

Revisioing
childhood: memory
and the senses in
alice munro's "walker
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Walker Brothers Cowboy, a short story written by Alice Munro, presents the pivotal (and perhaps formative) experience of a young, unnamed, female narrator. Munro filters the girl's visual and olfactory-enriched memories through the present tense thoughts of a markedly matured voice, creating a nostalgic effect which foregrounds the significance of this childhood story to the narrator. A "warm night" filled with "cracked sidewalks" and the sound of "A very quiet, washing noise on the stones of the beach" (p. 2) greet the reader; these descriptions are the substance of the narrator's world, in Walker Brothers Cowboy. It is important that Munro creates a substantial, three-dimensional world, seen from the perspective of this young, somber girl. 'Seen' is indeed the key word here. The sensory effects illustrated are mainly visual, to present the reader with a lucid and inviting reality. Not only is the established setting established more solidly and made easier to enter, but also the piercing visual descriptions of the narrator reveal her pre-adolescent perspective of discovery and lucidity. Here, the narrator interprets a central theme in Munro's writing visually: "Children, of their own will, draw apart, separate into islands of two or one under the heavy trees, occupying themselves in such solitary ways as I do all day..." (p. 2) Though the twin themes of solitude and intimacy are only indirectly related to memory in Walker Brothers Cowboy, the narrator's penetrating visual portrayal of each of them here is important. From this example, it is evident how the reader can access the heart of the story. Without these sprinklings of sensory metaphors and interpretation, the story would be a much dimmer, two-dimensional construct. For, instead of describing a perfectly linear plot through a straightforward first person narrative, Munro takes care to sketch her story fluidly. She makes small hops across times and spaces to illustrate <https://assignbuster.com/revisioning-childhood-memory-and-the-senses-in-alice-munros-walker-brothers-cowboy/>

the characters, setting and mood, but always staying within the confines of present-tense first person to limit and define the story. Because Munro's writing style opens so many tiny possibilities, like pricks of sunlight that come through a straw hat, (p. 7) the reader must be able to enter the story on even terms with the narrator. Munro's scattered sensory descriptions and metaphors draw the reader's empathy towards the narrator very effectively. Once the reader is able to view and interpret the narrator's world from her perspective, the concept of memory comes into play. The narrator, unlike her brother, can access these events via her memory. "No worry about my brother, he does not notice enough." (p. 11) Descriptions such as "little drops form along her upper lip, hang in the soft black hairs at the corner of her mouth," (p. 10) which contrast the narrator and her brother, infuse the story with nostalgia. The perspective and feelings behind her memories are exposed, like a developing photograph, for reader and future versions of the narrator herself to examine. Hints of nostalgia are also present throughout the piece in the narrator's formal, developed diction. While all of the narrator's reactions and feelings are accurate for a young girl, her rich descriptions are reminiscent of an older, mature woman who is remembering an important past event. Nostalgia is also referenced inside of the story. On page three, her father describes the flow of icecaps with his hand in the snow. The narrator becomes uncomfortable in the twist of thoughts provoked by these vast passages of time: does entropy creep into everything? Entropy, an important aspect of nostalgia, is confronted by Munro, though subtly. The narrator admits: "I wish the Lake to be always just a lake," (p. 3) Conveying both a longing for an unchanging world and the impossibility of that longing. However, there is one place the lake will be undisturbed by <https://assignbuster.com/revisioning-childhood-memory-and-the-senses-in-alice-munros-walker-brothers-cowboy/>

entropy. The lake, “ with the safe-swimming floats marking it, and the breakwater and the lights of Tuppertown,” (p. 3) does exist, unchangeable and invulnerable to time, within the communication of the story. While any real place is susceptible to time, this fictional construct will live through Munro’s writing, within the narrator’s, and of course reader’s imagination and memory. The tension between the narrator’s mother and father, who represent much of the narrator’s world, contrast more than just their character. It emphasizes two different ways of looking at the past, two kinds of remembering. One agonizes over the past, lost in entropy or misfortune or time, and one creates fond memories in the present, regarding the past with serenity. Her father would create snatches of song which incite the narrator to laughter and pleasant memory. Whereas the narrator’s mother directly relates to presently felt nostalgia several times in the story: “ Do you remember when we put you in your sled and Major pulled you?”. (p. 4) The narrator’s father sees the present with good humour, modesty, and an accepting, easygoing nature. Her mother looks at the present situation “ with dignity, with bitterness, with no reconciliation,” (p. 3). The disparity between parents is sharply and humorously defined in the occurrence, and later retelling of the “ pee” incident. While the father later retells the event as an anecdote, built up for comic effect, he hushes the children on page four, saying: “Just don’t tell your mother that...she isn’t liable to see the joke.” Finally, in the end of the story, the shocking realization appears that her mother and father represent two sides to the same coin. The family’s past was lost, buried under change like the dinosaurs were buried under ice. Yet of course it still exists, in her father’s memory, and now in the narrator’s, and reader’s as well. The narrator connects the imagery of glaciers and her

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father's newfound past in the last page, using the metaphor of a landscape, with " All kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine." (p. 11)

Munro has beautifully sculpted a significant transitional period in this young woman's life, exalting the tiny observations to the point of nostalgia. She reaches a climax, and a thoughtful resolution with few, and small plot events. With an introspective narrator, Munro is able to implant sensory details in the reader, and illuminate the moment of realization in a way with which the reader can empathize with and understand. Source: Munro, Alice. Walker Brothers Cowboy. The Norton Anthology of Literature: The Twentieth Century. Volume F. 2nd Edition. Ed. Sarah Lawall and Maynard Mack. W. W Norton & Co. New York and London, 2002. 3010-3020.