



RESEARCH ARTICLE



MIRRORING SPACES OF WILDERNESS AND OBSESSION IN ALICE MUNRO'S "VANDALS"

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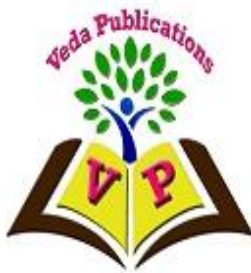
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ABSTRACT



Short stories by Alice Munro merge autobiographical themes with remarkable language and stirring imagery. This paper analyzes the impact of 'wilderness' and mirrors the complexities of the obsession with the human psyche in the lives of the characters of Alice Munro's short story "Vandals". She portrays the evil and the threat that prevails in the wild and its hazardous impact on the psychology of its characters where they face cognitive clinical manias. The objective of the present paper is to read "Vandals" with reference to Bertrand Westphal's theory of 'geocriticism' as proposed in his book *Real and Fictional Spaces* (2007) to identify the psychic disorders that Ladner, Bea, and Liza possess in the story. The wilderness that is constantly set against civilization or the urban space, distorts perception and self-perception, which metaphorically is an intrusion into the mental space of an individual. The characters are driven by intrusive thoughts and dysfunctional beliefs which lead to the suppression of their thoughts and psychological obsession after encountering the wilderness of Canada. This essay analyses Alice Munro's depiction of this Gothic setting through the Canadian environment and the character's preoccupation with the wild. The significance of the wilderness as a place, both in its 'physical' and 'abstract' representations in Munro's stories, has been attempted to be discussed.

Keywords: Alice Munro, wilderness, Gothic, insanity, obsession, space.



INTRODUCTION

Alice Munro's position within the literary landscape of Canada has been well established; she has won various national and international awards and honours and has received widespread recognition for her contribution to the short-story genre. Munro creatively portrays the small-town life of southern Ontario and her lived experiences in the region of Canada. The story analyzed in this paper is "Vandals" from the volume *Open Secrets* (1994), where Munro depicts the influence of the wilderness of Canada on its characters. She portrays the evil and the threat that prevails in the wild and its unsettling influence on the psyche of the individuals. In her stories, Munro illustrates how her characters come to understand themselves and the world around them via their experiences. The Swedish Academy members referred to her as "the master of the contemporary short story" and called her the first Canadian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013. The universally appealing themes in Munro's books won her praise and admiration. Her stories investigate difficult emotional, social, and psychological issues that highlight how complicated human life is. Her tales are multi-layered with nuanced meanings and offer numerous facets and viewpoints of both her characters and her own personal experiences.

Readers of different ages and locations are drawn into and charmed by her novels. Munro in an interview with Coral Ann Howells states: "The part of the country I come from is absolutely Gothic. You can't get it all down". She continues: "a key figure in contemporary English-Canadian Gothic writing" (105). According to Howells, Munro's stories depict

the experiences of her characters in the wilderness that are a threat to physical and mental integrity and might lead to insanity. The wilderness is constantly set against civilization or the urban space that distorts perception and self-perception, which metaphorically is an intrusion to the mental space of an individual. Robert McGill in the article "Where Do You Think You Are? Alice Munro's Open Houses" states, "Physical space does not dissolve but is all the more important as space because of its relationship with human mental life" (105). The setting of the Canadian wilderness in some of Munro's stories brings in Gothic elements and the space represented is darker and expansive producing anxiety. He also discusses the importance of the house as an open space. He states; "A reading of 'Vandals,' the final story in Munro's 1994 collection *Open Secrets*, demonstrates that Munro's fiction makes use of its own spatiality to comment upon the places it evokes within its narrative, while those places in turn inform the space of the story." (103).

Munro in the story "Vandals" presents the influence of the physical environment of the wilderness of Canada on its characters which is ominous and frightening. It focuses on themes of Gothic fiction that vividly describe Canadian wilderness that include themes such as child abuse, guilt, and obsession. Munro represents open spaces as a place of molestation represented by Ladner in the story. The narrative technique employed by Munro to show the inner workings of her characters' minds has also been examined by critics. Paula Ruth Gilbert in her article "All Roads Pass through Jubilee: Gabrielle Roy's *La Route d'Altamont* and Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*" describes the narrative technique employed by Munro to frame the



plot of the story. She states, "The Munro text is much more detailed and dense in description, overflowing with words, lists, satire, parody, and often photographic realism" (138). She mentions varied themes and elements that contribute to making a successful short story.

