

# Portrait of The Artist as a Young Girl: Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*

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In the last chapter of *Lives of Girls and Women*, "Epilogue: The Photographer," Del Jordan explicitly states her artistic creed. As a mature woman, she looks back at her adolescent self and tries to recapture her earlier sense of life. She makes up lists of her memories of Jubilee—a list of all the stores and businesses up and down Main Street and their owners, a list of family names, of names on tombstones, and similar things. Then she concludes:

And no list could hold what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing, 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.<sup>1</sup>

Here is Del's method of capturing reality in a novel. It consists of noting every detail of subjective and especially objective life. Reality is rendered through an account of the myriad details of mundane existence. But, as the

parable of the photographer illustrates, the artist records the objective details of everyday life with a difference. Like the photographer whose mysterious pictures reveal possibilities which people do not know, the signs of stupidity or dullness on fresh, unlined faces, the dreadful ravages of future life hidden in the present, the artist invests his detailed portrayals of time and place with an unseen significance. This is not only the artistic creed of the protagonist Del Jordan, it is also Alice Munro's creed; and *Lives of Girls and Women* is an example of its use. By illustrating these principles, the novel studies the development of the kind of artist who espouses them. If *Lives of Girls and Women* is in some ways Alice Munro's artistic autobiography, Del Jordan's life symbolizes the kind of experiences that create an artistic consciousness like that of Alice Munro. And Del Jordan's life is quintessentially female, composed of experiences and perceptions directly related to her role as a girl and as a woman.

J.R. Struthers, in an essay comparing *Lives of Girls and Women* to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, stresses that the importance of Munro's novel lies in its being a *kunstlerroman*, a story of the development of the artist, rather than just a *bildungsroman*, the story of the development of any young protagonist.<sup>2</sup> I will show that the emphasis in *Lives of Girls and Women* is on Del Jordan's growth and development as a young woman, and that there is a crucial relationship between her womanhood and her artistry.

As a *bildungsroman*, *Lives of Girls and Women* begins with the narrow focus and limited perspective of a young school girl and then gradually widens its focus to accommodate Del's maturing interests and the growing number of people with whom she is involved.<sup>3</sup> In Chapter One, Del is immersed in her family and its immediate surroundings. In Chapter Two, she encounters the relatives at Jenkins' Bend. Later chapters enlarge her sphere to include her friends at school and the townspeople of Jubilee. Within this frame of gradually widening family and social relationships, one of the ways that Del defines herself is by comparing and contrasting, imitating and rejecting the various girls and women who provide examples for her of feminine behaviour.

Del's first and most influential model is her mother. At first, she is an unquestioned and unanalyzed model. Ida Jordan belongs neither to the shabby and unconventional society of the Flats Road nor to the more organized, but also more traditional, life of the town of Jubilee. While Del was very young and they were living on the Flats Road, her mother turned to the town

hopefully and with enjoyment and made sure it would notice her, calling out greetings to ladies who turned with surprised, though pleasant, faces, going into the dark dry-goods store and seating herself on one of the little high stools and

calling for somebody to please get her a glass of water after that hot dusty walk. (pp. 6-7)

At that time, Del "followed her without embarrassment, enjoying the commotion" (p. 7). When they did move to Jubilee, Ida Jordan's tactlessness, her innocence, her disconcerting ideas and contempt for traditional ways prevented her from making any friends in town except her boarder, Fern Dogherty. But in those days, Del was her mother's accomplice and the sharer of her enthusiasms.

During the war, Del's mother took up selling encyclopedias; and her excitement over the factual details of the ants' social system or the plumbing in Knossos was not shared by Del's Aunts. Del is forced to realize "that to some people, maybe to most people, knowledge was just an oddity; it stuck out like warts. But I shared my mother's appetite myself, I could not help it" (p. 55). As a child, Del's fascination with acquiring facts isolates and frustrates her. Her ability to reel off the names of the presidents of the United States only embarrasses the country children whom she meets while "going on the road" with her mother. As an adolescent, Del learns, instead, to focus her passion for acquiring information on the rituals and routines of daily life in Jubilee, both imitating and parodying them. As a participant-observer, she stores up the facts and feelings that she later draws on and transforms in her mature writing.

