

# Things within Things

## Possible Readings of Alice Munro's "The Love of a Good Woman"

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*Abstract:* Alice Munro's "The Love of a Good Woman" is perhaps one of the most important stories in her *œuvre* in terms of how it accentuates the motivation for the Nobel Prize of Literature: "master of the contemporary short story." The story was first published in *The New Yorker* in December 1996, and over 70 pages long it pushes every rule of what it means to be categorised as short fiction. Early critic of the genre, Edgar Allan Poe distinguished short fiction as an extremely focused attention to plot, properly defined as that to which "no part can be displaced without ruin to the whole". Part of Munro's art is that of stitching seemingly disparate narrative threads together and still leaving the reader with a sense of completeness.

The story's publication in *The New Yorker* included a subtitle that is not part of its appearing in the two-year-later collection. The subtitle, "a murder, a mystery, a romance," is interesting in how it is suggestive for possible interpretations and the story's play with genres. In a discussion of critical readings of Munro's story, I propose that the story's resonance of significance lies in its daring composition of narrative threads where depths of meaning keep occurring depending on what aspects one is focusing on for the moment. Further, I suggest that a sense of completion is created in tone and paralleling of imagery. Meaning emerges in what I have called a story's "possibility-space." This term has affinities with what others have named "sideshadowing," where rather than resisting closure, the story turns back into itself, and compels the reader to further reflect on the difficult issues of human behaviour raised in the story.

*Keywords:* Alice Munro, Possibility-space, Sideshadowing, Text analysis, "The Love of a Good Woman"

### **The Story and its Interpretations**

"The Love of a Good Woman" occupies a central space in Alice Munro's writing, both in terms of publication chronology — it is the title story of one of her middle collections — and in terms of its importance to her particular writing of short stories. It is one of her most complex stories, it has a layered narrative structure, and it is in this story that she excels in the skill of "keeping it all together" that has be-

come one of the characteristics of her art. Critics have grappled with this story since its publication, and it is especially the ending that continues to puzzle and amaze readers. From more than a dozen critical readings of this story I will in this paper highlight four interpretations that will serve as examples for how one might grasp different levels of its narrative. The reason for making a selection of four interpretations is of course spatial, but more importantly it is because some of the interpretations can be clustered in groups as they reveal similar ideas and conclusions. The ones that I will discuss in this paper are either the most recent or the most influential in terms of how creative their conclusions have shown to be. To start out I would like to mention Teresa M. Dobson who teaches at University of British Columbia. She has used "The Love of a Good Woman" in her classes to develop students' writing and facilitate their engagement with complex narratives. She concludes that working with this story in a computer-based "wiki" environment is rewarding for students' understanding of short fiction. I will not delve further into her study here because she does not offer an interpretation of Munro's story that is of importance to how we might conclude a reading, but her study is interesting from a teaching perspective. She argues that engaging creatively with a work of fiction in writing assignments pushes the students further in their interpretative understandings, and it sharpens their critical skills. "The Love of a Good Woman" offers a rich detailed narrative open to possible readings that serves well to these kinds of assignments.

Before entering into the in-depth discussion of different interpretations of "The Love of a Good Woman," I will briefly recapitulate the plot since it is crucial to know the story in order to grasp how meaning is woven into the intricately structured narrative. "The Love of a Good Woman," is a complex treatment of secrets in a small Canadian town. In this respect it is typically Munro. This has been her topic in collection after collection. What is not so typical about this story, though, is that it is divided into four sections, starting out with a brief introduction with an odd description of the town museum and some articles in the museum described in mysterious detail. A red box is particularly interesting. It contains instruments that belonged to the optometrist (eye doctor), Mr. Willens who drowned in the river in 1951, and the box is donated to the museum by an anonymous person (we can hear how the plot thickens already from the first paragraph). The story then continues with a remarkable find in section I. Three teenage boys who go for their first spring swim in the river find the body of Mr. Willens in his submerged car. They do not report their discovery to anyone immediately but instead wait until later to tell the local constable, who is too deaf to hear them, and the revelation is postponed in odd ways. Much later, one of the boys undramatically tells his mother, and the police can pick up the body.

