

SELF ACTUALIZATION IN THE SELECT SHORT STORIES OF ALICE MUNRO

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Dr. Abraham Maslow defines the term self-actualization as follows :

“A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. This is the need we may call self-actualization . . . it refers to man’s desires for fulfillment, namely the tendency for him to become actually in what he is potentially ; to become everything that one is capable of becoming. . . (Theory 27)

Self-Actualization is the desire for self-fulfillment, namely the tendency to become actualized in what the one is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming. Maslow used the term self-actualization to describe a desire, not a driving force that could lead to realizing one’s capabilities. He did not feel that self-actualization determined one’s life; rather, he felt that it gave the individual a desire or motivation to achieve budding ambitions (Gleitman, *et al* 54). A self-actualizer is a person who is living creatively and fully using his or her potentials.

A more explicit definition of self-actualization according to Maslow, is “intrinsic growth of what is already in the organism, or more accurately of what is the organism itself... self-actualization is growth-motivated rather than deficiency-motivated”. Maslow considered self-actualizing people to possess “an unusual ability to detect the spurious, the fake, and the dishonest in personality and in general to judge the people correctly and efficiently”. (Web.11 Nov.2012)

The most important characteristic features of self-actualizers, as delineated by Maslow are :

1. The self-actualizers are capable to judging situations correctly and honestly. They are very sensitive to the fake and dishonest.
2. They accept their own human nature with all its flaws. The shortcomings of others and the contradictions of the human condition are accepted with humour and tolerance.
3. They tend to be unusually alive, engaged and spontaneous.

4. They have a mission to fulfil in life or some task or problem outside of themselves to pursue. Humanitarians such as Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa represent this quality.
5. They are free from reliance on external authorities or other people. They tend to be resourceful and independent.
6. They seem to constantly review appreciation of life's basic goods. A sunset or a flower will be experienced as intensely time after time as it was at first. There is an "innocence of vision", like that of an artist or a child.
7. They feel a deep identification with others and the human situation in general.
8. Their interpersonal relationships are marked by deep loving bonds.
9. Despite their satisfying relationship with others, they value solitude and are comfortable being alone.
10. They possess a non-hostile sense of humour. This refers to the wonderful capacity to laugh at oneself.
11. They experience frequent-occurrence of peak experiences, that is, temporary moments of self-actualization. These occasions are marked by feelings of ecstasy, harmony, and deep meaning. They feel at one with the universe, stronger and calmer than ever before, filled with light, beautiful and good, and so forth.
12. They feel safe, not anxious, accepted, loved, loving and alive.

Based on these characteristic features of self-actualization, the present article tries to show that the dominant figures in the select short stories of Alice Munro are self-actualizers. Munro's main focus is on female characters and they are portrayed as intelligent and mature narrators who question society's expectation of them as female. They move through places, fate and circumstances. In this process they acquire a new unpredictability.

Munro has written more than eighty short stories. Her art is very much grafted on from the female experience and its social, psychological and physical realities. The modern heroine "renounces the subordinate nurturing role of the past in favour of independence, social authority and her own humanity" (Rasporich XIV). In the short story, **The view from Castle Rock**, Agnes the wife of Andrew, comes from a large Hawick family who work in the mills. They learn all the arts of cutting each other to size, of squabbling and surviving in close quarters. Now she has to cope with the "rigid manners, the defense and silences among the queer sort of people on her husband's family" (Castle Rock 34). But she feels content that her husband is an honest man.

Mary, in the story is the elder sister of her family and therefore she tends all her brothers. But she fears Agnes's temper. However, Mary does not blame Agnes because "she thinks that women like Agnes-men's women, mother women - lead an appalling life" (36).

