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The story's the thing : holding up a mirror to nature in Raymond Carver's "Put yourself in my shoes" and Alice Munro's "Material"

Joy LaFrance
Lehigh University

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**The Story's the Thing: Holding Up a Mirror to Nature in Raymond Carver's
"Put Yourself in My Shoes" and Alice Munro's "Material"**

By Joy LaFrance

Faculty Advisor -- Professor Elizabeth Fifer

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Date

Thesis Advisor

Co-Advisor

Chairperson of Department

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Abstract of
**The Story's the Thing: Holding Up a Mirror to Nature in Raymond Carver's
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By Joy LaFrance

Raymond Carver and Alice Munro both investigate the question of where and how art and life intersect. Raymond Carver's fiction has been described as "a bit like standing in a model kitchen at Sears—you experience a weird feeling of disjuncture that comes from being in a place where things *appear* to be real and familiar, but where a closer look shows that the turkey is papier-mâché, the broccoli is rubber, and the frilly curtains cover a blank wall". Similarly, Ajay Heble has written about Munro's fiction: "The world of facts, details, and objects, which, at first, serves to ground the reader in a safe and recognizable reality, is suddenly called into question as Munro makes us aware that we are reading only an attempt to represent these things in fiction, that language is being used to represent reality".

Wolfgang Iser reminds us:

If the reader were given the whole story ... then his imagination would never enter the field, and the result would be the boredom that inevitably arises when everything is laid out and cut and dried before us. A literary text must therefore ... engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative. (Iser 190)

George Woodcock has compared Munro's work to this piece of realist art as he writes:

The artist is not merely representing life, not merely recording how a particular girl with rather greasy hair and a largish bottom looked when she sat on the grass on a certain day in July. He is creating an image, outside time and place, that stands in our minds not merely as a painted surface, but as an epitome, a focusing of several generalities that come together in its eternal moment."

This portrayal of an "epitome" is what I am suggesting that Munro and Carver do in their fiction. By "holding up a mirror to nature," both writers suggest just enough of "reality" for readers to recognize, realizing that "true reality" will always exist in the reader's own perception. As a mirror can only represent things two-dimensionally, so the writers can only present part of the whole "reality." But we know that the image we see in the mirror is not always the image we expect to see, suggesting that a different three-dimensional reality exists, and this enlightenment is what fiction can help us to achieve.

**The Story's the Thing: Holding Up a Mirror to Nature in Raymond Carver's
"Put Yourself in My Shoes" and Alice Munro's "Material"**

By Joy LaFrance

Advisor Professor Elizabeth Fifer

How long does art need to be to imitate life? Raymond Carver and Alice Munro both investigate the question of where and how art and life intersect. In their fiction, both of these writers probe the very depths of what it means to be human, and through similar methods attempt to arrive at something resembling "reality," yet seem to recognize the limitations of art. Both writers have been categorized as "realist," yet they both seem to question what that title means. Raymond Carver's fiction has been described as "a bit like standing in a model kitchen at Sears—you experience a weird feeling of disjuncture that comes from being in a place where things *appear* to be real and familiar, but where a closer look shows that the turkey is papier-mâché, the broccoli is rubber, and the frilly curtains cover a blank wall" (McCaffery and Gregory 66). Similarly, Ajay Heble has written about Munro's fiction: "The world of facts, details, and objects, which, at first, serves to ground the reader in a safe and recognizable reality, is suddenly called into question as Munro makes us aware that we are reading only an attempt to represent these things in fiction, that language is being used to represent reality" (Heble 6-7). Wolfgang Iser reminds us:

If the reader were given the whole story, and there were nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would never enter the field, and the result would be the boredom that inevitably arises when everything is laid out and cut and dried before us. A literary text must therefore be

conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative. (Iser 190)

Carver echoes this purpose for writers:

The writer's job, if he or she has a job, is not to provide conclusions or answers. If the story answers itself, its problems and conflicts, and meets its own requirements, then that's enough. On the other hand, I want to make certain my readers aren't left feeling cheated in one way or another when they've finished my stories. It's important for writers to provide enough to satisfy readers, even if they don't provide "the" answers, or clear resolutions. (McCaffery and Gregory 78)

In attempting to portray "reality," then, these writers seem to provide just enough of something that the reader will recognize to make their stories credible, but leave to the reader the task of relating these to "reality." In their short stories "Put Yourself in My Shoes" and "Material", Carver and Munro respectively tackle the challenges faced by writers in representing "reality" in fiction. Through an analysis of these two stories, I will explore how "reality" changes when transferred to narrative, and whether a line can be drawn between "reality" and fiction, or whether the two converge.

