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## Thresholds and What Seems to Be: Munro's First Sentences

### ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of Alice Munro's first sentences from her 149 stories published in her 14 collections. Despite the epithet "Munroesque," there is a remarkable variety to the typical Munro story and Munro's style. Many of her stories begin with short, mundanely declarative sentences of a few words; many other first sentences stretch over several lines; many foreground time or, more accurately, time past. The variety of these first sentences might lead the cataloguer to despair or to proclaim fatuously that *the Munroesque quality of her fiction lies in how different it all is* .... Though generalizations are dangerous, there is one constant: for all their stylistic diversity, Munro's first sentences tend to establish a tension between what is realistic and tangible and the seeming, what lies beneath or hidden.

**Ključne besede:** Alice Munro, stylistics, first sentences, short story

### Med vidnim in navideznim: uvodne povedi v prozi Alice Munro

#### IZVLEČEK

V prispevku so obravnavane uvodne povedi iz 149 kratkih zgodb Alice Munro, objavljenih v 14 zbirkah. Čeprav se je za njen slog uveljavila oznaka »monrojevski«, so si zgodbe med seboj po svojih slogovnih značilnostih zelo različne. Uvodne povedi so tako pogosto kratke in preproste, po drugi strani pa lahko obsegajo tudi več vrstic. V njih je pogosto poudarjen čas, še posebej pretekli časi. Pravzaprav se izkaže, da se povedi med seboj tako razlikujejo, da nas lahko vsak poskus njihovega razvrščanja pripelje na robu obupa, ali pa preprosto do ugotovitve, da je *bistvo monrojevskih značilnosti njene proze v njeni različnosti* ... Čeprav so posplošitve vedno tvegane, je jasno eno: uvodne povedi Munrojeve kljub njihovi slogovni raznovrstnosti zaznamuje razhajanje med realnim in oprijemljivim na eni strani in med dozdevnim, nevidnim in prikritim na drugi.

**Keywords:** Alice Munro, stilistika, uvodne povedi, kratka zgodba

# 1 Introduction

On the cover of *The Beggar Maid* (published as *Who Do You Think You Are?* in Canada), A. S. Byatt pronounces Alice Munro “the greatest living short story writer.” Critic James Wood places her beside Jane Austen as one of the “greatest realists” (2008, 247). Harold Bloom, never one to praise lightly, admits that “ordinary unhappiness, which in others is not colorful to us, is an achievement for most of her women and many of her men,” but mitigates this by saying she “lacks the fine madness of great literary art” (2009, 1–2). Tamas Dobozy, another fine short story writer from Canada, reveres Munro precisely for her lack of madness, for her ability “to make the quotidian so readable” and her fearlessness in narrating the everyday “plainly in all its plainness, and then somehow in that process, arriving at the sublime” (qtd. in Grubisic, 2022). Scholarly works, too, have scrutinized Munro from many an angle and not found her wanting. *The Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro*, in addition to being an academic work, is as much as celebration of the “excellence of her writings” (Staines 2016, 3), and the authors consider Munro an “unobtrusive and undogmatic” feminist (Löschnigg 2016, 60), a realist capable of making even a “menu list” “dramatic” (Glover 2016, 53), one who makes small town and rural place “a chimera: deceptive, implausible, sometimes one thing, sometimes another” (Simonds 2016, 26). There have also been many thematic and stylistic analyses. Nevertheless, one of the aspects that has received little attention is how Munro begins her stories, which is why we examine how her very opening lines usher the reader into her world of small towns and people with ordinary lives and ordinary problems.

This article has three subsections: in the first, previous research on first lines in fiction is presented; in the second, main part, the methodology behind the study and the analysis of first lines in Munro’s stories is presented; and the article closes with the conclusions.

## 2 Opening Lines in Fiction

In her essay “The Fisherwoman’s Daughter,” Ursula Le Guin refers to opening sentences in fiction as “doors to worlds” (1988). Quoting the first line of Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room*, Le Guin explains how Woolf’s novel, although focused on the central character Jacob Flanders, opens elsewhere, with a description of his mother sitting on the sand by the sea, writing. The significance of first lines has also been acknowledged by Stephen King. In an interview given a telling title, “Why Stephen King Spends ‘Months and Even Years’ Writing Opening Sentences,” King uses the same conceptual metaphor as Le Guin, noting that his first sentences “were a doorway I went through,” which is why the opening paragraphs of his stories sometimes take “weeks and months and even years” of wording and rewording until he is pleased with them (2013). Similarly, William Gibson speaks of the opening line as something that “must be done, or at least approximately done, else nothing will follow” (2014). Opening lines are equally, if not more, fascinating to readers of fiction.<sup>1</sup> Even a simple search on Google with phrases such as “first sentence in fiction” results in dozens of websites ranking the “top best opening lines in literature” or promising “killer opening lines” to budding authors.