Her brothers call her “Poor Mary” (36). Since her physical features are not even, she suffers from inferiority complex” She has great difficulty in looking anybody in the face - even the members of her own family” (36). It is only when the boy, James, hitches on to the narrow shelf of her hip that she becomes capable of some coherent and decisive speech. She believes that she will not die while James is still of a size to ride on her hip or still in need of her. She also knows that a time will come when he will turn away from her, as her brothers did, when he will become ashamed of the connection with her. But still she loves even his howls and rags and his kicks and bites. One day she is in the line for the wash water, the boy becomes missing. Mary searches him miserably when she sees Mr.Suter bringing James, she gives a wild shriek and she thinks of going away with James and bringing him up as his mother. She forgets the faults of all and decides to live with her nephew happily.

In the story **Home** which is included in **The view From Castle Rock**, the narrator’s mother is a self-respecting woman and so she had made her husband, even before they got married, that he would never drink liquor. After her marriage also she never allows a bottle of any kind of liquor in the house. The narrator’s stepmother is Irlma In her brown eyes, there is a sparkle of a look of emotional readiness of being always on the brink of hilarity. She is always on the brink of impatience, which flaring into outrage, she makes people laugh and likes to laugh herself. At times, she would put her hands on her hips and thrust her head forward and make such a harsh statement as to provoke a fight. She knows only those things which are useful to her. She is a person who would take the boots off a dead body on the street. The narrator’s mother is a lover of books but her stepmother Irlma,

. . . . doesn’t care for the sight of people reading
because it is not sociable and at the end of
it all what has been accomplished? She thinks
people are better off playing cards, or making things.
(Castle Rock 291)

On the contrary she honours the writing that the narrator’s father has taken up in his old age.

The story **Working for a Living** depicts how women are treated with discrimination. The narrator’s grandfather reads books in the library but never talks about what he reads. But the whole community knows about it and respects him. Her grandmother also reads books all the time but nobody respects her in the least. On the other hand the talk was always about how the dust grows under her bed and how her husband eats cold dinner. It is, perhaps, because she reads novels and stories and the grandfather reads heavy books. Here the narrator poses a question and finds out the reason:

Now - if the woman with dust balls under the beds had read the heavy books would she have been forgiven? I don't believe so. It was women who judged her and women judged women more heavily than they did men. (Castle Rock 135)

When the narrator grows, she comes to feel something like revulsion. She despises the idea of making herself dependent on the response of others.

Dick is the narrator of the story **Thanks for the Ride** and he is Munro's sole male first-person narrator. His partner, Lois, is almost wholly inarticulate and so her character is defined by Dick's observations of the town's environment, her physical appearance, and her home and family. Lois is apparently as rough as her environment and she is roughly used by boys like Dick and George who belong to the city. Her name was suggested by her friend Adelaide to be Dick's partner in their ride together. While, in the house of Lois, Dick observes that her "face had no innocence in it that I could see; it was knowledgeable; clam, and hostile" (DHS 50), and she goes all the way to London to buy her dress. The following adjectives used by Dick define Lois: "Contemptuous", "Scornful" "acquiescent; "angry" and "inarticulate". Lois is all of these.

In the story **An Ounce of Cure**, The narrator's incommensurable nature calls for her mother's feelings of pride and maternal accomplishment. The narrator is a baby-sitter for Berrymans. Once Martin Collingwood kissed on her mouth. It was the first time that anybody had ever kissed her and therefore "I did not wash my face that night or the next morning, in order to keep the imprint of these kisses intact" (DHS 76). But Martin Collingwood dropped her after two months of that incident. He fell in love with another girl who played opposite him in **Pride and Prejudice**. The narrator used to remember this event with pain. She daydreamed endlessly and spent perhaps ten times as many hours thinking about Martin Collingwood - yes, pining and weeping for him - as I ever spent with him; the idea of him dominated my mind relentlessly" (DHS 77). He married a girl after writing his senior Matric, and taking a course in the city. The narrator went to a shower for the girl he married. She also had been married several years after being scandalized for having heavily drunk at the Berrymans. She happened to meet Martin Collingwood at a relative's funeral. She saw him that he was still nice-looking and he looked at her with an expression as close to a reminiscent smile. She gave him a gentle uncomprehending look in return" (DHS 88). She is now a grown up woman and knows her limitations.

