

Questions and Proposals about Alice Munro's story, "Royal Beatings"

For future readers of these study questions: The page numbers indicated below refer to the story anthology, *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction: Shorter Seventh Edition*, eds. R. V. Cassill and Richard Bausch, 2006. In the All Souls Book Group at the Cathedral of All Souls in Asheville, NC, we read "Royal Beatings" as part of a course we undertook in the short story in the fall of 2009.

Please note: This document concludes with a brief reflection on some of the rewards to be enjoyed in reading the stories of Alice Munro – and to be enjoyed in reading creative literature generally.

1. Rose's, and the story's, habit of "picturing things"

In the third sentence of "Royal Beatings" (569), we read that, "Rose had a need to picture things, to pursue absurdities, that was stronger than the need to stay out of trouble [...]."

One thing you might do as you review the story is to go back through the first three pages and put a mark in the margin beside every instance of something being "pictured." I'm not sure yet, but I think it could safely be said that "picturing things" is one of this story's deep subjects or questions. So when we meet on Monday, we will start out by going through the story and indicating all the instances in which something is being "pictured." (By the way, I'm using the term "picture" loosely. "Imagine" or "figure" or even "suppose" could work here as well.)

2. Is it possible that these characters do as much "picturing" as they do because of their economic circumstance?

Is it possible that these characters do as much "picturing" as they do because of their economic circumstance? A lot of the things they picture are things they don't fully understand--because they haven't

had the fortune to obtain the education that would create that understanding. (Is that right?) Or is the matter more complex than that? What do you think?

3. The story's materialism/ interest in social structures, and in the poverty borne by the story's central characters

Why do you think Munro has included the very long section --in the Norton anthology this section is the first paragraph on 572 --about the "social structures" of Hanratty and its impoverished companion, West Hanratty? The paragraph ends with a lengthy description of the physical composition -- and, in many instances, de-composition -- of West Hanratty. Munro makes sure we know of the "legendary poverty" of this time and place. (And it's interesting: it is only decades later that the poverty will be figured as "legendary.") How does this poverty, matter to, *affect*, the relationship between Rose and Flo?

4. The long section about the Tydes

Why do you think so much attention is given to the Tydes, or, more important, to *stories about* the Tydes? In the Norton anthology we're working with, this section begins in the middle of page 573 and extends through to the middle of page 575. The stories --about Becky Tyde's polio, about her father, about the horsewhipping given to her father by three ne'er do wells in West Hanratty --are told by Flo to Rose.

The section ends with Flo saying, "Imagine."

Why do you think these stories about the Tydes are in the larger story? And why do you think Munro concludes the section with that word, "Imagine"?

5. Now the reader is "supposing," "picturing," "pursuing absurdities." Or, maybe now the reader is watching and/or listening to the writer write.

About two-thirds of the way through the story, the narrative address shifts to the second person. Here is the passage in which this shift happens:

“The royal beatings. What got them started?”

Suppose a Saturday, in spring. Leaves not out yet but the doors open to the sunlight. Crows. Ditches full of running water. Hopeful weather. Often on Saturdays Flo left rose in charge of the store – it’s a few years now, these are the years when Rose was nine, ten, eleven, twelve – while she herself went across the bridge to Hanratty (going uptown they called it) to shop and see people, and listen to them.” (576, *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction, Shorter Seventh Edition*, 2006).

So quiet is this shift, you might not notice it unless you were listening for it, but we will again be directed to “suppose” the circumstances in which the “royal beatings” “got started” several more times as the story continues. This is to say that Munro intends this re-orientation in a lasting, consciousness-shaping way. Who do you think is being spoken to, in this shift of address? Is the address to us, the readers of the story? Or is the narrator talking to herself, figuring out how her story will go, or could go? Perhaps what is happening here is that we’re watching the story, the very world of the story, being hewn out, “pictured” out, “supposed” out. But maybe I am wrong. What do you think is happening here?

6. And what about the ending?

What a way to end a story! What about the leap forward in time? What about that crazy coincidence of Rose hearing Hat Nettleton being interviewed on the radio? “Hat Nettleton. Horsewhipper into centenarian.” (584) The interview itself, the questions asked of Hat, “imagine” him, “suppose” him, in a very particular way. Rose knows otherwise about Hat – or, she knows “an” otherwise. (It is important, indeed crucial, to remember that this story offers *multiple* apprehensions of its characters. Also crucial to keep in mind is that

nearly every one of those apprehensions is arrived at through “picturing,” “imagining” – through storytelling.) And how hilarious, that when the interviewer, with his/her “smooth, encouraging voice,” tries rhetorically to force Hat to have had these “experiences” which young men growing up in a different time--read, young men who weren’t bone poor – didn’t have, Hat disarms the interviewer by talking about eating “groundhog meat.” Groundhog meat! An experience indeed.

And then you’ve got the “biting” last image of Flo occasionally “showing her feelings” “by biting a nurse.” (We haven’t seen many characters “show their feelings” in this story. Or have we?) Note that this moment isn’t “supposed” by someone else in the story. It actually...happened, and you as reader are the only one who knows about it. Why make Flo biting a nurse be the last image in the story?