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, openings to short stories are no different from novel openings, even if “the short story is essentially ‘end-oriented,’ inasmuch as one begins a short story in the expectation of soon reaching its conclusion” (Lodge 2011, 225).

In contrast, first lines have received limited scholarly attention. Literary theorists (e.g., Culler 2000; Eagleton 2008; Barry 2017) typically mention them in passing, which is to some extent understandable, given the focus of literary theory on the macrostructural aspects of literature. Not surprisingly, story openings feature more prominently in narratological studies. Gerald Prince (1982), for example, highlighted the avoidance of presuppositions in the opening sections of fairy tales, which he explains with their primary intended audience (1982, 44). Mieke Bal (2017) analysed the opening lines of several canonical literary works, underscoring the role of changing perspectives in the opening of Balzac's *Père Goriot* (35) or the shifting between different levels of first-person narration in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (39–41). Seymour Chatman, both a literary scholar and film critic, illustrated the many similarities between the literary and cinematic narrator with the opening sequence of Alfred Hitchcock's movie *Rear Window* (1990, 45). As it turns out, narratological tools are particularly useful for examining the functional aspects of narratives, including their opening, such as point of view, temporality, sequential ordering, or levels of narration.

The linguistic, microstructural characteristics of fiction, on the other hand, are the subject of stylistic research, some of which has also focused on first lines. A prime example is *Style in Fiction* by Leech and Short (2007), comprising analyses of opening lines from several works of fiction. One case in point is their analysis of D. H. Lawrence's short story "Odour of Chrysanthemums" (Leech and Short 2007, 37), which opens with a sentence describing the sounds accompanying the arrival of a locomotive: "The small locomotive engine, Number A, came clanking, stumbling down from Selston with seven full wagons" (qtd. in Leech and Short 2007, 37). As Leech and Short show, the sentence imitates the motion of the locomotive, creating an onomatopoeic effect, which is the result of a combination of rhythm, the dragging effect of consonant clusters, and the actual qualities of the consonants themselves. In addition, the authors consider the syntactic characteristics of the sentence and use the combination on the microstructural level to explain the effect on the macrostructural level (Leech and Short 2007, 37). Similar stylistic analyses can be found in other studies on stylistics (e.g., Simpson 2004; Toolan 2013).

### 3 Opening Lines in Munro's Short Stories

Alice Munro's first sentences do not obviously rank among literature's greatest hits or greatest hooks. There is no Orwellian, "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen"; There is no grand Tolstoyesque "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," nor is there Camus's notoriously cold "Mother died today"; and, of course, in Munro nobody turns into a giant bug like poor Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. In contrast, five out of the 149 stories looked at for this paper begin with static verbs like "sitting" or "waiting" – sometimes both, as in "Amundsen": "On the bench outside the station I sat and waited" (2012, 31). One 1982 story, "Accident," begins with "loitering...": "Frances is loitering by a second-floor window of the high school in Hanratty, on an afternoon in early December" (2006a, 84); a few begin with train or plane travel – that is, waiting but moving at the same time. For example, "Rich as Stink" begins: "While the plane was pulling up to the gate on a summer evening in 1974, Karin reached down and

got some things out of her backpack” (1998, 215); “The Jack Randa Hotel” starts: “On the runway, in Honolulu, the plane loses speed, loses heart, falters and veers onto the grass, and bumps to a stop” (1994, 124); and “Train,” from *Dear Life*, starts: “This is a slow train anyway, and it has slowed some more for the curve” (2012, 175). Although we expect short stories to be plot-driven, and quick out of the blocks, Munro often starts obliquely, sluggishly, almost like a “slow train.”

