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# Moments of Epiphany in Alice Munro's Short Story Collection: Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage

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***Abstract :*** *Alice Munro's short story collection Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage deals with stories in which the main characters achieve epiphanies at critical junctures in their lives which in turn urges them to move further in life. These revelatory moments might not be exactly what they yearn for, but in spite of this, they still see them as means of perceiving, appreciating and bettering their own lives, however unconsciously it might turn out to be. These moments turn their lives around, thereby raising the ordinary to the extraordinary. A little peek into what the future might hold for them makes their pain worth enduring. Munro's epiphanies are typically flashes of insight, where the mysterious is observed but never explicitly stated. One gets the feeling that one might lose these moments of epiphany if one doesn't follow the narrative closely enough. The duality of both life and reality encompasses elements of both the ordinary and the epiphanic, and this echo throughout her work.*

**Keywords** Aging, alienation, Crisis, desire, Epiphany, enlightenment, infidelity, insight, revelation, narrative, mystery, narrative, revelation.

According to the *Evening Telegraph*, considered to be one of the most important and influential of all the Dublin newspapers during James Joyce's age, the term epiphany can be traced all the way back to the ancient Greek word *epiphaneia*, which can be roughly translated as an apparition, a revelation or an enlightening realization that is drawn from looking at an ordinary object, but from a different perspective, a life altering perspective one might say. This term has been widely used in scientific, religious, philosophical and psychological contexts. Archimedes' Eureka moment, during which he discovered a method to ascertain the volume of an entity with an irregular shape, Isaac Newton's epiphanic moment when he saw an apple falling from a tree, which in turn led him to determine the laws of gravity and Johannes Kepler's revelatory moment that lead to his improvement of the Copernican or Helio- centric model of the universe, are of which offer examples of exceptionally profound scientific epiphanies.

To Christian thinkers an epiphany denotes a manifestation of God's presence in the most common place things that surround one. James Joyce is credited with importing this word into English literature. He gave epiphany a secular significance in an early draft of his critically acclaimed work *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* originally entitled *Stephen Hero.* Abrams opines

that Joyce uses this word to give one "a sense of radiance and revelation"(111). It signifies a sudden and uncharacteristic moment of clarity in an otherwise chaotic and troubled setting. It is a moment when the outward appearance triggers a more profound understanding of what can be called the quintessential truth, which until that precise moment lay beyond one's grasp.

However, it is imperative to note that Joyce is not the first writer who has dealt with this concept. Shelley in his *The Selected poems & Prose of Shelley* (1821) elucidates the exact nature of poetry in the following lines:

> We are aware of evanescent visitations of thought and feeling sometimes associated with place or person, sometimes regarding our own mind alone, and always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden, but elevating and delightful beyond all expression: so that even in the desire and the regret they leave, there cannot but be pleasure, participating as it does in the nature of its object. (657)

Nobel laureate and popular Canadian short fiction writer, Alice Munro is considered to be a master in her use of epiphany as a literary device that requires more effort on the part of the reader as far as interpretation of the story goes and less on the writer. As Karen E. Smythe in her book entitled *Figuring Grief: Gallant Munro, and the Poetics of Elegy* says: (108)

> Munro's realism produces such oxymoronic moments- both bright or luminous, and odd or shadowy- in an affirmative magic reality[19] that enlightens the reader with characteristic "queer bright moments." [20]

Smythe in the above mentioned lines cites John Metcalf, who in an interview with Munro regarding her interests was told by her that she had an avid interest in magic realist painters and how she was influenced by how magical the everyday or common place things can be.

This at first glance seems to be contrary to a Joycean epiphany where one single moment is handled with care and painstakingly detailed as opposed to how a Munrovian epiphany is handled. In the latter type of epiphany the reader needs to concentrate and read the particular passage carefully and closely in order to interpret it, following which it gains paramount importance. As Thomas Edmund Connolly suggests in his book *Joyce's Portrait* (1962):

> Even in his early works there is a lyrical or rhetorical passage wherever there is a climactic epiphany of particular emotional significance, or where a generalized rather than an individual *quidditas* is revealed. (217)

Munro on the other hand deals with a chain of events in so natural and realistic a manner that defining one single moment in time becomes less definitive. Using Freytag's Pyramid for tracing the movement in the short story from exposition to climax to denouement, it is obvious that epiphanies mostly are introduced during the climactic stage.

