they are only mentioned once (see Ronen 424). This is for example the case in “Gravel.” In this story, the narrator presents the setting, i.e. their new house and its surroundings, at the very beginning already:

At that time we were living beside a gravel pit. Not a large one, hollowed out by monster machinery, just a minor pit that a farmer must have made some money from years before. [...] In this new house, which was really a trailer, my sister, Caro, and I had narrow cots, stacked one above the other. (*Dear Life* 91/92)

Even though it is only described here in the opening paragraph of the story, the setting remains the same for the whole story, apart from a short passage in which the narrator informs the reader about the place her family had lived in before. The fact that this description forms the beginning of the story also indicates the particular importance of the setting, which becomes clear later on in the story, when the narrator’s sister dies at this exact place.

However, in Munro’s work, sudden changes of setting commonly occur; they are not always described, but rather evoked through the action or dialogues of characters. A suitable example can be found in the story “Dimensions”, in which Doree’s complicated journey from her home town to her workplace, the Blue Spruce Inn, is described. Amid this description, there is a sudden shift of space and time: “On the first bus she was not too troubled. Just riding along and looking at the scenery. She had grown up on the coast, where there was such a thing as spring, but here winter jumped almost directly into summer” (*Too Much Happiness* 2).

Within one sentence, there is a shift of space from the bus to the place at the coast where Doree grew up, as well as a shift in time back to her childhood. Then, still within the same sentence, there is a shift back to the current situation, namely Doree travelling on the bus. This is what Hermann and other critics refer to as a deictic shift, which I explained in chapter one. The readers are asked to “relocate from the here and

now of the act of narration to other space-time coordinates” (Herman, *Story Logic* 271).

### 2.2.2 Elements in space

In Munro’s fiction, we can find several types of frames and settings as proposed by Ronen. As far as the elements in space are concerned, it is interesting that Munro’s spaces vary from minute descriptions of rooms in her protagonist’s houses, to descriptions of wide landscapes or whole towns. I would like to refer to two examples which show the contrast between these two types:

Our house was full of things that had not been paid for with money, but taken in some complicated trade, and that might not be ours to keep. For a while, we could play piano, consult an Encyclopaedia Britannica, eat off an oak table. But one day I would come home from school and find that each of these things had moved on. A mirror off the wall could go as easily, a cruet stand, a horsehair loveseat that had replaced a sofa that had replaced a daybed. We were living in a warehouse. (*The Moons of Jupiter* 19)

In this passage from the story “The Stone in the Field” Munro makes use of a high number of different objects, which creates a vivid image of the house of the narrator and her family. This vividness is strengthened by the narrator telling us that the objects were regularly replaced by others. Thus, change plays an important role here, too. The enumerations, divided by commas, reinforce the quick and regular changes of objects found in their house. Considering the fact that the narrator is only talking about specific objects in their house, the physical space dedicated to this description is fairly long.

A completely different image is conveyed in the following passage a bit later on in the same story:

The route was complicated. Around Dalgleish most roads were straight, but out here the roads twisted around hills or buried themselves in swamps. [...] In some places wild berrybushes sent creepers across the road. These high, thick bushes, dense and thorny, with leaves of a shiny green that seemed almost black, reminded me of the waves of the sea. (23)

In contrast to the first example, this second one conveys a completely different image. The picture presented here is undoubtedly larger than the image of the house in the first example. In the earlier example, the leaves of the bushes referred to by the narrator, are the smallest units, whereas the narrator is mostly referring to larger units, such as “route”, “hills”, “swamps” or “waves of the sea” in the second passage. Just like in the earlier example, a lot of space is dedicated for the elaboration of space in this passage, as well. Thus, one can conclude that this story is definitely space-centred.

### 2.2.3 Analysis according to Herman’s questions

Herman listed four basic questions that can be used as a first guideline for analysing space in narrative. I have listed all of them in the first chapter and would now like to demonstrate how they can be applied in practice, using Munro’s story “The Flats Road” as an example. To begin, the first question is related to where the events take place and to what extent this place is relevant for the situation of the characters. Already the story’s title hints at a particular place, namely the Flats Road, which is the street where the narrator lives. The street itself is given great attention throughout the whole story. For example, at the beginning of the story, the narrator, Del, gives a detailed account of what the Flats Road and its surrounding look like:

Our house was at the end of the Flats Road, which ran west from Buckles’ Store, at the edge of town. [...] Sidewalks, street lights, lined-up shade trees, milkmen’s and icemen’s carts, bird-baths, flower borders, verandas with wicker chairs, from which ladies watched the street [...] and we walked [...] on the wide meandering Flats Road, with no shade from Buckles’ Store to our house, between fields ragged with weeds, and yellow with dandelions, wild mustard, or goldenrod, depending on the season of the year. Houses were set further apart and looked in general more neglected, poor and eccentric than town houses would ever be. (*Lives of Girls and Women* 8)

From this passage we learn that Del and her family live at this place, which explains its relevance to the story. In this particular scene, the surrounding is described in great detail, as it is described from the narrator’s point of view while walking home from school.

The second question, according to Herman, is concerned with what the space consists of and if it changes over time. As we can see, the narrator does not only inform the readers where in town the Flats Road is situated, but also what houses look like, which other buildings are to be found there, and what the surrounding nature is like. Readers only see the things the narrator is paying attention to, which are flowers and the appearance of the houses. In general, the description is rather static and general; the only 'active' part is the ladies sitting on wicker chairs from which they are watching the street. The question of change is only briefly touched upon in this scene, namely when the narrator says that it depends on the season which kinds of flowers are in the fields.

Considering Herman's third question of foregrounded versus backgrounded parts of the space, the Flats Road itself is at the centre of attention in this passage. Clearly, in this description, the aim is to offer an overall picture of the place where the protagonist lives. We get an impression of where in town the street is situated and Del describes its surrounding. Hence, foregrounding and backgrounding is also closely related to her personal perception. I would argue that the specific types of flowers which she mentions belong to the background, as she does not really describe them, but only lists them in passing, which can be found in the passage "sidewalks, street lights, lined-up shade trees, milkmen's and icemen's carts, bird-baths, flower borders." However, the houses are described in some further detail by the use of adjectives ("poor", "eccentric", "neglected")

The fourth question goes hand in hand with my analysis in response to question three. Undoubtedly, the vantage point in this passage is Del's, and the readers see the Flats Road through her eyes. Since the way home from school is a path a child has to walk every day, we can assume that Del, too, is watching this path very closely and more or less knows it by heart. Another character would perhaps not pay attention to the flowers next to the road, or would describe the houses differently. Del does not describe the houses' materials or colours, but rather their appearance (poor and neglected), allowing the reader to strongly recognize the personal nature of the description.

### 2.2.4 Buchholz and Jahn's parameters

The parameters of space outlined by Buchholz and Jahn can be considered as a supplement to Herman's questions of analysis, which is why I will outline what they refer to in Munro's literature. Let us consider the following passage from "Leaving Maverley:"

[T]he town was boxed in for the first time that year and the main street was the only one that the snowplows tried to keep open. Nearly all the stores were closed, and in the part of town where Leah's family lived the power had gone out and there was nothing that could be done about it, with the wind arching and bowing the trees until it looked as if they were trying to sweep the ground (*Dear Life* 75).

This scene demonstrates how winter has affected the town. The first parameter of what is super- and subordinate can thus be interpreted as follows: The town itself is subordinate to a region and a country – in that case, it is subordinate to south-western Ontario and, more generally, to Canada. On the other hand, the town is superordinate to houses and other places within this town. To mention some examples of objects contained in this space, which is the second parameter, the narrator talks about "stores" and "trees". Thirdly, the living conditions connected to this scene are clearly harsh, since the narrator mentions that in some parts of the streets there is no electricity and that most of the shops are closed. Finally, the temporal dimension in this passage relates to a particular day, namely the first day "that year" in which "the town was boxed in". It is not a general description like the description of a landscape, for instance, but relates to a particular situation on a particular day.

Comparing Buchholz and Jahn's parameters to Herman's approach, it is clear that Herman's analysis is deeper. While the focus of Buchholz and Jahn is nearly exclusively on the relation between space and characters, Herman is more concerned with the spatial aspects themselves. The usefulness of each approach depends on the aim of an analysis of space.

## 2.3 A matter of perspective

### 2.3.1 The importance of perspective

The description of a space is always influenced by the perspective it is told from. As we have seen above, Herman as well as Buchholz and Jahn, have included perspective as one of their main foci of the analysis of literary space. The following chapter will examine the general role of perspective in Alice Munro's stories more closely.

In Munro's earlier work, stories are exclusively told by a first-person narrator. As a consequence, the descriptions are given through the narrator's eyes, and this, of course, strongly influences the image that is conveyed. Redekop states that in her stories, Munro is typically dealing with "people in the *act* of looking" (208). In other words, according to Redekop, Munro is concerned with showing her readers how the narrators see the world. For the purpose of my thesis, it is thus relevant to see how the narrators perceive space.

However, in Munro's later work, this trend changes slightly. In her later collections, like *Dear Life* and *Too Much Happiness*, one can also find several stories written from a third-person perspective. Yet, in these stories, the narrators are not omniscient. Therefore, the information we receive is also subjective, as it comes from one particular character. To put it in Genette's terms, Munro makes use of internal focalization in these stories.

I would like to refer to the story "The Ottawa Valley" in order to illustrate in how far perspective and personal experience influence how readers visualise the image evoked. In this story, the first person narrator, her mother and her sister travel to the Ottawa Valley, which is where the mother grew up. Munro uses different levels of perspective, so that we get different views of the region of the Ottawa Valley. When they arrive there, the narrator seems somewhat disappointed, detecting that "[i]t was no valley" (*Selected Stories* 68). Thus, her expectations based on her mother's descriptions are not fulfilled.

When her mother was telling her about the valley, the narrator clearly had a different picture in mind; a picture which was not reaffirmed when she actually travels to this place. She says that she "was looking for mountains, or at least hills" while "all it was was fields and bush" (68). Duncan calls this kind of phenomenon "reflexive



antagonism” (60). Put differently, this passage can be regarded as a mirror which serves “to question reality” (Redekop 209).

Another aspect discussed in chapter one becomes evident in this particular scene. Ronen says that literary space is subjective in a double sense, not only because it depends on the one who is looking at the place, but also on the one who is interpreting the description (434). Usually this relates to the different perspectives of writers and readers, but in this case it is also mirrored within fiction itself.

A suitable example to show the extent to which perspective influences how places are perceived is a short passage from “Train”, a story from the collection *Dear Life*, in which we get a description of Belle’s house from Jackson’s perspective:

The windows there had no curtains, so the light was coming in. Also the woodstove had been in use. There was a sink with a hand pump, a table with oilcloth on it worn in some places to shreds, and a couch covered with a patchy old quilt. Also a pillow that had shed some feathers. So far, not so bad, though old and shabby.” (181)

While the first few sentences appear to be rather objective, the subjective perspective is revealed in the last sentence, when the narrator says that the house would be “[s]o far, not so bad, though old and shabby.” This expression shows his personal impression of the house and can therefore be interpreted as internal focalization, perfectly matching the concept of topophilia, a term coined by Tuan and explained in chapter one. To put it in Herman’s terms, this scene could also be called a projective location as it mirrors Jackson’s personal view of that particular place.

It is not only the personal attributes towards an object, place, etc. which play a role in connection to perspective, but rather, an author or narrator will usually describe what he or she considers important or relevant for the reader to know. This is always a question of selection. In case of the example above, the narrator starts talking about rather basic objects such as the windows or the stove, but we later also get information on details such as “a patchy old quilt” or “a pillow that had shed some feathers”.

Moreover, deictic expressions (‘here’, ‘there’, etc.) can be considered as “strategic cues inviting the reader to transpose to the scene of action and to picture the setting imaginatively” (Buchholz and Jahn 553). Herman further stresses that such

expressions of reference – either to places or also to characters or to time – are important “coordinates organizing the account being presented” (*Narrative Theory* 99).

In connection, it is also important to note that in some cases, the narrators, who look back at their childhood, or, more generally, look back at earlier events in their life, correct themselves, like at the end of the story “Nettles”. The narrator discovers that “[t]hose plants with the big pinkish-purple flowers are not nettles” and realises that “they are called joe-pye weed” (*Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* 187).

### 2.3.2 Change of perspective

In some stories, perspective changes from time to time. Sometimes, these changes of perspective happen quite suddenly, which requires special attentiveness from the readers. In the story “Train”, perspective, or rather the focalization, changes several times between the two protagonists, Jackson and Belle. I would like to demonstrate this argument with another example, which is referring to the same place as above. At one stage of the story, Jackson has to undergo an operation in hospital. Shortly before this operation, Belle starts reflecting on her home, which she has renovated together with Jackson:

The white paint shining on the outside, and even the back kitchen whitewashed and furnished with a plank floor. The roof resingled and the windows restored to their plain old style, and most of all glories, the plumbing that was such a joy in the wintertime. [...] ‘Oh, I wish, I was *there* and not *here*’. (*Dear Life* 193) [emphasis added]

The deictic expression “there” is of course referring to their home, whereas the “here” stands for the hospital, where Jackson and Belle have to stay at that particular moment of narration. In case a reader is only reading this passage and does not get any further information about the story, it would of course be impossible to comprehend the meaning of the deictic expressions.

This passage is not only suitable for showing the function of deictic expressions, but also for pointing out the fact that within one story, different perspectives may be presented. While the first citation, which I used above, presents Jackson's perspective of their home, this second citation clearly indicates a shift of perspective as well as a shift of time. In this example, the reader is provided with a picture of the house from the perspective of Belle, which is quite different from the one of Jackson. Furthermore, this description refers to the house after they have renovated it, which means that the house has changed in the meantime.

I would now like to show how sudden shifts in perspective take place in some stories, by referring to a passage of the beginning of "Lichen":

Stella's father built the place as a summer house, on the clay bluffs overlooking Lake Huron. Her family always called it 'the summer cottage.' David was surprised when he first saw it, because it had none of the knotty-pine charm, the battened-down coziness, that those words suggested. A city boy, from what Stella's family called 'a different background,' he had no experience of summer places. It was and is a high, bare wooden house, painted gray – a copy of the old farmhouses nearby, though perhaps less substantial. [...] Behind it is a small fenced garden, where Stella grows vegetables with considerable skill and coaxing, a short sandy lane, and a jungle of wild blackberry bushes. (*Selected Stories* 242)

In this opening paragraph of "Lichen", Munro has used several instances of focalization as well as polyphony (see also Duncan 41). While it starts with an external focalization, in the third sentence, there is a shift of perspective to David as we get his idea of what a summer cottage looks like ("David was surprised..."). Then, immediately in the next sentence, there is another shift, namely to the perspective of Stella's family who regard David as a "city boy". At the end of the paragraph, the description of the house itself is fairly objective and it is not quite clear who the focalizer is in the last sentences. According to Duncan, the external focalization at the beginning of the story serves to "delineate the scene and to present the main characters" (43).

If we consider the different expectations of a summer cottage of the characters in the story once again, there is another character named Catherine who makes a statement about this issue a bit later on in the story. She says, "I love this house. [...] It's so

primitive and unpretentious. It's full of light. [...] That's what summer houses should be like, and they never are" (245/246). She clearly has a completely different view of summer cottages which is interesting to see in contrast to David's expectations. For her, the house is a perfect example of summer cottages, whereas David has a completely different image in mind.

### 2.3.3 A child's perspective

It is also important to note that in many of Munro's short stories, narrators reflect upon their childhoods. Therefore, some descriptions are recalled and reflect the narrator's perspective as a child, like for example in "The Eye", when the narrator is looking back at her school time: "Now school has started. It started some weeks ago, before the leaves turned red and yellow. Now they were mostly gone" (*Dear Life* 264). The fact that she does not speak of months or dates, but relates the time period to aspects of nature – in that case, leaves – reflects a child's perspective or a child's way of looking at things.

Another example is "The Ottawa Valley", in which the narrator describes the train station which she and her sister see for the first time in their lives. The girls are fascinated by the train station and it is described in such a way as it would probably not be described by an adult. Here, the expression 'magic of the ordinary', which has been coined quite often in connection to Munro's literature, comes to mind:

My sister and I went out into the station, which was like a street with its lighted shops and like a church with its high curved roof and great windows at each end. It was full of the thunder of trains hidden, it seemed, just behind the walls, and an amplified voice, luxuriant, powerful, reciting place names that could not quite be understood. (*Selected Stories* 68)

The collection *Lives of Girls and Women* is particularly relevant as far as perspective is concerned. Some critics do not consider it a short story collection, but rather a novel, or even a bildungsroman, as all the stories are connected to each other and as they represent the narrator's childhood and youth. In all the stories, Del Jordan is the first-person narrator. Throughout the collection, she is growing up, maturing and changing

her opinions and attitudes. This is mirrored in how she sees the world and in how she perceives her surroundings.

Let me first of all refer to the first story of *Lives of Girls and Women*, “The Flats Road”. In this story, space plays a highly important role, as Del is describing the street where she lives with her family, the Flats Road, as well as the landscape in this part of the country. Her descriptions are painstakingly detailed and the reader can frequently recognize a child’s perspective, like for instance in the following passage, in which Del speaks about Mitch Plim’s house: “Their whole house seemed to embody so much that was evil and mysterious that I would never look at it directly, and walked by with my face set stiffly ahead, controlling my urge to run” (9).