As we go into the second section of the story, it shifts to a period some time after the death of Mr. Willens. A young woman and mother, Mrs. Quinn, is dying of kidney failure. She is cared for by a home nurse named Enid. Mrs. Quinn is portrayed as cranky and demanding, and Enid is described as a middle-aged spinster tormented by erotic dreams and occupied with doing good.

The third section links the first two sections together by recounting the story of Mr. Willens's death, as Mrs. Quinn reveals it to Enid. Mrs. Quinn is having an eye examination in her house by Mr. Willens. He has a reputation for taking advantage of women. When Mrs. Quinn's husband, Rupert, comes home and sees his wife with her skirt up her thighs and Mr. Willens's hands on her leg, he knocks him down and beats his head on the floor until he dies. Mrs. Quinn comes up with the idea to push Mr. Willens and his car in the river, and she helps her husband carry out the plan.

In the fourth section Mrs. Quinn dies, and Enid, who has feelings for Rupert, believes he should go to the police and confess to killing Mr. Willens. Convinced that he cannot live in the world with such a secret, she tells herself that she will go to the trial every day and then wait for him while he is in prison. But she is not sure whether the story that Mrs. Quinn told her is true, and therefore she devises a scheme to test Rupert. She plans to have him row her out in the middle of the river, reveal that she cannot swim, and then tell him what she knows. This will give him the opportunity to kill her or regret his deed if the story is true. "The Love of a Good Woman" ends with Rupert getting the oars while Enid waits for him on the riverbank. The reader never knows whether Rupert killed Mr. Willens or whether he will kill Enid or whether they will become lovers.

Early interpretations of this story seemed to focus on one genre specific reading. A few focus on the romance and highlight genre expectations to bring together seemingly disparate elements into a coherent pattern. These critics read the story as being about a woman, Enid who has missed out on love until she reestablishes a connection with a man from her past, Rupert. No matter if he turns out to be a murderer and will eventually kill her too. The possibility of violence and murder is what other critics have paid close attention to arguing that "The Love of a Good Woman" is a Gothic horror story, a woman with a fatal attraction for self-sacrifice falls in love with a murderer and might become his next victim. And, of course we do pay attention to all the genre cues in the story, but at the same time we need to acknowledge that Munro's use of them is off centre, and that at the end there is never a resolution of either of these genre plots. There simply are too many question marks at the end of the story to leave a satisfactory conclusion of that kind, and any sort of tracing of evidence in details of the story to find answers to the mysterious death of Mr. Willens will eventually lead to an impasse. Catherine Sheldrick Ross demonstrates this in a close reading of the different sections of the story. She concludes that any "interpretation of the story's events is radically unstable, as readers are invited to consider incompatible possibilities for the provenance of the red box" (791). The story will turn out to be much more than a detective puzzle or a love drama. It raises far reaching questions about, human communication (guilt and penitence), what can be told, what must be told, and what is better to be kept hidden? What secrets are hidden, comes to the surface, are hidden again and resurfaces? What Munro gives account to, is also that events are not that easily described, when you try to tell them, but that they turn out to be a complex layer of facts, visible details, and human beings' hidden and open feelings and moti-

ves. Instead of emphasising either the romance or the murder-story, we need to keep closer attention to “the mystery” as this genre encircles the other two.