Jennifer Andrews depicts the traits of the Canadian Gothic, which is distinguished by regional differences. Canadians are haunted by the wilderness, a haunting which is defined by the "tension between the desire for an orderly, contained culture and the freedom to engage with primitive nature" (3), in other words, a tension between civilization and savagery. The Gothic connotes the darkness and wilderness of Canada and the mind of its inhabitants. Furthermore, Southern Ontario provides a perfect setting for English-Canadian Gothic fiction, Andrews continues and portrays the effect on the psyche of the characters as; "decaying and destructive social order and the knowledge of various characters that their spirits are being imprisoned and perverted by the very context in which they live" (3).

Discussing the term "Gothic" Edmund Burke comments: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible or is conversant about terrible objects, or operated in a manner analogous to terror is a source of the sublime, that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (39). The impact of wilderness is intense, on the one hand, exposure to Canadian forests can be hazardous with negative effects on humans, on the other, being in the open space can be beneficial – it helps one to escape from the challenges of everyday life, provides relaxation, aids recreational activities,

therefore, has a positive impact on one's mind. But Munro in many of her stories depicts open spaces as being savage and barbaric, in which an individual loses sanity and moves into a state of delirium.

In "Alice Munro's Canadian Gothic: An Ill-fitting Spatial Gothic Paradigm?" Andrea F. Szabo states: "In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, Canadian artists and critics emphasize the uncanniness of Canadianness: the paradoxes of national identity, the dullness and the grotesqueness of life there with sudden eruptions of violence". He describes the Canadian Gothic and the elements that are associated with the wild. The story "Vandals" reflects many of these elements. Munro portrays the outside space as bewitching which tempts people to do wrong. She depicts the open spaces to have their limitations and where an individual is helpless in front of the powerful forces of nature.

VANDALS

Munro in the story "Vandals" presents the influence of the physical environment of the wilderness of Canada on its characters which is ominous and frightening. It focuses on themes of Gothic fiction that vividly describe Canadian wilderness including child abuse, guilt, and obsession. Bachelard intensifies the difference between open and closed spaces, "This time, in the darkness of the casket, it is the enclosed reflections that reproduce objects. The inversion of interior and exterior is experienced so intensely by the poet that it brings about an inversion of objects and reflections" (87). Munro shows the evil that lurks in the forests of Canada, which hampers the psychological and emotional stability of her characters. She depicts the threat that the wild and barbarous woods contain



and their impact on the mental and physical health of an individual. She portrays woods as a place of abuse as depicted by Ladner who tries to intrude on both Liza and Bea and tries to physically abuse them.

Bea had numerous affairs and marriages before she meets Ladner who was her husband's friend. "When Bea spoke of having had a checkered career, she was taking a sarcastic or disparaging tone that did not reflect what she felt about her life of love affairs"(265). Bea has had an adventurous life of love affairs, but the relationships lasted for a little time. She left her husband Peter Parr, who was the Principal of the school and they had a good, satisfying life, for Ladner, who had an element of mystery and dark impulse attached to his persona. "He was a man who had been wounded and disillusioned in the worst way and had withdrawn from the world, yet gave all he could back to it in his attention to nature"(265). Ladner was a soldier in the Royal Air Force and after he was wounded, he bought large acres of land and cultivated it accordingly as close to nature and has turned the natural habitat by structuring it according to his principles. "He had created there a remarkable sort of nature preserve, with bridges and trails and streams dammed up to make ponds, and exhibits along the trail of lifelike birds and animals" (266). Jackson in her book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* states, "presents a natural world inverted into something strange, something 'other'. It becomes 'domesticated', humanized, turning from transcendental explorations to transcriptions of a human condition" (18). Ladner did not allow people to come and see his place because there were rules and regulations attached to it and he felt that people have the fascination to break the rules, therefore he

didn't even allow Bea and Peter to enter his premises. Suddenly after meeting Ladner, Bea had a sudden change of heart, she no longer was attracted to Peter's decency but wanted a savage life with Ladner, learning more and more about the natural life in the woods. She was now fascinated with the menacing, threatening, uncivilized, and thuggish atmosphere of the bush.