Another example which implies a child’s perspective can be taken from “Heirs of the Living Body”, in which Del is at the funeral of her Uncle Craig and does not want to see his dead body:

The house was like one of those puzzles, those mazes on paper, with a black dot in one of the squares, or rooms; you are supposed to find your way in to it, or out from it. The black dot in this case was Uncle Craig’s body, and my whole concern was not to find my way to it but to avoid it, not to open even the safest-looking door because of what might be stretched out behind it. (57)

What these two descriptions have in common is that in both, there is an association of the places with personal feelings. In the first case, it is evil and mystery, while in the second case it is threat. These emotions are connected to the child’s life experience which is clearly different from that of an adult. Consequently, the association of places with certain feelings is different, too.

“Age of Faith” is one of the last stories from the collection, which means that Del is already a few years older. In this story, she is reflecting on different religions. For instance, she describes the Catholics as “bizarre and secretive” (104), the Baptists as “extreme as well, but in a completely unsinister, slightly comic way” (104), and the Presbyterians as “mostly elderly”, “campaigning against hockey practice on Sundays, and sang psalms” (105). In this story, Del is also very much concerned with her own imagination of God and her personal attitude towards religion in general. If we compare these reflections to her comparatively naive descriptions of the landscape

surrounding their house and her descriptions of other places from the beginning of *Lives of Girls and Women*, one can clearly recognize a more mature narrator.

Moreover, in the later stories of this collection, space plays a less important role. I would argue that this is due to the fact that children tend to observe their surrounding more closely and are probably more aware of certain details than adults. When Del grows up, she is concerned with more mature topics, such as issues of faith. In any case, the narrator is looking back, which means that “she includes us [the readers] to accept within the perceptions of a child, perspectives that could only be in the retrospective awareness of an adult” (Martin 59). In other words, the narrator is looking back, but, simultaneously, this reflection is influenced by the narrator’s world experience as an adult.

## 2.4 Space Functions

From the examples I provided, one recognizes that in Munro’s stories, space usually plays a primary role. Bal says that in Munro’s literature, space is “thematized” (95) and is foregrounded for at least one paragraph in each of her short stories. From a stylistic point of view, Munro makes descriptive pauses in order to give the reader more information about space. As we have seen, this information can either be a panoramic picture of the whole surrounding, or a description of particular details of one aspect within the space. But what is the function of space in Munro’s stories?

I would like to demonstrate a few possible rhetorical functions of space in Munro by using the terminology introduced by Phelan and Rabinowitz, which I analysed in chapter one. I will refer to examples from the story “Marrakesh”. To begin, let me take a closer look at the synthetic function, which refers to the general space and time conditions in a narrative. The story starts with the following sentence: “Dorothy was sitting in a straight-backed chair on the side porch, eating nuts” (*Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* 156). The function of space here is synthetic, since the reader is introduced to the overall situation. Space here is very narrow, as the reader only knows that Dorothy is sitting on a chair, but is not informed if she is inside or outside etc. Furthermore, one can assume that Dorothy is the protagonist of the story. Hence, one

can conclude that the synthetic function of space here serves as an introduction of the narrative.

As far as the mimetic function is concerned, I would like to refer to another passage a little bit later on in the same story:

From where Dorothy sat on the porch the street looked hotter and shabbier than it had looked any other summer. This was because the trees were gone. Last fall the men who worked for the municipality had come along and cut down all the elm trees, those tall, old, deeply shading trees whose branches used to darken and brush against the upstairs windows of many of the houses, and in October bury the lawns in leaves. The trees were all diseased, some already half-dead, and they had to be taken out before the winter storms made them dangerous. (160)

As already touched upon in chapter one, the mimetic function is controversial, and many theorists claim that it distracts the reader from the actual plot of the story. If we consider the passage I cited here, it is true that it could likely be omitted without changing the plot. The function of space here is secondary as it does not change the action that is going on. However, it fulfils another purpose, namely a decorative one. It provides the reader with some ‘background information’ of what the surrounding looks like where the plot is set.

The last and most complex function according to Phelan and Rabinowitz is the thematic one. In this story, one comes across a great deal of symbolism in connection to space. The cited passage about the trees, for example, could also be interpreted as being symbolic for Dorothy’s personal change. Just like the trees changed, her attitudes towards life changed. But let us take a look at another example, which fits into the same context:

How she [Dorothy] hated change, then, and clung to old things, old mossy rotten picturesque things. Now she had changed, herself. She saw what beauty was, all right; she acknowledged the dappling shadows on the grass, the grey sidewalk but she saw that it was, in a way, something to get round. It did not matter greatly to her. Nor did familiarity. (162)

This passage is symbolic as it shows in how far Dorothy’s attitude towards her surrounding has changed over the years. While she questioned everything when she

was a child, she now accepts that not only nature changes, but also, that she herself changes. This indifference towards “dappling shadows on the grass” and “the grey sidewalk” mirrors Dorothy’s general attitude towards life. For example, she does not seem to care about the “economical and provided company” (159) of Viola who is living with her, and silently accepts everything that happens around her.

## 2.5 Alice Munro as a cartographer

Tally Jr.’s model of literary cartography perfectly fits Alice Munro’s art. In several of her stories, Munro provides her readers with more or less accurate maps of the towns the action is set in. Let us consider the following passage of “Thanks for the Ride”:

It was a town of unpaved, wide, sandy streets and bare yards. Only the hardy things like red and yellow nasturtiums, or a lilac bush with brown curled leaves grew out of that cracked earth. The houses were set wide apart, with their own pumps and sheds and privies out behind; most of them were built of wood and painted green or grey or yellow. The trees that grew there were big willows or poplars, their fine leaves greyed with the dust. There were no trees along the main street, but spaces of tall grass and dandelions and blowing thistles – open country between the store buildings. The town hall was surprisingly large, with a great bell in a tower, the red brick rather glaring in the midst of the town’s walls of faded, pale-painted wood. (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 46/47)

This example is prototypical for what Munro does in many of her stories. She is giving an overall picture of small-towns and what houses and streets look like. As noted by Tally Jr., this stylistic way of mapping is again connected to selection. A description of every single street or house is impossible, but the author can choose those aspects he or she wants the reader to know about. Even though the description here refers to a fictional place, the reader has a clear overall image of the town in mind.

A similar image can be found in “The Flats Road,” in a passage which I already quoted in a different context above:

Our house was at the end of the Flats Road, which ran west from Buckles’ Store, at the edge of town. [...] Sidewalks, street lights, lined-up shade trees, milkmen’s and icemen’s carts, birdbaths, flower borders, verandahs with



wicker chairs, from which ladies watched the street. [...] Houses were set further apart and looked in general more neglected, poor, and eccentric than town houses would ever be; half a wall would be painted and the job abandoned, the ladder left up; scars of porch torn away were left uncovered and a front door without steps, three feet off the ground; windows could be spread with yellowed newspapers in place of blinds. The Flats Road was not part of town but it was not part of the country either. The curve of the river, and the Grenoch Swamp, cut it off from the rest of the township, to which it nominally belonged. (*Lives of Girls and Women* 8/9)

Again, Munro draws a picture, or rather, a map, of the town, which gives an overall impression of what houses and streets look like there. It is the reader's task to imagine the rest of the picture, as only parts of it are described. The fact that she uses concrete place names, like in this case "Flats Road", "Buckle's Store" and "Grenoch Swamp" creates authenticity and conveys the impression that she is describing an existing town.

The two towns described here are essentially interchangeable, which is also true for other Ontarian small towns described in other stories. Not only do we get information about certain objects within space, but we also learn about their quality, for instance in the description of the "neglected, poor, and eccentric" houses, which are described as being completely different from "town houses." Thus, here we also have a comparison between town and country houses.

## 2.6 Levels of structuring space

In chapter one I defined the different levels of structuring space according to Zoran, but I would now like to illustrate each of them with an example taken from Alice Munro's stories. The topographical level, which is the most straightforward one, can be compared to Tally Jr.'s model of cartography. It usually consists of explicit descriptions of space which sometimes serve to stress differences between certain places or to stress the quality of these places. Thus, the examples which I have just cited in chapter 2.5 do also account for the topographical level defined by Zoran.

The chronotopic level is sub-divided into two different categories, namely synchronic and diachronic relations. Synchronic relations refer to instances of motion and rest. As explained by Zoran, there are characters "which have a capacity for movement and

there are those which are, so to speak, tied to their places” (318). With regard to Munro’s characters, one can mostly find protagonists who are ‘at rest’, in the sense that they cannot really escape their situations and their home towns. This is especially true for those narrators who look back at their childhood, but it also accounts for those female narrators who seem to be bound to their houses, or more generally, to their towns.

In “The Peace of Utrecht”, for instance, the narrator is reflecting about her coming back to her home town Jubilee after several years. She notes that “there is no easy way to get to Jubilee from anywhere on earth” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 196), which also indicates that there is no easy way to get *out of* Jubilee. This somehow characterises people living in Jubilee as people at rest for it is not easy to escape the town. The narrator herself, however, managed to leave Jubilee when she went to university in Toronto.

Another example, also from *Dance of the Happy Shades*, is the story “A Trip to the Coast”, in which the place of action, called Black Horse, can be described as a place at rest: “Black Horse is marked on the map but there is nothing except a store and three houses and an old cemetery and a livery shed which belonged to a church that burned down” (172). This description does not point to any action going on in this town, which is why it fits into this category of a place at rest.

Diachronic relations, on the other hand, refer to directions, axes and powers related to space. If we take the story “The Peace of Utrecht” as an example once more, there are certain powers which are influencing the town of Jubilee, namely the powers of transport connection. People living there are forced to drive “a complicated system of highways and sideroads” (196), which makes it difficult, though not impossible, for them to get into the town, and also out of it. Moreover, in many of Munro’s stories, her characters are more or less bound to their home towns due to a lack of money and a lack of perspective. Thus, they are hindered from leaving their home town in which they sometimes lead unhappy and desperate lives.

The last structure to consider is the textual one, which refers to the textual organisation of space. This is of course dependent on the point of view, the amount of physical space dedicated to the revelation of fictional space and the selection of which aspects

to deal with. In order to illuminate the consequences of these choices, I would like to refer to the following sentence from “Postcard”: “Yesterday afternoon, yesterday, I was going along the street, thinking how sick I was of snow, sore throats, the whole dragged-out tail end of winter, and I wished I could pack off to Florida” (*Selected Stories* 26). This is the introductory sentence of the story and sets the scene. Compared to other stories, relatively little physical space is used for introducing space. Here, we only know that the narrator is going along a street, but it is not yet clear where this street is situated or where the narrator is going. However, what we know, even though it is only mentioned explicitly, is that there is snow and that winter should actually already be over. This fact can be concluded from the narrator’s feelings (“how sick I was of snow,” “dragged-out tail end of winter”).

I would like to compare the example I just analysed with another one from the story “Images”, to illustrate the differences of weight put on space:

Then we went along the river, the Wawanash River, which was high, running full, silver in the middle where the sun hit it and where it arrowed in to its swiftest motion. That is the current, I thought, and I pictured the current as something separate from the water, just as the wind was separate from the air and had its own invading shape. The banks were steep and slippery and lined with willow bushes, still bare and bent over and looking weak as grass. The noise the river made was not loud but deep, and seemed to come from away down in the middle of it, some hidden place where the water issued with a roar from underground. (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 36/37)

In both cases, space is presented from the viewpoint of the first-person-narrator, but in contrast to the first example, here, the narrator is going into much more detail about where she is going. Apart from the first part of the first sentence (“Then we went along the river”), the whole passage is dedicated to a description of what the river and its surrounding look like. The narrator is not only concerned with an outward description but also with sounds (“the noise the river made”) and her personal interpretations and speculations (“I thought,” “I pictured the current as something separate”).

## 2.7 Space units

In connection with the levels of structuring space, Zoran also developed different space units. He divided the general unit of a scene into three different sub-categories, namely place, zone of action and field of vision. In the first chapter, I already explained what each of them refers to but I would now like to provide a more practical account of these definitions. The few examples I listed here are of course not exhaustive and only illustrate some of the many possible relations between space units in literature. Let us take a look at the opening sentences of the story “Walking on Water”:

This was a part of town where a lot of old people still lived, though many had moved to high-rises across the park. Mr. Lougheed had a number of friends, or perhaps it would be better to say acquaintances, whom he met every day or so on the way downtown, at the bus stop, or on the walks overlooking the sea. (*Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You* 67)

In this example, there is the perceptible place of a particular “part of town”. In the background there are “high-rises across the park,” “the bus stop” and “the walks overlooking the sea,” whereas in the foreground, Mr. Lougheed is walking downtown. In this case, the topographical place is overlapped by the field of vision as well as the zone of action.

Another example would be the following passage from “The Executioners”, in which the situation is similar:

Past the building in town I had to walk a mile on a straight country road. Our house was at the end of it, a big brick house with bay windows upstairs and down. [...] I was glad when they tore that house down, years later; they turned our land into the Municipal Airport. Along the road there were only two or three other houses. One of them was Stump Troy's. (*Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You* 140)

Again, we have a concrete place (“our house”) but the background does not consist of objects which are seen together with the character as in the other example. We only know that it is “a straight country road” which had been transformed into “the Municipal Airport” a few years later. Yet, in this example, too, the field of vision overlaps with the place and the zone of action.

The situation is a slightly different one in the next example, taken from “Miles City, Montana”: “[W]e turned onto the interstate and drove through Coeur d'Alene and

Kellogg into Montana. After Missoula, we turned south toward Butte, but detoured to see Helena, the state capital. In the car, we played Who Am I?" (*Selected Stories* 270). Here, we have to consider the relation between inside (the car) and outside (their route). The information about the place itself is not as exhaustive as in the other examples, as there are only place names rather than descriptions of what these places look like. From a geographic point of view, the field of vision is far larger than in the other passages cited above, as the voyage between several cities is mentioned; this voyage is the zone of action.

### 3. Semantisation of typical settings

According to Gerald Lynch, Munro's short stories are essentially focusing on either place or character (74). Taking a look at the titles of her short stories, many of them are named after a fictional place or include some other hint towards a specific setting. I will not list all of them but I would like to mention a few examples: "The Flats Road" in *Lives of Girls and Women*, "The Jack Randa Hotel" and "A Wilderness Station" in *Open Secrets*, "The Shining Houses", "A Trip to the Coast" and "The Peace of Utrecht" in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, "Wood" in *Too Much Happiness*, "The Stone in the Field" in *The Moons of Jupiter*, "Walking on Water", "Marrakesh", "Winter Wind" and "The Ottawa Valley" in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, "To Reach Japan", "Amundsen" and "In Sight of the Lake" in *Dear Life* and many more.

Taking a look at these titles, one can see that her stories reach from Ontarian small towns to faraway places such as Morocco, Japan, and even to another planet, namely Jupiter. The fact that these stories have a place in their title does not automatically mean that space here plays a more important role than in other stories, but it is interesting that Munro uses these places as her titles rather than a character's name or something referring to the stories' content. Though, as I said, setting is always closely connected to characters and plot anyway. In some stories, the titles are actually quite misleading, most notably "The Moons of Jupiter." Jupiter has nothing to do with the actual setting of the plot, but rather, is only mentioned as the protagonist goes to a planetarium. Similarly "To Reach Japan" is not set in Japan, nor is "Marrakesh" set in Morocco.

Within the stories, readers come across many toponyms, which are mostly cities or other places in south-western Ontario. For instance, there is frequent reference to the Ontarian cities Toronto and London, as well as the Ottawa Valley and the Wawanash River. Similarly, the few stories which are set outside Ontario refer to real places, as well, such as Australia or Albania. Munro also invented several place names, for instance Jubilee, Dalglish, Gilmore, Logan and Hanratty.

But let me now turn to a more detailed examination of how Munro creates literary space in her stories. In most of Alice Munro's short stories, we get information about the landscape and the towns in which the characters live. In other stories, she provides

the reader with descriptions of the houses her characters live in or the places where they spend their holidays. Again in other stories, weather or the change of seasons fulfils an important job.

As argued by Carscallen, Munro creates her own “microcosm” (79) in her short story collections. Some critics even talk about “Munrovia” (Creighton qtd. in *Writing Her Lives* 463) or about “Alice Munro Country” (Thacker in *Writing Her Lives* 463) when referring to Munro’s short story settings, as they are so specific and noteworthy. Munro works with extreme preciseness and writes about her settings in a stylistically fine-tuned way, which is why it requires some special consideration. Before doing so, however, I would like to mention some biographical as well as geographical background information that makes the consideration of her settings even more interesting.

### **3.1 Background information**

#### **3.1.1 Regionalism in Canada**

Keith, who published a book about the representation of Canada in literature in general, is very much concerned with the representation of the ‘real’ country in literature in order to see in how well this coincides with reality. He emphasises that until today, Canada remains a very special country in terms of how different its regions are, causing regionalism to play an important role in Canadian life. But what does regionalism in Canada mean today? Before going into more depth about regionalism in Canada, I need to clarify what regionalism means in general.

A theorist concerned with this question, Frank Davey, refers to regionalism as an ideology, being socially created (1/2). Whereas the term “region” can be defined as “a territorial definition of geographic space,” “regionalism” refers to “an interpretation of social interests that gives geographic location priority over such other possible interests as gender, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, and race” (2). A slightly different, and more general, definition can be found in Pryse: “regionalism represents the deep structure of local knowledge, where geographical and literary landscape become imbued and interwoven with features of culture” (19). As noted by Pryse,

there are certain connotations to regionalism, such as “the local” rather than “the national” or “the universal” (19).