Freytag's theory is mostly applied to theatre; however, it can also be used to analyse other literary forms like the short story. As Ruth Franklin, in her review of the short story collection under study in this paper called "Assent and Lamentation" that appeared in *The New Republic* that came out on February 25, 2002, says that:

The short story is the single mother of the literary family. No matter how hard it strives or how many esteemed advocates it summons, its detractors will never be convinced that it deserves the moral legitimacy of the novel. Even in the case of Alice Munro, who has produced ten consistently distinguished volumes of stories over the past thirty years, the acclaim acquires a strange aftertaste as it piles up.

Munro though seems immune to criticism regarding her choice of genre and very successfully chronicles life around her. Beauty and truth comes in many forms and sizes and Munro is quite content with her genre and the wide critical acclaim that she enjoys validates her opinion quite satisfyingly.

Alice Anne Munro nee Alice Anne Laidlaw born in Ontario, Canada, hailed as 'our Chekhov' by the American Jewish short story writer, essayist and novelist, Cynthia Ozick was a critically acclaimed and widely popular short story writer having won the highest of accolades throughout the world. Munro was the 2009 Man Booker International Prize winner for her work and was also the 2013 Nobel Prize winner in literature for her work as a "master of contemporary the short story". Most of the literary critics consider Munro to be one of the foremost agenda-less writers of the present age. Munro is the three time winner of the Governor General's Awards, which are a collection of awards presented by the Governor General of Canada. Her short story collection includes *Dance of the Happy Shades*(1968), *The Lives of Girls and Women*(1971), *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*(1974), *The Moons of Jupiter*(1982), *Friend of My Youth*(1986), *A Wilderness Station*(1994), *The Love of a Good Woman*(1998) and *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*(2001). The short story collection *Dear Life* (2012) is generally seen as a fictionalized autobiography which deals with an introspection of her own life as seen from the perspective of an aging Munro. The short story "Bear Came Over the Mountain" originally published in her collection *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, deals with the debilitating and corroding effects of Alzheimer's disease. It has been adapted into a critically acclaimed motion picture, *Away from Her* (2006), which premiered in the Toronto International Film Festival. The only novel written by her is *Lives of Girls and Women* published in the year 1971. This novel has a structure similar to her short stories and is very vividly realistic though perhaps does not have the control that her short stories have.

Her short stories have been translated into nearly fourteen languages and many of them have been included immensely popular anthologies. Most of her short stories are classic coming of age tales narrated in an extremely pragmatic manner. In 1978 the world renowned critic Hallward Dahlie said that Munro is "a writer who has quietly and firmly established herself over the past decade." Munro has also written books which are a part of a sub-category in fiction where the

writer fictionalizes his or her own creative apprenticeship. The present collection under study *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) deals with the trials and tribulations encountered by middle class women, both young and elderly, in a style that is distinctly Munrovian. The present collection comprises of nine short stories out of which five of them deal with epiphanies and revelations which give new meaning and significance to everyday, mundane events. She juxtaposes the fantastic with the realistic, thereby raising the ordinary to the extraordinary or the epiphanic.

The short story "Floating Bridge" starts in medias res and is set on the edge of a swamp in the Ontario landscape and tells the story of a woman, Jinny who is terminally ill with cancer and her relationship with her indifferent husband, Neal. After being told by the doctor that her cancer is probably in remission, Jinny tries to come to terms with the fact that she might live longer than she had previously thought. She has trouble comprehending this new knowledge and is reluctant to discuss this with Neal. While the doctor treating Jinny is optimistic without going over the top, Jinny herself refuses to acknowledge the fact that she might indeed be getting better.

> Quite a favorable sign. We do not know that there may not be more trouble in the future but we can say we are cautiously optimistic. (74)

Jinny has just been operated upon and finished her final bout of chemotherapy and at least for the time being she seems to be getting better. Jinny is left with a choice on how to deal with her own mortality. She can choose between finding a way out of her loveless marriage and living her life to the fullest or she can just give up and let herself die. Neal's ambivalent way of dealing with his sick wife does nothing to endear him to the reader. He takes her on a long, uncomfortable drive along with a young woman, Helen, in the course of which he blatantly flirts with her. He gets insulted too when Jinny refuses to come inside the trailer of Helen's foster parents and leaves her alone in the vehicle. Jinny meets a young man Ricky, who happens to be Helen's foster parent's son, who takes her on a journey to the Borneo swamp where logs of wood form floating bridges across the water. At first Jinny thinks she is walking on a dock only to realize that these floating bridges are also used by cars to cross the little lakes which are an integral part of the landscape. Jinny experiences what can only be called an epiphanic moment which begins when she walks on the floating bridge. Ricky then holds her close and kisses her and for one moment Jinny experiences a kiss which is an event in itself, the event in this case being the kiss. This speaks volumes about the physical relationship that she has with Neal. Though adulterous the kiss seems to wake Jinny from a kind of stupor and brings her back to life. It is at this point that she realizes that life is meant to be enjoyed and not endured. Even in that particular moment of insight she thinks of that pitifully tiny part of love that she still feels for Neal. However she pushes it aside and basks in the light of realization that seems to be lighting her from the inside.

