

Alice munro essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



Alice Munro's collection of short stories in *Open Secrets* is one example of her focus on women, ordinary women, and the lives they experience and lead. Her stories present us with characters that think, feel, and develop in normal, as well as abnormal, situations. In the following discussion we focus on two of her short stories from *Open Secrets*, and confer the characters and their development. The stories chosen for examination are "Open Secrets" and "Vandals." Each of them will be discussed individually. Both of the short stories will be presented a discussion and summary concerning the characters and their development.

In the title story, 'Open Secrets,' a teenage girl out on a hike with the Canadian Girls in Training disappears. The story is described from Maureen Stephen's point-of-view, a young woman married to a much older man, a reputable lawyer in town who has speech problem and is recovering from a stroke.

Maureen is a woman apparently obsessed by what may have happened to the girl, and a woman whose own positions in life mirror that happening. She examines the conditions of what happened, or what may have happened, to this young girl, and finds herself examining her own life as a result. "Sometimes when she is just going to sleep but not quite asleep, not dreaming yet, she has caught something. Or even in the daytime during what she thinks of as her normal life. She might catch herself sitting on stone steps eating cherries and watching a man coming up the steps carrying a parcel. She has never seen those steps or that man, but for an instant they seem to be part of another life that she is leading, a life just as long and complicated and strange and dull as this one (Pp 184). After reading the

passage we can see that Maureen is a young woman who is intelligent and introspective. She is not merely moving through life blind, but a woman who is probing her present position in life and looking at the future that may well be her life.

Furthermore, She examines and analyzes life and death. For example, in one particular scene we see her looking out a window at a wall of trees along the river. She is an introspective mood and “ She could imagine vanishing. But of course you didn’t vanish, and there was always the other person on a path to intersect yours and his head was full of plans for you even before you met” (Pp 162). She might be referring to the town’s suspicion that the missing girl met her doom at the hands of a man in the woods. Obviously, this part resonates with far deeper metaphorical implication; we cannot separate this woman’s musings on foul play from our perception that she is living a life she was steered toward and does not necessarily accept as truly hers. In this is it’s incredibly, if not painfully, obvious that Maureen is a woman who is focused on developing, or understanding her life and her position in her life.

Also, from the short stories in *Open Secret*, Munro seems never forces any of her characters to make a larger point; she seems to respect them and the inherent complexity of their story far too much for that. While they develop they are also merely living, in a manner that is experienced by normal individuals. They nurture, grow, they discover, and learn, but the growth and development is not all-inclusive, and does not leave us with a powerful

ending, but rather a powerful thought process that will continue after the story is over.

The final scenes in the story: “ Maureen is a young woman yet, though she doesn’t think so, and she has life ahead of her. First a death – that will come soon – then another marriage, new places and houses. In kitchens hundreds and thousands of miles away, she’ll watch the soft skin form on the back of a wooden spoon and her memory will twitch, but it will not quite reveal to her this moment when she seems to be looking into an open secret, something not startling until you think of trying to tell it” (PP 186). In this we can evidently see a woman who is thinking, growing, and perhaps most of all, waiting. She does not necessarily understand anything new in the story, but the development is subtle as she sees where her future may lie. She comes to perhaps realize that she has a future, and that this future may be promising to her, but that promise is perhaps unrealized, may be a secret she is learning to realize and understand.

In ‘ Vandals’, Bea Doud is a typical character among Munro’s short stories. Bea has left an earnest, pleasant high school principal for a taxidermist who is rude, testy and slightly savage. This puts Bea in a position where she is also examining her life. She wants to understand why she tainted her life in this manner. And, she asks a correspondent what this reason may have been: “ She would hate to think so, because wasn’t that the way in all the dreary romances–some brute gets the woman tingling and then it’s goodbye to Mr. Fine-and-Decent? ... But what she did think–and she knew that this was very regressive and bad form–what she did think was that some women,

women like herself, might be always on the lookout for an insanity that could contain them. For what was living with a man if it wasn't living inside his insanity? A man could have a very ordinary . . . insanity, such as his devotion to a ball team. But that might not be enough, not big enough—and an insanity that was not big enough simply made a woman mean and discontented. Peter Parr, for instance, displayed kindness and hopefulness to a fairly fanatical degree. But in the end, for me ... that was not a suitable insanity” (Pp 314).

We can see a mystifying and intense inspection of one's life in the above excerpt. Here Bea is trying to understand what a woman wants in a man, and comes to some conclusion that there must be some overpowering force, some level of insanity which attracts the woman in many ways.

“ What her new man gives her is not only a fiercely guarded preserve of stuffed and active wild life but, more to her point, a life surrounded by his ‘ implacability’” (Solotaroff 665). In this we see that a woman, Bea in particular, feels the need to find some challenge and difficulty in her relationships. She needs a challenge that can perhaps display how wrong a man is, or how delicate he is, either way subtly perhaps asking for the support or balance offered by a woman. Solotaroff further offers us some insight into this perspective in the following: “ A vain as well as ironic daughter of the first family in Carstairs, addicted to the star turns of serial love affairs, Bea finds that Ladner's harsh coldness is indeed the climate she needs, and she thrives as half of one of those ‘ interesting’ older couples in baggy pants and flannel shirts one sees in country towns. But then he

suddenly dies and she soon loses her hold again, her skid greased by another aspect of his implacability she hadn't allowed herself to be aware of. Munro brings this out in another narrative line that she threads through loops in Bea's, about a young girl, Liza, from the shanty next door whom Ladner cruelly seduced and who returns after his death, a born-again Christian, to trash their property" (Solotaroff 665).

Bea is obviously a woman who thrives on some sort of chaos, and needs a powerful discrepancy in her relationships in order to feel like she is achieving something, and part of some odd yet powerful panel. She perhaps longs for a negative sort of eccentricity as it relates to affairs. She develops, despite the apparent stability of this need, for she comes to understand it more, delving into the reasons why she would be attracted to this man. And, when he is gone, she must develop for she is alone.

To conclude, these two primary characters are women who are exploring and examining their lives and their relationships. Even if we know no more of their involvement, they are obviously developing through assessment. And, in fact, this seems to be the primary key to their development. They learn and comprehend their lives in one way or another. This does not mean they come out ahead in life, for Bea obviously will seek out the unconstructive and negative over and over in order to find balance. But, the fact that they become enlightened about themselves and their lives is a powerful sense of development. They both also learn that in many ways they do control their own fate. Maureen understands that she will, if not now, have some level of control, although some aspects of her life may be predestined. The same is

applicable to Bea, for her understanding of her need in relationship to men is a sense of understanding control, but also an understanding, or perhaps acceptance, which argues she is fated to be this way.

Reference:

Solotaroff, Ted. “ Open Secrets. (book review).,” The Nation, (1994): November, v259 n18, pp. 665(4).

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Engl 106

Alice Munro’s Characters in the Novel Titled, Open Secrets

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