### 3.1.2 Canadian regionalism in literature

Turning now to the situation in Canada in particular, one can see that due to geographically very different regions, and partly huge distances between them, even today, many towns are rather isolated. This is also reflected in a rather small population as compared to the large size of the country (see Keith 13). According to Omhové it is exactly this fact which makes Canada a particularly interesting setting, no matter where in the huge country a story is set (13). As discussed by Davey, regionalism is frequently associated with *hinterland* (2). We have already seen that it is also true for Munro that we frequently find extensive descriptions of the landscape of her setting. This is not surprising as the place she has chosen for her setting, south-western Ontario, is known for its nature. In literature in general, landscape then turns into a text, which means that it can be “read” (New 9).

Braun claims that Canadian writers from the middle of the twentieth century onwards have been very much concerned with aspects of regionalism as well as ethnicity (187). As far as regionalism in connection with literature is concerned, there seems to be an increasing interest in regional phenomena such as language or traditions (see Braun 189). Hartmann also notes that Munro, whose stories are firmly rooted in south-western Ontario, serves as a role-model for younger writers, showing that regional literature does not necessarily mean bad literature (see Hartmann 12).

In an interview with Gibson, Munro explains: “Well, I grew up in a rural community, a very traditional community. I almost always felt it. I find it still when I go back” (246). As already mentioned several times, Alice Munro’s fiction is almost explicitly set in the countryside of Ontario, depicting the “experience of women in Canada’s colonial and postcolonial history” (Hunter 166). Hence, she is partly also portraying Canadian history by referring to exemplary private stories about women, which represent a lot of other women (see Hunter 166).



Interestingly, the region of Ontario could actually be considered *the* centre of Canada, at least from an economic or political point of view (see Keith 14, McMullen 14). Yet, Munro's stories do not convey the picture of a political or economic centre. This fact is not only true for Munro, but also for many other Canadian writers. As Keith argues, the typical image of Ontario in literature is that of "almost interminable forest" (21).

James Polk argues that in literature, usually, small towns in Ontario are "shaped into those safe, bourgeois organisms sustaining clergymen, lawyers and young lovers" (qtd. in Besner 24). However, this is clearly not the case in Alice Munro's fiction. Her protagonists are frequently confronted with feelings of loneliness and isolation, which can mostly be lead back to their hometowns. *Lives of Girls and Women*, which is sometimes considered a novel, is probably the best example to illustrate this point. Throughout all the stories in this work, the setting is the same, namely the fictional town Jubilee, which is very similar to Wingham, Ontario, where Munro herself grew up. Throughout the whole book, the reader is informed about streets, houses, changing seasons, the surrounding countryside, parades and traditions, and society in Jubilee in general. Alice Munro herself said in an interview with Struthers that she is interested in "the whole business of how life is made into a story by the people who live it, and then the whole town sort of makes its own story" (103).

As Keith states, "[f]or most Ontario writers, the small town about which they write is a version – sometimes idealized, sometimes satirized – of the community in which they grew up" (163). What is interesting in Munro's work in relation to this quote is that all her fictional small towns are very similar, and according to Keith, they are even "interchangeable" (163). However, some critics argue that the picture of Canada conveyed by Munro is not as complete as it seems to be at first sight. For example, Beran argues that especially modern aspects, such as multiculturalism or homosexuality, are completely left out, even though they play a crucial role in Canada's everyday life (see 334). However, I have to disagree with that argument, as there are indeed some stories in which such issues turn up, even though they only play a minor role.

For example, in "The Turkey Season", the narrator is discussing people's attitudes towards homosexuality. In her home town, Logan, people do not seem to have much

an idea of homosexuality, which results in the fact that most of the people living there connect homosexuals to typical clichés like “an elegant, light-voiced, wavy-haired paperhanger,” or “a hypochondriacal church organist and music teacher.” Yet the narrator says that “[o]nce the label was fixed, there was a good deal of tolerance for these people” (*The Moons of Jupiter* 65). So clearly, Munro wishes to stress here the typical prejudices that people in small towns have about homosexual people.

Another example would be a scene in “Deep-Holes”, in which Sally is looking for her son Kent in Toronto and in which multiculturalism is dealt with:

She had a feeling of [...] embarrassment because she was feeling just what people from her part of the country often seemed to feel, though she would never say what they said. You’d think you were in the Congo or in India or Vietnam, they would say. Anyplace but Ontario. Turbans and saris and dashikis were much in evidence, and Sally was all in favour of their swish and bright colours. But they weren’t being worn as foreign costumes. The wearers hadn’t just arrived here; they had got past the moving-in phase. She was in their way. (*Too Much Happiness* 107/108)

Sally herself does not seem to have a negative attitude towards multiculturalism. However, “people from her part of the country”, in other words, people from the countryside, seem to have a different opinion. Sally notes that these people from other countries are not tourists, but rather, people actually living in Toronto. For her, this seems to be something fairly unusual and somewhat special, there are hardly any foreigners where she lives.

But let me turn back to regionalism in general. A question which might arise from the whole discussion is of course: What can be concluded from regionalist writing and what are its functions? Pryse argues that “regionalist literature may indeed be generalizable, at least to the extent that regionalism represents an impulse to keep alive alternative visions of national and global development” (22/23). If we follow Pryse’s argumentation, regionalist literature can also be viewed as describing the “marginalized ‘other’ ” (25). Put differently, Pryse argues that there is a strong contrast between country and city and that those living on the countryside are usually perceived as ‘the other’.

David Martin is another critic who is concerned with the functions of regionalist fiction, saying that it fulfils “an ethnographic function through fictional means” (35). In other words, through regionalist literature, regions that might otherwise be neglected or ‘ignored,’ are given prominence and attention. These regions might then become famous because an author is using them as the setting in his or her fiction. Furthermore, Martin emphasises that there are some very interesting and delicate topics such as difference and heterogeneity which frequently occur in this kind of literature.

### **3.1.3 Alice Munro as a regionalist writer**

Keith notes that usually, writers do not speak of themselves as being Ontarian since this would seem “unduly limiting” (14). This definitely does not ring true for Alice Munro, who embraces her origins and can therefore be considered a “true Ontario southerner” (Harold 135). As argued by Davey, geography is related to social identification, which makes descriptions of Canadians as Westerners, Maritimers, or Ontarians, possible (3). Besides, Keith also emphasises that “[t]he finest writers [...] become universal by writing about, and out of, what they know best, which is generally their own back-yards” (15). Roger Angell even claims that Munro is a writer who “stakes out an entire region of the imagination and of the countryside [...] which becomes theirs alone, marked in our minds by unique inhabitants and terrain” (qtd. in *Writing Her Lives* 527).

Calder notes the difficulty of regional writers to “convey the individual and the particular” on the one hand and the “reporting on the general life of the region” (54) on the other hand. I think that Munro perfectly combines these two aspects; she does not simply report about small town life but still makes an issue out of it by characterising the circumstances under which her protagonists live.

As opposed to many other authors who write about places in which they grew up themselves, Munro does not present these places from a distanced perspective, but gives the reader the feeling of full immediacy. Even though her stories are not autobiographical, – at least, that is what she claims in all the interviews – they leave

the reader with the feeling that they are true and that they really happened. This is also related to how setting is depicted in Munro's fiction.

As I already mentioned, some of Munro's protagonists are looking back at their childhood. This fact of looking back very much reflects Munro's writing herself. In an interview with Dickler Awano, Munro says,

I think if you're really going to write seriously about your parents, your childhood, you have to be as honest as you can, you have to think about what *really* happened, rather than what story your memory dishes up. But of course you never can do that, so at least, you've got to say, 'Well, this is *my* side of the story – this is what *I* remember.' (184)

Alice Munro gives much consideration to the difference between the life in a rural surrounding to life in the city due to an "increased interest in the distinctiveness of local areas" (Keith 110). Again, this might relate back to Munro's personal experiences (see Thacker, *Writing Her Lives* 87). After having grown up in Wingham, a small town in south-western Ontario, Munro's life changed dramatically when she got granted a two years scholarship for the University of Western Ontario in London (see Thacker, *Writing Her Lives* 89).

McMullin would even argue that Munro is a "hinterland artist" (14/15) and that it is typical for such writers to move to what he calls "heartland" (16). He further claims that it is sometimes a drawback for hinterland artists to write about the region where they come from, since this would usually not "conform to Central Canadian editorial taste" (16). However, as we have seen, this is definitely not true for Alice Munro.

After Munro's time at university, she married James Munro with whom she moved to British Columbia. However, in interviews, Munro has repeatedly stressed that during her time at the West Coast, she was missing the Ontarian life and landscape (see Thacker, *Writing Her Lives* 246). In 1973, she then moved back to Blyth, Huron County, which is only twenty kilometres from Wingham, with her second husband, Gerald Fremlin (see Hartmann 12).

Thus, one could argue that Alice Munro's life consists of a certain kind of cycle: growing up on the countryside – fleeing from this life for a life in the city, and ultimately returning home (see also Blodgett 2). Ravitch says that "[l]eaving home, in

one form or another, is the perpetual drama for Munro” (qtd. in Thacker, *Writing Her Lives* 507). In an interview with Horwood, Munro commented on her relationship to her home, stating: “I love that land. I don’t think I can ever leave it. [...] I always felt when I lived in Vancouver and Victoria that I had to go home [...] because life on the west coast wasn’t real in the same way” (135). Therefore, as I have already mentioned above, Harold describes Munro as “a true Ontario southerner” (135).

According to Thacker (*Writing Her Lives*), her fiction from after her return to Ontario is quite different from the fiction she wrote before. He claims that from the collection *Who Do You Think You Are?* onwards, her stories are more complex as Munro “saw social differences even more clearly,” seeing her home town “harsher” and “in a more sociological way” (328). While Grady says that her later work is written in “a sadder key,” having a slightly “nostalgic value” (qtd. in *Writing Her Lives* 353), French praises Munro’s ability to perfectly convey “the mood and texture of Ontario’s small towns” (qtd. in *Writing Her Lives* 353).

### 3.1.4 Huron County Blues

Joyce Wayne is not all wrong when he refers to “Huron County Blues” in connection with Munro’s work. This is actually the title of an article in which he addresses Munro’s ‘adversaries’. What he means by that is that no matter how you interpret Munro’s representations of Canada, she does definitely not shed a very positive light on the region she is writing about.

Therefore, Wayne coined the rather harsh sentence, “her succors is her sin” (9). What he means by that is that the material she works with – and which she is so famous for – does not only cause success but also critique. And this critique comes from those who she writes about. Wayne cites a sentence of the *Advance-Times* to emphasise his argument: “Sadly enough Wingham people have never had much chance to enjoy the excellence of [Munro’s] writing ability because we have repeatedly been made the butt of soured and cruel introspection on the part of a gifted writer” (qtd. in Wayne 9).

### 3.2 Ontario small towns

The very same cycle of Munro's life can also be rediscovered in many of her short stories, most obviously in "Working for a Living", "The Peace of Utrecht", "Home", "Winter Wind", or also "The Ottawa Valley." In these stories, her protagonists undergo a similar development, reflecting on their lives from a new perspective. As also noted by Hartmann, in many stories, Munro's protagonists try to escape their home towns where they are confronted with "boredom of their bourgeois marriages" and "the narrow scope" (7). However, instead of then starting a new and better life, they end up disappointed and "disillusioned" (7) and usually throw themselves in unhappy affairs. This leads to most of Munro's protagonists – just like Munro herself – finally returning home.

For instance, the events in "The Peace of Utrecht" can be compared to Munro's homecoming to Wingham:

[P]eople ask me what it is like to be back in Jubilee. But I don't know. I'm still waiting for something to tell me, to make me understand that I am back. The day I drove up from Toronto with my children in the back seat of the car I was very tired, on the last lap of a twenty-five-hundred-mile trip. I had to follow a complicated system of highways and sideroads, for there is no easy way to get to Jubilee from anywhere on earth. Then about two o'clock in the afternoon I saw ahead of me, so familiar and unexpected, the gaudy, peeling cupola of the town hall, which is no relation to any of the rest of the town's squarely-built dingy grey-and-red-brick architecture. This is just how Wingham looks across the 'prairie' river flats south of town as one drives north on Highway 4. (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 196)

This passage is a suitable example for Herman's *paths*, which I mentioned in chapter one. Here, the path from Toronto back to the protagonist's home town serves to indicate the enormous differences between the two places. Moreover, it characterises her feelings about coming back. Obviously, the narrator's return to her home town is characterised by melancholy and alienation. On the one hand, she is aiming at "much bigger things than Jubilee" (192), while Maddy, a friend of hers who once had the same plans, seems to be part of the Jubilee community now. On the other hand, she feels alienated and is lacking a sense of belonging.

Thacker argues that in these stories, which were published in 1978 after Munro's return back to Ontario, Munro "was not looking so much for new materials as she was for new ways of seeing, of understanding her 'old' material, her home place" (*Writing Her Lives* 282). In other words, after coming home to Huron County, Munro is still concerned with similar topics and her stories are set in the same places, but this time, she is looking at everything from a different angle.

Raymond Williams coined the term "structures of feeling" which is very closely connected to the notion of country as opposed to city. What he means by these structures of feeling is that there are usually certain kinds of feelings and emotions related to certain places (see Williams 1). In Munro's stories, the feelings associated with small-towns are overall clearly negative while feelings evoked in connection to city tend to be positive. Ross summarises this phenomenon, saying that in literature in general, settings which are associated with the lower world tend to evoke feelings of darkness and dreariness, while descriptions referring to the city, and consequently to the upper world "suggest brightness and light" (*At Least Part Legend* 121).

### 3.3 The description of houses

Above I wrote that Munro's small towns described in different stories could basically be interchanged, as they are so similar. This partly also accounts for the houses where her protagonists live. Apart from the fact that all of them are situated in remote Ontarian small towns, the descriptions of the outside as well as of the inside of these houses are very much alike. The description of "big brick houses [...] with their wooden verandahs and gaping, dark-screened windows" (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 196) in "The Peace of Utrecht" is very similar to the house where the narrator of "Connection" lives: "Our house was decent too, an old brick house of a fair size, but it was drafty and laid out in an inconvenient way and the trim needed paint" (*The Moons of Jupiter* 6). Similarly, in "In Sight of the Lake" the narrator says that all houses in town are "slightly different yet somehow looking all the same. Gently colored stone or pale brick, peaked or rounded windows, a rejection of the utilitarian look, the ranch style of past decades" (*Dear Life* 222).

Most of the houses are described as very uncomfortable, poorly equipped, cold and uninviting places. An extreme example is “Winter Wind”, in which the narrator” contrasts the home of her grandmother with that of her parents: “The hallway of this house [the grandmother’s house] was all wood, polished, fragrant, smooth, cozy as the inside of a nutshell” (*Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You* 193). In comparison to that description as well as to the “lovely smells” (193) in the house of her grandmother, the image of her home is the complete opposite:

Compare this to the scene at home. The only warm room there was the kitchen; we had a wood stove. (...) Dirt and chaos threatened all the time. (...) We were selling eggs at this time, and everywhere were baskets of eggs with bits of straw and feathers and hen-dirt stuck to them, waiting to be cleaned. I believed that the smell of hencoops came into the house on boots and clothes and you could not get rid of it. (193)

The immediate juxtaposition of these two places and the fact that the narrator tells us that she only spends two or three nights a year at her grandparents’ house makes the reader feel sorry for her. While the first description relies on placing positive adjectives next to each other (“polished, fragrant, smooth, cozy”), the second description is characterised by a high amount of negatively connoted nouns such as “dirt”, “chaos”, “hen-dirt” and “smell of hencoops”. Warmth and cosiness is confronted with cold and dirt.

The scene in which her grandmother offers to come to their house once in a while to help them with cleaning and ironing, emphasises this difference once more. The narrator feels ashamed about the house she and her family are living in and even thinks she “would be obliged to try to clean the house, reorganize the cupboards as much as possible, shove certain disgraces” (195) before her grandmother’s arrival. The fact that she uses tentative expressions such as “try to clean the house,” “as much as possible” and “certain disgraces,” shows again in what terrible condition her home is and that one person alone would not even manage to put everything into order.

I would now like to consider another example from “The Flats Road”. Note the following description of Uncle Benny’s house:

Away at the edge of the bush – the bush that turned into a swamp, a mile further in – was Uncle Benny’s house, tall and silvery, old unpainted boards,



bleached dry in the summer, and dark green blinds, cracked and torn, pulled down over all the windows. The bush behind was black, hot, thick with thorny bushes, and dense with insects whirling in galaxies. (*Lives of Girls and Women* 5)

In this short description, Munro evokes quite a number of different aspects simultaneously. She does not only describe the house itself, but also the place where it is situated and the kind of landscape surrounding this place. Moreover, she mentions several details, such as the fact that house's boards are bleached in the summer. So she even makes reference to how nature can change the look of a house. The description of bush behind the house as "dense with insects whirling in galaxies" mirrors that the description is told from a child's perspective.

### 3.4 Landscape and weather

Weather plays a considerable role throughout all of Alice Munro's short story collections. Especially the influence of weather on landscape is a recurring motif in her fiction. As stressed by Norcliffe and Simpson-Housley, the geographic aspects are interesting when analysing the depictions of weather in literature in general: "They [weather and landscape] have deeper significance, closely bound up with attitudes and values" (3).