Del's Aunts at Jenkins Bend make Del aware of a very different set of standards and values from those of her mother. They examine Del's wrinkled blouse sleeves, and comment compassionately that her mother does not have much time for ironing. They mention her mother's account of getting stuck on the Jericho Road:

All by herself, stuck on the Jericho Road!  
Poor Ada! But the mud on her, we had to

laugh! "We had to scrub the hall linoleum," said Auntie Grace with a note of apology, as if it was a thing she did not like to tell me. From such a vantage point, my mother did seem a wild woman. (p. 54)

When her mother, representing the encyclopedia company, comes to Del's school to award a prize for an essay, Del is overcome with embarrassment:

I hated her selling encyclopedias and making speeches and wearing that hat. I hated her writing letters to the newspapers . . . Other people than Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace would say to me, "I seen that letter of your mother's in the paper," and I would feel how contemptuous, how superior and silent and enviable they were, those people who all their lives could stay still, with no need to do or say anything remarkable.

I myself was not so different from my mother, but concealed it, knowing what dangers there were. (p. 68)

Del's own need to say and do something remarkable goes underground at this stage; it will resurface in her late adolescence when she aspires to play the role of the artist. But it is not until she has resolved her ambivalent feelings about wanting to be ordinary that she finds her artistic voice.

In addition to her aunts, the other adult woman Del knows well is Fern Dogherty, her mother's boarder. Fern is very different from Del's mother:

All those qualities my mother had developed for her assault on life—sharpness, smartness, determination, selectiveness—seemed to have their opposites in

Fern, with her diffuse complaints, lazy movements, indifferent agreeableness. (p. 120)

Fern provides Del with a female model for whom the sensual and sexual aspect of life is important. In this respect, she fills an important gap left by Del's mother. Ida Jordan's negative attitude to sex makes her an unacceptable model for the adolescent Del. To Del's mother, Fern's experience suggests the limitations sexuality imposes on a woman. She cautions Del against not using her mind:

Use your brains. Don't be distracted. Once you make that mistake, of being—distracted, over a man, your life will never be your own. You will get the burden, a woman always does. (p. 147)

Del cannot accept her mother's advice because she feels obliged to rebel against her mother's "earnestness and stubborn hopefulness" and because

I felt that it was not so different from all the other advice handed out to women, to girls, advice that assumed being female made you damagable, that a certain amount of carefulness and solemn fuss and self-protection were called for, whereas men were supposed to be able to go out and take on all kinds of experiences and shuck off what they didn't want and come back proud. Without even thinking about it, I had decided to do the same. (p. 147)

Shortly after Del makes this declaration of sexual independence, she reads an article by a New York psychiatrist on the difference between male and female modes of thought. The psychiatrist writes that a boy, sitting on a park bench looking at the moon, thinks about the immensity of the universe, the girl thinks about washing her hair. Reading this, Del

worries that she can never satisfy both her desire to be loved as a woman and her desire to find fulfillment as a thinking human being. Although her mother has always assured her that it is acceptable for women to use their minds, Del does not want to resemble her mother "with her virginal brusqueness, her innocence. I wanted men to love me, *and* I wanted to think of the universe when I looked at the moon" (p. 150). Del suggests the difficulty for women in retaining a belief in their femininity when they violate their society's narrow expectations about appropriate feminine behaviour.

To have different expectations or desires than those around one is not just a female problem. Being different can cause difficulties for a boy, too, as Del's friend Jerry Story realizes. Jerry, however, does not pretend to be other than he is:

He could not do otherwise; he was what he seemed. I, whose natural boundaries were so much more ambiguous, who soaked up protective coloration wherever it might be found, began to see that it might be restful to be like Jerry. (p. 166)

It is more difficult for Del to accept herself as different from those around her than for Jerry because the pressures on her to conform are greater. Although Jerry will always be different, there is an acceptable way for him to turn his difference into power. He is brilliant and, as his mother tells Del, he has a whole future mapped out for him. He will spend years at the university, get his Ph.D., perhaps engage in post-doctoral work. Because Jerry can imagine what his future will be, because he can envision future success and rewards, he can give meaningful form to his present sense of difference.

