

"Who Do You Think You Are?"

Alice Munro and the Place of Origin

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The Canadian writer Alice Munro is today firmly established as an important author with a world-wide readership. Her medium is the short story, but two of her collections, *Lives of Girls and Women* from 1971 and *Who Do You Think You Are?* from 1978, can be seen as novels in that in each of them, the stories follow the same main character from childhood to late adolescence or middle age. Both books are set in the 1930s and 1940s. Del, the protagonist of the earlier book, grows up in Jubilee, and Rose, in the later one, in Hanratty, both of them small towns in Huron County, Ontario, close to Lake Huron, and both clearly modeled on Wingham, the town in that area where the author grew up.

That Munro's stories are set in Canada does not seem to have been a drawback with American readers: she has a particularly great following in the United States, where for 15 years she has been represented in *The New Yorker*. But when *Who Do You Think You Are?* was to be brought out in that country, the publisher rejected the title of the Canadian edition, because, as Munro has told us, "They felt the colloquial put-down was not familiar to Americans."¹

The expression "Who do you think you are?" could be meant as an encouragement to self-examination in order to gain self-knowledge. The more obvious reading, however, is to see it as a reprimand for being conceited, or pretentious, or overly ambitious. It was undoubtedly the latter reading the New York publisher had in mind, and we may ask

1 J. R. (Tim) Struthers, "The Real Material: An Interview with Alice Munro," in *Probable Fictions. Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*, ed. Louis K. MacKendrick (Downsview, Ontario: ECW Press, 1983), p. 29.

ourselves: if an expression criticizing ambition and self-sufficiency evidently is understood in Munro's world, but is unfamiliar to people in America, could the reason be that while these qualities are frowned upon in Canada, they are regarded as virtues in the United States?

This raises the question of the different national characteristics of the two countries. In the following I shall look at these differences and their historic origins. After establishing, necessarily with oversimplification, some traits we might expect to find in the United States and in (English-speaking) Canada, I shall look at Munro's two novels to see if what the author tells us about the protagonists and their Canadian place of origin tallies with what we would expect to find there.

Central in any discussion of the differences between America and its northern neighbor are the writings of Seymour Martin Lipset. In the article "Revolution and Counterrevolution: The United States and Canada" he takes us back to the early history of the two countries where he finds the roots for what he sees as their respective national characteristics.² America was formed through a revolution. The thirteen colonies were united in their desire to free themselves from British domination. They created the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. These documents very much concentrate on the individual, especially when they speak of the "inalienable rights" of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."³

America was already seen as the promised land. Now, thanks to the American self-reliant individualism (and from the 1840s also the idea of the Manifest Destiny), the frontier became a symbol for unlimited possibilities. The American, this New Man, demonstrated such traits as independence, a restless energy, persistence, an active approach to life; he was full of initiative, adventurousness, and wanderlust; he was an

2 First published 1965. Reprinted in *A Passion for Identity. An Introduction to Canadian Studies*, eds. Eli Mandel and David Taras (Toronto: Methuen, 1987), pp. 68-81. A fuller discussion by Lipset of the two countries is found in his recent book *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

3 The following discussion of the different national characteristics of the two countries draws upon Lipset's "Revolution and Counterrevolution"; Arthur Schlesinger, "What Then Is the American, This New Man?" (1940), as reprinted in *Readings in Intellectual History: The American Tradition*, ed. by C. K. McFarland (New York: Holt, 1970), pp. 404-419, and Luther S. Luedtke, "The Search for American Character," in *Making America. The Society and Culture of the United States*, ed. Luther S. Luedtke (Washington, D. C.: United States Information Agency, 1987), pp. 7-34.

idealist and an optimist, with confidence in a future which he should actively shape rather than passively accept; he held a progressive rather than a static view of history, emphasizing the new rather than the old, and regarding change as good because it could only lead to something better. The new nation believed in democracy, in equality, in an egalitarian society; the emphasis was on hard work, on achievement and success; the individual personality was highly valued, and the New Man developed a certain brashness and a love of bragging.