The reason why weather is that important in Munro's stories is that the climate in the region where most of them are set has, as the narrator in "Night" explains, "no dallying, no mercies" (*Dear Life* 273). Thus, apart from the fact that the region of south-western Ontario is very isolated, the people living there have to face extreme weather conditions – in summer as well as in winter. In "The Peace of Utrecht," the narrator says that in her home town "[t]he rhythm of life [...] is primitively seasonal. Deaths occur in the winter; marriages are celebrated in the summer. There is a good reason for this; the winters are long and full of hardship and the old and weak cannot always get through them" (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 194).

In the following section, I will consider different elements of landscape and weather that are included in several of Munro's stories.

### 3.4.1 Trees and flowers

In many of Munro's stories, trees are an important part of descriptions of landscape and nature. These descriptions are not necessarily related to any particular seasons. The most extreme example is the story "Wood". We see from the title alone that the work is closely related to the issue of trees. The protagonist of this story, Roy – this time the protagonist is male – is extremely passionate about trees, which is mirrored in several passages of the story, like for instance in the following one:

Many people recognize trees by their leaves or by their general shape and size, but walking through the leafless deep bush Roy knows them by their bark. Ironwood, that heavy and reliable firewood, has a shaggy brown bark on its stocky trunk, but its limbs are smooth at their tips and decidedly reddish. Cherry is the blackest tree in the bush, and its bark lies in picturesque scales. Most people would be surprised at how high cherry trees grow here – they are nothing like cherry trees in fruit orchards. Apple trees are more like their orchard representatives – not very tall, bark not so definitely scaled or dark as the cherry's. Ash is a soldierly tree with a corduroy-ribbed trunk. The maple's grey bark has an irregular surface, the shadows creating black streaks, which meet sometimes in rough rectangles, sometimes not. There is a comfortable carelessness about that bark, suitable to the maple tree, which is homely and familiar and what most people think of when they think of a tree. (*Too Much Happiness* 228/229)

It is useful to cite the whole passage here for several reasons. First of all, it is striking that this description provides a significant amount of information about the protagonist, even though the focus is clearly on trees only. What is special is that when seeing a tree, Roy first of all takes a look at their bark, something a person who does not know a lot about trees would probably not do. Moreover, one might even claim that trees replace human beings and the barks stand for people's outward appearance to others. This phenomenon can for example be observed in descriptions such as the "soldierly" ash, or the "carelessness" of the maple's bark.

Similarly, it is interesting to see that the maple tree, which is *the* symbol of Canada, is described as the tree that "most people think of when they think of a tree". These "most people" are definitely Canadians, as an Austrian, for example, would probably not think of a maple tree when thinking about a tree in general. So quite obviously, Munro has interwoven a cliché into this short passage.

Another reason for citing this long passage is to show how much weight is given to trees and their appearance in this story of only twenty pages. This is only one of several examples of descriptions; indeed one could estimate that a fourth of the whole story is dedicated to trees, which is comparatively significant. In other Munro stories, trees play a less important role, but are nevertheless an important element and are mentioned in the descriptions of setting repeatedly. An example is the beginning of “Walker Brothers Cowboy:” “The street is shaded, in some places by maple trees whose roots have cracked and heaved the sidewalk and spread out like crocodiles into the bare yards” (*Selected Stories* 3). In “Amundsen,” the narrator mentions “[b]rITTLE-looking birch trees with black marks on their white bark, and some kind of small untidy evergreens” (*Dear Life* 32).

Flowers, too, are very frequently described in detail, like for example in one passage from “The Stone in the Field:” “Up there were pasture hills covered with purple-flowering milkweed, wild pea blossom, black-eyed Susans. Hardly any trees here, but lots of elderberry bushes, blooming all along the road. They looked as if they were sprinkled with snow” (*The Moons of Jupiter* 24).

### 3.4.2 Winter

Simpson-Housley and Norcliffe stress that in literature in general, Canada is very frequently presented as a “cold, hard, and unforgiving land” (1). Munro, too, makes use of this image. In fact, winter seems to be one of Munro’s preferred seasons for her stories, used to emphasise the feelings of her characters or the general atmosphere in her stories. One should not forget that space in general is often determining how the characters in it feel.

In “Boys and Girls,” for example, the narrator describes winter as “the time of the year when snowdrifts curled around our house like sleeping whales and the wind harassed us all night, coming up from the buried fields, the frozen swamp” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 112). In some other stories, Munro offers minute descriptions of snow, for example in “The Time of Death”, when the narrator says: “The snow came, falling slowly, evenly, between the highway and the houses and the pine trees, falling in big

flakes at first and in smaller and smaller flakes that did not melt on the hard furrows, the rock of earth” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 99).

In other works, Munro refers to the Snow Belt, which is a specific region near the Great Lakes in Canada and the United States. This region is known for its heavy snowfall. One story, in which Munro makes explicit reference to the Snow Belt is “Fits:”

Not much more than a hundred miles from Toronto it is a different country. The snowbelt. Coming up here to live was not unlike heading into the wilderness, after all. Blizzards still isolate the towns and villages. Winter comes down hard on the country, settles down just the way the two-mile-high ice did thousands of years ago. (*Selected Stories* 281)

In “Corrie”, Munro refers to the long endurance of winter: “It was April, but still cold enough that you would like to have a fire” (*Dear Life* 161). In “Gravel”, the narrator reflects on her memories about winter: “These short winter days must have seemed strange to me – in town” (*Dear Life* 96). Thus obviously, in the part of the country where she comes from, winter is comparatively longer than in town.

The story “Amundsen” is set during winter time, whereas its effects are mentioned several times throughout the story. Already at the beginning, when the narrator, Vivien, arrives at her new workplace in Amundsen, she says that the air was “like ice” and “[t]he frozen lake not level but mounded along the shore, as if the waves had turned into ice in the act of falling” (*Dear Life* 32). In the school where she works itself, she emphasises the fact that it is extremely cold again and again: “No heat, no light” (33), “[m]y room was cold – every part of the building seemed cold” (42). Moreover, the narrator comes from Toronto to Amundsen, which is a small town in the middle of the woods. The cold strengthens the image of this remote place once more. The narrator is at an unfamiliar, cold, and lonely place, somewhere in the middle of nowhere. Moreover, one could argue that this cold represents Dr. Fox, who first wants to marry Vivien, but, in the end, changes his mind and sends her back to Toronto.

Munro frequently points out that the whole population of south-western Ontario is affected by the consequences of the harsh winter (see Keith 112). For example, the narrator of “Boys and Girls” says, “[w]e were afraid at night in the winter” (*Dance of*

*the Happy Shades* 112). In “The Peace of Utrecht,” the narrator talks about the consequences of the winter the year before: “Last winter was a catastrophe, such as may be expected every ten or twelve years; you can see how the pavement in the streets is broken up, as if the town had survived a minor bombardment” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 194). In “Fits,” the narrator explains that in her home town “[p]eople live within the winter in a way outsiders do not understand. They are watchful, provident, fatigued, exhilarated” (*Selected Stories* 281).

If we consider the feelings of the population which Munro includes in these descriptions, we can clearly see that all of them are negative: “afraid,” “fatigued, exhilarated”. Moreover, the fact that Munro uses vocabulary from the semantic field of war and compares the effect of winter to a “minor bombardment” emphasises the harsh living conditions during winter time once more. When one of her narrators tells us that people “live within the winter in a way outsiders do not understand,” we learn that these living conditions are inconceivable for people who have never experienced a winter in this part of the world.

Another story, which deals with the problems people have to face in winter, is “Night”. The following passage is taken from the opening paragraph of the story. The narrator points to the fact that winter conditions make emergencies even more problematic and difficult:

When I was young, there seemed to be never a childbirth, or a burst appendix, or any other drastic physical event that did not occur simultaneously with a snowstorm. The roads would be closed, there was no question of digging out a car anyway, and some horses had to be hitched up to make their way into town to the hospital. (*Dear Life* 271)

A scene which depicts the end of winter is one from “Images”. The narrator looks back at an event of her childhood, when she was looking down at the Wawanash River from the top of a hill: “The whole basin of country drained by the Wawanash River lay in front of us – *greenish brown* smudge of bush with the leaves not out yet and evergreens, *dark, shabby* after winter, showing through, *straw-brown* fields and the others, *darker* from last year’s plowing, with scales of snow faintly stripping them” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 42) [emphasis added]. This very figurative description with lots of colours and adjectives shows that traces of winter are still visible (“leaves

not out yet,” “shabby after winter,” “scales of snow faintly stripping them”). As noted by Keith (111), in this case, the scene does not provide the reader with topographical details, but rather evokes a particular atmosphere.

### 3.4.3 Spring and summer

Having considered the extremely harsh winter conditions, it is not surprising, that for society, the release at the beginning of spring is enormous. This is for instance depicted in “Wigtime:”

Spring in that part of Ontario comes in a rush. The ice breaks up into grinding jostling chunks on the rivers and along the lake shore; it slides underwater in the pound and turns the water green. The snow melts and the creeks flood, and in no time comes a day when you open your coat and stuff your scarf and mittens in your pocket. (*Friend of My Youth* 257)

This scene depicts movement in nature after a long winter, in which the whole region is literally paralysed due to freezing temperatures, ice and snow. This movement is indicated through the use of many expressions of movement, such as coming in a rush, the melting of snow, flooding, and the breaking up of the ice. The fact that people can open their coats and do not need mittens any longer is presented as a great relief. Thus, the image presented in this scene is one of release; release from the winter ‘prison’.

Another story which is an example for the deeper meaning in descriptions of weather is “Vandals”. In one passage, the narrator describes the day when she met Ladner, who becomes her boyfriend a bit later on in the story, as “a dazzling, freshly green day” (*Open Secrets* 266). In this case, spring is connected to falling in love. The adjective “dazzling” does not only describe the weather that day, but also the narrator’s personal feelings when meeting the love of her life for the first time.

However, weather can also be extreme during spring time. This fact is depicted in “The Found Boat,” in which the narrator describes the Flood of Wawanash River:

Some springs, say one every five, it covered the roads on that side of town and washed over the fields, creating a shallow choppy lake. Light reflected off the water and made everything bright and cold, as it is in a lakeside town, and woke or revived in people certain vague hopes of disaster. Mostly during

the late afternoon and early evening, there were people straggling out to look at it, and discuss whether it was still rising. (*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* 125)

Again, Munro is referring to the consequences for the population living in this part of town. They have to live with constant fear that the river will rise further, destroying their homes. Thus, even spring, which is usually depicted as a romantic season in literature, is shown to bring certain dangers with it in Munro's stories.

An example of a story set during summer time is "The Peace of Utrecht". In this story, the narrator returns to her home town after having spent several years in Toronto. Back at home, she regularly meets her friend Maddy: "At night we often sit out on the steps of the verandah [...] It is hot; the evening takes a long time to burn out. The high brick house, which stays fairly cool until midafternoon, holds the heat of the day trapped until long after dark" (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 190). As this example shows, summer is not depicted especially positively either, which once again underlines the fact that seasons in Ontario are extreme – extremely cold winters and extremely hot summers.

Munro is contrasting these extremes to other Canadian regions, where the situation is different. This is for example done in "Dulse," in which the protagonist, Lydia, goes to New Brunswick during summer time and is impressed by how different the West Coast is from Ontario:

The goldenrod and wild aster were in bloom, and Japanese boxwood, a rarity in Ontario, seemed commonplace here. The grass was long and coarse and the trees were small. The Atlantic coast, which she had never seen before, was just as she had expected it to be. The bending grass; the bare houses; the sea light. (*The Moons of Jupiter* 37)

#### **3.4.4 Significance of weather for the storyline**

We have already seen in the examples above that there is more to weather descriptions than just a decorative aim. Blodgett claims that "weather as scene in Munro is functional only as it bears upon character" (153) and further concludes that the "change or changing" does not take place "within the landscape but within the

character” (154). In other words, Blodgett asserts that weather description is a frequently used technique in order to portray a character.

Blodgett uses a passage from “Walker Brothers Cowboy” to illustrate this argument:

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. (*Selected Stories* 15)

This is the very last paragraph of the story and shows that the narrator is not really describing weather itself, but rather the circumstances of the story. More precisely, it relates to the life of the narrator’s father who had a fox farm which went bankrupt and brought unforeseen changes into his life. Keith even claims that the kind of weather that we find in this passage “does not belong to nature” (154) at all.

Weather is frequently used to reflect how her characters feel, like in “Dance of the Happy Shades”. The narrator’s mother has planned to go to a garden party and says, “‘I will die if it rains’ [...] ‘I will die of depression at this affair if it rains’ ” (*Selected Stories* 20). Another example would be “Heirs of the Living Body” in which the narrator compares her mother’s disapproval in a conversation as being “open and unmistakable, like heavy weather” (*Lives of Girls and Women* 43). What this example shows is that weather is sometimes included in stories in order to reflect certain character traits, or in that case, the reaction of characters.

As we have seen, Munro also often works with descriptions of luxuriant growth in landscape. Duncan argues that this can be related to “sensual pleasure for the female narrator or protagonist” (101). What is meant by that can for example be shown with a passage from “Lives of Girls and Women,” when Del drives through the Canadian countryside with Mr. Chamberlain during summer time:

I looked out the window; the countryside I knew was altered by his presence. [...] now with Mr. Chamberlain I saw that the whole nature became debased, maddeningly erotic. It was just now the richest, greenest time of year; ditches sprouted coarse daisies, toadflax, buttercups, hollows were full of nameless faintly golden bushes and the gleam of high creeks. I saw all this as a vast



arrangement of hiding places, ploughed fields beyond rearing up like shameless mattresses. (*Lives of Girls and Women* 185)

The narrator explicitly says that she experiences nature as “maddeningly erotic” due to the fact that Mr. Chamberlain is with her. The rich nature with all sorts of flowers during “the richest, greenest time of the year” emphasises her feelings of lust, which reaches a peak when she sees all these fields as “mattresses” and “hiding places” where she wants to go with Mr. Chamberlain. Thus, in this particular passage, nature is definitely connoted with eroticism and sensual pleasure.

Another example is the story “Nettles,” in which the following description perfectly fits the protagonist’s inner mind. She meets Mike again after many years and still seems to feel attracted to him. When they take a walk together at the golf course, she perceives nature surrounding them in a very picturesque way:

Between it [the water] and us there was a meadow of weeds, all of it seemed in bloom. Goldenrod, jewel-weed with its red and yellow bells, and what I thought were flowering nettles with pinkish-purple clusters, and wild asters. Grapevine, too, grabbing and wrapping whatever it could find and tangling underfoot. The soil was soft not quite gummy. Even the most frail-stemmed, delicate-looking plants had grown up almost as high as, or higher than, our heads. When we stopped and looked up through them we could see trees at a little distance tossing around like bouquets. (*Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* 181)

This reflects her feelings of “pleasure” and “lust,” which “had given her shooting pains” (180). The image created here is a very romantic one and somehow reflects the cliché of ‘la vie en rose’. The reader feels that the narrator’s feelings for Mike, which she had before he left, return immediately. These feelings seem to influence the way she perceives the places surrounding them, which is for instance indicated in the impression “all of it *seemed* in bloom”. Another image created in that passage is that of marriage, which arises in the last sentence, when she says, “we could see trees at a little distance tossing around like bouquets”. The comparison of trees to bouquets which are being tossed around very much reminds the reader of a bridal bouquet.

### 3.5 Stories set outside Ontario

As already mentioned, in Munro's work, stories which are set in other parts of the world than Ontario are rather exceptional. Yet, there are some stories which have their setting outside Canada and in the following sub-chapters, I would like to analyse if and if yes, the extent to which they are different from other Munro stories.

#### 3.5.1 Australia

In total, there are two stories that are set in Australia, "Bardon Bus" from *The Moons of Jupiter* and "The Jack Randa Hotel" from *Open Secrets*. Considering the fact that there are not that many stories set outside Canada, it is interesting that two of them are set in the same country. These two stories do not only take place in the same country, but also in the same region, namely Queensland.

"Bardon Bus" is generally acknowledged to be the first story written by Alice Munro which does not have its primary setting in Canada. The story is not only exceptional in that it is set outside south-western Ontario, but also because its structure is different from all the other stories. It is sub-divided into several numbered sections. Each section adds some information to the story, but they are not ordered chronologically. As a consequence, the reader must be very attentive, as there are frequent shifts in time and place. The entire story is not set in Australia, though parts of it take place in Canada. For this section, however, I will only focus on those parts which are set in Australia. The narrator spends some time in Bardon, Queensland, where she is writing a book. There she meets an anthropologist whom she got to know in Canada and whom she calls X.

First of all, it is striking that the descriptions of streets, nature and houses evoked are completely different from those other stories by Munro. A suitable example to illustrate this is the scene in which the narrator remembers her bus rides from her home to downtown for grocery shopping:

I say to myself 'Bardon Bus, No. 144,' and I see a whole succession of scenes. I see them in detail; streets and houses. LaTrobe Terrace, Paddington. Schools like large, pleasant bungalows, betting shops, frangipani trees

dropping their waxy, easily bruised, and highly scented flowers. (*The Moons of Jupiter* 112)

Stylistically, this description could be part of any of Munro's stories. If we take a look at the elements described, however, it is obvious that this scene cannot take place in Ontario. The frangipani trees as well as the schools, which are "like large, pleasant bungalows", definitely do not fit into the image of an Ontarian small town.

Also the description of the house the narrator lives in is quite different from the houses described in other stories. She lives in a "typical old Queensland house with the high tongue-and-groove walls and the ventilation panels over the doors filled with graceful carved vines" (119). When looking out of the window, she "looked out over a gully like an oval bowl, ringed with small houses and filled with jacaranda, poinciana, frangipani, cypress, and palm trees. Leaves like fans, whips, feathers plates: every bright, light, dark, dusty, glossy shade of greed" (119).