To continue with this catalogue of what Munro does not do, she does not anticipate in the style of O. Henry’s “The Ransom of Red Chief” (“It looked like a good thing: but wait till I tell you.”); nor does she promise the world like Ford Madox Ford in the *The Good Soldier*: “This is the saddest story I have ever heard.” Indeed, when we teach Munro’s work, students comment that she is not overtly literary because her vocabulary is not lexically complex. She is not one for verbal pyrotechnics. Many a Munro sentence “looks casual,” with “the flavour of an aside” but with a style and “rhetoric [that] is deliberate” (New 2016, 127). The most strikingly literary sounding start is from 1990’s “Goodness and Mercy”: “Bugs said so long to the disappearing land, a dark-blue finger of Labrador” (New 2016, 131). Note that the zest of the metaphor “dark-blue finger” is offset by the quotidian “said so long.” “Bugs said so long...” pushes us towards country-speak, and “a dark-blue finger” points us in other, loftier lexical directions. If, as the formalists argued, literary language deviates from ordinary language, or makes us see the world in a new way, Munro is decisively non-literary.

Alice Munro “writes,” says author Francine Prose, “with the simplicity and beauty of a Shaker box. Everything about her style is meant to attract *no* notice, to make you *not* pay attention” (2006, 25). One wonders whether Munro missed her true calling as a confidence woman, a scammer, or at least a superb pickpocket, since she is a master of understated distraction. Munro herself described her theory of writing in a 1978 interview with Don Harron: “What I have as an ideal, I think, is something so clear, as if you’re looking through perfectly clean water, so that the words don’t get between the reader and what’s happening. [...] If anything seems to be decoration, I will take it out” (CBC 2022).

This paper arises from a survey of the first sentences in each of Alice Munro’s original short story collections, not including stories that appeared in magazines but never in a collection.<sup>2</sup> We have included at least one sentence from each of Munro’s fourteen books: *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974), *Who Do You Think You Are? / The Beggar Maid* (1978), *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), *The Progress of Love* (1986), *Friend of My Youth* (1990), *Open Secrets* (1994), *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998), *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001), *Runaway* (2004), *The View from Castle Rock* (2006), *Too Much Happiness* (2009), and *Dear Life* (2012). The background to this paper is double:

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<sup>2</sup> Early stories and even later *New Yorker* stories that Munro did not republish, such as the fine “Axis,” are not included. Also, the first sentences selected were those from the book edition, which occasionally differ slightly from the magazine version. For example, the magazine version of “Free Radicals” (2008) begins “At first, people kept phoning, to make sure that Nita was not too depressed, not too lonely, not eating too little or drinking too much.” The more understated lead-off in *Too Much Happiness*: “At first people *were* phoning to make sure that Nita was not too depressed, not too lonely, not eating too little or drinking too much” (our emphasis; 2009, 95). On the types of changes Munro made to her stories between magazine and book publication, see New (2016).

1. There is a contemporary tendency to avoid looking at language and style (in favour of, say, themes or context or, perhaps, word policing). If one asks students to examine a sentence closely in stylistic terms, they are far less comfortable than when discoursing on abstractions or themes.<sup>3</sup> In our experience, one reason for this lack is that in-depth stylistic analyses require proficiency in both literary and linguistic concepts and terminology, which may be a challenge for less advanced students.
2. Second, is there a Munro style? If so, can we see it from the outset of a Munro story? We read about Munro's "characteristic style" (*Publisher's Weekly*) and her "characteristic sentences" (Mars-Jones) (qtd. in Thacker 2011, 447, 420), and we can presumably tell Munro from Cormac McCarthy at a glance, but could we *explain* that difference with anything other than clichés about, "simplicity"<sup>4</sup> and "voice" and "understatement"?

Novelist and critic David Lodge argues that the first lines of a story or novel are "a threshold, separating the real world we inhabit from the world the [author] has imagined" (2011, 4). Narratologist Mieke Bal states that the first sentence of a literary work is a "commentary on the narrative about to unfold" (2009, 174) – it tells us what to expect, how the tale will be told (first person, third, second). If the speakers says, "I'm gonna tell ya a story..." or "Once upon a time..." or "This actually happened..." expectations differ radically. A question that lurks in the background of our approach is: What is a sentence? Linguists say, it's the "largest unit of grammar [...] over which a rule of grammar can operate" (Matthews 1997, 337); philosophers say, "the smallest entity whose production constitutes a message, such as an assertion, a command, or a question" (Blackburn 2016, 439). For the sake of simplicity, we merely stopped at the first period. Therefore, the first "sentence" of Munro's 1978 story "Royal Beatings" is the nominal phrase "Royal Beating." (The second: "That was Flo's promise." (*BM*, -112013b, 3).) These are fragments that deliver a message of some sort – even without a verb, you know the message: a threat of being physically punished.