Alice Munro told her friend Metcalf that her short story **The Peace of Utrecht** was her "first really painful autobiographical story" (Martin 45). She further said that it was the first time "I wrote a story that tore me up" (Ibid 45). In this story Munro has created a fierce, tragically egocentric mother, the timid spinster aunts steeped in their eccentricities and the sisters who resist female rituals of emotionalism, yet picked against each other. Helen and Maddy are well-intentioned and intelligent sisters. They painfully came to know

that owing to an inescapable condition of their lives, they happened to grow apart. Their pain is intensified by their mother's illness which imposed a trying responsibility on both the sisters. But the sisters were not true to each other. Helen's mind was filled with the feelings of sadness and guilt for having left both Maddy and Ontario. Now the responsibility of looking after their ailing mother falls on Maddy alone.

The scene in which Maddy breaks the cut-glass bowl of raspberries is "painfully pathetic" (Subathra 108), because Maddy feels that her hands have begun to shake which, she thinks, is the sign of the disease that had killed her mother. She was considerate towards her sister, the narrator. When people asked the narrator why she did not come for her mother's funeral, she told them that Maddy had written so vehemently urging me to stay away" (DHS 95-96) she is not jealous of her sister who is now living faraway" in an unspecified but evidently more sophisticated place on a coast" (Carscallen 84-85). However, the narrator "coming back from the West Coast to Jubilee on the summer after her mother's death, moves from the ordinary world to a world of silences, imprisonment and death" (Mackendrick 119). The loss of their mother makes bring their closer and they get reconciled.

Miss.Marsalles is a music teacher in the story **Dance of the Happy Shades**. She has an ailing sister who is in bed, following a stroke. Miss.Marsalles gives Piano lessons to her students, most of whom are children. She cherishes "indestructible beliefs that she can see into children's hearts, and she finds there a treasury of good intentions and natural love for good things" (DHS 213) and she used to say "All children need music. All children love music in their hearts" (213). She gives away presents to the students on every annual day party. The gifts would be mostly in the form of books. Though she does not have any other source of income she does not stop giving presents. The strength of the students dwindles year by year in number. But Miss.Marsalles does not stop teaching music. But people are not thankful to her.

Miss.Marsalles has trained a retarded child to play piano beautifully. When the child played the piano on an annual party, the mothers felt an embarrassment of having to sit and listen "with a look of protest on their faces, a more proud anxiety than before as if reminded of something that they had forgotten "to the radiant playing of a backward child to an atmosphere in the room of some freakish inescapable dream" (DHS 222). What Miss.Marsalles has done is beyond comprehension. "Like some ancient divinity, she has worked a 'miracle' with the retarded child she has taught to play the piano" (Rasporich 43). That is why the narrator asks: "why is that we are unable to say - as we must have expected to say - poor Miss.Marselles?" (DHS 224). The real reason why young mothers did not appreciate Miss.Marsalles could be that Miss Marsalles, in her rouge and hairdo and brocaded dress, is hardly real, like a figure from masquerade.

The story **Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You** focuses on the lives of two sisters. They appear to be contrasting personalities. Et "didn't like mysteries or extremes" (SIB 7) and Char "was above, outside all ordinary considerations - a marvel, a mystery. No one could hope to solve her they were lucky just being allowed to contemplate her" (SIB 17). Et is jealous of her sister Char. Her jealousy is revealed through her statement that Char was beautiful, she couldn't lose it (SIB 1). But her jealousy is never permitted to see. It is "an absent signifier which confers meaning on the story's main turn of event" (Ajay 80). She makes this statement referring to Char's reaction at Et's statement", Anyway he knows how to fascinate women" (SIB 1). The word 'he' in the above statement refers to Blaikie Noble. Char never reveals the fact that she is in love with Blaikie Noble. Et comes to know of it when she sees them together behind the lilac bush in the midnight. Blaikie deserts Char and elopes with a lady Ventriloquist. On coming to know of his elopement Char attempts suicide by consuming laundry blueing. However she is saved. Blaikie Noble deserts the Ventriloquist and takes up with a well-to-do woman down at the hotel. Once again Char attempts suicide and this time her attempt is successful.