Not only is the flora described here seemingly different from the flora in Canada, but also the location of the house is different. Since this description is very picturesque and includes a high number of positively connoted adjectives, one can assume that the narrator has very positive memories of her time spent in Australia.

Let us now take a closer look at the second story set in Australia, namely "The Jack Randa Hotel". The plot of this short story revolves about the character Gail. This story is told from the third person perspective and, like many other short stories by Alice Munro, it starts somewhere in the middle and then jumps forward and backward in order to explain how this first scene came to be. In this case, Gail is sitting on a plane to Australia but at first, the reader does not know why or when she is going there.

The reader then learns that she is following her ex-boyfriend, Will, who left Canada for a new life with his new love, Sandy, in Brisbane. Curious about what his life looks like now, Gail decides to sell her shop in Canada and follow him. She does not let anybody know about her plans and tells everybody to go on a holiday with open end. Before going there, she undergoes a transformation, changing the colour and cut of her hair; "[i]t is a disguise" (*Open Secrets* 169). Arriving in Brisbane, Gail takes a taxi to

the address Will had given her. She observes the house and the street where it is situated, paying attention to minute details:

Eyre Road runs along a ridge. There is no sidewalk, just dusty path. No one walking, no cars passing, no shade. Fences of boards or a kind of basket-weaving – wattles? – or in some cases high hedges covered with flowers. No, the flowers are really the leaves of a purplish-pink or crimson color. Trees unfamiliar to Gail are showing over the fences. They have tough-looking dusty foliage, scaly or stringy bark, a shabby ornamental air. (170)

Although the story is a third person narrative, passages like these clearly show that the focalizer is Gail, as the description is far from being objective. From the description we get the feeling that she is desperately looking for negative traits of the neighbourhood. The overall image created here could basically also come from a story set in Ontario. Readers of Munro are already familiar with feelings of emptiness and shabbiness like they are conveyed here in this passage.

Gail's negative attitude becomes even more obvious when she describes Will and Sandy's house, which "is hidden by a board fence, painted a pale green" (170). To that Gail reacts very negatively, "her heart shrinks – her heart is in a cruel clutch" (170). It is not made clear why she feels that way about the green colour of the fence, but one could interpret that when seeing the house, she realized that Will and Sandy are still happy together. This scene somehow represents the proof Gail was looking for. The fact that she is following him to Australia, significantly far away from Canada, even though she was not happy with Will, shows the reader that she is still attached to him. The reader understands that she cannot stand seeing him happy and remains unable to let him go, even going as far as to steal a letter from their mailbox in front of the house.

Why the story is called "The Jack Randa Hotel" is only revealed towards the end of the story. Every morning, Gail goes for a walk in a park next to a hotel – the Jack Randa Hotel – as this is the only time of the day that "the verandas are empty, the doors are closed" (178). This scene is the only one in which a positive and idyllic atmosphere is evoked: "All the trees in the park have come out in bloom. The flowers are a color that she has seen and could not have imagined on trees before – a shade of silvery blue, or silvery purple, so delicate and beautiful" (180).

Apart from that, setting does not play as big of a role as it usually does in Munro's stories. There are no descriptions of the city Brisbane itself, nor of Australian nature – apart from the park next to the hotel. Yet, it is relevant to consider the fact that Gail wants to change her appearance completely before going abroad, which not only serves the purpose of not being recognised by Will but also seems to follow the motto 'new country – new identity'. A new look is part of that new identity. What is more, when people ask her where she comes from, she always lies and says she is American. It seems that she no longer wants to be confronted with her earlier life in Canada.

At the end, when Gail learns that Will has found out that she followed him, she immediately goes to the airport to book a flight back home. The story ends with the sentence "*Now it's up to you to follow me*" (189). The fact that this sentence is written in italics indicates that these are Gail's thoughts, while the rest of the story is told by a third-person narrator. Quite obviously, Gail wants Will to come back to her to Canada.

### 3.5.2 Albania

"The Albanian Virgin" is not only one of the longest stories from the collection *Open Secrets*, but also one of the most complex ones. Munro combines two different stories within one short story and the plot is jumping forward and backward between these two stories. At the beginning, we have the character Lottar who is kidnapped somewhere in the Albanian mountains after her guide has been shot and killed. Only after a few pages, the reader is informed that this is actually a story that the actual narrator of the story, whose name we don't know, is told by her friend Charlotte. She makes up this story and wants to turn it into a film.

The second story, which is told by the narrator, is set in a surrounding that Alice Munro readers are familiar with, namely in Canada. As in many other stories, in "The Albanian Virgin", too, the narrator escapes from her life in Ontario for a new start on the West Coast, where she opens a bookshop. More concretely, she moves to Victoria because, as she explains, "it was the farthest place I could get from London, Ontario, without going out of the country" (*Open Secrets* 110).

More important for the current discussion is how the setting of the second story, which is set in Albania, is drastically different from other stories. While at the beginning the reader cannot be quite sure of where Lottar is, after a while, more and more details are provided. At first, we only know that Lottar is in a big building which is called “kula” somewhere in the Albanian mountains, at a village called Maltisa e madhe. After some pages, the kula is described as “a great, rough stone house with a stable below and the living quarters above” (87). There is no possibility for Lottar to go home, so she stays at the kula where she helps the other women living there, for example with tobacco picking. She starts feeling comfortable and does not even think about going home anymore. After a while, though, the women want to sell her to a Muslim, and only with the help of a priest can she escape this situation, being turned into a Virgin. From then on, she must live alone. Let us now take a look at the description of the place where Lottar has to live after having been sent to live alone:

Up past the tobacco field was a beech wood, where Lottar had often gone to get sticks for fire. Beyond that was a grassy slope – a high meadow – and at the top of the meadow, about half an hour’s climb from the *kula*, was a small stone shelter, a primitive place with no window, a low doorway and no door, a corner hearth without a chimney. Sheep took over there; the floor was littered with their droppings. (97)

The primitiveness and the bad equipment of her shelter very much remind of typical house descriptions in other stories. Yet, of course, we usually speak of houses rather than stone shelters, but the image transferred is not that different. As we have seen in the chapter in which I dealt with the description of houses in Munro’s fiction, typically, the atmosphere typically evoked is rather cold, poor and dark. This is also true for this description. Expressions like “small”, “primitive”, “no window”, “no door” and of course the floor “littered with their [the sheep’s] droppings”, emphasise this image once more.

Clearly, apart from this shelter, the scenery is completely different from other Munro stories in terms of landscape, weather and vegetation. This is evoked, for example, in the scene, when Lottar is fleeing from the kula with the priest:

They came to a dry riverbed, paved with stones that were no flat and easily walkable but a torrent, a still torrent of stones between fields of corn and

tobacco. They could hear dogs barking, and sometimes people's voices. The corn and tobacco plants, still unharvested, were higher than their heads. (102)

Stylistically, Munro uses a similar way of describing the scene. The sentences are short, rather than complex. Moreover, she uses a high amount of adjectives, and she provides us with certain details from the foreground as well as the background that give a good impression of how the scenery looks. However, the elements in the description are quite different, compared to the typical Ontarian landscape, as it is described in most of the other stories. On the one hand, the tobacco field and the dry riverbed are unfamiliar objects in Munro. On the other hand, "unharvested corn" that is "higher than their heads" is a picture that we come across in several other stories as well.

The atmosphere created in this passage emphasises the danger Lottar is in. The priest tells her not to talk to anybody as nobody is allowed to know who she is and that she has escaped. Therefore, the high corn which they are surrounded by and the barking dogs and people's voices that they hear in the background create feelings of insecurity and anxiety. Thus, the function of this description is to build suspense. What is more, the fact that she hears dogs barking and people's voices at some distance indicate that they are getting closer to the city.

Here again, we find an example of a path, which is one of the three types of location defined by Herman (278). Here, the focus is clearly on the path itself, and on the difficult circumstances under which Lottar has to manage this path. Furthermore, it also serves to contrast the two places to each other. From a distance, the city of Skodra, which is their target destination, "seemed to float above the mud flats, its domes and steeples shining as if they were made of mist" (108).

When they come closer, though, this idyllic description no longer holds true since "all this tranquillity had vanished. The streets were paved with big, rough stones and were full of people and donkey carts, roving dogs, pigs being driven somewhere, and smells of fires and cooking and dung and something terrible – like rotten hides" (108). The image Munro creates in this scene is completely different from what Munro readers are used to. Streets full of people and animals are usually not the image we get from a small-town in Ontario. Yet, this passage resembles other stories, too, due to its

techniques. As we have seen in the chapters above, at first sight, all of the towns described in Munro's work seem to be attractive and idyllic. However, through the plot that follows these descriptions, they turn out to be not such sleepy and beautiful towns at all. Thus, in fact, even though the events take place far away from Canada, the setting evoked is not that different.

Now what can be concluded from these three stories? First of all, none of them is completely separated from Canada. The "The Albanian Virgin" consists of two parallel stories, whereas one of them is set in south-western Ontario. The second story, which is set in Albania, is actually a story made up by a character, who is Canadian, too. The protagonists of "Bardon Bus," too, are Canadians who emigrate to Australia for some time. In "The Jack Randa Hotel," both of the protagonists have their origins in Canada. Gail, who follows her ex-boyfriend to Australia, comes back to Canada in the end. We do not know if she is going back to her hometown Walley, but at least we know that she intends to return to Canada. Moreover, the reader is not informed if Will is coming home, too, or not.

Secondly, as far as the elements of space are concerned, we can see that Munro includes quite similar elements. Descriptions of landscape and nature play a role in these stories, too, although the elements themselves are not the same. In the Australian setting, Munro does not, of course, describe maples or goldenrod, but different flowers and trees.

The perspective is similar to the other stories, too. In "Bardon Bus" we have a first person narrator, whereas "The Jack Randa Hotel" is told from the point of view of a third person narrator, with Gail being the focaliser. In "The Albanian Virgin", the situation is a bit more complicated, as it consists of two different stories. The actual story is told by a first person narrator, too, but the second story, which is about Lottar's journey in Albania, is told from a third person narrator's point of view; the narrator is called Charlotte and she is a friend of the first person narrator. Thus, there are several changes between these two perspectives throughout the whole story. In summation, these three stories are exceptional as they have an exotic setting. However, at the same time, they do not really differ in how Munro works with space.



## 4. Stylistic aspects

### 4.1 Paradox and Parallel

The use of paradox and parallel is one of the most recognisable stylistic methods applied by Munro. With regards to space, Keith argued that this method is frequently used in order to emphasise differences between small town life and city life: “Attraction/repulsion, nostalgia/bitterness, love/hate. Responses to the Ontario small town – as well as small towns in other places – tend to swing between opposing poles” (Keith 170).

According to McMullen, paradox can be described as “the coexistence of the dull with the exciting, the grotesque with the commonplace, the prosaic with the romantic, the mundane with the marvellous” (144). How does Munro include instances of paradox in her stories related to setting? The most obvious of these instances is the use of contradictory adjectives next to each other. McMullen claims that the aim of these contradictory adjectives is to emphasise “the complex nature of the world” (145).

Another theorist who has been concerned with parallel and paradox in Alice Munro’s fiction is Walter Martin, who assumes that these stylistic methods are not only reflected in the themes she is dealing with, but also in the structure of her stories (see *Paradox and Parallel* 1). McMullen agrees with this argument and claims that using paradox in literature is a challenge for the author. In Munro, it is used as “structural as well as technical or linguistic attitude” (McMullen145).

Martin further demonstrates that the distinction between country and city has already been one of the main issues in her earlier work. I would once again like to refer to an example which I have already cited, namely a passage from “The Flats Road” in *Lives of Girls and Women*. In this story, town is described positively, having “civilized, desirable things” such as “sidewalks, streetlights, lined-up shade trees, milkmen’s and icemen’s carts, birdbaths, verandahs with wicker chairs, from which ladies watched the street” (8) whereas the Flats Road is situated “between fields ragged with weeds” (8) and has houses “set further apart” and which are “more neglected, poor and eccentric than town houses would ever be” (8). This is a typical example of what is meant by directly contrasting two different worlds.

In another episode of *Lives of Girls and Women*, the narrator, Del Jordan, contrasts negative images of the landscape on the countryside with images of the city, where she “loved the order, the wholeness, the intricate arrangements of town life [...] all these things, rituals and diversions, frail and bright” (59). In contrast to that, in “Baptizing”, one of the last stories in *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del describes “[t]rees, houses, fences, streets” which are “[u]nconnected to the life of love, uncoloured by love” (262/263). Ross says that an artist is “the person most in touch with both the luminous order of the upper world and the shadowed landscape of the lower world” (121).

Another suitable example is a passage taken from “Winter Wind”, in which the narrator and her friend Betty Gosley are excited that they are allowed to spend some time in town “to be able to *go out* like this into some kind of evening life, not just the dark and cold and rushing storms that wrapped our houses in the country” (*Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You* 197). She further describes that in town streets were “leading into one another” and lights being “evenly spaced” (197), which is another highlight for the country girls.

I would also like to refer to the first story of the collection *The Moons of Jupiter*, “Connection”, for the title suggests a very important keyword. For the narrator, her cousin from Philadelphia and her cousin from Des Moines serve as a “*connection* with the real, the prodigal, and dangerous, world” (6) [emphasis added]. While the narrator herself and her family “lived at the end of a road running west from Dalglish over some scrubby land where there were small wooden houses and flocks of chickens and children” (6), her cousins are described as coming from ‘exotic’ places, i.e. from big cities.

Their differences are not only reflected in the places they come from, but also in the ways they behave and the ways they talk. The narrator marries a man named Richard a few years later and he has a very negative attitude towards his wife’s origins. She even tells the readers that she “felt ashamed, as if there was something growing over me, mold, something nasty and dreary and inescapable” when he said Dalglish, which he called her “background” (12). Furthermore, she says that he had wanted her “amputated from that past which seemed to him such shabby baggage” (13). Hence,

Richard clearly wants to ‘separate’ his wife from where she comes from and does not have any sympathy for her roots at all.

In other words, Munro “is again making use of family relationships to present the interplay of contrast and similarity” (Martin, *Paradox and Parallel* 89). The situation the narrator is in can be compared to a statement of Alice Munro in an interview with Hancock: “[i]f you come from a fairly low, a fairly underprivileged class of very limited expectations and then make a big leap into another class [...] there’s some guilt involved in this” (95).

A very last example that I would like to mention to illustrate the use of paradox and parallel is the story “Home”. As suggested by Carrington, the title of this story is highly ironic, as “[i]t is neither a place, the narrator comes home to willingly nor a place where she feels she belongs. Paradoxically, however, it is also a place that she is afraid she has never actually left” (195). Osachoff claims that this story can even be categorised as a memoir, as the narrator “combines memories of the past with events in the present” (80).

When she returns home, the narrator reflects:

Now that I am living a hundred miles away I come every two months or so. Before that, for a long time, throughout my marriage, I lived thousands of miles away and would go without seeing this house for years at a time. I thought of it then as a place I might never see again. I was greatly moved by the memory of it. I would walk through its rooms in my mind. (*The View from Castle Rock* 134)

Alice Munro is not only contrasting city and countryside, but also “the familiar, the ordinary and the banal on the one hand, and on the other the strange, the exciting and the romantic” (Martin, *Paradox and Parallel* 141). Martin here refers to the story “Bardon Bus”, in which the narrator explains that in Australia “everything seemed familiar and yet not to be confused with anything we had known in the past” (*The Moons of Jupiter* 112). This statement clearly indicates that the narrator is very happy and feeling at home and secure in Brisbane, even though she is so far away from home. This is further stressed in the following passage:

We felt we knew the lives of the housewives [...] we knew the insides of the shuttered sun-blistered houses set up on wooden posts over the gullies [...] This familiarity was not oppressive but delightful, and there was a slight strangeness to it, as if we had come by it in a way we didn't understand. We moved through a leisurely domesticity with a feeling of perfect security – a security we hadn't felt [...] in any of the places where we more properly belonged. (112/113)

In this passage, Munro perfectly combines the two opposites of being abroad and far away from home with feeling safe and comfortable. This delightful, yet strange familiarity with their new surrounding clearly points to a paradox, which is revealed when we learn that the liaison of the narrator and X was very happy, but also very short. Within this short time, the narrator seems to absorb everything around her and experiences her time in Brisbane with “intense experience” (Martin, *Paradox and Parallel* 142).

## 4.2 Photography

“Now I look at what I've done and it is like a series of snapshots”. (*Selected Stories* 80)

Munro's partly minute descriptions can be well compared to photography (see Besner 29, Ross 113). Hutcheon stresses that photography in general plays a crucial role in Canadian literature, since it “suggests something distanced, frozen, even dead, in a sense” (46). Referring to Munro in particular, Hutcheon purported that her act of writing is very much reminiscent of taking a photo: “it is an act of reducing open, imaginative immediacy to a framed form” (51).

York, who wrote a book about photography in the stories of Alice Munro, noted that usually, photography is closely connected to objectivity, which is the goal of many writers. However, one should not forget that a photo only fakes objectivity, since it “transforms, rather than represents, reality” (York 9). Every photograph is subjective, as there is someone who takes the photograph, i.e. the photographer, and we only see the picture that he or she took. As Bowen says, “photographs are a product of both the

realm of physical reality and the realm of artifice” which is why “their status is ambiguous”.

