



The Spirit of Humanistic Care in Alice Munro's *Dear life*

XIA Genghua^{[a],*}; LIU Xiangqun^[b]

^[a] Associate professor of English, English Department, School of Foreign Languages, Yancheng Teachers University, Yancheng, China.

^[b] Assistant, English Department, Yancheng Polytechnic College, Yancheng, China.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Dear Life is considered to be Munro's last work, which Munro said was "the first, last, and most intimate words" about her life. This work not only takes women as the protagonists, grabs the fragments of women's life to observe their living conditions and explores their rich inner world, but also creates a large number of male images with marginal status, vague identity, passive behavior and even subordinate to women. These men no longer represent the traditional powerful patriarchy and the supreme male power. Instead, they display anxiety about their own masculinity and their male submissive identity, thus presenting a crisis of masculinity and gender paradox. Whether in her description of the plight of women's survival or in her portrayal of male images losing their subject identity, Munro, in this work, manages to express a humanistic concern for human nature. From the perspective of her understanding of women and her care for men, this paper will discuss Munro's spirit of humanistic care in *Dear life*.

Key words: *Dear life*; Humanistic care; Alice Munro

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1. INTRODUCTION

Alice Munro is the first Canadian woman writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature. She is known as "the master of contemporary short stories", and is one of the most important spokesmen of contemporary Canadian literature. Munro's short stories focus on the daily life of ordinary women in small towns in Canada. In her works, Munro describes their pursuit of love, their resistance to obstacles in life, and their insistence on their own values, which reflects the profound imprint of Traditional Gender Ethics on women's growth path, and which reflects their arduous growth process and tragic fate, and embodies Munro's strong insight into life, her unbiased compassion for humans and her literary ability to grasp the characteristics of the images she creates. *Dear life* is considered as "Munro's most abundant, perfect and personalized masterpiece" (Pu, 2019) and is also her self-proclaimed "sealed work". Peil Westberg, chairman of the Nobel Prize for literature, thinks that *Dear Life* is "the most distinctive works of Munro". (Wang, 2018) Munro herself said that this is her best work. *Dear Life* tells the ordinary life of escape and return, life and death, ethics and responsibility. The work consists of many short stories. Most of the stories are still set in the remote town of Huron County, Ontario, Munro's hometown. The time is roughly before and after World War II. It expresses the complex and delicate feelings about this cramped and narrow town life. It has a strong Canadian style. It is worth noting that the last four stories of *Dear Life* are grouped together. The final four works are not quite stories. They form a separate unit, one that is autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact. "I believe they are the first and last—and the closest—things I have to say about my own life". (Munro, 2013) *Dear Life* tells of parting and rebirth, real or illusory accidents, dangers and homecoming. The scenes depicted in *Dear Life* are vivid and unforgettable. Munro illustrates the critical moments

of life change, possibly a dream, a sexual encounter, or a little joke about fate, which eventually lead men and women out of their original trajectory and into a new way of being. The stories highlight her keen vision of life and her talent for telling stories that no one can match.

In the context of post-modern culture, in view of the weakening of humanistic spirit and the gradual loss of humanistic responsibility in contemporary literature, it is of great significance to advocate the spirit of humanistic care of literature. The spirit of humanistic care can also be seen as emotional humanitarianism. Rational humanitarians hope to change the world by mending the system, while emotional humanitarians hope to change the world by spreading the spirit of fraternity. Babbitt believes that humanists act between extreme sympathy and extreme discipline and choice, and become humanistic because they keep a balance between extremes. The more popular expression of this truth is: as Pascal said, the real mark of a man's excellence is the ability to coordinate the opposite virtues and occupy all the space in the middle. It is in this ability to harmoniously unify the opposite character in oneself that man obtains the essential superiority which is different from the animal. (Babbitt, 1908) Therefore, Munro's depiction of the choice and opposition of the good and the evil in the heart of women and men not only shows her grasp of the plight of human life, but also shows her spirit of humanistic care.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Dear Life could be regarded as a summary of Munro's writing practice at the conclusion of her career. Like the previous thirteen short story collections, stories in *Dear Life* continue to deal with the ordinary life of girls and women, but Munro adds more details of daily life for both woman and men. *The Boston Globe* comments that this collection is wise and unforgettable. It also points out that *Dear Life* is a wondrous gift; a reminder of why Munro's work endures. Alisa Cox (2014) provides a close reading in the collection with Bakhtinian concepts of dialogue and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. It discusses intertextual connections to Munro's earlier collections to illustrate that the writer's positioning of the autobiographical title as a "final" text has brought readers back to the origins of Munro's writing and its engagement in open-ended concepts of time and reality.

