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REVERENCE FOR LIFE, BACK TO NATURE -
AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY ON SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF ALICE MUNRO

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ABSTRACT

Alice Munro, is the first Canadian to win the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature, and the 13th female literature laureate in the history. She was awarded the Canadian Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction, after the publication of her first collection of short stories *Dance of the Happy Shades* which was taken as a masterpiece of Ecocriticism. This paper is to study the relationship between human beings and nature in "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "Images," and "Boys and Girls" from the perspective of Ecocriticism. The above three short stories selected from *Dance of the Happy Shades* are all narrated by the same preadolescent girl and are set in a small rural town. It is proposed to explore the cause of the contemporary environmental problems, and the tentative solution of reconstructing a harmonious ecological environment by revealing the disharmony between human beings and nature. Through the textual analysis based on the theory of Ecocriticism, it is expected to explore Munro's pursuit of ecological harmony and the peaceful coexistence between mankind and nature, to provide references for related researches, national and international.

Key Words: Alice Munro, Ecocriticism, anthropocentrism, ecological harmony

Introduction

Alice Munro is a prolific Canadian writer who has received numerous literary accolades, including the 1996 Writers' Trust of Canada's Marian Engel Award, the 2004 Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize for *Runaway*, the 2009 Man Booker International Prize, as well as the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature. Since the publication of *Dance of the Happy Shades*, Alice Munro has been acclaimed as one of Canada's most renowned contemporary writers for her contribution of short stories. Munro was born in Ontario and grew up on the outskirts of the town of Wingham, which often provides the backdrops for her writing. Her father was a fox and mink farmer and mother was a former schoolteacher, which shares a similar identity of the character in most of her stories. She is interested in questions of authenticity; she looks at her characters' fronts and pretensions, at what effect they are trying to achieve, and then she examines what lies underneath (Awano 93). In *Dance of the Happy Shades*, Munro depicts the life of common people through seemingly trivial events, displays the contradictions between human beings and nature, between men and women, between adults and children, then conveys her aspiration for reconstructing a harmonious ecological environment.

The study of Munro's short stories started in the 1970s and thrived in the next two decades. Western scholars have shown great enthusiasm in Munro's works since *Dance of the Happy Shades* appeared. The various ways in which critics have examined *Dance of the Happy Shades* clearly demonstrate the richness of this volume. Scholars delve into the stylistic studies, thematic studies, narrative studies, feminist studies, psychological realism, textual research, etc. In an essay written in the context of "Walker Brothers Cowboy," Rena Korb compares the adult characters and examines their relationship to the past, finding the young narrator's developing maturity. In "Penning in the Bodies: The Construction of Gendered Subjects in Alice Munro's 'Boys and Girls'", Marlene Goldman looks at the theme of societal forces that shape children into adults, especially the different things expected of boys and girls. She also looks at the very different worlds described by Munro in the story, that is, the male sphere and the female sphere. In recent years, the research of Munro has been taken from broader perspectives. The studies based on Ecocriticism and ecofeminism have produced a large volume of articles. Li Honghui appreciates a short story of *Lives of Girls and Women*, exploring Alice Munro's ecofeminism in which she advocates living in harmony between people, between people and nature and liberating women and nature (53). Jiang Guimei and Wang Jing consider that Munro criticizes the traditional ecological ethics under the background of anthropocentrism and expresses the ethics of reverence for life in *Runaway* (118). Yuan Xia's "Eco-feminism in Alice Munro's Southern Ontario Gothic" analyzes the female characters in the Gothic nature, revealing "the harm done to women and nature by dualism and patriarchy and Munro's care about women's fate and environment" (50). From the above, Munro's later works have witnessed a rising number of studies. However, it's hard to find an article discussing Munro's early short stories from the perspective of Ecocriticism.

Since the burst of environmentalism in the late 1960s and 1970s, more and more people have expressed concern about the environmental problems and the relevant scholars have been concentrating on progressive achievements of ecocritical theory and practice. There are various subject headings, such as American Studies, pastoralism, regionalism, human ecology, etc. The ideas and texts grown out of this period subsequently got consolidated into the field now known as Ecocriticism. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* published in 1962 finds that pesticides pose a serious threat to humans and the non-human life forms, which is considered as the beginning of the modern environmentalism. In 1978, William Rueckert coined the term "Ecocriticism" in an essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." It was in 1990s that the study of Ecocriticism grew rapidly. The common ground on which all strands of Ecocriticism stand is the assumption that a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature should be helpful to remedy the environmental problems.