This is also true for Alice Munro’s fiction, in particular concerning her choice of setting. Although the towns in her stories show great similarities to her home town Wingham, they are still ultimately fictional; they do not exist in reality. What we learn about her towns is only what she wants to show her readers or what she wants her readers to ‘see’ or know about the places. In other words, Munro is in the power to “edit and transform those images” (York 11). York also notes that Munro’s writing requires a “delicate balance of concealment and revelation” (21). This means that the scenes she presents do not reveal every single detail about setting, but still she has to provide enough information so that the reader can make something out of it and understand why the given information is relevant. The same accounts for a photograph; we only see a part of what the photographer sees. If, for example, we have a photograph of a tree, then this tree is actually part of a larger landscape. There is something around this tree, which we are unable to see because it is not included in the photograph. However, it is still there in reality.

For example, in “Gravel”, when the narrator describes their new house, she does not tell the reader about every single room of this house, but only mentions the following aspect: “In this new house, which was really a trailer, my sister, Caro, and I had narrow cots, stacked one above the other” (*Dear Life* 92). This raises the question why the narrator only mentions the room where her sister and her slept. In that case, this information is relevant, as the narrator talks about their old house before. She explains that there is not much she remembers about their old home, yet she can recall “the wallpaper with teddy bears” in her room (92). Thus, Munro juxtaposes her current with her old bedroom.

A similar picture of a bedroom can be found in “Night,” when the narrator describes the bedroom that she shares with her sister as “a small room that could not accommodate two single beds side by side, so the solution was a pair of bunk beds, with a ladder in place to help whoever slept in the top bunk climb into bed” (*Dear Life* 273/274).

Let us consider the following two passages from “Vandals”, which I have juxtaposed here in order to emphasise the huge contrast between them. Both descriptions, the one of Liza’s house, as well as the one of Ladner’s country, could be viewed as photographic.

There was her own [Liza’s] house sitting in the middle of a cornfield at the end of a short lane. It was a wooden house with the top half painted white and the bottom half of glaring pink, like lipstick. (...) There is not one tree anywhere near this house, and the only bush is a lilac with curly, brown-edged leaves, by the back steps. Around the house nothing but corn, and at a distance the leaning old barn that Liza and Kenny are forbidden to go into, because it might collapse at any time. No divisions over here, no secret places – everything is bare and simple. (*Open Secrets* 290/291)

But (...) when you cross into Ladner’s territory, it’s like coming into a world of different and distinct countries. There is the marsh country, which is deep and jungly, full of botflies and jewelweed and skunk cabbage. A sense there of tropical threats and complications. Then the pine plantation, solemn as a church, with its high boughs and needled carpet, inducing whispering. And the dark rooms under the down-swept branches of the cedars – entirely shaded and secret rooms with a bare earth floor. In different places the sun falls differently and in some places not at all. In some places the air is thick and private, and in other places you feel an energetic breeze. (291)

Here, the narrator is clearly describing two completely different worlds, which is why these two examples also fit into the category of paradox and parallel was discussed earlier. While Liza’s home is “in the middle of a cornfield” with “not one tree anywhere near”, Ladner’s place is described as a “marsh country, which is deep and jungly”. Neither of the two descriptions is more positive than the other, and both of them have something mysterious and dark.

Although Liza’s home is said to have “no secret places”, the fact that it is so isolated still evokes some mystery and uncertainty in the reader. Another very interesting aspect about the first quotation is that the place somehow is pictured as a female place. There is an overt expression, “pink like lipstick”, which directly names a make-up utensil, which is typically used by women, but there is also the description of “curly, brown-edged leaves”, which is evocative of curled hair.

Yet, interestingly, in this second description, one has the feeling that the narrator is talking about two different places in one. Even within this description, there are quite a lot of contradictions: “[i]n *different* places the sun falls *differently* and in *some* places not at all. In *some* places the air is thick and private, and in *other* places you feel an energetic breeze” [emphasis added]. These sentences not only suggest that Ladner’s territory is huge, but also that it consists of several different places within. Therefore, one may claim that the second passage consists of several different photographs, while the first one is more straightforward and can be pictured with one shot. Especially the description of the play of sun and shadow very much reminds readers of a photograph of a landscape. However, Munro not only plays with visual aspects here, but also includes smell and touch, which can, of course, not be made visible on a photograph. After all, one cannot ‘see’ smell. Nonetheless, her description is very picturesque and detailed, and therefore fits into the concept of photography.

What makes Munro’s photographic descriptions so interesting and special is that even though she talks about ordinary things, she evokes suspicion and something mythical. As also noted by York (36), this fact challenges her readers, since they have to discover for themselves what is beyond the surface of these realistic descriptions. York concludes that Munro is “evolving a photographic vision which both mirrors reality and subtly, mysteriously alters it” (30). She provides the reader with “small-town *surfaces*” (York 36) [emphasis added] but the readers need to find out what is hidden in the depth of such surfaces.

York and Carscallen call attention to the fact that Munro herself is pointing to photography in some of her stories. To illustrate this argument with an example, I would like to cite the following passage from “The Ottawa Valley”: “Now I look at what I’ve done and it is like a series of snapshots, like the brownish snapshots with fancy borders that my parents’ old camera used to take” (*Selected Stories* 80).

Thus, photography is not only an interesting stylistic device for depicting space, but also for the lives of her characters in general. In an interview, Munro once said, “There are just flashes of things we know and find out [...] I like looking at people’s lives over a number of years, without continuity. Like catching them in *snapshots*” (Hancock 89) [emphasis added]. This is exactly what she does in her stories, too. Most notably, this

method can be recognized in the collection *Lives of Girls and Women*, in which every story presents another episode – another snapshot – of Del Jordan’s life.

### 4.3 Emphasis of change

“Changing is the word I want”. (*Lives of Girls and Women* 54)

Apart from shifts in perspective, another method applied by Munro is that of shifts of space and time (see also Canitz and Seamon 69). In some cases, the reader is not prepared for such shifts and does not immediately understand their meaning. Therefore, readers have to pay very close attention to every word. Canitz and Seamon also stress that it is the reader’s task to grasp the meaning and importance of these shifts.

Martin and Ober more generally state that Munro’s emphasis lies very much on change. As we have already seen, in Munro’s fiction, change occurs as change of weather or seasons, or as a (sudden) change of setting, for example from a small town to a city or vice versa. Furthermore, she also sometimes stresses how places change over the years. This is the case in *Lives of Girls and Women*, in which all the stories are connected to each other. In “The Flats Road”, the first story of the collection, Del describes her Uncle Benny’s house as “tall and silvery”, having “old unpainted boards, bleached dry in the summer, and dark green blinds, cracked and torn, pulled down over all the windows” (5). However, in “Age of Faith”, a story which temporarily takes place a few years later, Del notes that this very same house has undergone tremendous change: “The house [...] was so dirty that it no longer had to be a house at all; it was like some sheltered extension of the out-of-doors” (122/123). The statement that “it no longer had to be a house at all” is very strong so that the reader feels that over the years, Uncle Benny’s house became completely dilapidated and dirty.

Another example is the story “The Shining Houses”, in which the narrator refers to how houses at Garden Place changed: “The houses were frail at first, skeletons of new wood standing up in the dusk of the cold spring days. But the roofs went on, black and green, blue and red, and the stucco, the siding; the windows were put in” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 23).



We have seen above that one of the most frequent methods of dealing with change is the use of paradox. Another common method applied by Munro is the use of prolepses. This is for example the case in “The Jack Randa Hotel”, which starts with Gail flying to Australia. Only after some time are the readers informed as to why she is doing that and what had happened before. But when Munro is jumping back in time, readers already know what is going to happen next. Hence, in some way, prolepses “reduce [a story’s] suspense, since they reveal future circumstances” (Duncan 113). However, they also increase the reader’s interest in how these situations came to be. In case of “The Jack Randa Hotel”, the reader is keen on knowing why Gail is going to Australia, and why she is going there alone.

#### **4.4 Poetic language**

McGill argues that Munro is a “geomancer”, as “she organizes space to some apparent harmony”. Thereby, she organises words in such a way that it makes the reader feel that there is something special about the setting. When reading these passages readers recognise the importance of space for the characters or for the plot.

As discussed by several theorists, at some point, Munro’s language can even be considered poetic. Colourful descriptions, rhetorical devices, such as metaphors, comparisons and personifications, as well as vivid images, lead to the fact that readers have a clear picture of setting in mind. Although many critics described Munro’s style as realistic, one can also discover that her descriptions are not always as realistic as they seem, but rather fulfil a clear function – in that case, a poetic function. Let us consider the following passage from “Vandals”, in which Liza takes a ride through nature on a snowmobile:

The river with its three feet of ice and level covering of snow made a wonderful road. The storm had come from the west, as storms usually did in that country, and the trees along the eastern bank were all plastered with snow, clotted with it, their branches spread out like wicker snow baskets. On the western bank, drifts curled like waves stopped, like huge lappings of cream. It was exciting to be out in this, with all the other snowmobiles carving the trails and assaulting the day with such roars and swirls of noise. The swamp was black from a distance, a long smudge on the northern

horizon. But close up, it too was choked with snow. Black trunks against the snow flashed by in a repetition that was faintly sickening. (*Open Secrets* 277)

McGill notes that especially the very last sentence of this passage is poetic. The antithesis of “black trunks against the [white] snow” definitely fulfils a poetic function. Yet there are some more poetic aspects which can be discussed in that connection. First of all, there are several comparisons: the branches of “the trees along the eastern bank” are “like wicker snow baskets”, and “drifts curled like waves stopped” are “like huge lapping of cream”. Especially the second comparison seems very bizarre and special. At least, the comparison of a spectacle of nature with cream is quite unusual. There are also some personifications in this passage, like “the river” which “made a wonderful road” and “the swamp” which is “choked with snow”. What can be concluded from this is that use of poetic devices creates a very vivid image of what space looks like in this particular scene.

I have also discovered that in some descriptions of objects, Munro uses adjectives that are usually associated with human beings, as for example in the following passage of “Nettles.” “Each of the trees on the place had likewise an attitude and a presence – the elm looked *serene* and the oak *threatening*, the maples *friendly* and *workaday*, the hawthorn old and *crabby*” (*Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* 159) [emphasis added]. She thus associates trees with character traits as well as activities of human beings.

Another story, in which an unusual image is evoked, is “Amundsen”, when the narrator describes “small untidy evergreens rolled up like sleepy bears” (*Dear Life* 32). A bit later on the narrator sums up the atmosphere as “austere and northerly, black-and-white under the high dome of clouds” (32).

In some scenes, Munro also works the other way round and provides her characters with non-human attributes, like for example in “Images”. The narrator describes Mary McQuade, a visitor at her grandmother’s house as follows: “Outside, in the cold March air, she lost some of her bulk and her smell. In the house I could always smell her, even in the room she seldom entered. What was her smell like? It was like *metal* and like some dark *spice*” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 32) [emphasis added].

## 4.5 Addressing all senses

As we have seen in some of the citations I worked with, Munro not only appeals to her readers' visual imagination. She also refers to taste, hearing, smell and touch. Even though Bal argues that in general, hearing, touch and sound contribute only little to the impression of space, I would argue that in Munro these aspects once more reinforce the readers' ability to imagine the situation. Readers then do not only have a visual picture in mind, but something like a multi-dimensional one, including other factors apart from what the narrators see. According to Thacker, Munro is thereby creating "a sense of immediacy" (*Narrative Dialectics* 40).

For example, in "Thanks for the Ride", the narrator provides many details about the smell in a house: "Some of the smell in the house seemed to come from her [an old woman standing in the doorway of the room]. It was a smell of a hidden decay, such as there is when some obscure little animal has died under the verandah" (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 51). Similarly, in "Day of the Butterfly", the narrator describes the smell of a person. "[T]here was a smell about Myra, but it was a rotten-sweetish smell as of a bad fruit" (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 103).

In "Vandals", the narrator notes the particular smell when entering another character's house: "A smell of hides greeted her, of Borax soap, wood shavings, turpentine" (*Open Secrets* 273). Just like in the other examples, the narrator uses quite a lot of specific details in order to describe the smell. For instance, it is not the smell of any soap, but of "Borax soap".

Another story in which smell is described in great detail is "Amundsen", where the narrator describes a hotel, she goes into in order to use the toilet there. She must pass a beer parlour, where it is "dark and noisy" and where there is "a smell of beer and whiskey, a blast of cigarette and cigar smoke fit to knock you down" (*Dear Life* 43). Again, very many details are provided; it is not the smoke of alcohol in general, but "of beer and whiskey", nor is there a smell of smoke, but "of cigarette and cigar smoke".

Noise is often mentioned when describing the Wawanash River, as for example in "Images": "The noise the river made was not loud but deep, and seemed to come from

away down in the middle of it, some hidden place where the water issued with a roar from underground” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 37).

“My room was cold – every part of the building seemed cold. [...] And the covers were thin” (*Dear Life* 42). That is how the narrator describes her new surrounding in “Amundsen”. Temperature is frequently discussed in descriptions of winter.

#### 4.6 Characters as part of the setting

From time to time, Alice Munro has the tendency to transform characters into setting. The point I wish to make here is that in some descriptions of space she includes characters, and makes them part of space. I would like to refer to a passage from “The Flats Road”, which I have already quoted several times in my work, to illustrate what is meant by this argument: “Sidewalks, street lights, lined-up shade trees, milkmen’s and icemen’s carts, birdbaths, flower borders, verandas with wicker chairs, *from which ladies watched the street*” (*Lives of Girls and Women* 8) [emphasis added]. In this passage, the narrator exclusively refers to objects within space, apart from the ladies, which serves to render an active part to this passive description.

In some cases, however, Munro transforms characters themselves into setting. A perfect example is the character of Nile in the story “Princess Ida”. Nile is the new girlfriend of the narrator’s uncle Bill. When seeing Nile for the first time, Del notes that she walked “as if she was a Chinese lady [...] for whom walking is a rare and unnatural activity” (*Lives of Girls and Women* 93). Later on, Del looks at her more closely, observing that

[s]he was perfect. [...] Her skin was without a mark, like a pink teacup; her mouth could have been cut out of burgundy-colored velvet, and pasted on. Her smell was inhumanly sweet and her fingernails – I saw this with shock, delight, and some slight misgiving, as if she might have gone too far – were painted *green*, to match her clothes. (93)

This description is greatly reminiscent of a description of a house or a landscape. Most striking is definitely the word “inhumanly”, which already demonstrates the point I wish to make here. The comparison of her skin and her mouth to objects,

namely a “pink teacup” and “burgundy-colored velvet”, is rather uncommon. The picture of Nile illustrated here can be well-compared to that of a painting. The effect created through such a description is that it underlines how fascinated Del is by Nile’s look. This image is reinforced even further a bit later on in the story: “She reached some extreme of feminine *decorativeness*, perfect *artificiality*, that I had not even known existed; seeing her, I understood that I would never be beautiful” (97) [emphasis added].

## 5. Effects created and messages conveyed

### 5.1 Remoteness and isolation

I would like to start with an example from the story “Train”, which perfectly shows how isolated the towns in which most of Alice Munro’s stories are set are:

The east side of our house and the west side looked on two different worlds, or so it seemed to me. The east side was the town side, even though you could not see any town. Not so much as two miles away, there were houses in rows, with streetlights and running water. And though I have said you could not see any of that, I am really not sure that you couldn’t get a certain glow if you stared long enough. To the west, the long curve of the river and the fields and the trees and the sunsets had nothing to interrupt them. (*Dear Life* 278)

The fact that at the “town side” of the house “you could not see any town” underlines that even the place which is considered a “town” is not really as big of a town as one would perhaps imagine. The other side of the house, where there is nothing but nature, illustrates the remoteness of their house.

A similar image is created in “Dolly” from the same collection:

One day we were driving around in the country not too far away from where we live, and we found a road we hadn’t known about. The trees, maples and oaks and others, were second growth, though of an impressive size, indicating that there had been cleared land. Farms at one time, pastures and houses and barns. But not a sign of this was left. The road was unpaved but not untravelled. (233).

To mention one more example from another collection, I would like to refer to “Walker Brothers Cowboy”. In this story, too, the narrator is commenting on farming life, saying “what could look more unwelcoming, more deserted than the tall unpainted farmhouse with grass growing uncut right up to the front door, green blinds down, and a door upstairs opening on nothing but air?” (*Selected Stories* 7/8). In this passage, Munro offers a similar picture of loneliness (“deserted”, doors “opening on nothing but air”) and unpleasantness (“grass growing uncut”, “unwelcoming”).

Munro is not only concerned with the remoteness of the places but also with its consequences for the people living in these isolated places. An example to illustrate this point is the story “The Stone in the Field”, in which the narrator and her family visit the family farm where the narrator’s father escaped from. When they are all sitting around the kitchen table, the narrator reflects: “There was no sign of frivolity, no indication that the people who lived there ever sought entertainment. No radio; no newspapers or magazines; certainly no books” (*The Moons of Jupiter* 26). This image reinforces once again the remoteness of farmhouses and a feeling of being cut off civilisation.

In summation, the picture of farmhouses is quite similar throughout all of Munro’s short story collections. It is not only repeatedly shown that the people living there have to fight against monotony and isolation but also against poverty, as most of the farmhouses are being described as poorly equipped, cold and neglected. Similarly, readers get the impression that there is no kind of entertainment for farmer families and that their lives consist of nothing but hard work (see Keith 64).

