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## The Human Geometry of Deathscapes and Homes in Alice Munro's *The View from Castle Rock*

### ABSTRACT

In her semi-autobiographical collection, *The View from Castle Rock* (2006), Alice Munro claims to portray the history of her ancestors by traveling through time and space and putting her fictional self at the centre of the narrative. This paper explores a set of complex relationships between space, place, and identity formation with the help of various spatial trajectories. At the thematic and structural centre of the narrative there are two recurring spatial trajectories that most commonly manifest themselves in the form of deathscapes and homes. This paper will map the different deathscapes and homes in relation to their physical locations in Scotland, the United States, and Canada, in the timeframe of the past 400 years, but more importantly in the context of their fictional meaning and the formative role they play in the protagonist's self-quest.

**Keywords:** *The View from Castle Rock*, literary cartography, spatial trajectories, death, home, Alice Munro

## Človeška geometrija pokrajin smrti in domov v zbirki *Pogled z grajske pečine* Alice Munro

### IZVLEČEK

Alice Munro trdi, da v svoji delno avtobiografski zbirki *Pogled z grajske pečine* iz leta 2006 slika zgodovino svojih prednikov, s tem ko potuje skozi čas in prostor in svoj fiktivni jaz postavi v središče pripovedi. Pričujoči članek raziskuje kompleksne odnose med prostorom, kraji in oblikovanjem identitete s pomočjo različnih potovanj skozi prostor. V tematskem in strukturnem središču pripovedi sta dve ponavljajoči se potovanji skozi prostor, ki se najpogosteje kažejo v obliki pokrajin smrti in domov. Prispevek bo identificiral različne pokrajine smrti in domove glede na njihovo fizično lokacijo na Škotskem, v ZDA in Kanadi v obdobju zadnjih štiristo let, predvsem pa v kontekstu njihovega fiktivnega pomena in formativne vloge, ki jo odigrajo na poti iskanja identitete posameznih junakov.

**Gljučne besede:** *Pogled z grajske pečine*, literarna kartografija, potovanje skozi prostor, smrt, dom, Alice Munro

# 1 Introduction

To explore the wide array of complex relationships between space, place, and identity formation, in the 1980s a novel field of study emerged, which came to be known as “new cultural geography”. The proliferation of recent ideas and texts resulted in a “spatial turn” that led to several new discoveries across the fields of humanities and social sciences.<sup>1</sup> In his book *Spatiality*, Robert Tally applies the concept of space to the field of literature and identifies the term “literary cartography” by comparing the act of writing to “a form of mapmaking” and the role of the writer to that of a cartographer (2013, 45). Maps represent geographical spaces, areas, and lands by exhibiting their physical features; similarly, literary texts can also map and make places and spaces visible. Bushell highlights the inevitably “subjective direction” of the process resulting from the “intersection between literature and geography/cartography (2020, 34), and emphasizes that “literary spatiality” can also be seen as a form of “‘human geometry’ that connects humans to each other and to their environment” (2020, 24). Although it is often possible to identify textual places on a geographical map, literary representations of space or place are not primarily topographical in nature, but more importantly, they foreground the vastly complex nature of human experience. This paper explores the different spatial locations and their role and meaning by following the narrator’s literary journey into her ancestral past. *The View from Castle Rock* (2006) reconstructs the writer’s family history with the help of public records, letters, diaries, and other family documents, and offers the perspective of Alice Munro’s fictionalized self.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Mapping Munro

As an iconic figure in Canadian literature, Alice Munro has also exerted a worldwide influence on short story writing that was acknowledged in her award of the Nobel Prize in 2013. The “master of the contemporary short story” was born as a Laidlaw, and on her father’s side, the family originates from Scotland. *The View from Castle Rock* is divided into two major parts, “No advantages” and “Home,” both of which place on the map a range of spatial locations. The title in “No advantages,” by quoting the Statistical Account of Scotland written in 1799, provides a matter-of-fact description of the Ettrick parish where the Laidlaws originate. The Ettrick Valley lies 50 miles south of Edinburgh and 30 miles north of the English border, and “[T]his parish possesses no advantages. Upon the hills the soil is in many places mossy and fit for nothing [...]. Barley oats and potatoes are the only crops raised. [...] There are ten proprietors of land in this parish: none of them resides in it” (Munro 2007, 3). In stark contrast with the barren location, the place is described as fertile land for stories. The reader learns about the home of Michael Scott or Scotus, a twelfth- and thirteenth-century philosopher and alleged sorcerer, who also features in Dante’s *Inferno*. This is where William Wallace, widely known as Braveheart, once hid, and Merlin was hunted down by the local shepherds (Munro 2007, 5). Not only is the place rich in ghost stories and fairy tales, but it also boasts notable literary connections. A canonical figure of Scottish literature,

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<sup>1</sup> Don Mitchell’s critical volume, *Cultural Geography* (2020), provides a concise overview of the new field of study.