While the Americans actively formed a new independent nation, the colonists in the north remained loyal to Britain and the Crown. The influx into Canada in the 1770s of 40,000 refugee Loyalists strengthened the emphasis there on the old conservative values. When the Fathers of Confederation in 1867 joined together Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick and formed the Dominion of Canada, this was a counterrevolution and not a revolution: ties with Britain were to remain strong. They were pragmatists rather than idealists: they did not speak of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," but of "peace, order and good government." Confederation was a marriage of convenience, entered into with the negative aim of not being swallowed up by the United States.

Canadians kept the old respect for law and the authorities, for the ruling elites. The British North America Act of 1867 (today called the Constitution Act) contained no Bill of Rights. It stressed communal rights—of provinces, of linguistic groups—more than those of the individual. While on the American frontier the newcomers often took the law into their own hands, in Canada the Royal Mounted Police preceded the pioneers and saw to it that development was orderly. As the Canadian historian Arthur Lower has said:

We have always carried authority and a code with us, no matter how far from "the law" we have happened momentarily to be.... The result has been less non-conformity in Canadian life than in America, less experimentation, more acceptance of standards built up in the long history of the English-speaking race.⁴

Margaret Atwood views *the frontier* as the symbol for America, the new place, the fresh virgin territory that "holds out hope, never fulfilled but always promised, of Utopia, the perfect human society," while she sees

4 As quoted in Lipset, "Revolution and Counterrevolution," p. 79.

survival as the central symbol for Canada, survival in the face of the elements, the natives, the opposing linguistic group, and (lately) the American influence.⁵

Certainly one does not find in Canada the same over-optimism, the same assertiveness as in the United States. The emphasis is more on moderation and compromise. The Horatio Alger success story did not inspire the Canadians: they remained less aggressive, less innovative, more cautious than the Americans. While the outgoing Americans felt that everybody might become somebody, asserting that "I'm as good as you," the more reserved Canadians rather said "I'm no better than anybody else."

Also as a nation Canada felt insecure. It took more than a hundred years before the British North America Act was "taken home" from London to Ottawa, and only in 1965 did the country get a national flag. The boisterous patriotism and the enthusiastic waving of the national flag which we find in the United States is much less likely to be encountered in Canada. As we might expect, the history and national characteristics of the two nations are reflected in their respective literatures. As Ronald Sutherland has said, while the traditional American hero is self-reliant and defies the world, his Canadian counterpart is more self-effacing, "struggling within himself to find an accommodation of some sort" Rather than being a winner who defies the system, the Canadian protagonist is a loser who blames himself for his failure.⁶

Del of *Lives of Girls and Women* does not seem like a future loser. She is a strong-willed girl who secretly wants to become somebody. But she has to fight a Canadian small-town environment where ambition is frowned upon. This comes out in her aunts' description of a visitor from the big city:

Didn't he think he was somebody! That was their final condemnation, lightly said. He thinks he's somebody. Don't they think they're somebody. Pretensions were everywhere.

Not that they were against ability. They acknowledged it in their own family, our family. But it seemed the thing to do was to keep it more or less a secret. Ambition was what they were alarmed by, for to be ambitious was to court failure and to risk making a fool of

5 Margaret Atwood, *Survival. A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), pp. 31-2.

6 Ronald Sutherland, "A Literary Perspective: The Development of a National Consciousness," in *Understanding Canada*, ed. William Metcalfe (New York: New York University Press, 1982), pp. 410-11.

oneself. The worst thing, I gathered, the worst thing that could happen in this life was to have people laughing at you.⁷

In *Who Do You Think You Are?* we are told about Rose's childhood in West Hanratty, the poorer section of the town, about her marriage in the big city, and about her divorce and her later career as an actress. As a young girl she is twice asked the question that gives title to the book. She is described as having "high hopes of herself," as harboring "gaudy ambitions." Flo, her step-mother, is irritated by her "smart-aleck behavior": "Oh, don't you think you're somebody, says Flo, and a moment later, Who do you think you are?"⁸

One day in school, Miss Hattie, the teacher, wrote a long poem on the blackboard and said that "everyone was to copy it out, then learn it off by heart, and the next day recite it." Rose

learned poetry with ease; it seemed reasonable to her to skip the first step. She read the poem and learned it, verse by verse, then said it over a couple of times in her head. While she was doing this Miss Hattie asked her why she wasn't copying.

Rose replied that she knew the poem already, though she was not perfectly sure that this was true.

"Do you really?" said Miss Hattie. "Stand up and face the back of the room."