Ecocriticism originates from the appearance of two momentous works: *The Ecocriticism Reader* compiled by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, *The Environmental Imagination* of Lawrence Buell. And Glotfelty defines Ecocriticism as, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Wang 48). Ecocriticism is an umbrella term used to refer to the environmentally oriented study of literature, which is concerned with nature writing and ecological themes. It deals with a wide variety of environmental issues such as pollution, waste contamination, acid rain, global warming, extinction of species, and other forms of ecological destruction. It is associated with the desire to mitigate the current environmental problems. In sum, it is an interdisciplinary study of the relationship between literature and environment under the guidance of ecological holism.

The main objective of this paper is to attempt an ecocritical analysis of the aforementioned three short stories of Alice Munro, "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "Images," and "Boys and Girls," by showing the disharmony between human beings and nature, examining the anthropocentrism which is the reason for the human exploitation of nature, and exploring Munro's pursuit of reconstructing a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature.

1. Representations of the Disharmony between Human Beings and Nature

Canadian literature, which pays close attention to the natural environment, has played an important role in promoting the development of ecological literature in the second half of the 20th century. Northrop

Frye, a Canadian literary critic and literary theorist, as well as Margaret Atwood, has pointed out that Canadian literature focuses on such subjects as nature and animal killing. Concerning the disharmony between human beings and nature, Munro also successfully reveals her ecological concern for the physical environment and the non-human life forms in her stories.

In the first line of the story "Boys and Girls," an unnamed young girl introduces that "my father was a fox farmer" (Munro 111). At the time the story takes place, the narrator, together with her young brother Laird, is watching their father doing skinning work which simply manifests the human exploitation of nature. The father's favorite book is *Robinson Crusoe* in which the anthropocentrism "not only destroys ecological environment, but also results in the confrontation between men and women" (Li 42). Like Robinson, the father becomes the owner of nature and controls animals for the sake of economic benefits. However, the foxes, enclosed and controlled by a "high guard fence" (Munro 114), have shown their hostility to mankind:

Naming them did not make pets out of them, or anything like it. Nobody but my father ever went into the pens, and he had twice had blood-poisoning from bites. When I was bringing them their water they prowled up and down on the paths they had made inside their pens, barking seldom--they saved that for nighttime, when they might get up a chorus of community frenzy--but always watching me, their eyes burning, clear gold, in their pointed, malevolent faces. (Munro 115)

Besides, the narrator discloses that the Hudson's Bay Company or the Montreal Fur Traders would supply them with "heroic calendars to hang, one on each side of the kitchen door" (Munro 111). The calendars depict nature conquered by magnificent savages in all their flag-planting majesty, which further illustrates the opposition between human beings and nature.

In the story "Walker Brothers Cowboy," the narrator's family suffers from an economic downturn, for which they are forced to move to Tuppertown and the narrator's father changes his job as a pedlar. In the past, the family owned a silver fox farm in Dungannon. At present, the father works for a firm called Walker Brothers "that sells almost entirely in the country, the back country" (Munro 3). It suggests that the development of industrial civilization has expanded its influence on the rural region. Much of the story is set in the backcountry near Tuppertown. However, the narrator describes the landscape like that, "the land is flat, scorched, empty. Bush lots at the back of the farms hold shade, black pine-shade like pools nobody can ever get to. We bump up a long lane and at the end of it what could look more unwelcoming" (Munro 7). Owing to the industrialization, human beings are estranged from nature. As the story notes, "the men, if they are working in the fields, are not in any fields that we can see" (Munro 9).

Munro's stories depict a child's world defined by the unreconciled polarities of an exterior, wild environment connoting adventure and freedom and the contained, ordered interior space of the house with its associations of conventionality and restriction (Hunt 61). In "Images," the bush surrounding the family's farm is considered as a wild and mysterious world. Wilderness is the environment that is not yet controlled and affected by human activities. When relevant organizations and governments started to engage in a variety of activities which have restricted the disturbance by humans on the undeveloped lands, literature also paid greater attention to examine how the wilderness plays an active role in nature which has early attracted enough attention of ecocritics. In this story, the narrator is eager to align herself with her father and fully appreciates the privilege of being his companion during the jaunt on his natural territory, which gives her a sense of freedom and adventure. When the narrator goes with her father to check the muskrat traps which he has installed in the bush, they come across Joe, a paranoid man who stealthily approaches the father with an axe. The description of Joe's cellar home goes like this, "an earthen-floored dwelling stale with the heavy air of coal oil and urine" (Hunt 61), which is totally different from the narrator's civilized house systematically arranged by Mary McQuade, the cousin of the narrator's father. Though not directly exposing ecological problems, the short story "Images" conveys a strong sense of the binary opposition between nature and culture through the narrator's closeness to wilderness.

Through covering the imbalance and disharmony between human beings and nature, the above three short stories have examined the latent ecological crisis of the physical environment and the non-human life forms, which shows Munro's ecological consciousness.