> No matter.
>
> What she [Jinny] felt was a lighthearted sort of compassion,

> almost like laughter. A swish of tender hilarity, getting the better of all her sores and hollows, for the time given. (83)

The story ends rather ambiguously because we do not know whether she is going to continue living her life with Neal or not but we are left feeling that no matter what happens Jinny is going to have the strength to fight, if need arises and she is going to hold on to the hard fought for optimism with which she is going to face life anew.

In her second short story "Family Furnishings" Munro tells the story of the narrator's second cousin, Alfrida, a journalist. The story begins with the reminiscences of the narrator's father and Alfrida, whom he calls Freddie. The narrator puts Alfrida on a pedestal and seems to worship the very ground that she walks on. This is probably because the narrator is treated like a grown-up for the first time in her life and this happens only when Alfrida comes to visit her family. The narrator smokes a cigarette in front of her parents along with Alfrida when she was barely seventeen years old.

> This moment was amazing, as if Alfrida had transformed us into new people. Ordinarily, my mother would say that she did not like to see a woman smoke. She did not say that it was indecent, or unladylike-just that she did like it. (86)

The narrator's father too seems more relaxed and laidback in the company of Alfrida, especially when they talk about politics. The narrator goes on to say that "My parents were put in a corner by Alfrida" (87).

Many years go by and the narrator attends college in the city where Alfrida lives. However she goes to Alfrida's house only once and finds that the allure that she had always associated to Alfrida is no longer there. She also meets Alfrida's husband, Bill, a washed out handsome man lacking gumption. It is after dinner that Alfrida talks about the horrific death of her mother, who was killed when a lamp exploded in her hands and about her own reaction on hearing the news. The young Alfrida insists on seeing her dead mother but is warned by her grandmother that it would just be too much for her young sensibility.

"I must've thought I was pretty big cheese, mustn't I? *She would want to see me.*"

This was a part of the story that I had never heard.

> And the minute I heard it, something happened. It was as if a trap had snapped shut, to hold these words in my head. I did not exactly understand what use I would have for them. I only knew how they jolted me and released me, right away, to breathe a different kind of air, available only to myself,
>
> *She would want to see me.* (109)

This is where she looks at Alfrida's life and achieves the most perfect epiphanic moment, and gains a new insight, though she is not too sure how she is going to deal with it. For the time being she is aware that something monumental has just occurred without going into the mechanics of understanding and assimilating her new found knowledge.

The narrative leaps forward to a time when the narrator meets her father who tells her that Afrida was very upset when a story written by the narrator in which she mentions the manner in which Alfrida's mother was killed was published and that he had to justify her writing and how distant their relationship had become after that. He goes on to tell her how her lack of sensitivity had bothered Alfrida, who saw it as an act of betrayal. Munro's expertise at deftly manoeuvring through time takes us forward to her father's funeral, where she meets Alfrida's illegitimate daughter. She gets to know that Alfrida is in a nursing home and is suffering from memory loss and dementia and talks about visiting the nursing home only to be told that Alfrida considered her a cold fish for her lack of understanding and callousness. The short story ends with her aimlessly walking down the streets and drinking a cup of bitter coffee and understanding that this is what she had ever wanted in life and concluding that she indeed is happy.

> I did not think of the story I would make about Alfrida-not of that in particular-but of the work I wanted to do, which seemed more like grabbing something out of the air than constructing stories. (117)

The short story "Nettles" was first published in the New Yorker in 2000 and tells the story of a middle aged woman who meets her childhood boyfriend after many years. This story uses the first person narration and the "I" in this case might refer to the author herself, though Munro states that her stories are not autobiographical but they seem to refer to an emotional reality; a reality which is strongly Munrovian and is derived from her own life. The very name of the story "Nettles" suggests that love though beautiful, might still possess the capability of hurting us , especially when we least expect it to. The story begins with the narrator walking into her friend Sunny's kitchen and seeing a man making a ketchup sandwich just as Mike, her ex-boyfriend used to. The narrative weaves between the past and the present and shows Munro's dexterity at handling both time and distance. Mike is the well driller's son who comes along with his father, curiously enough his name too is Mike McCallum. Mike, who comes along with his father on drilling jobs and the narrator quickly become friends and spend their summer vacation playing together along with her dog, Ranger. Though the narrator and Mike are aware of all the guilty pleasures and forbidden intimacies of a girl-boy relationship they do not indulge in them. After the drilling job is done the senior Mike leaves town along with his son, and the next time that the narrator lays eyes on him is in Sunny's kitchen. They go golfing but get caught up in a thunderstorm and find shelter in thick bushes with a lot of hedges and "flowering Nettles with pinkish purple clusters". Even though they end up kissing, Mike seems to hold himself with a lot of restraint. The reason for this restraint becomes evident when he tells her that he had run down his own son when he was backing out of his driveway. The narrator is dumbstruck after listening to Mike's revelation and has trouble finding words to express her feelings and can find no words of comfort for him.