Another reason for Et's jealousy against Char is that Char marries Arthur Comber who is Et's history teacher. At school Et is hardworking and Arthur is her admirer. He says that he admires Et and has given 'A' grade to her because he loves her sister Char. Arthur is the moving spirit behind the Amateur Dramatic society and the Ontario society in which Char is involved. They get married.

'Et' is a Latin word for the conjunction 'and' It also means "to couple", to link and "to supplement". So, naturally her name Et indicates her role in Char's life and she has been engaged in a gesture of supplementation:

As a supplement, as 'and', Et is an addition to something that is already complete, a role that becomes quite evident given Et's proximity to the lives of the married couple, Char and Arthur. As an addition, however Et's role is far from placid. She threatens to become a replacement and the fact that she ends up living with Arthur, the man she seems to have loved all along, suggests that she is fulfilling a necessary and perhaps inevitable role by making the transition from addition to substitute. (Ajay 79)

It is worth noting here that Et's role as Arthur's absent wife is inscribed in the very structure of the story. The character of Et is presented as a lifelong voyeur and because she never marries, "her corrosive jealousy turns her into a sharp tongued sharp-eyed woman viciously searching for every-body's Achilles heel. She enjoys catching people at a disadvantage and spends her whole life maliciously capitalizing on the opportunities to exercise the controlling power generated by these insights" (Carrington 113). The fact that Et went to collect her organdy dress from the cloth line, she saw both Arthur and Char

making love behind the lilac bush is a proof for her voyeurism. When Arthur said that Et was too smart to take up dressmaking business “takes more brains to cut and fit, if you do it right, than to teach people about the war of 1812 (SIB 18). No doubt her customers considered her a terror.

The narrator’s mother in the story **Walker Brothers Cowboy** adjusts herself with the conditions available in her domestic life. She is more interested in the members of her family rather than in the national calamity. Fate has flung her and the members of her family into a street of poor people but she is accustomed to see her life of poverty “with dignity, with bitterness, with no reconciliation” (DHS 4). When the narrator goes out with her father and mother after supper, people on the sides of street used to laugh at them. The narrator feels that she and her parents have become objects of universal ridicule. But her mother does not seem to notice. She walks serenely like a lady shopping” (DHS 5). In contrast to the sick and decorous mother, Nora, the old girlfriend of the narrator’s father, is a vibrant flash of colours in her “soft brilliant” dress (17) and a hearty woman “capable of uproarious behavior and active invitation” (Rasporich 40) and she feels that she is never sick.

Mary McQuade in **Images** “is one of practical nurses, and course-grained and bossy to match-decidedly an Elizabeth” (Carscallen 86). But in the bedroom of the narrator’s dying father she is very different. There is a silent and motionless presence and white against the surrounding gloom and thus “she is very much one kind of Mary as her name indicates” (Ibid. 86). McQuade becomes more meaningful. But her presence in the house causes the narrator “to intuit the threatening possibilities that surround her in her everyday life (Ajay 26). At once the narrator feels that Mary McQuade is an invader, an uninvited force who has violated the comforts of home. The narrator says,

I doubted that she was asked to come. She came, and cooked what she liked and rearranged things to suit herself, complaining about draughts, and let her power loose in the house. If she had never come my mother would never have taken to bed. (DHS 32-33)

The narrator’s father has also taken on a new kind of role as a result of Mary McQuade’s presence in the house. Mary McQuade has the power of unmarrying people, turning them from adults to childish practical jokers and senile invalids.

Alice Munro’s characters fulfil their tendency to become actually in what they are potentially. In this respect they are self-actualizers.

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