Catherine Sheldrick Ross, a Munro Scholar since the 80s (she has written one book and several articles on Munro’s fiction), constructs a thematic reading of “The Love of a Good Woman” based on echoes from other stories. She argues that previous “experience with earlier Munro stories, where the patterns are clearer” and perhaps plainer, “provides a sort of scaffolding helpful in making sense of” later and more complex works (786). And, I believe that with a writer such as Munro who perpetually returns to the same themes, places, characters and even plots it is inevitable to make such connections. These connections is usually rewarding in terms of how they give an array of interpretative layers to events and stories. They give meaningful variations to the one story just read. Now that Munro has published her last story, at least this is what she has claimed in several interviews, and I think we will have to take her on her words considering her age and her health, it has shown that “The Love of a Good Woman” occupies a central place in her *œuvre*. By her biographer Robert Thacker, as well as by the Canadian literary scholar Dennis Duffy, “The Love of a Good Woman” is argued to be “a central Munro text” and a “capstone” and “pivotal work in the structure of her fiction.” As such it is a garden of forking paths into many other of Munro’s collections of stories. Ross envisions how this story can turn “into an encyclopaedic reservoir of stories, the particular one realized by any single reading depending on which echo of previous Munro (sic.) stories the reader hears, which detail the reader chooses to foreground, and which patterns the reader is prepared to see” (806). For example, Ross sees a connection to earlier stories in how a trait of wanting to include too many things and too many narrative threads is thematised in these earlier stories. Characters who are wannabe writers refuse to simplify or streamline their narratives. They include “too many things, too many things going on at the same time; also too many people” as do the protagonist in “Differently” (216). She receives the advice to concentrate on “the important thing” (216). However, this protagonist makes “a long list of all the things that had been left out and handed it in as an appendix to the story” (216). This gives us an idea of how important things and details are to Munro, also things that might seem off to the side. This is part of Munro’s creative eye, to see the connections between seemingly disparate things. The feeling then when reading “The Love of a Good Woman” is that every detail leads to a possible meaning. The red box for example that resurfaces in several sections, and that could have been donated by one of the boys, by Rupert or by Enid, but every wish to find out the concluding story about the red box leads to an impasse, and gives us a fuller understanding of the full importance of the thing in itself. It turns out that its meaning points in every direction, but it finally signifies nothing beyond itself and its alluring possibility to mean something.

Ross creates a fascinating pattern of connections with different Munro stories, and notes how differences in representations of the practical nurse over a series of stories reveal how the view of them are in part a function of who is doing the looking. Since most of the story proper of “The Love of a Good Woman” is seen

through the eyes of Enid herself, the events are constructed in a light sympathetic to her. What we get in Ross's reading of the story is an introduction to a Munro world, how it is populated, how it is arranged and how it functions. What Ross does not give, however, is an interpretative clue to the conclusion of the total of the story.

We turn to, John Gerlach, the American short fiction scholar, who focuses on closure and ending as a particularly important feature for understanding short fiction. He starts off with the notion that "'The Love of a Good Woman' poses unusual problems for the reader at its conclusion—which is virtually no conclusion at all" (146). The problem with the story is that it offers no closure, no conclusion and practically no ending at all and this clashes with the reader's desire for closure in any narrative. We will never know if Enid gets the prince, who is the murderer, or if there is a murder case at all. The story ends in a frustrating mystery, and Gerlach continues to grapple with this: "Stories often do end ambiguously, and we already have the serviceable term 'open ending' for such cases, but generally the choices for an open ending are primarily binary, rather than continuously indeterminate," as is the case with this and several of Munro's stories (148).

Gerlach concludes that Enid, as well as the readers, have "reached the limit of what we can know," but that readers accept this since the eager to know is replaced by something else, namely the thrill of this unknown potent future. Gerlach borrows an analytical tool from Gary Saul Morson who in *Narrative and Freedom: the Shadows of Time* invents the term "sideshadowing" to capture narrative strategies that keep time and choice open. Sideshadowing is described as relying "on a concept of time as a field of possibilities" (151). Munro's ending then, Gerlach continues to claim, is particularly interesting in how it refuses to give us a simplified satisfactory answer. Instead it gives us "a sense of presentness, of continuing uncertainty," and reveals the complexity of the issues at stake that really matter, good and evil, confession and repression, and how these might be irresolvable (151). "Narrative, especially developed narrative," Gerlach argues, "stories that approach novella length, or shorter stories with a dense texture, do have that tension for us: they give the illusion of the inevitable, the wrapped, the apocalyptica, one of our deepest needs, but we also don't really want it to be so, we want just as deeply to experience the world alive at the brink of a new moment" (156). And this is what "The Love of a Good Woman" masterfully makes us experience. However, as I will show later there is a sense of the inevitable, of the dissolution of choice that is central to Munro's writing, and as I will show later this can be recognised in the stories "possibility-space."