<sup>2</sup> In the Foreword to *The View from Castle Rock*, Alice Munro self-consciously identifies the main motif of her book by claiming, “I was ... exploring a life, my own life [...] I put myself in the center and wrote about that self, as searchingly as I could” (Munro 2007, x).

James Hogg,<sup>3</sup> became widely known as the “Ettrick Shepherd,” a nickname under which some of his works were published; Hogg was a cousin to James Laidlaw.<sup>4</sup> The writer’s father, Robert Hogg (1729–1820), was a tenant farmer, while his mother, Margaret (1730–1813), was known for collecting Scottish ballads. Hogg was a friend to many of the great writers of his day, including Sir Walter Scott (Munro 2007, 6). The “narrator-protagonist”<sup>5</sup> highlights that for several generations her ancestors were shepherds, yet in every family, somebody was known for writing letters, diaries, even articles for the famous *Blackwood’s Magazine* (Munro 2007, 24). She emphasizes that Scotland was the country where the Scottish Calvinist John Knox<sup>6</sup> decided that every child should learn to read and write so that everybody could read the Bible, and as a result, they became “the best-educated peasantry in Europe” (Munro 2007, 18). In the beginning of her book, Munro puts her ancestors on the literary map, people who, despite originating from a geographically remote and deprived location, possessed an abundance of creative inspiration.

For a long time, space in literary fiction was considered to have no function other than “to supply a general background against which the action takes place, something to be taken for granted rather than requiring attention” (Buchholz and Jahn 2005, 551). The French cultural theorist Michel de Certeau observes in *The Practice of Everyday Life* that the role of stories is similar to that of public transport. He gives the example of modern Athens where “the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorei*. To go to work or come home, one takes a ‘metaphor’—a bus or a train” (de Certeau 1984, 115). Similarly, stories also function as vehicles by traversing and organizing places, selecting and linking them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them, they function as “spatial trajectories” (de Certeau 1984, 115). Human geography defines the concept of space as abstract and universal, in contrast to place as concrete and individual. According to Tuan, the difference between “space” and “place” can best be described through the extent to which human beings have given meaning to a specific area (1977, 6). It is important to note that, despite their different connotations, “space and place are dialectically structured in human environmental experience, since our understanding of space is related to the places we inhabit, which in turn derive meaning from their spatial context” (Seamon and Sowers 2008, 44). The following analysis explores the different meanings and the connected and interrelated nature of the various spaces and places that feature in *The View from Castle Rock*. At the thematic and structural centre of the narrative there are two recurring spatial trajectories that most commonly manifest themselves in the form of graves and homes. This paper maps these multiple deathscapes and homes in relation to their physical and temporal location, and more importantly in the context of their fictional meaning and the formative part they play in the central character’s journey of self-quest.

<sup>3</sup> Scottish poet and novelist, 1770–1835.

<sup>4</sup> Adrien Hunter (2010) argues that James Hogg’s best-known work, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), most likely inspired Munro’s short story “Wilderness Station”.

<sup>5</sup> I have borrowed the term from Martin Löschnigg, who also refers to the first-person narrator in *The View from Castle Rock* as “Munro’s fictional alter ego” (2009, 223).

<sup>6</sup> John Knox (1514–1572), leader of the Scottish Reformation, who set the severe moral tone of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland and shaped the democratic form of government it adopted.

### 3 Deathscapes

Deathscape is a notional landscape of death or the cultural practices that surround it,<sup>7</sup> and as such, deathscapes are spaces connected to death, dying, mourning and remembrance. Human beings need “*lieux de mémoires*, symbolic spaces of remembrance [...] with their own spatio-temporal rules: time stands still and remembrance becomes eternal” (Klooster and Heirman 2013, 4). In Munro’s book, deathscapes are burial places occurring in the form of cemeteries, graves, or gravestones. They represent and preserve the past in a physical form, but in a symbolic sense, they also become spiritual milestones that mark the writer’s journey of self-quest as she is following in the footsteps of her predecessors. In spatial terms, *The View from Castle Rock* begins in an Etrick graveyard in Scotland, and it ends in a Canadian cemetery in Blyth, Ontario. The events of the book extend over 400 years, since the narrative begins in seventeenth-century Scotland and ends in the present.