7. Some praise for Alice Munro/ A reflection the rewards of reading her fiction and on reading creative literature generally

One of the reasons I am grateful to Alice Munro – -and my gratitude is likely shared by thousands of readers--is for the work she did story after story to “impress” upon her readers’ minds new “patterns”* of experience, fresh, cliché-less “pictures” of life – -of oneself; of the other; of those episodes in history otherwise lost to legend; of those populations, usually poor, otherwise lost to idealization; of one’s parents, one’s forebears; of marriage; of sex; of what is involved in being a woman; of what is involved in being a woman writer; of what is involved in loss; of what is involved in being on the verge of death; and the list here could go on at length. To me, the originality of Munro’s craft is not about ideas or literary innovation or even about mounting a possibly useful or illuminating critique; it is about giving us new forms by which to “suppose” ourselves--new “pictures,” new “patterns,” whose sudden and sometimes brutal-feeling arrival within a story can free us from those old patterns which may deaden imagination, and here I mean patterns shaped by ideology, and by the fear bred by ideology. Munro is a wild writer – -she writes into a kind of wilderness, or perhaps wilderness is too

attractive a word, maybe “squalor” would be better: a world still being improvised, still entering its first cycle, where the meanings and the structures by which we organize the meanings have yet to be established. In doing so, she gives us the chance to imagine originally again, to find life in places we had not expected it, this because we had never “thought” our way to those “places” before--at least not within the realm of creative literature.

“Royal Beatings,” to be sure, offers the kinds of imaginative opportunity described in the paragraph above, but I want to add that these opportunities are not restricted to the many stories Munro has written about people who are materially poor. There is squalor and/or wildness of meaning to be encountered in Munro’s stories about comfortable people as well, and here I mean people like you and me. Take, for example, “The Bear Came Over the Mountain,” a story some of you may know, in that it was made into a film, called “Away From Her,” released in 2006. (It was shown at the Fine Arts Theater in Asheville soon after its release.) In this story, a couple, Fiona and Grant, long and often happily married, face, and then endure, separation, as Fiona develops Alzheimer’s, and has to be placed by a reluctant Grant into a nursing facility. There are many elements to the story I’m leaving out; the element I want submit as a way to develop my argument is Fiona’s falling in love, after she has gotten settled in the facility, with a fellow patient, Aubrey. The story now raises a sublimely exhilarating question: How is it possible to fall in love with someone when you don’t know who you are? The compass points by which we navigate across our very souls are in Munro’s stories—well, not present; indeed, in “The Bear Came Over the Mountain,” what we mainly see, when setting is shown, is ice and snow (it’s winter), along with repeated reference to “Iceland,” a subject interesting to Fiona before she’d developed Alzheimer’s—her mother had been Icelandic---and entirely negligible to her afterwards, her disinterest a point of sorrow for Grant, as Iceland was something the couple had shared. The ice, the white and cold, the now emptiness of the word “Iceland” (which is actually green), are presumably intended to show what Grant may feel like as he is forced by *contingency merely*, by chaos, into a kind of polar Brigadoon

where it is not just *his* love he must reconsider, but love a- particularly, love homelessly. The turn, within Fiona, away from a known past to an unknown and never-ending present, her mind now cheerfully emptied of decades of marriage, is terrifying, for Grant and for us --but the turn results for Fiona in connection, in life. A squalid, unlovely, uncultivated, almost garishly absurd kind of life, in the way forsythia seem absurd, blooming raggedly in fire-hydrant yellow out of the mud of late winter. Forsythia bushes appear throughout one of Munro's most ambitious stories, "The Love of a Good Woman," and stand for me as one of her signature images -- an emblem of Munro's commitment to writing out of the material world while still sternly and reasonably expecting to find life amidst its sometime chaos and cruelty. Life where you least expected it, life where you thought was death. And, paradox not paradox anymore, rather a full-ness the reach of which we had not anticipated before reading Alice Munro.

What am I doing? Trying to persuade you to read more Alice Munro. I'm also trying to demonstrate one of the rewards of reading great fiction, which is the habitation, for as long as one is reading, anyway, within new forms by which to imagine our selves and our lives. That is a valuable contribution. And who knows, maybe these rewards last beyond the reading experience itself. Maybe the frequent reader has a kind of repertoire of forms/ templates/ figurations available to her as she encounters circumstances like the ones she has read about, forms which she can reincarnate as she tries to "figure out" her own story. Or maybe the advantage lies precisely in having *multiple* forms; maybe to have a choice can free her from perceived bondage to a perceived standard, the agency then to be enjoyed itself a form, or maybe even a victory *over* form, in that now the experience is less an apprehension -- of something out there that you are not-- than a mobility, a fluidity or fluency, even a kind of expertise. (Munro has a story about this kind of agency/ mobility in her most recent collection, *Too Much Happiness*. The story is called "Fictions.") I'm getting a little out ahead of myself, but some of you may have read about these recent neurological findings that say that our minds are essentially plastic things whose pathways we can determine on the

basis of what we do with those minds – what we give our attention to, whether we are introducing our minds to new questions, new problems, new environments, and so on. What better argument for the reading of creative literature, and for the reading of the path-breaking kind when we do.

*The expression, “impress” new “patterns” on the mind, comes in part from the title story of Munro’s most recent collection, *Too Much Happiness* (Knopf, 2009). The story is about a 19th century Russian female mathematician, Sophia. Late in the story, Sophia is thinking about how students have “mediocre minds”: “Only the most obvious, regular patterns can be impressed upon them,” she thinks. From this sentence I am extrapolating a definition of what creative literature can do, which is to “impress new patterns on the mind.” My guess is that I’m not the only reader who has wondered whether Munro didn’t intend Sophia’s work with her math as a portrait of, or as an analogy to, Munro’s work with fiction.