At home, Lin Yuzhen analyzes Munro's changing of thought from its narrative features of male characters in *Dear Life*. She points out that Munro describes the life of men from their marginal status, vague words, subordinate role as well as their passive view point in her earlier works. In her last work, however, she modifies this kind of marginal status to give some direct descriptions of males to reveal what is the reality of common life (Lin, 2015). Liu Hongyu illustrates *Dear Life* from

Lacan's psychoanalysis, which holds that women in this collection are struggling on their narrow rough way of pursuing dreams and desires which were often broken and uncertain. And he mentions that Munro uses stream of consciousness to insert herself as an obvious other, which makes the subject become a complete nothingness (Liu, 2015). Although the above scholars have analyzed the portrayal of women and men in *Dear Life*, few people have researched into Munro's spirit of humanistic care conveyed in the novel. Therefore, this paper attempts to interpret the humanistic care revealed in the novel from the following two aspects.

3. THE SPIRIT OF HUMANISTIC CARE IN DEAR LIFE

3.1 Munro's Understanding of Women

Munro depicts a variety of female characters in the novel, who are different not only in their personalities, but also in the difficulties they encounter. They often face ethical, emotional and life problems. These problems are true of real life and reflect the realistic problems faced by modern women in their struggle for survival. Munro uses simple and inclusive brushwork as much as possible to express women's reactions to various difficulties. Instead of beautifying them or judging their choices morally, Munro provides an open ending, leaving endless reverie in the end. In Babbitt's discourse, humanism is a good way to save the flood of emotion. Understanding the complexity of emotion and respecting the choice out of emotion is the basic understanding of human nature, which also conforms to the basic principles of humanistic care. In *Drifting to Japan*, Greta, the heroine, has a thinking gap with her husband and mother-in-law, and her identity as a poet is not really recognized by the people around her, which makes her want to flee. However, in Munro's writing, this trip to Toronto is more like a Utopian journey than a real one. Maybe it's just Greta's fancy wish. The call of family life to her heart is Greta's self-examination of her own heart, which shows that people may be lost in the colorful desires for a moment, but they still have to return to their own lives and fulfill their social responsibilities. The contradiction between women's family responsibility and career pursuit, social identity and private identity leads to the heroine's confusion. Munro reveals the character's uneasiness and perplexity with delicate psychological description, which reflects not only Munro's understanding of the difficulties faced by women in life, but also her sympathy for them, and her attempts to arrange a possibility for them to escape.

In *The View of the Lake*, Munro depicts a mental patient named Nancy. The ending of the novel is very unexpected, which makes it very unique in this book. In the story, the heroine is constantly searching for the

doctor, and meantime meets a man who is quite fond of her. However, in the sanatorium where there are doctors, she is suddenly locked up. At last, the mystery is solved, and it turns out that she is a patient living in a sanatorium. The heroine's escape is more like a reminiscence of the happy life of the past, whether it be a disease attack or a self-directed performance. She was, at that time, able to drive and leave the sanatorium, with her beloved husband. Other people's escape is to head for a certain future, but her escape is to return to the past. In the author's writing, this reverse escape is also a way to face life. The author arranges Nancy to escape the cruel reality through fantasy to achieve at least a moment of peace. Nancy's misfortune, among other things, reflects Munro's sympathy for and concern about the survival plight of women in their old age.