Once Bea went without telling Peter about her visit to Ladner's place, where she was awestruck by his hard work at the bush and his physical strength. Suddenly, he offered her a trip around the place to show her the trees, birds, flowers, and streams in detail as before she was not allowed inside the bush with her husband. "Women like herself, might be always on the lookout for an insanity that could contain them. For what was living with a man if it wasn't living inside his insanity?" (268). Munro illustrates the fondness of her woman characters for indulging in adulterous relationships, where they want to leave the already established and stable house with family for someone like Ladner who is a wanderer and adventurous man. Even though Bea knows that Ladner cannot provide her stability in their relationship, she still leaves her husband for her likeness of the woods which depicts her insanity and wrong choices. Bea gets attracted to his wild and barbaric self and realised that she can no longer live without him. "She didn't want any more of his geniality, his good intentions, his puzzling and striving. According to Jackson, the topography of the uncanny is characterized by "relatively bleak, empty, indeterminate landscapes, which are less definable as places than as spaces, as white, grey, or shady blanknesses" (42).



Ladner took her inside the bush and showed her the ordered nature he has made in his land. She was amazed to see the way Ladner has preserved the property. He has brought order to the Canadian wilderness. She was surprised to see the wild creatures that Ladner has stuffed and preserved for people to see, she did feel his madness and his obsession for his place, but she wanted to live in his world of insanity, even though it was frightening and hazardous. Munro depicts the irrational and dark impulses of Ladner by showing how he has cultivated his forest and everything in it was in harmony and tranquillity with each other with an underline sense of future danger and threat. Ladner had put up various signs, and quotes from famous literary persons like, Nature does nothing uselessly by Aristotle and Nature never deceives us; it is always we who deceive ourselves Rousseau; information regarding animals and precautions to be taken inside the bush. Ladner dictates and commands everybody who comes to see his place; he is the ruler of the restrained nature that he has cultivated. Bea eventually settled with Ladner amongst his wilderness leaving behind the world of reality and sanity. Ladner had different impulses, suddenly he would be charged with passion, and the other day he would become lonely and would not even want to recognize Bea.

Bea phoned Liza to go and check her house and whether it was in the proper condition or not. Bea had monetarily helped Liza during her younger days. Both Liza and her husband Warren went to Bea's house, "the swamp was black from a distance, a long smudge on the northern horizon" (277). Liza found the key which was kept in a hole in a tree. They went inside and she hurriedly started searching for

something, making a mess of the floor and throwing out all the stuff that came her way. She started tearing the pages of the books, checking the drawers, and breaking the wine and vinegar bottles, she broke most of the items in the house and then called Bea to tell her that somebody had invaded her house and vandalized it. Liza was wild as Ladner's obsession with woods; she had an uncontrollable fierce energy similar to the energy of the wilderness. "She said she had been wild before becoming a Christian" (281). Warren was surprised at her behavior and asked her the reason behind her being so mad at Bea. Warren was surprised to see stuffed dead animals all around the house. Liza remembered how as kids their father wanted both Liza and Kenny to visit Ladner's place and learn about nature from him. Ladner warned them not to be mischievous on his land otherwise he would skin them like he skinned his animals. Soon Liza learned various things about birds, trees, and nature under Ladner's guidance. Once when everybody planned to go inside the pond to swim, Liza went deep inside the pond and got caught in the weeds. Ladner helped her, and while rescuing her he abused her by touching her at odd places, "He made a pretend to grab at her, to get her between the legs. At the same time he made a pious, shocked face as if the person in his head was having a fit at what his hand might do" (289). Munro with this incident of Ladner abusing Liza portrays woods being an open space that contains threat and danger to one's identity. Ladner in the wild gets an opportunity to physically mistreat Liza as it was not possible in the closed space of the house.