Rose did so, trembling for her boast.

"Now recite the poem to the class."

Rose's confidence was not mistaken. She recited without a hitch....

"Well, you may know the poem," Miss Hattie said, "but that is no excuse for not doing what you were told. Sit down and write it in your book. I want you to write every line three times. If you don't get it finished you can stay after four."

Rose did have to stay after four, of course, raging and writing while Miss Hattie got out her crocheting. When Rose took the copy to her desk Miss Hattie said mildly enough but with finality, "You can't go thinking you are better than other people just because you can learn poems. Who do you think you are?"

This was not the first time in her life Rose had been asked who she thought she was; in fact the question had often struck her like a monotonous gong and she paid no attention to it. But she understood, afterwards, that Miss Hattie was not a sadistic teacher; she had refrained from saying what she now said in front of the class. And she was not vindictive; she was not taking revenge because she had not believed Rose and had been proved wrong. The lesson she was trying to teach here was more important to her than any poem, and one she truly believed Rose needed. It seemed that many other people believed she needed it, too.⁹

7 Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 37-38.

8 Alice Munro, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1978), pp. 45, 13.

9 Ibid., pp. 195-6.

The message that Jubilee and Hanratty impress upon Munro's two gifted and ambitious young women: keep your aspirations and pretensions in check, seems well in line with the Canadian national characteristics sketched above. No wonder Del and Rose leave their stifling small towns for the big city, hoping it will offer them scope for their ambition.

In a brief essay on Neepawa, Manitoba, the place of her origin, Margaret Laurence writes:

When I was 18, I couldn't wait to get out of that town, away from the prairies. I did not know then that I would carry the land and the town all my life within my skull, that they would form the mainspring and source of the writing I was to do, wherever and however far away I might live.¹⁰

When Del, after years away, briefly revisits her place of origin, it has—with the distance—become precious to her: she wants

every last thing [of Jubilee], every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together—radiant, everlasting.¹¹

Like Del, Rose goes back temporarily to the place she came from—her stepmother needs help. Confronted with memories of her past there, she feels shame. "The thing she was ashamed of, in acting, was that she might have been paying attention to the wrong things" when she used her Hanratty past for funny stories at cocktail parties.¹²

We see that Munro illustrates also the first meaning of the phrase "Who do you think you are": an encouragement to self-examination in order to learn about yourself. Through a renewed confrontation with their home towns and their own origins, Del and Rose, in their different ways, are trying to come to grips with their true selves. When Munro was once asked if she didn't feel that Rose was unfulfilled, or a loser, she answered: "She gets something. She gets herself.... She gets a knowledge of herself."¹³

At the end of *Who Do You Think You Are?* Rose no longer thinks as

10 Margaret Laurence, *Heart of a Stranger* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), p. 217. The essay is called "Where the World Began."

11 *Lives of Girls and Women*, p. 249.

12 *Who Do You Think You Are?* p. 205.

13 Alice Munro in *For Openers. Conversations with 24 Canadian Writers*, ed. Alan Twigg (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour, 1981), p. 19.

much about the confining aspects of her place of origin as about how it may represent the truest, most valuable part of herself. But that doesn't mean that she can return to live there; nor can Del go back for good to Jubilee.

After nearly thirty years away, Alice Munro herself returned to live in Huron County, that is, not in Wingham, but in Clinton, a town somewhat further south. Some people of the district have felt offended by her books: *Lives of Girls* and *Women* was for a time removed from high school reading lists in the area, and the Wingham newspaper once printed an editorial criticizing the author.¹⁴

But at least one local person treated her as if time had stood still: when she after an absence of twenty years briefly revisited her home town, again taking the Wingham bus from London as she had done every week while going to college, she found the same bus driver, but now his hair was gray. As she gave him her ticket, he said: "Hello, Alice. Where have you been? What have you done?"¹⁵ So—she was home again.

14 Alice Munro in *For Openers*, p.15, and "What Is Real?" *Canadian Forum*, LXII, 721 (1982), 5, and Robert Thacker, "Connection: Alice Munro and Ontario," *American Review of Canadian Studies*, XIV, 2 (1984), 250.

15 This anecdote was told by Alice Munro at the Second Hovda Canadian Seminar (Hovda is a place in southern Norway), 12-15 February, 1982; quoted with her permission.