In terms of the female characters in the novel, the theme of *Dear Life* includes two aspects: escape and face up to. On the one hand, women in their life may encounter a variety of dilemmas. Some may experience betrayals; some remain mediocre their whole life; some feel confused about and unprepared for the cruel social reality; some do not meet with good endings with their life. When they feel trapped in the dilemmas, they choose to flee. In Munro's works, their escape, no matter what kind, is of human nature and Munro conveys her understanding of their dilemmas, her care about their struggles and her support of their choice. Her stories of women serve to reveal that for every individual life, no matter how humble, there is the possibility of glittering; every person, no matter how insignificant, has the right to pursue a happy life. On the other hand, Munro also makes her women characters realize that suffering is inevitable in life and dilemmas are everywhere in life. There may not be easy solutions to them or people have to wait for a long time for solutions to them. But in the end Munro gives women courage to face up to the reality of life and pursue happiness with kindness.

3.2 Munro's Care for Men

The description of male characters in *Dear Life* is also vivid. After the publication, Munro was asked whether she was a feminist writer, and she said, "I never thought about it. Of course, I may not know... I really think it's not easy to be a man." (Deborah, 2012) That means, even though she has a deep concern about women and their fate in her stories, she also displays care for men's life. For example, there is a man in her book born with cleft lip. Though disabled, he has been used to his appearance and lived a humble life. He seems to be quite contented with his humble life. But he is actually a man of strong self-esteem. When he is in the face of love, a feeling he has never experienced before, his inner inferiority prevents him from pursuing happiness. The female image here has become the dominant side of the relationship. Munro not only depicts the delicate and complex inner world of

men, but also reveals the gender relationship dominated by women. In the story, he refuses the heroine's affection because he did not want to be pitied, and their story seems to come to an abrupt end. However, the author tries to arrange an open ending for them. Finally, the woman was about to travel, and the man also sold the house. It happened that the five skunks attracted the attention of both of them. This simple but random pleasure made them laugh together. The development of the story seems to be unfinished. They may or may not get together, but at least it makes people understand that no matter who they are, no matter what kind of experience they have, everyone, men and women, has the right to pursue a simple and happy life and have the possibility of coming together to make a wonderful life for themselves.

Jung said: "Every man has an unconscious female image in order to make the personality harmonious and balanced, we must allow the female aspect of male personality and the male aspect of female personality to be displayed in individual consciousness and behavior." (Jung, 2011) In Munro's works, the traditional dominant image of male characters is dissolved by the author's creation of some female characters of independent personality. In *Amundsen*, the male "doctor" has always been a typical dominant male image. In his job, he is the leader. In his relation with his girlfriend, he has always occupied a leading position. He can decide to get married or suddenly go back on his word, all of which reflects a traditional patriarchal male image. However, in Munro's works, the doctor's contradictory personality is revealed through his inner struggles. Whether it be the doctor's fickleness, his being good at taking care of himself, or his painful expression of gripping the steering wheel with both hands before making the decision of repentance, all subvert the readers' impression of his previous dominant masculinity. More examples include a crying husband in the face of an adulterous wife, a police officer who was devastated after his wife died, etc. These images are covered in the outer shell of men, but they also have the inner weak moments as women. Munro truly reproduces the life dilemmas that men also face, and describes their inner struggle and suffering. The creation of these characters reflects Munro's humanistic care for men.

4. CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the female and male characters in *Dear Life*, this paper interprets the spirit of humanistic care in Alice Munro's works. It is found that Munro has a kind of sympathetic understanding of and care for both men and women. She truly represents the difficulties people encounter in modern life. Through different writing techniques she successfully depicts her characters' inner struggles and contradictions, revealing, free of gender bias, the human side of her characters.

Admittedly, the character analysis in this paper is far from enough, and there are still many characters to be analyzed. What's more, the understanding of characters in this paper is also relatively one-sided and fails to systematically interpret the concept of humanistic care. Therefore, there is still room for improvement in many respects.

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