Perhaps a good place to start is with an analysis of the use of perspective. In Carver's "Put Yourself in My Shoes," the Morgans relate a story about an affair between a female student and a university professor, believing that Myers will find such a story useful material for his writing. Each of them imagines the story from a different person's perspective - the professor's, his son's, the wife's, or the student's. They all recognize that it would be a very different story depending on whose perspective it was written from. The "reality" of the story would be some combination of all of them, combined with the reader's own

experience. Proust has written that "in reality every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have perceived in himself" (Wimmers 10-11). Both Carver and Munro then use multiple points of view in their stories, and leave the reader to make his or her own interpretation of them.

One example of contrasting points of view are different characters' perceptions of what it means to be a writer. The Morgans tell Myers stories, thinking that writers are always looking for such material to use in their fiction. Mrs. Morgan even tells Myers' wife Paula presumptuously, "This is your chance to see how your husband's mind goes to work on raw material." Likewise, the female speaker of Munro's "Material" tells her husband Hugo that he ought to pay attention to Dotty if he wanted to be a writer - that Dotty would be good material for a story. In Munro's story, the speaker thinks that Hugo will be interested in Dotty's collection of souvenir spoons or her obstetrical problems. He tells her that he is not interested because he is writing a play at the moment, but he does eventually write a novel about Dotty, but uses human details that the female speaker had missed - Dotty's habit of letting her mouth hang open and finishing people's sentences. Dotty's humanity was more interesting to Hugo than her spoons.

The need for the human element in his stories leads Myers to burst out laughing when Mrs. Morgan relates what she felt would be the profound "meaning" to her story, that "Fate sent Mrs. Attenborough to die on the couch in our living room in Germany" because it is so utterly *not* human. Mrs. Morgan's story had been entirely superficial - the closest she got to Mrs. Attenborough's character, her *reality*, were the facts that she had had three sons and had lived in Australia and raised sheep. Carver himself has said: "I'm against tricks that call

attention to themselves in an effort to be clever or merely devious. A writer mustn't lose sight of the story. I'm not interested in works that are all texture and no flesh and blood. I ... feel that the reader must somehow be involved at the human level. Writing ... is not just expression, it's communication" (McCaffery and Gregory 76-77).

Myers proves this, as he glances around the Morgans' house while they tell their stories. He observes their possessions, listens to the noises Mr. Morgan makes when he goes to the kitchen, and watches Mr. Morgan angrily rattling the cups, crushing wrapping paper under his feet and spilling tobacco from his pipe. Myers contemplates every comment the Morgans make for insight into their motivations, emotions and hang-ups, which will all provide material for his story. The irony is, of course, that while the Morgans are telling their stories completely without empathy for the characters, they are the material themselves, seen from Myers' perspective as he glances around the room. And this is further emphasized by Mr. Morgan's bungled narrative about Mr. X and the Y's and Z's -- obviously meant to represent the Myerses and Morgans, which highlights the disaster of not empathizing with characters—they become lifeless, without feelings, and the fact that he reverses the Y's and the Z's shows that they are interchangeable—they are, in fact, not people at all. Myers' story will be about the Morgans' foibles, hang-ups, their *humanity*, which, I believe, both Carver and Munro believe is more real than records or spoons.

But getting at people's humanity seems to be at best elusive, and both stories seem to suggest its *impossibility*. The reader sees Mr. Morgan rattling cups but never knows the source of his anger. Is he angry about the missing records, which he attributes to Myers, or had he and Mrs. Morgan been fighting before the Myers' arrived? Why does Mrs. Morgan break down into tears in the middle of the story? And Myers, while driving, gazes at the people on the street with

their shopping bags, possibly imagining what their lives must be like, trying "to see everything, save it for later," yet those people remain a mystery to him.

Similarly, the speaker of "Material" doesn't really know, and probably will not ever really know her husband Gabe, because his life before they met was so different from hers. She says:

I would look at him sleeping and think that for all I knew he might be a German or a Russian or even of all things a Canadian faking a past and an accent to make himself interesting. He was mysterious to me. Long after he became my lover and after he became my husband he remained, remains, mysterious to me. In spite of all the things I know about him, daily and physical things. (Munro 82)

Yet paradoxically, while humanity is necessary but elusive, it is this very elusiveness that makes characters intriguing.