2. The Cause of Ecological Problems: Anthropocentrism

Ecocriticism aims at criticizing the anthropocentric ideas of conquering and ruling nature. Scholars in Ecocriticism engage in questions regarding anthropocentrism, and the "mainstream assumption that the natural world is seen primarily as a resource for human beings as well as critical approaches to changing ideas in the material and cultural bases of modern society" (Clark 2). Through deconstructing the binary opposition between human beings and nature, it is concluded that it's wrong to believe that humans are more important than other animals which have intrinsic values.

In "Boys and Girls," the three male characters including the narrator's father, the narrator's brother and the hired man, Henry Bailey, are the representatives of anthropocentrism. As a farmer, the father cultivates wild animals for the purpose of consumption, taking great pains to build a miniature world for his captives. As the narrator explains, "it was surrounded by a high guard fence, like a medieval town, with a gate that was padlocked at night. Along the streets of this town were ranged large, sturdy pens" (Munro 114). From this image, it is obvious to perceive the father's strong sense of conquering other creatures. In several weeks before Christmas, the father skins the foxes in the cellar of the house, which makes the mother uncomfortable. The mother detests "the whole pelting operation--that was what the killing, skinning, and preparation of the furs was called--and wished it did not have to take place in the house" (Munro 111). On the contrary, the narrator whose ecological consciousness isn't awakened yet finds the primitive odour of the fox "reassuringly seasonal, like the smell of oranges and pine needles" (Munro 112). After that, "the naked, slippery bodies were collected in a sack and buried at the dump" (Munro 111). One time, Henry Bailey, the hired man, has taken a swipe at the narrator with this sack, saying "Christmas present" (Munro 111). What Henry has done exposes his disrespect for the foxes and makes the narrator's mother feel ridiculous.

In addition, the horses which have been kept for feeding the foxes are also enslaved and controlled under anthropocentrism. In line with his brutal character, Henry Bailey treats the butchering of Mack, one of the two horses in the narrator's house, as a bit of fun. After the father ultimately shoots Mack, Henry laughs when the horse "kicked his legs for a few seconds in the air" (Munro 122), thinking that "Mack had done a trick for him" (Munro 122). Henry's laughter fully uncovers his delight in power according to sheer inequality. In view of "the easy, practised way her father raised the gun" (Munro 123) and Henry's laughter, the narrator "felt a little ashamed" (Munro 124). At the time when the second horse, Flora, makes a run in the barnyard, the narrator opens the gate "as wide as she could" (Munro 125) instead of locking the horse in. But, Laird, the young brother, joins the hunting party as he begs the men to take him along for catching up Flora. Upon his return, Laird "lifted his arm to show off a streak of blood" (Munro 126), cheering that they "shot old Flora and cut her up in fifty pieces (Munro 127) and complaining that the narrator has released the horse. The mark of blood can be symbolized as the domination of the animals and, by extension, the triumph over nature.

The story "Walker Brothers Cowboy" takes place in a rural area in Ontario during the 1930s. At that time, the United States reduced a huge amount of Canadian exports for which Canada was suffering a drastic effect of the Great Depression. As the economy becomes a bigger part of the Canadian society, Munro debunks the personal isolation and social divisions in her stories. Dahlie opines that, Alice Munro's fiction could profitably be examined in terms of the themes of isolation and rejection, which unfolds in situations where human relationships are rarely cemented or consummated (58). The aforementioned can be illustrated from the narrator's mother who lives in the past and is entirely isolated from her surroundings. Despite living physically better in the town than on the farm, the mother always keeps herself from finding any joy in the present. She dislikes her husband's new job. She doesn't allow her children to play with other children in the neighborhood. She is determined to be a "lady shopping" (Munro 5) by wearing a good dress, a slip, and freshly whitened shoes and even trying to draw her daughter into these fantasies. Although the story does not directly describe the human oppression of nature, the anthropocentric thought and behavior can be seen from

the unbalanced spiritual state of the mother who only cares about her own interests. In "Images," the father makes a living by a barbaric way as a trapper and woodsman. Though being ready for "jokes and courtesies," the father "has an alternate expression, imaged in the dogged and uncompromising look of his boots, the counterpart of his face" (Hunt 60), which unveils the brutality of the father. His cruelty also finds its correspondence in the wild landscape, "the Wawanash River, which was high, running full, silver in the middle where the sun hit it and where it arrowed in to its swiftest motion" (Munro 36).

Munro is concerned about the binary opposition, such as subject and object, men and women, human beings and nature, etc. The plot of the stories quoted above is to expose the anthropocentric thought and behavior in dealing with the relationship between human beings and nature, which can reflect Munro's worries about human thinking and behavior patterns hidden behind ecological problems.

3. Reconstruction of Ecological Harmony

Showing the reverence for life and the respect for nature in the three short stories, Munro further reveals her pursuit of ecological harmony and the peaceful coexistence between human beings and nature.

