

“Bring What you Know of *Life* to Life”: Alice Munro's Storytelling

Natalia Rodríguez Nieto
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia
nrodriguez@madrid.uned.es

Resumen

Al ser preguntada por sus impresiones acerca de la etiqueta de escritora feminista durante una entrevista en 2001 Alice Munro explicó que, aunque al principio solía afirmar que se consideraba una escritora feminista, nunca había practicado y ni siquiera sabía nada sobre las perspectivas teóricas del feminismo. Afirmó que: “creo que soy feminista porque creo que la experiencia de la mujer es importante” (Feinberg 'Bringing Life'). Es precisamente esta experiencia femenina lo que Munro explora en su historia corta “Family Furnishings”, incluida en *Hateship, Frienship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001).

Prueba de su maestría como una de las mejores contadoras de historias canadienses de todos los tiempos, “Family Furnishings” nos abre la puerta a una representación realista de dos mujeres extraordinarias como epítomes que validan la ambivalencia femenina. Tanto la narradora, que también participa como personaje central de la historia, como Alfrida dedican su vida a la escritura y exploran las fronteras de la sociedad establecida abriendo nuevas perspectivas sobre la diversidad femenina, sobre sus contradicciones, ansiedades, decisiones, emociones cambiantes, coincidencias y diferencias de unas mujeres para las que el matrimonio es a veces un refugio, otras una carga, o incluso las dos o ninguna de ellas. Entre el ámbito social de una pequeña población canadiense y las nuevas elecciones vitales que les ofrece una pequeña ciudad en tiempos de posguerra, ambos personajes suponen un excelente ejemplo de la maestría de Munro y su ficcionalización realista, genuina, emocionante y valiente de la vida, en este caso, a través de la experiencia femenina. Pero Alfrida y su sobrina son aún más significativas puesto que sirven de eje de una forma de contar historias extraordinaria y muy característica de Munro; aquella en la que las historias se mezclan, se distancian, viajan del pasado al presente, se mueven de la primera a la tercera persona, y abren puertas a nuevas historias. Todas ellas como piezas pequeñas pero fundamentales que componen un boceto vital emotivo, un cuento sobre la vida.

Palabras clave: Alice Munro, "Family Furnishings", *Hateship, Frienship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, Historia Corta Canadiense, Storytelling, Experiencia femenina.

Abstract

When asked about her impressions on being called a feminist writer in 2001, Alice Munro explained that, although at the beginning she used to affirm she was, she neither practiced nor knew anything about feminist theoretical approaches whatsoever. She stated: "I think I'm a feminist as far as thinking that the experience of women is important" (**Feinberg 'Bringing Life'**). It is precisely part of this female experience what she explores in her short story "Family Furnishings", included in *Hateship, Frienship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001).

Proof of her mastery as one of the best Canadian storytellers ever, "Family Furnishings" leaps a realistic depiction of two extraordinary women as epitomes who validate female ambivalence. Both the feminine narrative voice, who also participates as pivotal character of the story, and Alfrida devote their life to writing and explore the contours of mainstream society opening a new door into women's diverse life choices, contradictions, anxieties, decisions, changing emotions, similarities and differences for whom marriage is sometimes a refuge, sometimes a burden, and even both or neither. In-between the inherited social mores of a Canadian small town and new life choices in the city during the aftermath of the First World War, both are excellent examples of Munro's realistic, genuine, challenging and moving fictionalization of life, in this case, through female experience, the life experience she seems to know better. But Alfrida and her niece are much more meaningful since they serve as axis of an extraordinary storytelling by Munro in which stories mingle, grow apart, travel from past to present, move from the first to the third person, and open doors to new stories. All of them as small but fundamental pieces that form an emotional life sketch, a tale of life.

Key Words: Alice Munro, "Family Furnishings", *Hateship, Frienship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, Canadian Short Story, Storytelling, Female experience.