> He started walking again, entering the parking lot. I walked a little behind him. And I did not say anything-not one kind,

> common helpless word. We had passed right by that. (181)

It is at this instant that the narrator attains an epiphany and understands how a tragedy can either unite people or break them apart. In this case the narrator understands that even if Mike's wife forgives him she will 'never get over it'. The narrator understands too that there can never be a future in their relationship. In that moment of clarity she understands that theirs is a love that can never find fulfilment.

> Love that was not usable, that knew its place. (184)

The story ends with the narrator identifying the big pinkish-purple flowers not as nettle but as joe-pye weed. Nettles on the other hand are more insignificant with a faded purple flower. Love more often than not, is not always beautiful and life giving, it can also be seen as something which is not too attractive to look at. Coral Anne Howells essay "Intimate Dislocations: Alice Munro, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*" talks aptly about what happens in the story.

> This is the case in "Nettles," when a woman's romantic fantasies about an old childhood friend collapse in the face of his revelation of a terrible family disaster, revealing secrets lurking under the social surfaces of normalcy. (175)

The next short story in this collection is "Post and Beam", which is a term associated with architecture and building trade and refers to buildings which use heavy upright timbers or beams to support equally heavy posts. Aesthetically speaking, a post and beam building almost blend and becomes a part of the landscape while at the same time holding on to its inherent beauty. The story revolves around Lorna, her husband Brendan, and his student at the university, Lionel. The story begins with Lionel's account of his mother's death, whom Lorna had met previously. Lorna tells Lionel about a memory that she once shared with her now dead mother. She tells Lionel that her mother and she always listened to a soap opera on the radio, and tells him about the concern that she felt when they missed listening to the radio for one evening.

> She felt a deep concern, not because of missing the story but because she wondered what would happen to the people in the story, with the radio not turned on, and her mother and herself not listening. (190)

More than concern she is horrified that her absence in some way might prove to be detrimental to the lives of the characters in the soap opera and how easy it is to lose things when one is not even aware of their existence. This memory leads to an epiphanic moment when she realizes that events cease to attain any significance when there is no audience to cater to. Any particular event needs both the actor and the audience to participate in order to attain and maintain a meaning.

Lorna tells him about her cousin Polly and one can see Lionel's interest is aroused by how she describes Polly and her social and familial circumstances. Smitten by Lionel, Lorna goes to the extent of going to Lionel's house in his absence without understanding what it is that is compelling her to act in such a manner. Her relationship with Lionel is a

little unorthodox with him sending her poems, which though innocent sounding are no less inappropriate. Lorna leaves for a vacation along with Brendan and her children leaving Polly alone in the house. Lorna understands that she has left Polly all alone and has hurt her feelings by not inviting her along on the journey. She starts imagining that when she returns home she might find Polly dead. She has a memory of how caring and protective Polly had been towards Lorna when they were children and begins to despise herself for her spitefulness and cruelty towards Polly. She tries to bargain with god in a futile attempt to make sure that Polly would be strong enough to bear the hurt and pain that Lorna had inflicted on her.

She returns from her vacation only to realize that there developed a strong bond between Lionel and Polly and that her fears were completely unwarranted for. She sees Polly with a new insight and sees her strength, vitality and her indomitable spirit. It did not matter whether she married Lionel or not and had the strength to move on in life. This leads to the final epiphanic moment when she sees Polly at ease with both Brendan and Lionel, an ease that Lorna herself was incapable of attaining.

> That might happen. Polly and Lionel. Or it might not. Polly might go home as planned, and if she did, there wouldn't be any heartbreak. Or that was what Lorna thought. Polly might marry, or not marry, but whichever way it was, the things that happened with men would not be what broke her heart. (214)

She finally sees what she has to give up excitement, romance and mystery and settle for normalcy, a dreary and dull normalcy. A ubiquitous resignation, which is part of any marriage, is what she is finally left with.