The British scholar, Isla Duncan, makes a narratological reading of the story focusing on literary linguistics by examining "disarrangements," and describing their purposes and effects. She displays Munro's narrative strategies, the headings for each section and how these ambiguously refer to events that take place. Duncan explains how Munro's manipulation of time, indicated by different verb-tenses and narrative perspectives builds expectation and dispense. She goes on to ask herself the question why Enid dislikes her patient so much. To my mind this is not the

most interesting question. I see much more at stake in the questions that appear around the mysteries of human behaviour, the human mind and how we make the choices we make. Munro seems to be ultimately fascinated by how people act and react, the consequences of their acts, not just in terms of what happens but how her characters react to what happens, and also to what happens in dreams and fantasies. Sometimes answers or echoes of an answer to what we meet in one story are to be found partly in another story. In the story “Circle of Prayer” from Munro’s sixth collection, *The Progress of Love*, two girlfriends discuss their taste for soap operas.

Trudy can’t stand to watch those old reruns of *Dallas*, to see the characters, with their younger, plumper faces, going through tribulations and bound up in romantic complications they and the audience have now forgotten all about. That’s what’s so hilarious, Janet says; it’s so unbelievable it’s wonderful. All that happens and they just forget about it and go on. But to Trudy it doesn’t seem so unbelievable that the characters would go from one thing to the next thing—forgetful, hopeful, photogenic, forever changing their clothes. That it’s not so unbelievable is the thing she really can’t stand. (259)

I believe that this passage gives a clue to what Munro is after in her stories, namely the amazing stuff of human behaviour, not on a surface level, but on an existential level. In his long-term study of the short story as genre, Charles E. May maintains that the short story is different in epistemology and ontology from its sibling, the novel. He claims that it is immanent to the short story that there exists some other reality that evades us. “The short story is the most adequate form to confront us with reality as we perceive it in our most profound moments” (*The Nature of Knowledge* 142). His arguments give a clue to what levels of meaning that are at stake in “The Love of a Good Woman.”

In terms of objects and their importance to the narrative, Duncan suggests that one need to refrain from reading them literally. “Ordinary harmless objects are transformed in the search for deeper meaning” (100), but they keep transforming in this search and create a pattern that emphasizes secrecy. This pattern of objects, Duncan connects to her reading of the ending of the story where the linguistic sign “if” plays an important part. This is the part where Enid visits Rupert with the intention of letting him know that she knows about Mr. Willens, but she has second thoughts and Rupert offers her a boat ride.

And the boat waiting, riding in the shadows, just the same. “The oars are hid,” said Rupert. He went into the willows to locate them. In a moment she lost sight of him. She went closer to the water’s edge, where her boots sank into the mud a little and held her. **If** she tried to, she could still hear Rupert’s movements in the bushes. But **if** she concentrated on the motion of the boat, a slight and secretive motion, she could feel as **if** everything for a long way around had gone quiet. (78, emphasis added)

In Duncan's convincing reading, the conditional is a reminder to the readers that Enid's benefits with marrying Rupert come with a price: the retention of a secret. Duncan demonstrates fascinating traits of Munro's narrative, however her conclusion that the character Enid is far from hapless or vulnerable, but rather, single minded and determined, someone who grasps the opportunity presented to her; callous and cool blooded, without conscience is a simplified reading. Dennis Duffy sees Enid as "the clueless Gothic heroine" about to embrace a demon lover, but there are images that complicate the matter. What Munro comes close to doing is presenting her as being both or neither, of being more than what the narrative can possibly disclose. Consider how Munro describes another character in one of her earliest stories, "Walker Brothers Cowboy." The protagonist is a young girl who is on an outing with her brother and father. In a moment of silent understanding between daughter and father, the protagonist has a vision of the depths of a person.