Even though Munro mostly does not dedicate more than one or two paragraphs to the depiction of setting, she chooses words so powerfully, that the reader still gets an impression of the whole surrounding. As noted by Kareda, “Munro has the ability to isolate the one detail that will evoke the rest of the landscape” (qtd. in *Writing Her Lives* 356).

However, it is not only her description of towns and environments which evoke loneliness and remoteness. Her characters seem to be longing for distant places, far away from their home towns as it is the case in “Deep-Holes”. The protagonist tells her husband that she feels attracted to lonely islands:

Not the Hawaiian Islands or the Canaries or the Hebrides or the Isles of Greece, where everybody wanted to go, but to small or obscure islands nobody talked about and which were seldom if ever visited. Ascension, Tristan de Cunha Chatham Islands, and Christmas Islands and Desolation Islands and the Faeroes. (*Too Much Happiness* 99)

The fact that popular islands are juxtaposed with rather unknown islands stresses the point the protagonist, Sally, wishes to make: She does not want to go “where everybody wanted to go”, but to islands where she is alone. Already the word “island” itself evokes some feelings of being cut off of the rest of the world and of being far away. Furthermore, she is naming a whole list of such islands, which clearly shows that she has some particular places in mind where she would like to go.

Aside from the fact that the narrator talks about remote places in this story, the actual setting of “Deep-Holes” itself is described as somewhat unusual. The setting seems to be “[a]nyplace but Ontario” (107). Especially at the beginning of the story, when Sally is looking for her husband, the setting evoked appears fairly strange. At first, Sally perceives the place as “quite ordinary and unthreatening” (94) but later it turns out to be a very dangerous and mysterious place with “[d]eep chambers [...] like rooms cut out of the rocks” and “[c]orridors zigzagging between them and ferns and mosses growing out of their sides” (94).

## 5.2 The magic of the ordinary

Ozick describes Alice Munro as “our Chekhov” (qtd. in *Writing Her Lives* 443), one of the best known Russian short story writers. Most notably, Chekhov is famous for his originality, even though, just like Alice Munro, he usually wrote about ordinary events and ordinary characters. Metcalf once said that Munro recognizes “the magic of the ordinary” (57/58), thereby making ordinary things in life look special.

According to Ross, Munro works similarly to realist painters, like for example Edward Hopper or Alex Colville, in the way that she “present[s] ordinary experience with such intensity that it stands revealed as something extraordinary” (112). Thus, working with ordinary things is by no means connoted with boredom.

One of her methods to do so is one that I touched upon before, namely that many stories by Alice Munro are told from the perspective of women looking back at their childhood. Therefore, we get to know how they saw the world at a younger age. Children tend to see things from a different perspective: they are able to see this magic of the ordinary. Keith says that Munro’s protagonists who look back at their childhood



present “what might otherwise be seen as ordinary and commonplace as amazing and surprising, a brave new – but often puzzling and frightening – world seen for the first time” (Keith 167).

This feeling is evoked in many different scenes, amongst others in landscape descriptions. Probably the best example is the collection *Lives of Girls and Women*, as the narrator Del, grows older throughout the stories, so we see how her attitudes towards certain things change. In the first story of the collection, “The Flats Road”, Del explains that their house is situated “between fields ragged with weeds, and yellow with dandelions, wild mustard or goldenrod, depending on the season of the year” (8). Comparing this passage to the rest of the descriptions of the Flats Road and the attitudes towards this place by other characters, one can see that she is the only one who sees something positive about her home. She pays attention to minute details and even mentions what kinds of plants and flowers are around their house.

A similar description is offered in the story which follows “The Flats Road”, namely “Heirs of the Living Body:”

The hay coils were still there. Last week, when I was visiting, the hay was cut, right up to the veranda steps, and coiled into smooth, perfect beehives higher than anybody’s head. In the evening, first casting long, pulled-out shadows, then turning gray, solid, when the sun went down, these hay coils made a village, or, if you looked around the corner of the house down the rest of the field, a whole city of secretive, exactly similar, purple-gray huts. But one had tumbled down, one was soft and wrecked, left for e to jump in. I would stand back against the steps and then run at it with my arms spread passionately, landing deep in fresh hay, still warm, still with its grassy growing smell. It was full of dried flowers – purple and white money-musk, yellow toadflax, little blue flowers nobody knew the name of. (57)

There are several aspects about this description which make it rewarding to examine it in some more detail. First of all, the things that are being described are quite ordinary ones. There is nothing special about hay coils; at least not for people who are living on the countryside. Similarly, sunset is something that happens every day. Yet, Del describes these instances as if they were something extraordinary and as if dried flowers in hay were something magical and unique. The fact that she compares hay coils to a village mirrors her great imagination, which an adult would perhaps not

have. Again, just like in the other example above, Del pays attention to minute details and even recognizes which kinds of dried flowers are in the hay.

Another example is the story “Images”, in which the narrator observes the shadows created by her father and a visitor at their house: “In its [the lamp’s] light my father and Mary McQuade threw gigantic shadows, whose heads wagged clumsily with their talk and laughing. I watched the shadows instead of the people” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 35). Again, there is something completely ordinary, namely the fact that one can see shadows of people, which here is treated like something special. For the narrator, these shadows are so extraordinary that she is completely distracted from them.

In “A Trip to the Coast”, atmosphere plays a crucial role and there are several descriptive pauses in which the narrator attributes a magic character to it. In order to demonstrate what these descriptions look like, I have chosen three examples:

The back yard at this time of the day was strange, damp and shadowy; the fields were grey and all the cobwebbed, shaggy bushes along the fences thick with birds; the sky was pale, cool, smoothly ribbed with light and flushed at the edges, like the inside of a shell” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 174).

This first example occurs at a scene in which the protagonist, May, hears a strange noise, so she walks through the house to see where it is coming from. Since her grandmother is still asleep, she feels liberated, but at the same time, due to the strange noise, is scared. Thus, on the one hand, the description of the atmosphere in the backyard serves to create images of danger, as evoked by the words “strange, damp and shadowy”, and it also underlines the fact that even though she currently is alone, she is actually ‘caught.’ The “inside of a shell” could be interpreted as being trapped in a small space. On the other hand, the “pale, cool” sky, which is “smoothly ribbed with light”, creates a rather idyllic image.

The second example occurs a bit later on in the same story: “The clouds were dingy; the world was filled with an old, dusty, unfriendly light that seemed to come not from the sky alone but from the flat brick walls, the white roads, the grey leaves rustling and the metal signs flapping in the hot, monotonous wind” (185). This description occurs when a man they do not know comes to their store. In this case, the function of

atmosphere is to foreshadow what happens next. This strange man turns out to be a hypnotist and May is very interested in what he is doing. Her grandmother does not want May to talk to him at first, but finally accepts being hypnotised by the man. However, her grandmother does not wake up again and dies.

The hypnotist immediately flees, and May is completely alone and does not know what to do. This tragic ending is mirrored in the last example I would like to present:

May stood outside the store and no other cars went by on the highway, no one came. The yards were empty in the Black Horse. It had begun to rain a little while before and the drops of rain fell separately around her, sputtering in the dust. Finally, she went back and sat on the step of the store where the rain fell too. It was quite warm and she did not mind. (189)

### 5.3 Commentary on societal differences

Alice Munro pays attention not only to the contrast between small towns and cities in atmosphere or geography, but also in society. Thus, these geographic distances are often used to mirror societal differences (see Keith 169). For example, the mother of the narrator in “Chaddeleys and Flemmings”, who had grown up in Fork Mills, in the Ottawa Valley, and who moved to a community near Lake Huron, emphasises the “paved streets, the service in its stores, the better quality of things for sale and the better class of people” (*The Moons of Jupiter* 6) [emphasis added]. Hence, everything she associates with city is positive and “better” than on the countryside.

In “The Ottawa Valley”, the narrator stresses the differences between her Aunt Dodie who represents the Valley and her mother who represents the town (see also Martin, *Paradox and Parallel* 89). “Aunt Dodie’s house was bare. It was the poorest house I had ever been in, to stay. From this distance, our own house – which I had always thought poor, because we lived too far out of town to have a flush toilet or running water” (*Selected Stories* 69).

Another suitable example is a passage at the beginning of the collection *Who Do You Think You Are?* when the narrator firmly compares Hanratty, where “the social structure ran from doctors and dentists and lawyers to foundry workers and factory workers and draymen”, with West Hanratty where “factory workers and foundry

workers” as well as “large improvident families of casual bootleggers and prostitutes and unsuccessful thieves” are to be found (4).

Munro also stresses that people have prejudices against each other based on where they live. This is for example indicated in “Working for a Living”:

In those days people in town did generally look upon the people from the country as more apt to be slow-witted, tongue-dead, uncivilized, than themselves, and somewhat more docile in spite of their strength. And farmers saw people who lived in towns as having an easy life and being unlikely to survive in situations calling for fortitude, self-reliance, hard work. (*The View from Castle Rock* 128/129)

I would claim that these prejudices are in fact not that outdated, so the “in those days” could actually be omitted. In Canada, as well as in other countries, people living in towns still have certain opinions about people living on the countryside and vice versa. In “Working for a Living” this image is once more stressed when the narrator says that country people would feel “stiff and shy” when being in town, while town-people are associated with an “I’m-not-going-to-let-any-of-them-make-a-fool-out-of-me behavior” (129).

## 5.4 Notions of gender

As noted by McGill, houses in Munro’s fiction are almost exclusively “open houses”, meaning that they provide the reader with access to the characters living in these houses. Yet, at the same time, some things are hidden in or from these houses. In her essay “What is Real?” Munro writes that a house “encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way” (224). This perfectly mirrors what her fiction does. The reader has to look at what is behind the walls, namely at the destiny of Munro’s characters who are living in these houses. Only then can readers understand how these characters see the world.

Another point made by McGill is that in some cases, Munro’s houses are “places of marginalization”, thereby connecting space to questions of gender, since marginalization predominantly relates to her female protagonists. Another critic who has a similar view is Aritha Van Herk. She is very much concerned with aspects of

feminism in narrative in general. She observes that female Canadian writers nowadays are no longer only occupied with “questions of regionalism” to present the “local colour” but that they try to investigate “the coordinates of female identity and imagination” (61). Munro seems to exemplify that theory quite well. After all, most of Munro’s female characters fight against loneliness and isolation at their homes. In contrast, it is the men’s task to work and it is their privilege to move and ‘get out of the house.’ However, this does not account for all of her work, because, as we have seen, her female protagonists move to town in order to escape their small-town life in many of her stories.

For those women, who return to their origins, Van Herk’s idea of women’s reinvention of themselves is quite plausible. These women “[try] to re/invent themselves past the boundaries of their destined regions – the home, the family, the domestic, and, particularly, conventional male constructions of Woman” (Verhoeven 61). Thus, they liberate themselves from the life which is destined for them.

Yet, in other stories, women seem to be somewhat bound to the houses they live in, as for example in the story “The Shining Houses”. Mrs. Fullerton tells Mary that her husband left her but that she was not able to leave the house they were living in together: “husbands maybe come and go, but a place you’ve lived fifty years is something else” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 21).

McGill then goes even further, differentiating between what a house means for men as opposed to what it represents for women. In contrast to other authors’ fiction, Alice Munro’s fiction shows that houses are places where women are controlled rather than places where women can “dream in peace” (Bachelard qtd. in McGill). For men, on the other hand, houses “both involve a sense of ownership and of belonging to place (McGill). This is relevant for the current discussion in so far, as it mirrors the way houses or homes are described in Alice Munro’s stories. As Van Herk wrote, “Munro evokes intensely claustrophobic atmospheres” (50). However, I personally do not agree in that point; although it is true that the picture Munro renders of the small towns and their surroundings does not provide people living there with many opportunities, nor is there a particularly manifold nature, I would still argue that the word “claustrophobic” is too strong and too negative.

## 6. Genre-specific techniques in Alice Munro

Having discussed some aspects of setting which are relevant in Alice Munro's fiction, it is now important to analyse which genre traditions her fiction fits into. In general, there seem to be four general tendencies: first of all, there are those critics, who argue that Alice Munro's work is realistic, like Canitz and Seamon. Secondly, several theorists tried to show that Munro's stories belong to the gothic tradition, for example Szabó. Thirdly, numerous critics describe her as a documentary writer, such as Mallinson. Lastly, a few theorists interpret Munro's writing as being Romantic.

### 6.1 Realism

"It's all real, it's all there" (Munro qtd. in Thacker, *Writing Her Lives* 134).

Munro once said that people are usually extremely interested in the extent to which the material she uses for her fiction is real: "Whenever people get an opportunity to ask me questions about my writing, I can be sure that some of the questions asked will be these: 'Do you write about real people?' 'Did these things really happen?' " (*What Is Real* 223). As previously mentioned, Munro herself always claims that her stories are not autobiographic. Of course, this does not mean that her material cannot still be realistic. Let us therefore take a look at how much of her work is realistic and turn to those theorists who argue for labelling Alice Munro's fiction with the genre realism.

Generally speaking, realist authors aim at representing " 'true' knowledge of the world" (Bruner 213) in their fiction. What does this mean for space in realistic narratives? Morris points out that in literary realism the "visualising aspect" of writers causes particular "pleasure in readers" (142). In other words, visual representation is an essential ingredient of a realistic narrative. Undoubtedly, space is closely related to these 'real' visual representations. Munro herself says that she works with "bits of the real in the sense of being really there and really happening, in the world, as most people see it" which she then transforms "into something that is really there and really happening, in the *story*" (224) [emphasis added]. As Thacker puts it, Munro does not only use real material, but she "makes her readers *feel*" (*Writing Her Lives* 49) as if it was real.

There are now two different tendencies within the field of theory dedicated to Alice Munro's realist writing, namely fictional realism and magic realism. In the following section, I am going to briefly comment on both types of realism.

### 6.1.1 Fictional realism

Carscallen is a proponent of the group of theorists who assign Munro's stories to realism, saying that Munro's stories are not fully, though "partly factual" (75). Yet, he stresses that even if all the material of her stories was completely factual, some selection would need to take place, as the author cannot possibly present every single detail. Another important point made by Carscallen is that even though Munro's stories are not one hundred percent realistic, they still give the readers "the feeling of 'that's the way it is' " (75). Thus, his argument is very similar to Thacker's theory. Carscallen classifies Munro's work as fictional realism, as they represent the 'real' world as it is, but still include many fictional elements.

Orange shares this view, saying that Munro's stories are designed in such a way that they "imply that all things are real and that everything in life can be arranged for many different purposes and effects" (95). Canitz and Seamon have also considered aspects of fictional realism in Alice Munro's fiction and strongly neglect the view that she takes on the role of a documentary writer, as suggested by other scholars. They even emphasise that Munro herself turns her readers' attention to the fact that her work is fiction rather than reality (see Canitz and Seamon 68). They use Roland Barthes' term of *reality effect* to refer to what Munro creates in many of her stories.

Such an effect can for instance be identified in "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You", when the narrator introduces a change of setting: "It was the heyday of Mock Hill and all the other towns around the lakes, of all the hotels which in later years would become Sunshine Camps for city children, t.b. sanatoriums, barracks for R.A.F. training pilots in World War II" (*Selected Stories* 55). Now how does this passage create a reality effect? First of all, the narrator supposes in the first sentence that this was the "heyday" of Mock Hill, which reveals that she is already aware of the fact that this was no longer the case some years later. Thus, she does not only look back at that time but also includes the knowledge she has at the moment of narrating, which is

clearly different of her knowledge many years before. Moreover, the reference to the R.A.F. and to the t.b. sanatoriums, which are really existing agencies, creates a sense of reality.

Similarly, in “The Peace of Utrecht”, as well as in some other stories, there is reference to a concrete highway, which really exists. Thereby Munro creates a similar effect: “This is just how Wingham looks across the ‘prairie’ river flats south of town as one drives north on Highway 4” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 196).

Canitz and Seamon conclude that Munro’s stories are “like models of what a story that is true to fact might be like” (79). Munro herself once said in an interview with Gardiner: “And yet, you know, that was not an imagined setting. [...] It’s all real. It’s all there. I did not make it for its meaning. I was trying to find meaning” (Munro qtd. in Thacker, *Writing Her Lives*, 134).

The arguments presented in this chapter relate to what I mentioned above about literary cartography. As noted by Tally Jr., “texts give form to a world that makes it real, while also making sense of that world in an allegorical structure of meaning that enables the reader to generate alternative meanings” (99). Through the process of mapping, authors have to inform the readers in how far their provided ‘maps’ refer to ‘real’ places. What is to be found behind the surface of these maps must be discovered by the reader. Wilson sums up the notion of fictional realism quite nicely, saying that there are basically two different worlds: “the one world lies always already present, though hidden, within the other” (73).

### **6.1.2 Magic realism**

The concept of magic realism has attracted many theorists and critics over the last few decades. This concept is particularly common when describing writers of North America, including Alice Munro, who has also been mentioned several times as belonging to this tradition. But what does this term actually refer to? This is a very broad concept, so it can be a challenge to find a suitable definition of magic realism.

York notes that “for Munro, the creative process begins on the documentary level – the desire to capture and fix reality – and ends on the imaginative level” (26), which is



what he refers to as magical realism. Thus, for him, this concept is a combination of reality and imagination.