The final short story in this collection "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" was originally published in the present collection, but was republished a little later and titled *Away from Her* (2007). The story revolves around an elderly couple, Fiona, a homemaker and Grant, a university professor. Grant takes early retirement when a scandal involving his extra marital affair with a student threatens to end his teaching career. Without ever confessing to Fiona about his affair he promises her a new life.

Twenty years later Grant struggles to come to terms with Fiona's sickness, which is diagnosed as Alzheimer's disease, becomes the central plot of the story. When Fiona realizes that she is getting progressively worse she insists on living in a facility that provides nursing care. When Grant comes to visit her after the first thirty days he sees that Fiona has become attached to Aubrey, another patient who is wheelchair bound on account of an accident and can hardly take care of himself. Fiona seems to be committed to Aubrey and can barely remember her husband, but nonetheless is polite to him. In a moment of great clarity Grant perceives this as Fiona's way of getting even with his lifelong infidelity, faithlessness and adultery, though Fiona is really not aware of it. The conversation that he has with Kristy, the nurse tending to Fiona regarding these 'attachments' as she puts it and was

about the only person with whom he can talk to in the facility.

"Well I sometimes wonder-" he said.

Kristy said sharply, "You wonder what?"

"I wonder whether she isn't putting on some kind of a charade."

"A what?" said Kristy. (292)

After Aubrey leaves the facility, Fiona becomes overcome with sorrow and her health rapidly deteriorates. In the wake of Aubrey's departure, Fiona is inconsolable and is unable to stop crying. She begins to lose her appetite and is given supplementary drinks in order to sustain her failing health. Her muscles start atrophying due to lack of exercise and Grant is left feeling inadequate and helpless. Try as he might he can't seem to stop Fiona's decline. By the end of the story Grant begins what can be called a romantic liaison with Aubrey's wife, Marian, and is finally able to come to grips with Fiona's relationship with Aubrey. However when he goes to see Fiona she seems to have forgotten about Aubrey completely and seems to have developed a new affection for Grant. She tells Grant that she thought he had abandoned her.

> "You could have just driven away," she said. "Just driven away without a care in the world and forsook me Forsooken me. Forsaken."
>
> He kept his face against her white hair, her pink scalp, her sweetly shaped skull. He said, Not a chance. (321)

At the end of the story Grant again sees the "spark of life" in Fiona's eyes, even though he is sure that it is but momentary and won't last too long and aware also that she is slipping rapidly away from him.

The title of the story which is about aging is ironically taken from a children's song, whose lyrics vary from version to version. Once the bear reaches the top of the mountain, it realizes that the only way forward is downhill. After a life time of infidelity, Grant's way of finding a solution, ironically involves condoning Fiona's infidelity.

The other short stories in this collection however do not deal explicitly with epiphanies or epiphanic moments but none the less have revelations which are extremely broad in scope. In the short story comfort for instance, Lewis has an argument with his wife, Nina about creationism and evolution. She has trouble with Lewis' vehement rejection of any kind of religious faith.

When Nina demands of Lewis,

"Can't you tolerate people being different, why is this so important?"

"If this isn't important, nothing is." (127)

Lewis understands that concepts of religious faith and scientific facts are not to be reconciled in so nonchalant or flippant a manner. A deeper understanding of what reconciliation entails while trying to resolve such matters is essential. This is a revelatory instant where one understands the gravity of what Lewis is trying to explain. For Lewis religion is not a concept that should be dealt with as naively as Nina does.

In "What is Remembered" Munro sees life as a collection of memories that

one amasses in one's life time. Waves of recollections keep jolting people through their lives and bring fresh meaning and understanding. These recollections bring about insights and revelations based on what one chooses to remember and they lie in the mind of the person who is recollecting and their reality in turn lies within their memory. One can keep picking up pieces that one might have missed in an earlier recollection. These lead to revelatory instances, though calling them epiphanies would be considered ambitious.

The short story "Queenie" deals with marital confinement and how running away from abusive households is seen as the only way out for women who encounter excruciatingly painful domestic situations. Like other short stories written by Munro there is not a lot happening in the novel other than psychological probing and introspection.

As Ajay Heble in *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence* opines:

> Munro's desire to work within yet go beyond the inherited conventions of realistic fiction reflects her conception of the dual nature of reality. For Munro, human lives are, at once, ordinary and mysterious, and for us to be unable to see this is one our greatest impoverishments. (16)

This duality of reality as mentioned earlier sets Munro apart from her contemporaries as her fiction resolves contradictions that arise from her working with the twin concepts of reality and mystery, without sacrificing one for the other. As she says in an interview with Graeme Gibson, her working understanding of the mysterious is not linked to any religious feeling but comes closest to describing it.

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