For Del, the future, as visualized by both her mother and herself, is extremely vague. Both believe she will win a scholarship and go to

university. But what then? What good will an education do a woman in a society like Jubilee? The only models in town for educated women are Miss Farris, the grade three teacher who organizes the school operetta and later commits suicide, and the Hungarian doctor's wife, who has lived in Jubilee over thirty years and still doesn't know anyone's name.

Both Del and her mother agree that an education will allow Del to escape from Jubilee, but there are no more concrete possibilities even hinted at in the novel. Del's future is as vague and unreal to her when she has finished high school as it was in her early adolescence when she walked the streets of Jubilee fantasizing that greatness awaited her. For Del, the problem of envisioning a possibly satisfying future can be restated as the problem of combining love and power; intellectual aspiration and achievement are ultimately a way to achieve power, as Jerry Story realizes. For a woman, achievement, success, or power can be ambiguous desires; they seem to stand in the way of achieving love and fulfillment. This conflict is brought out not only on the conscious, but also on the unconscious level. By her mid-teens, Del has consciously decided that she will not let herself be limited by the restrictions that society puts on girls. The chapter, "Live of Girls and Women," ends with her unspoken decision to do what men do and take on all kinds of experience and shuck off what she does not want. In the following chapter, "Baptizing," Del learns that she has been more affected by her society's standards than she thought. When she has her first passionate love affair, she finds herself ignoring or betraying almost all her conscious values and ideas. She goes with Garnet French every Monday evening to the Baptist Young People's Society, "the last place in Jubilee, except possibly the whorehouse, where I ever expected to be." She goes there unprotestingly, led by Garnet, who never asks her, but merely takes her.

Although Del is studying at this time for the examinations that will determine whether she will win a scholarship and hence be able to go to college, she finds herself becoming increasingly distracted. She falls into day dreams that last for half an hour. She spends several evenings a week with Garnet. The Sunday afternoon before her exams she goes with Garnet to see his family. That night Del and Garnet make love for the first time. When she writes her exams the next day she cannot make herself feel a sense of urgency. Instead she is preoccupied with "a radiant sense of importance, of physical grandeur."

Del's surrender of her ambitions and intellectual aspirations for emotional and sensual gratification is, however, only temporary. She does not ultimately give in to this compelling aspect of her nature. At a crucial moment, Del wakes up as from a dream and picks up all her old ways of life and thought that she had temporarily discarded. But her life has been crucially changed. She has not won a scholarship and she will not go to college to escape the limitations and demands of the Jubilees of the world. Rather she must find herself by living through the limited roles for women allowed in her society. Del finally comes to realize that the external conflicts are also internal. She prepares herself:

Now at last without fantasies or self-deception, cut off from the mistakes and confusion of the past, grave and simple, carrying a small suitcase, getting on a bus, like girls in movies leaving home, convents, lovers, I supposed I would get started on my real life. (pp. 200-201)

For Del the problem of preserving her sense of herself as a unique thinking person while at the same time not sacrificing her need for love becomes a problem of finding a place for herself in a society that still limits and narrowly defines what it means to be a woman.<sup>4</sup> In *Lives*

of *Girls and Women* the solution of this conflict for the heroine and the solution for the author converge. "Epilogue" suggests that Del will solve her need for love and achievement by becoming an artist. It is not an easy or automatic solution. When Del first decides to write a novel, she

wrote out a few bits of it and put them away, but soon I saw that it was a mistake to try to write anything down; what I wrote down might flaw the beauty and wholeness of the novel in my mind. (p. 203)

Del, as the potential artist, abandons the novel in her head because it cannot stand up to the test of reality; she cannot write it down because she lacks the skill to duplicate her fantasies in reality. But "Epilogue" suggests that in the future this inability to record her vision will no longer be true. After having been forced to confront "real life" without fantasies or self-deception, Del has a different perspective on reality than she did as an adolescent. She has learned through the day to day sharing of their prosaic routines to understand and value the ordinary lives of her fellow townspeople. Del comes to realize "People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable—deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" (p. 210).