When asked about her impressions on being called a feminist writer in 2001, Alice Munro explained that, although at the beginning she used to affirm she was, she neither practiced nor knew anything about feminist theoretical approaches whatsoever. She stated: "I think I'm a feminist as far as thinking that the experience of women is important" (**Feinberg**

'Bringing Life'). It is precisely part of this female experience what she explores in her short story "Family Furnishings", included in *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) together with other eight stories all set in her native Canada, often in small, provincial towns similar to her own childhood home of Wingham, Ontario. They are, for the most part, stories of women; of their contradictions, differences, fears, longings and paradoxes.

Rooted in what the author herself expressed about what storytelling means for her as female writer, and more specifically about this compilation, in different interviews and reviews from the time when *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* was published, the following reading offers a renewed angle. Far from the spread appraisal of her work now that she won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013, these reviews, interviews and personal comments show that her mastery was there long before the academy decided to canonize her. Besides, commenting on "Family Furnishings" as paradigm of Munro's many other great short stories taking into account her own ideas allows a wider and refreshing interpretation of what her brilliantly knitted stories convey: life itself -since that is what we, critics, ultimately do; interpreting from our different subjective standpoints whatever critical perspectives we employ-. As she commented, her intention as a writer is "bring[ing] what you know of *life* to life" (**Feinberg 'Bringing Life'**), in her case, that modest knowledge of a woman from a English-speaking Canadian small town.

Unlike what could be expected, simple autobiographical fiction, that is, a fictionalized version of what she knows of life, must not be assumed in Munro's case. Actually, on her writing around the time this compilation was taking form the author commented:

"I'm doing less personal writing now than I used to for a very simple, obvious reason. You use up your childhood, unless you're able, like William Maxwell, to keep going back and finding wonderful new levels in it. The deep, personal material of the latter half of your life is your children. You can write about your parents when they're gone, but your children are still going to be here, and you're going to want them to come and visit you in the nursing home." (Simpson 'A Quiet Genius')

On this point, precisely "Family Furnishings" is a patent example. As she explained, it is true that "Family Furnishings" returns to her own past, that she was also profoundly interested in writing, or that losing connection with a relative was not such a big deal for her; but "no—none of that actually happened" (**Feinberg 'Bringing Life'**). For her, the

essence is not in the real world that somehow inspires her, but in the new world that she creates which is “somehow much more enormously alive than the world I[*she*] was actually living in” (**Feinberg 'Bringing Life'**). It is perhaps precisely the appeal of that invented but at the same time so real world what offers that universal scope to her stories that Simpson claims; in her opinion, Munro's universality through naturalism is rooted in “mystery, an emotional sum greater than its technical parts” (*'A Quiet Genius'*).

Similarly, some of the details around "Family Furnishings" are to be identified with the background of any small Canadian town; the family gatherings, the contrast with urban people, or the prevailing life paths society apparently marks are, for instance, paradigmatic. Paradigmatic but not merely regional since they hold a broader reach; Munro's intention as expressed by herself is not “bring[ing] a region to life” but, as already mentioned, bringing life to life (**Feinberg 'Bringing Life'**). Her depiction of life itself is so powerful that it has been not only compared to that of Chekhov but it is said to transcend mere naturalism; I agree with Simpson on the fact that “it seems not translated from life but, rather, like life itself” (*'A Quiet Genius'*). **Moreover**, according to the writer Lorrie Moore when interviewed by Elizabeth Gaffney for *The Paris Review* in 2001: “although she[Munro] writes of the provinces, she is the least provincial writer I can think of. I'm not sure that this is always understood about her” (*'The Art Of Fiction'*). In fact, in "Family Furnishings" what is not representative is the story itself or, more precisely, the interweaved stories of two women who precisely tear apart traditional categorizations of a small Canadian town.

Both the compilation and the story analyzed here are excellent paradigms not only of what a special writer Munro is but also of her role as a contemporary female author. First of all, she did not mean to be short story writer but a novelist; life led her otherwise for as **Cara Feinberg explains based on Munro's words**: “as a young author taking care of three small children, Munro learned to write in the slivers of time she had, churning out stories during children's nap times, in between feedings, as dinners baked in the oven...” (**'Bringing Life'**). Likewise, Simpson explains that Munro affirmed in their interview that “the only time in her life when she didn't have to do housework” was when she was studying at the university (*'A Quiet Genius'*). Revealing facts notwithstanding since we are dealing with a world-wide known literary author in contemporary times.