In "Boys and Girls," at the same time as the father prepares to kill the horses with the intention of feeding the foxes, the narrator shows her affinity with animals and in the meantime her alignment with her father is gradually disintegrating. One time, when the father introduces her to the salesman as a hired man, the salesman responds that "I thought it was only a girl" (Munro 116). Another challenge arrives by the father's hired man, Henry Bailey. After the skinning work of the foxes, "the naked, slippery bodies were collected in a sack" (Munro 111) and Bailey swipes at the narrator with a sackful of the bodies, saying "Christmas Present" (Munro 111). This behaviour subtly implies the connection between the fate of the narrator and that of the foxes. And when Bailey sees the narrator and her brother fighting, he laughs and says, "Oh, that there Laird's gonna show you, one of these days" (Munro 119). The narrator thus gradually realizes that she is different from her father and brother. It is only when the men intend to shoot an old mare that the narrator radically breaks from her male-identified position.

The story of the two horses serves to underpin the main events and underscore the fate of the narrator. The narrator is like the skittish horse Flora, a living thing with energy that is finally entrapped and oppressed by greater forces. The survival of foxes depends upon the sacrifice of the dismal horses whose life will end while their meat is prime, which foreshadows the inevitability and unpleasantness of the narrator's future to capitulate to the traditional socialization. Despite the fact that the slaughter of Flora provokes feelings of pity and empathy from the girl who opens the gate wide for the horse to escape, the horse finally has been caught and shot by the men.

A Chinese scholar who devotes herself to studying Alice Munro mentions in her Doctoral dissertation, "the Jordan family shares many similarities with Munro's own family, the Laidlaws, as both consist of an ambitious mother, an escapist father, a sensitive daughter, and an unobservant young brother" (Zhou 31). Over dinner, Laird, the young brother, discloses that it is his sister who allows Flora to run out. The narrator is afraid of being sent away from the table and bursts into tears. The whole incident is simply dismissed by her father's words, "Never mind," "She's only a girl" (Munro 127). It can be found that what her father says exposes his deep-rooted patriarchal thoughts. The young narrator and the dead horse are both oppressed by the male. The story ends with a sentence "maybe it was true" (Munro 127), which suggests that the narrator becomes more girl-like and Laird has been taken into their father's side. Although the protagonist of "Boys and Girls" is a child, the story is told by the mature narrator, which suggests that the narrator continues to resist and criticize the patriarchal society in which both nature and women have been oppressed.

The stories "Walker Brothers Cowboy" and "Images" have manifested Munro's ecological concern. Munro grew up in a small town where she has experienced a difficult life. In her works, Munro modestly addresses issues of her times by focusing on her surroundings. In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," the father takes a walk with the young girl in order to "see if the Lake's still there" (Munro 1) in the beginning scene of this story. The father tells how the Great Lakes came into being, explaining that "then the ice went back, shrank

back towards the North Pole where it came from, and left its fingers of ice in the deep places it had gouged, and the ice turned to lakes and there they were today" (Munro 3). The narrator finds it hard to imagine when dinosaurs walked on the earth. She can't even imagine what the Lake was like when the Indians lived there. She is surprised that a person has lived on the earth for such a short time, judging that "the tiny share we have of time appalls me" (Munro 3). In "Images," Munro describes the father's job like this:

When he was younger he used to spend days, nights, weeks in the bush, following creeks all up and down Wawanash County, and he trapped not only muskrat then but red fox, wild mink, marten, all animals whose coats are prime in the fall. Muskrat is the only thing you can trap in the spring. Now that he was married and settled down to farming he just kept the one line, and that for only a few years. (35)

The family relies on nature for their living. In other words, it is nature that nurtures human beings, provides them with living places and meets the needs of them. Owing to this, it's clear to perceive Munro's aspiration for ecological harmony.

Conclusion

Through revealing the imbalance and disharmony between human beings and nature, this paper is concerned about the human exploitation of nature and the potential environmental problems. Furthermore, this paper continues to search for the cause of ecological crisis. It is anthropocentrism that results in human's conquest and domination of nature, which also reflects Munro's concern with the binary opposition, such as men and women, human beings and nature. Either her writing with passion for nature or her stern criticism on the negative effects of anthropocentrism has demonstrated a clear ecological consciousness. Having proposed the tentative solution of reconstructing a harmonious ecological environment -- reverence for life and back to nature, Munro subtly expresses her expectation of biocentric equality which affirms the equality of all things in the biosphere, including the physical environment and the non-human life forms. In general, the study of Munro's three short stories of *Dance of the Happy Shades* deals with the relationship between human beings and nature which is the main concern of Ecocriticism.

Apart from all the discoveries mentioned above, there is still room for exploring Munro's ecological thinking in her short stories. This paper is expected to provide references for related researches, national and international, through examining Munro's pursuit of ecological harmony and the peaceful coexistence between mankind and nature.

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