Dotty, for example, is interesting just because she is so inscrutable. Is Dotty a prostitute? Does she have a lover? After the female speaker observes her parting from a strange man in uniform in the middle of the afternoon while still in her dressing-gown, Dotty tries to explain away the situation in everyday, believable terms. But it is the dressing-gown in the middle of the afternoon and the mystery "deliveryman or gas-station attendant" that are interesting. Hugo tells his wife, "You don't get out enough. You're trying to make life interesting." Is life thought to be duller than fiction? Hugo is, however, forced to realize that something out of the ordinary is going on after seeing the assortment of men going to and from Dotty's door, and he then admits that "it was life imitating art again, it was bound to happen, after all the fat varicose-veined whores he'd met in books." Dotty then gained the label "harlot-in-residence," and Hugo and his wife describe her to their friends, but surprisingly, after seeing her, the friends are disappointed: "'That's not her!' they said. 'Is that her? Isn't she disappointing? Doesn't she have any professional clothes?' 'Don't be so naïve,'

we said. 'Did you think they all wore spangles and boas?'" So Dotty is more interesting than the average human, making her good material for fiction, but not as interesting as the fiction used to describe her. In the end, Dotty is interesting enough for Hugo to write a novel about her.

The speaker notices that Hugo's biographical details on the flap of his novel are inflated-- he is presented as having worked as a "telephone lineman," but she notes that he was never a telephone lineman, but he did have a job painting telephone poles. She calls these "lies, the half-lies, the absurdities." And to Hugo, the "noises and diversions and ordinary clutter" of life are distractions from writing, not subjects to be written about. So does fiction imitate life or exaggerate it? Surely we can all relate a story of something that has happened to us that is so bizarre or incredible that we think it would make a great story, "except that no one would believe it." So when life is dull, fiction exaggerates it, and when life is interesting, fiction imitates it, and when life is incredible, it's not believable enough to make good fiction. The line, then, between fiction and reality is certainly blurry. Carver explains his thoughts on this: "Presumably my fiction is in the realistic tradition, but just telling it like it is bores me. People couldn't possibly read pages of description about the way people *really* talk, about what *really* happens in their lives. They'd just snore away, of course" (McCaffery and Gregory 79).

Wolfgang Iser again provides some insight into this process of reading fiction:

Thus begins a whole dynamic process: the written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications in order to prevent these from becoming too blurred and hazy, but at the same time these implications, worked out by the reader's imagination, set the given situation against a background which endows it with far greater significance than it might have seemed to possess on its own. In this way, trivial scenes take on an

'enduring form of life'. This form ... is the end product of the interaction between text and reader. (Iser 190)

Stanley Fish tells us that serious discourse does not entail a responsibility to facts as they really are: "The rules and conventions under which the speakers and hearers 'normally' operate don't demand that language be faithful to the facts; rather, they specify the shape of that fidelity ... creating it, rather than enforcing it." (Wimmers 13) And Gérard Genette has said that "no narrative can 'show' or 'imitate' the story it tells. All it can do is tell it in a manner which is detailed, precise, 'alive,' and in that way give more or less the illusion of mimesis – which is the only narrative mimesis, for this single and sufficient reason: that narration, oral or written, is a fact of language, and language signifies without imitating." (Wimmers 16)

Munro's method of navigating the terrain of language and narrative, is that, according to Katherine J. Mayberry: "Throughout her career, she has insisted on the existence of prelinguistic experience, of a truth that originates outside of, independent of language. This truth is wholly experiential and wholly personal, never going beyond the bounds of individual perception. But ... this truth admits little access. The approaches attempted by most of Munro's characters are memory and narrative...." She concludes that in Munro "Narrative is finally not the province of truth; to tell is at best to revise, but never perfectly to revive" (Mayberry 540). As Iser notes, then, "thus we have the apparently paradoxical situation in which the reader is forced to reveal aspects of himself in order to experience a reality which is different from his own." (Iser 194) The only true reality is outside language and within ourselves, yet we have to use our own experience to understand another's truth.

Perhaps the solution, then, is to give up trying to find "reality" in fiction. The speaker of "Material" admits that she does not always need to know the "reality." From Hugo's picture she constructs an impression:

He looks, at the same time, woebegone and cheerful. ... Do you wash, Hugo? Do you have bad breath, with those teeth? Do you call your girl students fond exasperated dirty names, are there phone calls from insulted parents, does the Dean or somebody have to explain that no harm is meant, that writers are not as other men are? (Munro 84)

Yet she admits the deficiency of her assumptions:

I have no proof. I construct somebody from this one smudgy picture, I am content with such clichés. ... I have noticed anyway... how shopworn and simple, really, are the disguises, the identities if you like, that people take up. In fiction, in Hugo's business, such disguises would not do, but in life they are all we seem to want, all anybody can manage. (Munro 84-85)

She recognizes the difference between people's everyday reality and "identities" and those presented in fiction, but also recognizes the impossibility of ever knowing the true "reality" of someone or anyone, and therefore limits herself to her own individual perception.