Precisely from that daily urgency, the naturalness and agility of her fiction might stem. The way she describes her writing process matches this mirroring between life and her role as short story author; she writes her stories without too much asking neither examining but

leaving stories develop on their own, grow, take this or that path. As Munro affirms: “in fact, if a story wants to go in a particular direction, I let that happen. I just put it out there and see what it does” (**Feinberg 'Bringing Life'**). It is only after when she goes back and checks, changes, discards. She even acknowledges the disruptive contribution of her stories to modern fiction since, in her opinion, they - as if they were alive by themselves - have “grown [...] more disjointed and demanding and peculiar” not as a product of deep reflection but because that “occurs to me[her], but not with any particular regret; I[she] figure[s] I[she] can only write what interests me[her]” (**Feinberg**).

But what makes Munro's role as writer very powerful is the blending between the roles of observer and storyteller. On the one hand, I totally agree with Simpson that one of the most outstanding features of her storytelling relies on the emotional reach that tinge her stories; something that cannot be easily described and much less analysed, scrutinized, critically dissected, but experienced in reading. It is right there; life as it is, depicted, represented, fictionalized but at the same time so close to us, so far from fiction. It is as if stories were simply flowing from Munro's hands and that is precisely what she explains: “I just can't give up this drive. We've been driving through the same towns for years, and noticing what happens. It's like a time when you drop out of your life and into just being an observer” (**Feinberg 'Bringing Life'**).

On the other hand, perhaps the detachment between author and fiction, or even the disappearance of authorial voice, in her stories helps convey this emotional portray more vividly. In this sense, when referring to *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* Simpson affirms that it is not only hard to identify the author but that it seems to be “everywhere and nowhere in the work” ('A Quiet Genius'). Just as in “Family Furnishings,” in Munro's stories there is rarely any judgment since characters simply act, live, are; it is the reader who, if wanting, can evaluate, analyse, or even sentence the people inhabiting her lines depending on his/her own social mores. She tells their stories to investigate, understand and show how “we all tell stories of our lives to ourselves, as well as to other people” (**Feinberg 'Bringing Life'**), since life is in fact a constant act of storytelling.

In “Family Furnishings” Munro leads us into a world inhabited by women; a nameless female narrator introduces us the character and life her aunt Alfrida and develops that storytelling Munro affirms to be so interested in. That of the memory, of the ways we all are storytellers since we are constantly talking to us, shaping and piling up anecdotes, tales, memoirs and even fables through which we knit the story of our life. Being women's stories more emotional in her opinion than that of male epics, Munro is interested in “what

is put in at different times in your life, what is left out at different times, and how you use the stories to see yourself, or sometimes just to make life bearable for yourself" (**Feinberg 'Bringing Life'**). In "Family Furnishings" Alfrida's story is indeed a door into another storytelling, that of the third person narrator's own life, in which meetings and disagreements with her aunt's story are eye-opening.

As if taken by the hand of a child who walks us into the living room, readers are guided into the intimacy of this family, their gatherings, kitchen, chitchats, and family furnishings. It's the end of the First World War, we are in a small Ontarian town and at the dinner table there is Alfrida, her cousin, the narrator's father and mother, and this young girl, the storyteller. Alfrida is a city woman, a writer with a literary identity split between a promoter of girlish issues (weddings, brides treatments, salons etc) and the alter ego of an old lady to whom women from all over the country write in search of practical advice (eczema etc). Talkative and apparently freer since, for instance, she is the only woman talking about politics with men; referred to as a "career girl" or a "city person" (Munro: 89); a very important member of the family for whom the best dinner service was ready; she was one of the few, if not the only, social life events of the family who "had transformed us[them] into new people" (88).

