

The Ecological Thoughts in Alice Munro's Literary Works

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This paper investigates Alice Munro's exploration of ecocritical themes through her detailed portrayals of nature and the interactions between humans and their surroundings. By analyzing Munro's depiction of natural settings, character emotions, and identity, this research uncovers her deep engagement with ecological ethics, environmental responsibility, and the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. Notably, her portrayal of the connections between female characters and nature embodies ecofeminist concepts, shedding light on the complex interplay between them. Furthermore, her subtle narrative focus on gradual environmental shifts reflects her awareness of issues, such as climate change and ecological decline. This analysis, framed through an ecocritical perspective, underscores Munro's distinctive contributions to modern discussions on environmental sustainability and gender equity.

Keywords: Alice Munro, ecocriticism, environmental ethics, ecofeminism, nature description

Introduction

In recent years, the integration of literature and ecology has become a popular topic in academic research. Ecocriticism focuses on analyzing how literary works represent the relationship between humans and nature, exploring issues, such as environmental ethics and the use of natural resources (Clark, 2011, p. 17). From this perspective, the natural environment is given a central role in driving plot development and shaping characters' inner lives, no longer just serving as background or symbolism. Scholars like Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996) have made pioneering contributions in this field, emphasizing how ecocriticism reveals society's attitudes and understanding of ecological issues through natural depictions in literature (p. xviii).

Although Alice Munro's works do not directly address environmental crises, her detailed descriptions of nature and the characters' responses to it have become key entry points for ecocritical analysis. In particular, Munro's exploration of the complex interaction between humans and nature highlights the importance of the natural world in personal growth, social relationships, and cultural identity. For example, Greg Garrard (2012) pointed out in his ecocritical work that nature in literature often serves to reveal human vulnerability and societal problems (p. 64), a notion reflected in Munro's narratives.

Additionally, as gender studies and ecology intersect (such as in ecofeminism), the relationship between female characters and nature in Munro's works has sparked extensive discussion. Val Plumwood's (1993) research emphasizes that both women and nature have historically been objectified and dominated (p. 12). Munro's portrayal of women finding themselves and resisting constraints in nature reflects the resonance and resistance shared by both women and nature under oppression. Thus, Munro's works provide rich texts for

ecocriticism, showcasing her reflections on ecological ethics, environmental responsibility, and the complex relationship between humans and the environment.

Munro's works, through metaphorical natural descriptions, intricately depict human emotional responses and inner struggles when facing environmental change (Carrington, 2010, p. 45). While her works do not explicitly advocate for environmentalism, they delve deeply into the complexities of human-nature interactions, demonstrating the profound interconnection between humans and the natural world (Buell, 1995, pp. 1-25). Munro's ecological thoughts are subtly embedded in her narratives, demonstrating her care for the environment, respect for nature, and implicit attention to ecological ethics.

The Interdependence Between Humans and Nature

A recurring theme in Munro's works is the interdependence between humans and nature. Nature in her narratives is not merely a backdrop but a critical element that shapes characters' personalities and drives the plot, reflecting the interaction between humans and the environment (Soper, 1995, p. 124). For example, in *Runaway*, the escape of a goat symbolizes the protagonist Carla's internal conflict between freedom and repression. The goat's escape is not just a plot event but an expression of Carla's desire to break free from the constraints of marriage, revealing the complex relationship she shares with nature. As a domesticated animal, the goat represents both the family farm and the potential for wildness and freedom, reflecting Carla's internal tug-of-war between freedom and the constraints of reality.

In *The Bear Came Over the Mountain*, Munro reveals human emotional fragility through the gradual changes in the natural landscape. The Alzheimer's patient Fiona's fading memory mirrors the progressive changes in the natural environment. Fiona's husband, Grant, perceives the impermanence of the natural landscape as symbolic of humanity's inability to control memory and love. In this story, nature does not merely exist as a background; rather, through the changing seasons and animal activity, it becomes deeply intertwined with the characters' emotional world, generating strong resonance. This relationship between characters' psychological states and the natural environment highlights nature's role as a mirror to human emotions, revealing the fragility and impermanence of humans in the face of nature's forces.

Munro's natural descriptions go beyond the beauty of landscapes, using the dynamic changes in nature to reflect characters' emotional fluctuations and inner struggles. In *Dear Life*, she intertwines the natural environment with human history and memory, with the characters' rural memories intertwining with rivers, forests, and fields, creating a deep emotional connection to nature, which is a consistent ecological theme in her works (Howells, 2000, p. 60).

Munro also uses weather and seasonal changes to show nature's impact on human choices and fate. In *The Progress of Love*, the weather and seasons not only drive the plot but also hint at changes in the relationships between characters and their emotional shifts. In this way, the natural environment acts as a silent emotional catalyst, shaping the atmosphere and influencing the characters' minds and emotions. The interplay between weather and emotion underscores the profound impact of the natural world on human life, showcasing Munro's keen observation of the close connection between human beings and ecological systems.

Garrard (2012), in his ecocritical study, asserts that nature and human life are inseparable (p. 64), and Munro's works vividly embody this idea. Her works not only portray the ecological context of human life through the interactions between characters and nature, but also explore how natural forces shape human destinies and emotions.