Geoff Hancock published an article in which he contrasted the concepts of realism and magic which are, per definition, contradictory. But it is exactly this contradiction which makes it worth taking a closer look at this approach. Hancock compares magic realism to 'primitive art', as both of them are very much focused on images in painted, and in written form. As argued by Hancock, "[t]hese images are more than hunting 'magic' to capture game. They remind us how close we are to primitive thinking. Images are totemistic or metaphoric. They are the secret structures of our imagination" (34). Thus, he claims that people always think in images, which he considers to be primitive. This lends itself well to a comparison to what authors are doing, since they imagine pictures and present them to their readers, who then again try to imagine what the transferred picture should look like.

Yet, I think that the argument presented by Hancock sounds as if this was something negative, as the word 'primitive' generally does not have a very positive connotation. Furthermore, his comparison to totemism is, in my opinion, too harsh. If I think of his argument in Munro, for example, I would argue that this is rather something very positive. She has the talent to present her settings so well that the reader has a perfect picture of them in their head. Even though she does not present her readers with every single detail, I would argue that she chooses the right elements to evoke the rest of the picture. And what is so "magical" about her art is that even though the settings she chooses for her stories are rather ordinary, she emphasises that there is something special and something "magic" about them.

However, there is one point made by Hancock which I fully agree with: "Magic realism shows the difficulty of distinguishing what is real from what is fantastic. It's all a trick of perspective; magic realism goes beyond copying reality to inventing it" (35). It is true that descriptions are always a matter of perspective, as we have already seen at the beginning of my paper. In Munro's case, invented places are presented as if they were real. Even though the small towns of her stories do not really exist, she describes them in such a way that the reader believes she describes real towns. In other words, one could argue that Munro creates her own reality. She provides the reader

with “precise details around a probable event, or a probable legend” (Hancock 41), she “portray[s] reality with such intense perception and clear unwavering light that it breaks down into molecules” (46). But what one should never forget is the fact that in magic realism the borders between reality and fiction are always rather vague.

To conclude, I would like to refer to an example which would fit in to the category of magic realism. The passage I chose is from the story “In Sight of the Lake”, when the narrator describes the appearance of the Lakeview Rest Home: “She likes how the lattice provides a touch of fantasy. [...] Here she parks in front of a bright dome that has a look of welcome, of cheerful excess” (*Dear Life* 229). Clearly, the description of a lattice conveying “a touch of fantasy” and the association of a dome with “welcome, cheerful excess” are rather extraordinary.

In “Amundsen”, the narrator evokes magic in her description of a winter scene:

The frozen lake not level but mounded along the shore, as if the waves had turned into ice in the act of falling. [...] Everything austere and northerly, black-and-white under the high dome of clouds. But the birch bark not white after all as you got closer. Grayish yellow, grayish blue, gray. (*Dear Life* 32)

## 6.2 Gothic

“Everything here is touchable and mysterious” (Munro, *Weekend Magazine* 33).

Another group of theorists are concerned with gothic elements in Alice Munro’s stories, like for example Szabó, or Sugars and Turcotte. These gothic elements are also partly related to setting. While on the one hand, Szabó argues that Munro’s writing belongs to the realist tradition, she also stresses that realism is related to the gothic, since “both insist on novelistic truth as opposed to historical truth”. In the view of Sugars and Turcotte (qtd. in Szabó), the gothic lends itself perfectly for Canadian writers in order to convey topics related to Canada. According to Szabó, Munro’s collection *Dear Life* is one of the works which can be considered Gothic in several ways. First of all, the characters as well as the action itself would fit for a Gothic novel. Secondly, the setting, ‘Munro country’, which I already referred to earlier, transfers a very dark and uncomfortable image.

I would like to refer to a passage from “Night” to show that Munro’s stories sometimes convey very dark and mysterious images: “Of course there were no streetlights – we were too far from town. Everything was larger. The trees around the house [...] were all intensely black” (*Dear Life* 278). The image evoked here perfectly fits into the scheme of the gothic. It creates feelings of insecurity and being lost and exposed, which is done by referring to darkness, or rather blackness, and isolation (“too far from town”).

Another story from the same collection which suits into the category of the gothic is “Images”. In particular, I am referring to the scene where the narrator walks along with her father somewhere in the wilderness. The atmosphere evoked is very dark and mysterious: “After a while there was a bush behind us the afternoon darkened. [...] Now the bank, instead of willows, grew thick bushes higher than my head” (*Selected Stories* 45). A bit later on, the narrator describes a scary man she spots in the darkness who “made no noise coming through the bushes [...] as if he followed a path I could not see”. She further describes him as “dark” and thinks that he is carrying “a little axe, or hatchet” (45). In this case, this gothic description creates suspense and creates a feeling of uneasiness.

A further example is “A Wilderness Station”, in which the protagonists Annie and Moodie must deal with feelings of anxiety and fear when being in the wilderness (see also Szabó). Furthermore, the story conveys the picture of being isolated, and far away from the next city or town. This is an image which is very common in Alice Munro, also in her earlier work. Her towns are situated in the middle of nowhere, cut off from civilisation, which not only connotes isolation but also fear, loneliness, sadness and desolation. A similar picture is evoked in “The Shining Houses”, when the narrator talks about “the old wilderness city” where houses are “dark, enclosed, expressing something like savagery in their disorder” and where “thick smoke [is] coming out of their chimneys, walls unpainted and patched and showing different degrees of age and darkening” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 24). As suggested by Irvine, in such descriptions “secrecy and transformation” (106) are conveyed.

“In Sight of the Lake” is another story which fits into the category of Gothic literature. The Lakeview Rest Home described in this story perfectly represents a typical Gothic

space with its “relentless, charmless look” and its inside “of loftiness” (*Dear Life* 229). The fact that many of the doors inside are locked and that there is no artificial light makes Nancy feel “more discouraged than she would care to admit” (231). At the end of the story it is implied that Nancy is locked; she tries to calm down but starts panicking.

Ross has closely analysed the story “The Peace of Utrecht”, in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, in which the narrator returns from the West Coast of Canada to her home town, Jubilee. As suggested by Ross, she “moves from the ordinary world to a world of silences, imprisonment and death” (119), which is, for instance, conjured up in the following passages cited by Ross: “the dim world of continuing disaster, of home” (191), “the dreaming, sunken feeling of these streets” (196), “the once-familiar atmosphere of frenzy and frustration” (200), or “feelings of hysteria” (201). Furthermore, in this story, the narrator’s mother is referred to as the “Gothic Mother”, who has a “cold appalling mask of the Shaking Palsy laid across her features, shuffling, weeping, devouring attention wherever she can get it, eyes dead and burning, fixed inward on herself” (200). Thus, in this story, a gothic atmosphere is not only evoked in the setting, but also in one of the characters, who is described like a devil with “dead and burning” eyes and “Shaking Palsy”.

Munro herself once wrote an article for the *Weekend Magazine* in which she is describing the Maitland River, also called Menesetung, as follows: “We believed there were deep holes in the river. I am still partly convinced that this river – not even the whole river, but this little stretch of it – will provide whatever myths you want, whatever adventures. [...] This ordinary place is sufficient; everything here is touchable and mysterious” (33). This citation perfectly shows that Munro’s material of her own origins provide her with countless possibilities – she can even write Gothic stories without completely changing the subject or setting.

The image of a Gothic surrounding is further strengthened when Munro is describing winter scenes. I would like to refer to one last example to illustrate this point. In “Winter Wind”, the first person narrator describes the look out of the window of her grandmother’s house, where she could see the Wawanash River, which was “[a]ll frozen now, all ice and untracked snow” (*Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You*

192). The description of the landscape from her grandmother's point of view is even more gothic: "Like Siberia, my grandmother said, offended, you would think we were living at the edge of the wilderness" (192).

### 6.3 Documentary

Struthers in "Alice Munro and the American South" admires Munro's "straight, documentary style" which shows that she rejects "the tendency of many photographers to manipulate images" (198). So, according to Struthers, Munro works like a photographer while being realistic and authentic.

Martin and Ober describe Munro as a "small-town historian" as they consider her work as "a comprehensive record of the enduring conditions and details of the small town" (128). In "Walker Brothers Cowboy", Munro makes use of facts of Canadian prehistory when the narrator's father tells her "how the Great Lakes came to be" (*Selected Stories* 4). As noted by Martin ("The Strange and the Familiar"), in this passage, the real historical event is being reduced in the sense of that the father does not present every single detail about it. At the same time, it is presented in a way that it is not completely horrifying, but rather "meaningful, manageable and meaningful for his daughter" (215).

Another story in which history plays a crucial role is "Spaceships Have Landed". As Martin and Ober note, the story is not simply about the town of Carstairs, which is the setting throughout the whole story, but rather, it is about human settlement in general. The following passage is one example which shows how the issue of settlement is treated in this particular story:

On the river flats lay the old fairgrounds, some grandstands abandoned since before the war, when the fair here was taken over by the big fair at Walley. (...) This was where the town set out to be, over a hundred years ago. Mills and hostleries were here. But the river floods persuaded people to move to higher ground. House-plots remained on the map, and roads laid out, but only the one row of houses where people lived was still there, people who were too poor or in some way too stubborn to change – or, at the other extreme, too temporary to their living arrangements to object to the invasion of the water (*Open Secrets* 234).

However, towards the end of this story, the narrator notes that “everything” was “gone of that first mistaken settlement” and “[n]othing can be built there anymore” (259). Following the argument of Martin and Ober, this description is general rather than specific, which is shown by the use of general expressions such as “floods”, “hostelries”, “house-plots”, etc. Therefore, the story could basically be set *anywhere* and could refer to the settlement of any other small town in Ontario.

I would also like to draw attention to the story “Connection” of *The Moons of Jupiter*. In this story, one paragraph is dedicated to Canadian settlement history, as well. The narrator not only considers her cousins from Philadelphia and Des Moines as connections to the real world, but also as connections “to England and history” (7). She then analyses the different ways Canadians of Scottish and Irish decent talk about their past as compared to Canadians of English decent. The reason for that difference is explained in the following way: “conditions in Scotland and Ireland were such as to force wholesale emigration, while Englishmen may have chosen to leave home for more colorful, personal reasons” (7).

Similarly, a short passage of “Age of Faith” is dedicated to settlement history: “The people who settled Wawanash County and built up Jubilee were Scotch Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Methodists from the north of England” (*Lives of Girls and Women* 105). As noted by Weaver, Munro “exhume[s] and record[s] the truth while appreciating both the material circumstances and the accidental influences on common lives in small communities” (Weaver, qtd. in Martin and Ober 130).

## 6.4 Romantic

Charles May does not belong to any of these groups of theorists which I have discussed in this chapter so far. He takes the view that generally, most short stories feature authentic characters and topics, but stresses that Alice Munro’s fiction could also be interpreted as being Romantic due to the fact that her stories “attempt to be authentic to the immaterial reality of the inner world of the self in its relation to *eternal* rather than temporal reality” (177) [emphasis added].

In addition to that, Lynch notes that some recurring topics in Munro, like excursus and recursus, are typically romantic (see Lynch 79). He compares her stories to return stories, which have their origins in the Romantic Return Poem. These kinds of poems are concerned with questions of identity “in relation to a particular place, a community, and/or a country” (Lynch 91). Many stories deal with the quest of identity of the – mostly female – protagonists. As already discussed in more detail, many characters escape their small town lives for a new life in a big city, like Toronto. Yet many of them return to their home, still looking for love and happiness.

Nature is another factor that plays an important role in romantic literature. It is true that in Munro, too, readers come across manifold and vivid images of nature. As we have seen, images of nature sometimes serve to mirror plot or characters. We have also observed that in some cases, Munro’s descriptions of nature have rather little to do with physical nature itself, but really only fulfil a symbolic task. In the chapter on semantisation of space in Munro’s stories, I dedicated a section to descriptions of weather and nature. For instance, I argued that descriptions of beautiful weather and flowers in spring typically symbolise love and eroticism, while the depiction of rough and hard winter scenes often mirror cold and unpleasant characters. Similar symbolism can be found in romantic literature, especially in romantic poems, in which weather is frequently used as a means of depicting feelings and mood.

Day notes that in romanticism, “[i]ndividual subjectivity and nature are [...] transcendentalized: they are attributed a spiritual dimension that is greater than the merely individual and the material” (45). In several stories by Alice Munro, too, images of nature carry ‘paranormal’ meaning. An example is the following scene from “Thanks for the Ride”, in which the narrator drives back into town at night: “I only drove faster, too fast, making the town come nearer. The street lights bloomed out of the dark trees ahead” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 57). This description evokes the impression that the street lights are living beings and that it is the town that is moving, rather than the car.

## Conclusion

According to Weaver, Munro embodies two different poles, “the historian as a collector”, as she “relies facts and artefacts without ordering their meaning,” and “the creative soul”, trying to “record the concrete but also the passions” (qtd. in Martin and Ober 128). The citation epitomises the complexities of Munro’s work as discussed in this thesis. As we have seen, the ways Munro is working with space are manifold and complex, making it impossible to summarise her relationship with space in just one sentence.

Her fiction demonstrates that space matters in literature and that it should not be neglected when analysing literary works. In her stories, she makes her readers travel through Ontario, from the smallest countryside towns, to the metropolis Toronto, over to the West Coast and, in some exceptional stories, even as far as Australia or Albania. She guides us through the settings as if we were tourists, and makes us familiar with the most important hotspots of these places, if there is anything which can be called a hotspot. Munro transports her readers to her simultaneously very real and yet fictional world.

Through the use of topographical excurses, Munro dedicates a lot of physical space to the elaboration of where her stories are set. Thus, Munro does not put space into the background but rather into the foreground, making it a part of her plot. Compared to other short story authors, she devotes quite a lot of room to descriptions of space. She sometimes provides her readers with panoramic descriptions of the space in order to obtain an impression of the whole, while in other cases, minutely describing elements within her fictional space in other cases, including trees, flowers, or any other objects which she wishes to put into the foreground. Munro’s space descriptions never happen accidentally, but always have deeper meaning, as we have seen in the various examples I provided in the last chapters. They might serve to emphasise atmosphere in a particular scene, but can also be symbolic for a particular character trait. Again in other stories, descriptions of space are used to foreshadow what is going to happen next.

In most cases, Munro’s space descriptions evoke feelings of separateness and loneliness, but at the same time represent sleepy and somewhat idyllic places situated



in the middle of nowhere. However, she makes clear that Ontarian small town life is not actually as idyllic as it might seem at first sight. Being Ontarian herself, many stories of Munro have an autobiographic touch, which makes them even more true-to-life. Long distances, harsh winters, and the longing for distant places characterise her female protagonists' lives. Yet, most of her protagonists seem to be firmly rooted in their home towns, as most of them who were trying their luck in different places, finally return back home, just like Alice Munro herself.

Theorists disagree as to which genre Munro's stories belong to; as thoroughly discussed in chapter six, one can find arguments which speak in favour of realism, of gothic, of romantic and of documentary genres. This clearly shows that there is no category in which her stories perfectly fit. However, I personally would claim that fictional realism probably is the most accurate description, even verging on naturalism. Although her towns are fictional, Munro gives her readers the impression that they really exist, as she presents them in a way which lets them appear real and authentic. Simultaneously, she lends her space descriptions something magical which makes them outstanding.

In conclusion, Munro's fiction is unique in how space is dealt with. This does not only concern the high level of importance which she dedicates to space in her stories, but also to her astoundingly interesting way of working with space. At first sight, it might appear as though she simply places much weight on space in her stories, but upon closer look, one realises that space fulfils far more functions than simply a decorative purpose.

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# Abstract

Ziel dieser Diplomarbeit ist es, Alice Munros Umgang mit Raum in ihren Kurzgeschichten zu analysieren und kritisch zu hinterfragen. Obwohl sich der Großteil von Munros Fiktion in derselben Region, nämlich Ontario, Kanada, abspielt, lässt sich eine enorme Vielfalt im Hinblick auf ihre Methodik wie sie diese Schauplätze präsentiert feststellen. Tatsache ist, dass im Allgemeinen in ihren Kurzgeschichten, verglichen mit jenen von anderen AutorInnen, besonders viel Gewicht auf Raum liegt. Warum und inwiefern dies der Fall ist, soll im Laufe der Diplomarbeit beantwortet werden.

Bevor in den praktischen Teil meiner Arbeit übergegangen wird, sind einige Begriffserklärungen nötig, wie beispielsweise die des Raumes und des Schauplatzes in der Literatur im Allgemeinen. Anschließend liegt das Hauptaugenmerk auf der Semantisierung des Raumes in ihren Werken generell, welche als Basis für die darauffolgende Analyse dient. Durch genaue Betrachtung von Munros zahlreichen stilistischen Methoden soll herausgefunden werden, welche unterschiedlichen Effekte sie dadurch erreicht und inwiefern der Raum die Atmosphäre sowie die Gefühlslage ihrer Protagonisten unterstreicht. In diesem Zusammenhang werden die narratologischen Raumdarstellungen aus verschiedenen Blickwinkeln betrachtet.

Um diesen Aspekten auf den Grund zu gehen, werden Kurzgeschichten aus den zahlreichen Kollektionen von Alice Munro im Hinblick auf die Bedeutung von Raum behandelt. Anschließend sollen die Funktionen sowie die Effekte der Raumbeschreibungen in ihrem jeweiligen Kontext durchleuchtet werden. Anhand einer Vielzahl solcher Beispiele soll schließlich eine allgemeine Tendenz skizziert werden, die die Stilistik von Alice Munro betreffend ihre Schauplätze wiedergibt. Ziel ist es zu zeigen, dass ein ähnlicher Schauplatz längst nicht mit monotoner Stilistik gleichzusetzen ist.



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