But, just as in any other story, and still more in family stories, there are also downsides. At first, only "the rest of the family was never present when Alfrida had dinner at our[their] house" (Munro: 96), but later this special connection with this section of the family also cools down. The explanation the narrator thinks is the most reasonable is connected with her intimate life; Alfrida was not married but had a relationship with a married man nobody was apparently against until she asked to bring him to dinner. "My mother had a horror for irregular sex or flaunted sex" (Munro: 98), the narrator explains very informatively on both different female life attitudes and the social background Alfrida and her niece had to endure. It is precisely this male presence in Alfrida's story what disrupts the previous gaiety; now that there was a man in her life "her attention may have shifted entirely [...] she may have become a different person" (98). As if not being her own axis, the center of her own story, had changed absolutely everything.

Ironically, it is also this different person what the narrator becomes when getting married to an upper class man. Having already offered some brushstrokes on her own life, now the story moves closer in time and focuses on her; from past to near past, from "she" to "I". After a short but intense hysterical period of housekeeping since her mother's sickness aimed at pretending to be a "normal family" -whatever that means-, she wins a scholarship

and moves precisely to the city where Alfrida still lives. While a college young girl, she grows, meets her future wealthy husband, and, very significantly, decides to become a writer. This is a very good example of what Simpson explains about Munro recurring to the theme of the artist, being in her case “a woman in a small town, without the complications of recognition” just as Alfrida and her niece are (**'A Quiet Genius'**).

Curiously enough, both women are writers which may have created a strong connection between them but, on the contrary, there seems to be an irreconcilable distance. That gulf between both characters is made evident through the narrator's rejection of her aunt by ignoring once and once again her invitations for dinner. She feels ashamed of part of her roots now that she belongs to something classier and more upraised, now that she is going to build up her own family, or so she thinks.

Finally she agrees and visits Alfrida and her partner in her house although without her fiancé. That is when she realizes that Alfrida had surrendered at some point; she had resigned and contented herself with the company of a good but quiet and weak man, “her child taking unsupported steps” (107). There seem to be no traces of that lively and independent woman whose only visible improvement are her gleaming teeth; now she is wealthier and could afford to get them fixed. Her house, as metaphor of herself, is a dazzling paradigm. It is not very big but it is packed with furniture that so curiously reminds of both women's female relatives' households. “It's family furnishings” Alfrida explains, and reveals that “I[*she*] couldn't let them go” (104). Her inability to get rid of those burdens from the past represented by these family furnishings seem to speak for another lack of courage or, perhaps, even for a life surrender since she was unable to get rid of the familial and societal ties which led her to turn her back to freedom and independence.

Right at this point of the story readers find themselves at a crossroads: who is the real Alfrida? Is this one depicted in decay as a result of a direct experience of her life, or the previous shinning woman who paid a visit from time to time telling *her* story? Or are perhaps both true and complementary? Was the first story about her not so gay as the young narrator in her fascination for such a different character told us? This is precisely what Munro masters in storytelling. As if in a life mirroring Munro interweaves stories: about one character told by herself and by others, independently and in connection with other characters, from the past and the present; the stories that everybody wants to believe in contrast with the real story. Readers are left to decide but one has the feeling that in fact all of them are true, real and valid.

Although not told right after this episode but at the end of the story after many other details about the true stories of both women have been already revealed, such meddling into Alfrida's decaying home and life mean a life revelation for the narrator. It is one of those moments of light we all experience from time to time from which life is never the same again. She decides to walk through the city, nobody is in town, friends and husband are away; little by little she realizes a different way of living is possible and even maybe desirable; not only her long-time admired aunt is not what she thought but also her apparently stunning life of a woman writer married to a cultivated and handsome man starts to seem alien to her.

When I had walked for over an hour, I saw a drugstore that was open. I went in and had a cup of coffee. The coffee was reheated, black and bitter -its taste was medicinal, exactly what I needed. I was already feeling relieved, and now I began to feel happy. Such happiness to be alone. (119).