Hans Vaihinger has said that "a fictive judgment cannot give us a theoretical, absolute truth, but only a practical, relative one, a truth that is only 'right' in relation to the speaker and the purpose he has in mind." But this relative truth may be one which we need the text to discover, leading to what Hans Georg Gadamer wrote about the "philosophical significance" of art, that "we can find truth through a work of art that we could not find in any other way." (Wimmers 15) Or, as Iser summarizes:

Through this entanglement the reader is bound to open himself up to the workings of the text, and so leave behind his own preconceptions. This

gives him the chance to have an experience in the way George Bernard Shaw once described it: "You have learnt something. That always feels at first as if you had lost something." Reading reflects the structure of experience to the extent that we must suspend the ideas and attitudes that shape our own personality before we can experience the unfamiliar world of the literary text. But during this process, something happens to us. (Iser 201)

In order to help readers have this experience, I believe that writers attempt to do for narratives what Ken Danby's painting "The Sunbather" did for visual art. George Woodcock has compared Munro's work to this piece of realist art as he writes:

the realism, precise and particular as it may be, is much more than mimetic. The artist is not merely representing life, not merely recording how a particular girl with rather greasy hair and a largish bottom looked when she sat on the grass on a certain day in July. He is creating an image, outside time and place, that stands in our minds not merely as a painted surface, but as an epitome, a focusing of several generalities that come together in its eternal moment - generalities like youth and girliness and the benison of sunlight and the suggestion of fertility that we sense in the girl's broad hips and at the same time in the springing green of the grass and weed leaves among which she sits" (Woodcock 235).

This portrayal of an "epitome" is what I am suggesting that Munro and Carver do in their fiction. Neil K. Besner has written: "The writer's art, regardless of its conventions, creates a reality which, regardless of its own "truth," is both autonomous and related to the world it refers to, however diffuse or symbolic this connection may be" (Besner). Munro herself told an interviewer that "writing is the act of approach and recognition," an act of "just approaching

something that is mysterious and important" (Thacker). Carver's work especially has been described as "minimalist," which also supports the position that these writers do not attempt a detailed, comprehensive rendering of the color of their character's hat, the pace of their step or the rustle of their skirts, à la Dickens or Tolstoy, but by "holding up a mirror to nature," both writers suggest just enough of "reality" for readers to recognize, realizing that "true reality" will always exist in the reader's own perception, leaving some doors open, some questions unanswered. As a mirror can only represent things two-dimensionally, so the writers can only present part of the whole "reality." But we know that the image we see in the mirror is not always the image we expect to see, suggesting that a different three-dimensional reality exists, and this enlightenment is what fiction can help us to achieve.

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Curriculum Vitae

Joy Elizabeth LaFrance was born on April 9, 1970 in Urbana, Illinois while her parents were attending the University of Illinois, her father earning a PhD in Computer Science, her mother earning a PhD in Psychology.

She grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, attended Metro Christian Academy and Booker T Washington High Schools.

She attended the University of Kansas from 1989 to 1997, earning a B.A. in English and German in 1997. She then went to Germany, where she attended the University of Bonn, completing many graduate courses but earning no degree.

She taught English as a Second Language to Germans and other non-native speakers for Inlingua School of Languages and The Academy of European Languages from 1998-2001. She also worked translating English technical and marketing texts from German into English for Simon Kucher and Partners, a marketing research firm, from 1998-2001. Additionally, she edited and translated texts for the Center for European Integration Studies, a research institution of the University of Bonn.

She taught English language and culture to German undergraduates at the University of Bonn from 200-2001, and taught Composition and Literature to undergraduates at Lehigh University from 2002-2003.

Honors include the award for Best First-Year Student of Russian at the University of Kansas in 1997, and the Dean's Fellowship at Lehigh for 2001-2002.

She expects to earn a Master of Arts in English from Lehigh University in May 2003. Starting in the summer of 2003, she will write, edit and do research for *A Global Agenda* and other publications of the United Nations Association in New York City. She would like to work in journalism and eventually to write novels, stories, satire or editorials. She is very interested in politics and international relations.

Joy LaFrance
107 W. 4th St. 1A,
Bethlehem, PA 18015

610-657-3357

jel8@lehigh.edu

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