## 4 Methodology and Results

The methodology is somewhat informed by stylistics – that is, the concrete application of linguistic analysis to a literary text. For the purposes of the present study, a small corpus was built, featuring 149 first sentences from Alice Munro's published collections (including the "Foreword" and the "Epilogue" from *The View from Castle Rock* – 147 stories). All sentences were copied to Word and Excel files for qualitative and quantitative analysis, and a corpus file was created for concordancing and text analysis with the corpus analysis toolkit AntConc. In stories that open with a motto, both the motto and the initial sentence were included in the corpus. In total, the corpus thus comprises 2872 tokens, comprising 1059 different words. The average number of words in each sentence is 18.38; the median 16 (i.e., half the sentences are longer, half are shorter); the mode is 16, meaning that 17 of Munro's first sentences have 16 words. The sentences were also manually analysed from

<sup>3</sup> To quote Terry Eagleton, "close analysis of language, responsiveness to literary form, a sense of moral seriousness" are less foregrounded in literary studies – "people could be very smart about the context of a poem, but had no idea about how to talk about it as a poem" (*Oxonian*).

<sup>4</sup> On simplicity, see James Wood (2008, 182–84), who observes that even "ornate writers" such as Cormac McCarthy are masters of simplicity.

a qualitative standpoint. This part of the study addressed questions such as the following: Which tenses does Munro use? What kind of and how many adjectives, nouns or verbs does she use? Is the prevalent narration mode first or third person? What are the main syntactic patterns? What punctuation is used? In the end, the results were assessed and an attempt was made to interpret the findings.

## 5 Results

In terms of length, the shortest sentence is from “Family Furnishings”: “Alfrida.” (*HFCLM*, 2001b, 68). One word. Alfrida is the cousin of the narrator’s father from Toronto and initially fascinates the narrator, a young girl from rural Ontario, with her seeming city-girl sophistication, only for the narrator to realize that her idealization of Alfrida is unjustified. The proper name thus serves as a pivot and the central point around which the story evolves, in the sense that “Alfrida” is a potential alternative title of the story. At the other end of the spectrum in the corpus is the longest sentence (66 words) from “Epilogue: The Photographer,” from *Lives of Girls and Women*:

“This town is rife with suicides,” was one of the things my mother would say, and for a long time I carried this mysterious, dogmatic statement around with me, believing it to be true – that is, believing that Jubilee had many more suicides than other places, just as Porterfield had fights and drunks, that its suicides distinguished the town like the cupola on the Town Hall. (2001a, 265)

Evidently, this type of opening has a different effect on the reader. The first impression is that of flowing prose, befitting a budding young artist. Direct speech at the beginning of the sentence is a signal that the story opens *in medias res*, with the reader confronting a narratee face-to-face even before they meet the narrator. However, it then turns out that inverted commas do not mean that the reader has found herself or himself in the middle of a conversation between two or more speakers; instead, the past tense in the accompanying introductory clause of the first person narrator signals that the clause in inverted commas comprising a simple sentence is singled out retrospectively by the narrator, who uses the generic statement made by her mother as a starting point for her own consideration of her mother’s observation that Jubilee had the worst reputation for suicides. The introductory clause features two coordinate sentences, with two more participial clauses in parallel (believing it / believing that), following which the narrator reflects on her own position towards her mother’s claim. The sentence characterized by some syntactic parallelism thus also includes a large amount of information to process in one stroke. In addition, the subject being addressed is grim: suicide statistics. At the same time, the narrator is seemingly not upset by the subject, given that the number of suicides is compared to the numbers of fights and drunks, while also being used in the simile of the cupola. From a lexical standpoint, the sentence is a mix of simple, monosyllabic words (“town,” “say,” etc.) and more sophisticated words of Latin origin (“dogmatic”), suggesting a person who can communicate clearly but also in a high register. In contrast with “Alfrida” in the previous example, this sentence does not yet clearly indicate which way the story might turn: Is it about the narrator’s mother? About suicide statistics? About a particular suicide? The options are many.