The older Del does not want to alter reality to suit her fantasies as the younger Del did in making up the story about the Sheriff family, but rather to record reality in such a way that she will catch the profound truths—the intimations of pain and beauty and wonder—that dwell inside all the details of everyday life. This is Alice Munro's artistic creed; this is what she has done in her book.

In a fine interview with Graeme Gibson, Alice Munro talks about the importance to her of the external world:

I'm very, very excited by what you might call the surface of life, and it must be that this seems to me meaningful in a way I can't analyze or describe.<sup>5</sup>

Munro ties her interest in the surface of life to a special kind of vision she has:

Well for me it's just things about people, the way they look, the way they sound, the way things smell, the way everything is that you go through everyday. It seems to me very important to do something with this.<sup>6</sup>

.....

When I'm writing, I don't think of it as *my* image of how things are, I am so far gone that I think of it as the image, as a kind of revelation . . .<sup>7</sup>

Munro, then, like Del in "Epilogue," wants to present physical reality in such a way as to convey to the reader a metaphysical sense of how it feels to be alive.

Alice Munro, having herself achieved artistic recognition, can envisage the role of artist as a possible solution to Del's conflict between a desire for love and for achievement. Munro published her first book of short stories in her late thirties, having written quietly, and even secretively, for many years. In an interview in *Maclean's* she mentions how, as a young wife and mother living in the suburbs, she used to keep her writing a secret from the young mothers around her for fear they would think her strange if they knew.<sup>8</sup> For Munro, then, the conflict between her desire to be successful as a woman, that is as a wife and mother, and as an artist was also problematic:

I always operated in disguises, feeling if I do to a certain point what the world expects of me, then they'll leave me alone, and I can do my work.<sup>9</sup>

To carry on like this quietly and perseveringly, year after year, requires an "irrational inner confidence":

You have to think that your work is more important than almost anything else, and you have to start thinking this when you're very young.<sup>10</sup>

Such confidence, stoicism, and ability to use protective camouflage are the source of Del's strength also. Unlike the heroines of many other modern novels by women,<sup>11</sup> Del can live with the irreconcilable conflict between her desire to be loved and accepted as a woman and her individual aspirations. She neither rebels against it nor despairs. Rather, she prepares to take up the challenge of "real life," the prosaic, dull, trivial life society requires of most women. "Epilogue" optimistically suggests that by having the courage and perseverance to accept the limitations and denials of "real life" without succumbing to them, Del will transcend them. Indeed, out of these limitations, the absorption in physical details and concern with the needs of others that make up the lives of most women, she will wrest the source of her artistic vision. Her artistic fulfillment will come from transforming these quintessentially female experiences in such a way as to illuminate the extraordinary mystery and beauty that lie at the heart of the ordinary.

#### NOTES

1. Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971; rpt. Toronto: New American Library of Canada, 1974), p. 210. All quotations from *Lives of Girls and Women* are from this edition.
2. J.R. Struthers, "Reality and Ordering: The Growth of a Young Artist in *Lives of Girls and Women*," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, no. 3 (Fall, 1975), pp. 32-46.
3. See Rebecca Smith's article on the female *bildungsroman* as an important new genre for the 1970's--"The only Flying Turtle Under the Sun: The *Bildungsroman* in Contemporary Women's Fiction," *Atlantis*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Spring, 1977), pp. 124-132.
4. See Lorraine McMullen's article, "The Divided Self," *Atlantis*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Spring, 1980), pp. 52-67, in which she demonstrates that the kind of conflict I have delineated in

Del's story is a common one for heroines in books by Canadian women writers. But I will show that Munro's solution to this conflict differs from that of the many women writers whom McMullen discusses.

5. Graeme Gibson, interviewer, *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (1973; rpt. Toronto: Anansi Press, 1979), p. 241.
6. Gibson, p. 241.
7. Gibson, p. 254.
8. Barbara Frum, "Great Dames," *Maclean's*, no. 86 (April, 1973), p. 32.
9. Gibson, p. 251.
10. Gibson, p. 253.
11. I am thinking, for example, of Martha Quest in *Martha Quest* by Doris Lessing, Jane Grey in Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall*, and Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* by Margaret Atwood.