Rural Landscapes as a Symbol of Identity

In Alice Munro's works, rural landscapes are not just the backdrop to the characters' lives, but also symbols of their identity and cultural belonging. She frequently sets her stories in the rural Ontario landscape with which she is familiar, where the natural environments and rural settings symbolize the emotional, cultural, and social identity of the characters. Rural life thus becomes an integral part of their self-identity.

In *Lives of Girls and Women*, the protagonist Del Jordan's coming-of-age process is closely linked to the rural environment around her. The land, farmland, and rivers not only shape her life experiences, but also deeply influence her sense of identity. The rural environment offers Del emotional security while simultaneously limiting her freedom. Growing up in a small, closed community, she faces traditional moral constraints, and the rural landscape symbolizes everything she knows. The rural life and land represent both her dependence on family and her emotional sense of belonging, yet they also represent her inner struggle to escape and break free.

Del's journey of self-discovery involves a reimagining of the rural landscape. On the one hand, she draws strength from the rural environment, while on the other, she feels its constraints. As she grows up in this small town, she becomes increasingly aware that the environment is both a familiar sanctuary and a place of confinement. Munro uses Del's ambivalent relationship with rural life to show that the rural landscape is not just a backdrop but an essential force shaping personal growth and identity. In her quest for selfhood and independence, Del's rural background continually influences her choices and emotions.

Munro's works frequently show the key role rural landscapes play in shaping the identity of her characters. In *Dear Life*, she uses the rural and natural environment as a foundation, delicately portraying the complex emotional connection between characters and the land. Characters often look back nostalgically at their rural origins, and these landscapes gradually become symbols of their personal and collective memories. Munro reveals that the modern process of urbanization is impacting identity formation, with rural landscapes becoming increasingly replaced and altered. As the rural environment changes, characters experience a sense of loss and are prompted to reconsider their identities.

Moreover, Munro uses rural landscapes to explore collective identity and the passing down of cultural traditions. For example, in *The Bear Came Over the Mountain*, the rural setting symbolizes the characters' deep connections to the past, family, and community. Their lives and identities are inseparable from the land, which becomes an important emotional anchor. When the natural environment changes, the characters' sense of self and identity is shaken. Munro's portrayal of the interwoven relationship between rural landscapes and identity highlights her deep understanding of traditional values and rural culture.

In conclusion, in Munro's works, rural landscapes serve not only as the backdrop to life, but also as symbols of individual and collective identity. Through her meticulous depictions of rural and natural landscapes, Munro demonstrates how nature profoundly influences personal growth, cultural continuity, and social belonging. The rural landscape plays an indispensable role in her narratives, becoming a central element in the characters' process of self-exploration and identity construction.

Environmental Ethics and Ecological Responsibility

Alice Munro subtly but profoundly addresses themes of environmental ethics in her works. Through intricate depictions of the relationship between humans and nature, she delves into the moral responsibilities and ethical dilemmas humans face when interacting with the land, animals, and the environment. In many of her works, the

choices characters make in their interactions with nature reveal deep reflections on environmental preservation and sustainable development.

For example, in *The Progress of Love*, Munro portrays the complex and tight-knit relationship between a family and the land passed down through generations, reflecting the ethical issues surrounding land use and family inheritance. In the story, the family's land not only symbolizes wealth and economic resources, but also represents family history and cultural continuity. As time progresses, the land's value is no longer solely seen in economic terms but also as a vital part of family legacy and environmental responsibility. In this story, Munro critiques the commodification of nature and emphasizes the importance of respecting and preserving the environment for future generations.

In *Runaway*, Munro uses a subtle but powerful critique of human environmental impact. The protagonist Carla's flight from her husband represents a broader escape from the confining structures of human society, but her relationship with the natural world is also crucial to her emotional and physical survival. The relationship between Carla and nature represents her desire for freedom and a return to a purer, less constrained existence, suggesting an ecological ethos of return to natural forms of existence and sustainability.

Finally, in *Dear Life*, Munro portrays a character's growing awareness of the impermanence and fragility of the natural world. Through the quiet, subtle depictions of rural environments, Munro invites readers to reflect on the consequences of human actions on the environment and the ethical responsibility we hold to protect it.

By presenting nuanced representations of the ethical considerations humans face in relation to nature, Munro contributes to a broader ecological discourse, engaging with ideas of environmental responsibility, conservation, and the preservation of nature's integrity. Through her stories, Munro encourages reflection on humanity's moral obligation to act as stewards of the environment, safeguarding it for future generations.

Conclusion

Alice Munro's works offer rich insights into the complex relationship between humans and nature, making significant contributions to ecocritical discourse. Through her careful depictions of rural landscapes, changing seasons, and characters' interactions with the natural world, Munro highlights the inseparable bond between human lives and the environment. Her works explore ecological themes ranging from the psychological impact of nature to environmental ethics and the preservation of rural landscapes.

In her writing, Munro reflects on the human need for connection to nature, the deep emotional resonance of landscapes, and the moral responsibility humans have toward the environment. While her works are often subtle in their ecological themes, they offer profound commentaries on the environmental crises facing our world today. As we face increasingly urgent environmental challenges, Alice Munro's exploration of nature's role in human lives serves as an important and timely reminder of the need for ecological awareness and responsibility.

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