The two sentences considered above lead to two observations about openings that are at polar opposites in terms of the number of words. However, the corpus features several other notable characteristics, one of them being punctuation. The following is a breakdown of punctuation in the corpus:

- Three semi-colons.
- One set of parentheses: “Liza, my dear, I have never written you yet to thank you for going out to our house (poor old Dismal, I guess it really deserves the name now) in the teeth or anyway the aftermath of the storm last February and for letting me know what you found there” (“Vandals,” OS, 1994, 197).
- Ten dashes. These usually indicate a specification to help the reader join a relational reference: “Violet’s mother – Aunt Ivie –” (“A Queer Streak,” PL, 1986, 180) or “Sometimes I dream about my grandmother and her sister, my Aunt Charlie – who was of course not my aunt but my great-aunt” (“The Ticket,” VCR, 2006b, 183); once indicating a date range, and two veering off in another direction, before the story has even begun.
- Four question marks. For example, “‘Is that your brother out there?’ Davidson said” (“Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux,” PL, 1986, 53), or the famous opening of “Walker Brothers Cowboy”: “After supper my father says, ‘Want to go down and see if the Lake’s still there?’” (DHS, 2013a, 1).
- Two comma splices. Munro was famous for fusing two full sentences or independent clauses with a comma: “I had a name for this unruly device of hers – I started calling it ‘The Munro Splice’ to myself,” said Daniel Menaker, one of Munro’s editors at *The New Yorker* (qtd. in Thacker 2011, 398).

As can be seen, a full-stop or period is by far the most frequent punctuation, showing the prevalence of indicative mood. On the other hand, not a single exclamation mark is used, which confirms Munro’s avoidance of affective language.

To determine its lexical characteristics, the corpus was analysed using online Wordcloud or “tag cloud” applications. The results showed that the following were the most frequently used words: mother, house, town, father, years. Mother: 14; House: 14 (interestingly, Munro uses “house,” not “home”); Town: 13; Father: 12; Years: 9 (“years old” and “years ago”). These results will surprise few readers of Munro, yet there is comfort in having numerical proof of what we have intuited. The analysis has also shown that simple stylistic or quantitative tools fulfil the gambler’s desire to have their gut instinct proven correct. Here are the wordclouds for the most frequent ten and twenty words (Figures 1 and 2):



FIGURE 1. The most frequent ten words.



FIGURE 2. The most frequent twenty words.

Regarding the use of verbs, the most frequent ones are “be” and “have,” mostly because they are typically used as auxiliary verbs. Among other verbs, “say” accounts for 13 appearances, followed by “call” with nine appearances and seven of “come.” Other verbs have lower frequencies.

It is also interesting to observe the use of pronouns. Not surprisingly, given the prevalence of first-person narration, the top ranking one is “I” with 50 appearances, followed by “my” with 34 appearances throughout lead-off stories in the collections. The two exceptions are *Who do You Think You Are?* and *Runaway*, which are narrated in third person and do not even have the characters use first person pronouns. On the other hand, the largely autobiographical *The View from Castle Rock* accounts for eight out of 34 appearances of “my,” while “I” is used as many times in *Something I’ve been Meaning to Tell You*. The pronoun “she” is used more frequently than “he,” with 20 vs. 12 appearances, respectively.

Another interesting group of words consists of expressions for time, which are also frequent, suggesting that the narrator and characters pay attention to temporal deictics. “When” thus appears 14 times, and the adverb “ago” appears five times.

When it comes to analysing literature through linguistic means or numbers, there is a tension between the aesthetic or the linguistic (Leech 2007, 12), between subjective impressionism and objective quantification. Regardless of which end of the spectrum is at the forefront at a particular moment, the study has a clear focus: Munro’s quiet brilliance.

Many of Munro’s stories begin with a short, declarative sentence of a few words (such as in “Boys and Girls”: “My father was a fox farmer.” *DHS*, 2013a, 111); many other first sentences stretch over several lines; many foreground time or, more accurately, time past (with a specific reference to, say, 1979 or 1965; or general markers of time past “used to” or changing names: “Maybe you better stop calling me that,” Queenie said, when she met me at Union Station (“Queenie,” 2001b, *HFCLM*, 16); others start with gasps and spurts, with dashes interrupting flow, and two include rhymes or near rhymes – “Simon’s Luck”: “Rose gets lonely in new places; she wishes she had invitations” (2013b, *BM*, 156) hovers somewhere between a bawdy rhyme and an advertising jingle or a country speech saying.