Anshoo Sharma in referring to the open space comments, "Openness, peace, and freedom – traditionally associated with the country and present



in its physical landscape, is not evident in the close-knit social interaction which almost at times borders on the oppressive" (63). The incident left Liza shocked and guilty and she wondered what had happened between them, she wanted to tell Bea but she was warned not to tell. Ladner, on the contrary, was not guilty of what had happened; in fact, he could "He could switch from one person to another and make it your fault if you remember" (289). Ladner pushed himself onto Liza to assault her physically, but he collapsed and wanted Bea's help to rescue him. Bea had forgiven Ladner of the sins he had committed as she was attracted to him because of his flamboyant nature and his inappropriate treatment towards women. "She had forgiven Ladner, after all, or made a bargain not to remember" (293).

Liza remembers the sinister surroundings of Ladner's house "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" (291). Liza believed that if Bea could have been a strong woman she would have brought sanity to the wilderness of Ladner and his place. Bea on the contrary did not believe in herself and gave into her desires of getting attracted to Ladner's obsession with woods as something attractive, unusual, and mysterious, but was threatening and menacing for others around him. Munro depicts the wild Canadian surroundings in her stories; therefore a reader empathizes with the reflection of the place which encompasses the insanity that prevails in the forests. Therefore, Munro describes how an author develops a place through her writings which appear

to be real; the readers can identify the landscape of Canada through the portrayal of Munro's characters and their reactions in a particular space. Readers can feel the immensity of the natural space which Munro portrays through her characters' insanity. Munro transports an individual to her space of southern Ontario and views the space as gothic with sinister qualities which hurts the minds of her characters. Thus Munro repeatedly emphasizes the negative effects of the Canadian wilderness, this space causes her characters to develop a space that reflects instability.

Munro emphasizes the negative effects of the place, as mentioned by Westphal in his analysis of Geocriticism, "This tension between the desire for a normatively sanctioned unity and the need for freedom emerging at the margins of the law inscribes the individual in a society were different, more or less compatible but asynchronous, rhythms coexist" (44). Westphal talks about how authors develop multiple narrators and how the space is represented through these multiple narrators and they show their point of view, "Every man, every woman is a place, a land that one fails to discover or that fails to be fully discovered; its borders are based on the chorography that it describes or that describes it (chorography is what describes a particularized geographic zone). This is why, when entering space in its infinite forms, one seeks to multiply the points of view, and finally has a glimpse into one's own unknown territory" (64). Munro has also developed multiple narrators, and develops the story through their perspectives, leaving the ending of the story ambiguous. Westphal elucidates the space where women are still considered to be on the margins, he states, "When space is perceived in its mobility, it enables one to



reflect on the crisis of the center-periphery model and stimulates the emergence of a minority perspective" (65).

Katrin Berndt in her article "The Ordinary Terrors of Survival: Alice Munro and the Canadian Gothic" discusses the use of Canadian wilderness as a setting by the authors. She states, "Canadian authors have addressed such anxieties as the fear of the unknown, and a terror that a natural surrounding perceived as hostile induced in European settlers" (2). Ladner took Bea inside the bush and showed her the ordered landscape he has designed on his land. She was amazed to see the way Ladner had preserved the property. She was surprised to see the wild creatures that Ladner has stuffed and preserved for people to see, she did feel his madness and his obsession for his place, but she wanted to live in his world of insanity, even though it was frightening and hazardous.

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CONCLUSION

In the story "Vandals" Munro presents the ominous and frightening experience of the protagonist Bea when confronted with the area of wilderness cultivated by Chapter Six Conclusion 196 Ladner. She comes in contact with the dark and irrational impulses that were a part of Ladner's life. Munro in the character of Ladner depicts his uncontrollable fierce energy that resembled the

energy of the space of the wilderness. The open space of his forest exposed his perverted nature and the freedom he attained by sexually assaulting the little girl Liza her student. The wilderness portrayed shows two aspects, on one hand, it provides freedom and independence from the four walls of the house, on the other, it reflects the evil that lurks in the open space that leads to insanity and savagery.

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