So my father drives and my brother watches the road for rabbits and I feel my father's life flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine. (18)

The father's life is revealed in its full potential of being known and being other, slipping out of our wish to determine a character.

I see Munro's stories as opening up and closing in into something I have called "possibility-space." A possibility-space is characteristically seen or revealed in decisive moments and "is somehow connected to the necessary or inevitable" (Skagert, 18). At the moment when Enid is determined to make Rupert confess and mark him a murderer, disparate thoughts enter Enid's mind, and what she has felt must be known is no longer of importance. "She hadn't asked him yet, she hadn't spoken" (75). Enid's dissolution of decision is juxtaposed with an imagery of insects with a narrative intensity and a bearing on the conception of choice, but that "lacks explanatory moorings" (Skagert, 121). "Bugs no bigger than specks of dust that were constantly in motion yet kept themselves together in the shape of a pillar or a cloud. How did they manage to do that? And how did they choose one spot over another to do it in?" (78). The bugs are in perpetual motion just like characters' lives through the narrative will open and close, reveal and obscure.

Catherine Sheldrick Ross suggests that the polarities of the good woman/bad woman are not fixed and Enid's life and the events in the story are far more unsettled than for us to be able to fixate them into categories of good and bad, and as Ross has suggested echoes from previous stories help us see this. However, whereas Ross wants to place Enid among the variants of invading practical nurses, Mary McQuade in "Images" and Audrey Atkinson in "Friend of My Youth," I see

stronger parallels to protagonists of more evasive character. She is “stubborn” and “secretive,” and she can try a “joke where it had hardly a hope of working” (42, 33). She is a character who is allowed to keep her integrity, but as all the characters in this story she is immersed in the games of the mind, dreams, actions and thoughts that she has no control off. As I have argued in my dissertation on Munro’s short stories, “The Love of a Good Woman” is deeply concerned with the justification of choices and matters of good and evil. The question of guilt and penance looms large. There is a theological framework that is put in place by a seemingly causal reference to the Reformation, to the Edict of Nantes, to the phenomenon of prayers, to blessings, to penitence, to Catholicism, to depravity, and to the devil. In Enid’s rational and self-reassuring dismissal of these notions, their possibilities and implications accentuate their poignancy. On the one hand the Edict of Nantes materialises as a mere unit of useless information in a book. On the other hand, the Edict signals controversy over theological issues that have a bearing on the relation between conscience, depravity, guilt, and confession—things that concern Enid. These are the question that she poses: Is the attention to God, to depravity, to an attitude of evil and to filth to be answered by a human effort to be good? And, if a person does something very bad, do they have to be punished? Or ought there be surrender to the awareness that life “can get turned on its head in an instant” in a world where evil simply “grabs us,” where “pain and disintegration lie in wait” as “horrors” pushing every “lovely life” to “disaster,” and where “pretending it wasn’t so” only aggravates the “end” (52). Enid’s uncertainty and the stories’ ambivalence is accentuated by the two words “Surely not” (51).

Charles E. May rightly claims that “The Love of a Good Woman” is ambiguously open-ended and that the reader does not know “whether Enid confronts Rupert and, if she does, whether he pushes her in the river or rows them back to the shore” (Why Short Stories Are Essential 17). Of course we cannot disagree. However, I want to argue that the story does not primarily rely on the workings of ambiguity but on the phenomenon of possibility. The resolution of the story is the regeneration of Enid’s wish to do right, and her decision to confront Rupert. When she returns to the house all dressed up to meet with her destiny, her indecisiveness is key.