The variety of these first sentences might lead the catalogueur to despair or to absurdly claim that *the Munroesque quality of her fiction lies in how different it all is. . .* Although generalizations are dangerous, there is one constant: for all their stylistic diversity, Munro’s first sentences establish a tension between what is realistic and tangible and what is seeming, what lies beneath or hidden.

Robert Fulford has commented on Munro's knack for pulling off the "marvelously duplicitous and contradictory act" (qtd. in Thacker 2011, 233). Put more simply, Douglas Glover applauds the "but-construction" – "a sentence (or paragraph) that turns on the word 'but' or some cognate, or an implied but, antithesis, irony, or contrasting parallel" (Glover 2012, 32). One sees this construction in "A Trip to the Coast": "The place called Black Horse is marked on the map but there is nothing there except a store and three houses and an old cemetery and a livery shed which belonged to a church that burned down" (2013a, *DHS*, 172). Similarly, "Walking on Water" begins: "This was a part of town where a lot of old people still lived, though many had moved to high-rises across the park" (2014, *SIBM*, 78).

For the balance of this paper, we will zero in on a few opening sentences and cleanse ourselves of bare numbers in hopes of understanding how a Munro sentence works – how a sentence comes to *mean* or *affect* us is, of course, not an accident of language.

Another note drawn from David Lodge (of campus novel fame): He compares the beginning of a novel to the human embryo becoming a person. In terms of genesis: when did the author get the idea for this story? When did she first make a mental sketch? "For the reader, however, the [text] always begins with that opening sentence" (2011, 4). Lodge's cogitations are incomplete because the title leads the reader into the first line. For example, the first sentence of a 1978 story reads: "Rose fell in love with Clifford at a party which Clifford and Jocelyn gave and Patrick and Rose attended" (*BM*, 2013b, 101). The story title is "Mischiefs," which colours our reading. We would be starting a different story, so to speak, if the title were "Party" or "Rose and Clifford" because those titles would stoke alternative expectations in the reader. We might be on the lookout for hints of bacchanalia, or assume we were entering the romance genre.

Another aspect of Munro's first sentences is this: We do not approach her work naively if we are at all familiar with her stories. We come to expect extraordinary events told with a certain coolness of delivery – no exclamation marks. Most obviously, if Munro starts a story "March 13, 1927" (as she does in "Powers," *R*, 2004, 193), we expect her to shift to a later date – as she does: "summer day in the early seventies" ("Powers," *R*, 2004, 222) – or even to the present. We can see how the present and the past interact. As is well attested, she is a master of time shifts. Coral Ann Howells, examining "Royal Beatings," notes how Munro controls how "past leaps into the present," while being attuned to how a "double vision" of a place such as the fictional Hanratty can occur, thanks to "shifts of emphasis within personal and communal memory over time" (Howells, 51). To move from academic to author plaudits, novelist and short story writer Lauren Groff (2011) proclaims that "Alice Munro does time and structure better than anyone".

In a close reading of "The Peace of Utrecht," Isla Duncan praises Munro's "temporal and spatial shifts" and her ability to ensure that the "tensual and aspectual nuances in the opening paragraphs are a foretaste of the subsequent temporal shifts that distinguish this narrative" (2011, 21). In other words, Munro can set structural foundations from the outset through grammatical and tense means. Munro's "dexterous" "shifts between narrative past and present" (Duncan 2011, 108) are evident from the outset of "Friend of My Youth": "I used to dream about my mother, and though the details in the dream varied, the surprise in it was always the same" (1990, *FMY*, 7). A few details we may note: there is a first-person narrator, and

Munro breaks the “tell a dream, lose a reader”<sup>5</sup> rule of thumb, by beginning, it seems, with a pat Freudian reference; then there is the tension created by “though...,” which is similar to the “but-construction” Douglas Glover praises, above. A further tension exists, however – namely, the tension between “surprise” and “always the same.” Though dream logic runs by its own rules (unhindered by such constraints as space and time), here Munro seems to be undoing dream logic itself. “The details...” are quickly done away with, and the sentence – the opening sentence of a story – finishes with “always the same.”