It is while telling Alfrida's story that the narrator offers brushstrokes about her own future story, although now told backwards, with the wisdom of passed time. Whereas at that moment she did not know what her role as woman in the presence of men should be since "all of my[her] experience of a woman with men, of a woman listening to her man, hoping and hoping that he will establish himself as somebody she can reasonably be proud of, was in the future" (107), sometime later she has learnt and changed a lot. Curiously enough, she has gone through such a catharsis precisely, and partly, because of Alfrida. Alfrida tells her the story of her mother's death and explains how the rest of the family did not allow her to see her mom for the last time claiming that she would feel better that way; in one of those moments of grandeur we all recall, or perhaps fictionalize, about our own past stories she remembers having said that maybe: "She would want to see me" (111).

This tightening of screws on how to approach storytelling, not from the I but from the other, is what drove the narrator to become a writer although somehow unconsciously for it was "not until it had become quite unimportant to think about who had put the idea into my head in the first place" (112). She actually became an author whose written story was precisely this one you and me and we all, readers, are reading right now. But her change does not stop her; she, the woman who thought her future husband was above and beyond all her relatives and thus herself, not only gets divorced but remarries and divorces again. As Simpson explains: "Munro's women are not terribly sentimental about marriage. Divorce is less a tragedy than a developmental milestone" (**'A Quiet Genius'**).

Smoothly driven again to Alfrida's story thanks to Munro's mastery in shifting the focus in short stories, we are informed that Alfrida changed the city for the old family town where she was called again Alfrida and not Freddie, as the narrator's father used to refer to her fondly before they all stopped respecting her. Respect is indeed key between these two women; just as the grown-up woman narrator stops admiring her aunt, Alfrida despises her niece's personal choices. Now it is through her father that we and she gets to know that Alfrida liked the fact that she had become a writer but totally rejected her divorce (113); to such an extent that she did not attend her father's funeral because she did not want to see her niece, clearly showing her discontent, or even shame, towards her life choices, just as her niece did in the past by not visiting Alfrida and not introducing her fiancé. This is a curious detail notwithstanding since Alfrida herself had also been despised precisely for her attitude towards men, so that the story goes back to itself. Here we have again, although metaphorically, those "family furnishings" Alfrida could not let go (104).

Ironically, this is not the only paradox found between the stories of these two women. During the funeral, a new character is introduced; an unknown woman who turns out to be Alfrida's birth daughter acts again as spokesperson of her mother's opinion on the narrator: "she said you were smart, but you weren't ever quite as smart as you thought you were" (118). It is clear now that Munro presents us both characters through the other's eyes; all along the story we are spectators of Alfrida's story based on her niece's views and, the opposite, the narrator's life is frequently told from others' viewpoints. And this is exactly what the narrator explains when back in the small Canadian town for the funeral she recalls the danger of going back home and "seeing my life through other eyes than my own. Seeing it as an ever-increasing roll of words like barbed wire, intricate, bewildering, uncomfortable -set against the rich productions, the foods, the flowers, and knitted garments, of other women's domesticity" (114).

Finally, the story comes back to the time right after niece and aunt met for dinner at Alfrida's place. It's Sunday, the narrator goes for a walk and rejoices that moment of solitude in which she realized that what anybody thought or thinks about her life choices did not matter, when she knew it was/is not compulsory to ask for forgiveness from those who behave differently and that committing mistakes or changing views/opinions/attitudes is simply part of life, of who we are along the way for, at that moment, she felt "this is what I wanted, this was what I thought I had to pay attention to, this was how I wanted my life to be" (119).

Proof of her mastery as one of the best Canadian storytellers ever, “Family Furnishings” leaps a realistic depiction of two extraordinary women as epitomes who validate female ambivalence. Both the feminine narrative voice, who also participates as pivotal character of the story, and Alfrida devote their life to writing and explore the contours of mainstream society opening a new door into women's diverse life choices, contradictions, anxieties, decisions, changing emotions, similarities and differences for whom marriage is sometimes a refuge, sometimes a burden, and even both or neither. Trapped in between the inherited social mores of a Canadian small town and new life choices in the city during the aftermath of the First World War, both are excellent examples of Munro's realistic, genuine, challenging and moving fictionalization of life, in this case, through female experience, the life experience she seems to know better.

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