She hadn’t asked him yet, she hadn’t spoken. Nothing yet committed her to asking. It was still before. Mr. Willens had still driven himself into Jutland Pond, on purpose or by accident. Everybody still believed it, too. And as long as that was so, this room and this house and her life held a different **possibility**, an entirely different **possibility** from the one she had been living with (or glorying in—however you wanted to put it) for the last few days. The different **possibility** was coming closer to her, and all she needed to do was to keep quiet and let it come. (75-76)

It is not only for Enid that the events hold possibilities. The possibility-space works on a story-level as well and includes all the events in the story as they reveal their



complex layers, details, twists and turns, along the narrative flow, and as readers we revisit them continuously concerned with their meanings and interpretations. To illustrate this predicament, I borrow a description from a Swedish sculptor who explains his work *Room Without Appendix*.

What I want to stress by this title is that the sculpture is closed in itself. It certainly points in many directions, but it always suddenly returns and embraces its own earlier movements. Such compositions are often called 'space-time' as they are linked to the idea that by following an eternal coil with the eyes, one experiences a happening in time at the same time as the coil builds up a restricted space. The volume which we always demand in a sculptor is in this case more the air embraced by the coil than the material from which the coil is made. (Hesselgren, 324)

Applying this 'space-time' idea to literature we can see how a story is both unified and completed by its own structure, but by its layering it offers or points to interpretations in many directions. The different readings I have discussed here illustrate one thing that is also clear in Munro's narratives, that while one aspect or area of the story or of a phenomenon is illuminated, other aspects will remain obscure. Things seem to be perpetually undulating between clarity and obscurity. These are the open secrets that Munro is after, and that she captures in story after story. The stories resonate significance but refuse to be pinpointed in one determinate interpretation. The potent image from the prologue of "The Love of a Good Woman" comes to mind—of the hole one looks through in the instrument found in the river—it has "various lenses" that can be moved, and underneath "the round forehead clamp is something like an elf's head, with a round flat face and a pointed metal cap. This is tilted at a forty-five-degree angle to a slim column, and out of the top of the column a tiny light is supposed to shine. The flat face is made of glass and is a dark sort of mirror" (4). It is not farfetched to view this object as a metaphor for how the narrative work, as double-edged instrument that sometimes blurs and distorts, but that also clarifies. Munro's stories clarify through patterns and connections.

Charles E. May, one of the most ardent spokesmen for the short story as a particular genre, argues persuasively in an article on Munro's story "Passion," that the novel and the short story present different interpretations of what reality is. Further, he concludes that the

problem with criticism of the short story has always been the assumption that since the short story tells a story it must therefore be read by following the rules of reading long narratives, i.e. focus on plot, character, and ideology. However, the short story as practiced by Munro and all other great short story writers, does not depend on plot or character, but rather on some unspeakable significance by means of reiteration through pattern. If the short story does not hold together by plot or action, but rather reitera-

tion through pattern, then the short story is not a narrative form at all, but rather a poetic form. (The Short Story's Way of Meaning 181)

When reading short stories then, one needs to pay closer attention to repetitive rhythms in language and imagery. It is in Munro's daring composition that something is achieved and understood. Loose ends are precisely what make the conclusion seem so large, enigmatic and brimming with possibility. In a CBC interview by Peter Gzowski on the publication of her collection *Open Secrets*, Munro reveals that what she is more and more set to do in her stories is

to move away from what happened, to the possibility of this happening, or that happening, and a kind of idea that life is not just made up of the facts, the things that happened... But all the things that happen in fantasy, the things that might have happened, the kind of alternate life that can almost seem to be accompanying what we call our real lives.

She wants to get all those levels of life working together, and this is part of the complex reality that she captures, the strange and marvellous, flexible richness of the human mind.

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