If one looks at all of Munro’s first sentences, laid out neatly in the order in which they appeared, one seeks patterns and therefore finds patterns in addition to the lexical and thematic characteristics evident in the wordclouds above. In both “Home” and “Dimensions,” a character travels on “three buses”: “I come home as I have done several times in the past year, travelling on three buses” (*VCR*, 2006b, 204); “Doree had to take three buses – one to Kincardine, where she waited for the one to London, where she waited again for the city bus out to the facility” (*TMH*, 2009, 8). This is at best a curiosity, or perhaps an echo of Munro’s own past travels. But two is at best coincidence, not a pattern. Elsewhere one becomes tempted to find meaning where none might exist. For example, it seems Munro has a propensity to use the letter combination F-L-O in her first sentences. Nine stories include the words “Flo” or “flowered” or “Florida” or “Flood” or “floor.” Other readers would no doubt find similarly whimsical patterns. This is an example of a would-be theory born of discovery desire and crystallized by confirmation bias – not of the intra-story “perfectly symmetrical alliterative pattern” that Héliane Ventura wonderfully examines in the penultimate paragraph of *The View from Castle Rock*, where words “resonate against each other and prolong each other’s effect: ‘drainboards ... dried’, ‘light ... lamps’, ‘cream cans’, ‘warmed in winter’, ‘bodies and breath’” (2016, 159).

It should also be acknowledged that the stories looked at here were written over half a century. This leads to another temptation, namely, seeking out development. As Robert McGill notes, there is a “critical inclination to identify an arc of artistic development in Munro’s career [that] is further evident in attempts to ascribe phases to it” (2016, 139). When it comes to style, we are all wonderfully adept at discerning progression or decay as long as we already know when something was published. This is the literary critic’s version of the sloppy historian’s presentism problem. Looking at the admittedly limited corpus of Munro’s first sentences, we can agree with McGill in confirming “the view that Munro’s career has been marked more by continuity and recursion than by transformation” (McGill 2016, 137).

However, there is one pattern that occurs in Munro’s last published stories. The final four pieces that Munro published in *Dear Life* are preceded by a commentary by Munro: “The final four works in this book 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” (2012, 256). Munro is dancing the line between pure invention and providing a kernel of truth. In terms of beginnings, the starts of the final four stories look like self-parody. Munro, the master of narrative time, chronology, and time-shifts, begins the same way, four times in a row:

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<sup>5</sup> “Tell a dream, lose a reader, the master said,” writes Richard Ford in *The Lay of the Land* (2006, 74), referring to Henry James. In *Inside Story*, Martin Amis quotes the same advice, but adds that nobody has ever been able to “track down” this “dictum usually attributed to Henry James” (2020, 42).

“When I was five years old my parents all of a sudden produced a baby boy, which my mother said was what I had always wanted.” (“The Eye,” 257)

“When I was young, there seemed to be never a childbirth, or a burst appendix, or any other drastic physical event that did not occur simultaneously with a snowstorm.” (“Night,” 271)

“When my mother was growing up, she and her whole family would go to dances.” (“Voices,” 286)

“I lived when I was young at the end of a long road, or a road that seemed long to me.” (“Dear Life,” 299)

## 6 Conclusion

The present paper aimed to provide an overview of and to clarify the opening lines of Munro’s short fiction. The examples above not only corroborated Bloom’s observation that the art of Munro’s stories is “to tell themselves” (2009, 2) but also confirmed that the opening lines are an important part of the “telling,” from setting the scene and the tone of the story, summarizing, characterizing the narrator and narratees or simply intriguing the reader. The study also underscored some of the linguistic and stylistic tools that comprise the microstructural fabric of Munro’s fiction, from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. Understandably, no literary work can be reduced to tables and figures, Munro’s being no exception. Conversely, given that her writing is essentially an epitome of humanist virtues and values, and given that, in addition, the present volume is a birthday celebration in her honour, it is not inappropriate to conclude the present article with the last words Munro wrote for publication. These refer to her *not* going home for the funeral of her mother: “We say of some things that they can’t be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves. But we do – we do it all the time” (2012, 320). What a fantastic conclusion for a writer emerging from a very moral world – she does not say “we should” or “we must” just that we do – for better or for worse. How can one crunch numbers on that sort of sentence?

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