The zero milestone of the story lies in the graveyard of the Etrick parish church in Scotland, where William Laidlaw, the great-great-great-great-grandfather of Munro was born at the end of the seventeenth century. The epitaph of the Laidlaw’s ancestor was composed by his grandson, James Hogg the writer: “Here lyeth W. L., the far-famed Will o’ Phaup, who for feats of frolic, agility and strength, had no equal in his day [...]” (Munro 2007, 7). The reader also learns that Will established a legendary reputation in the community as a fast runner, and a bootlegger by smuggling French brandy (Munro 2007, 10). As the sight of tombstones and epigraphs fuels the narrator’s imagination, it recalls the opening scene of Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, where the central character of the novel, Pip, visits the grave of his parents, whom he never met, and in his childish fantasy he imagines them with the help of the inscription on their gravestone. Similarly, in the writerly imagination, the character of Will grows into a mythical hero possessing larger-than-life qualities. The narrator draws a parallel between the antithetical nature of her ancestor’s character—a near pagan, a merry man, a brandy drinker, a man who listened to fairies and to the strict principles of the Calvinist faith—and the inherent contradictions of lives past and present (Munro 2007, 17).

In the course of the collection, graves and gravestones become emotional “gravity centers” (Piatti 2009, 181) that mark the stations on a journey that the narrator undertakes to connect with her family. The arrival in the Etrick village turns out to be a disappointing experience, as the “conspicuous, out of place, and cold” (Munro 2007, 6) setting compares so unfavourably to the dearly familiar landscapes of Canada:

I was struck with a feeling familiar, I suppose to many people whose long history goes back to a country far away from the place where they grew up. I was a naïve North American, in spite of my stored knowledge. Past and present lumped together here made a reality that was commonplace and yet disturbing beyond anything I had imagined. (Munro 2007, 7)

By staging herself as a naïve outsider—whose ancestors left the “Old World” in the hope of finding a better one—the narrator foreshadows the intensity of an emotionally disturbing

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<sup>7</sup> I have taken the definition of the *WordSense Online Dictionary* <https://www.wordsense.eu/deathscapel/>.

journey that, in the larger context of Munro's fiction, often "reveals a concern with the implications of space for identity formation" (McGill 2002, 10).

Graves and cemeteries are, on the one hand, real places, but they are also spaces of reflection that through the narrator's memory, outline broader spatiotemporal attachments between geographically and chronologically distant notions. Thus, the title chapter of the book connects the family history of past and present by recounting the story of the voyage and the emigration of Will's grandson, James Laidlaw, who makes the move to the new world at the unusual age of 60, following the loss of his wife at the birth of their sixth child. The tragic death of the wife marks a new beginning for the family, and it is a well-recorded event that on June 4th 1818, the Laidlaws, the father, James, his children Andrew, Walter and Mary, Andrew's son and wife, board a ship that takes them to Nova Scotia.<sup>8</sup> The voyage was said to have been inspired by "the view from Castle Rock". According to the family anecdote, James and his son Andrew climb Castle Rock, the hill where Edinburgh Castle was built, and by pointing to the estuary, the father makes the boy believe that in the distance he can see America, the country that will one day become their home. The symbolic meaning of the scene on the one hand highlights the limited nature of our vision and the way distance distorts our perspective and understanding of the world. On the other hand, when our vision is blurred, we tend to fill in the invisible or missing content with the help of our imagination. Tina Trigg compares the illuminating nature of distance to the act of storytelling by observing that spatial and temporal remoteness and displacement fuel the mind's eye and offer new perspectives and meanings (2017, 123). In *The View from Castle Rock*, the writerly imagination becomes an essential structural device that mingles autobiographical and fictional elements as it moves between real and fictional locations. The first part of the book starts in the Scottish graveyard, and it ends 3357 miles from Ettrick parish, in the Canadian graveyard of Boston Church, Esquesing, in Halton County, Ontario, where the first Laidlaws and their descendants are buried (Munro 2007, 84–87). The temporal and spatial structure of the narrative maps essential connections between past and present, the old and the new worlds, and their influence on the narrator's family.

Deathscapes have the function of the *memento mori*, to remind us of mortality, and in Munro's book the concluding chapter, "What Do You Want to Know For?", expands the topic of quest to a more universal theme about the ultimate meaning of life and death at a time when the narrator faces the possibility of her own death. The chapter moves along two parallel plotlines: one follows the search for an ancient crypt that she once accidentally noticed during a yearly cross-country journey, while the other follows the medical search for a lump in the narrator's breast. Side by side with the sighting of the crypt, the doctor also sights the narrator's lump, and as with the many detours that pave the way to the crypt, the medical saga also entails several unproductive and postponed examinations. The crypt is set in the middle of a small country cemetery, and it looks "[l]ike a big woolly animal-

<sup>8</sup> Val Ross claims: "The 12 stories in *Castle Rock* are as close as Munro has come to turning her family's life into stories. She uses author James Hogg's late-18th-century account of her folk, the Laidlaws, of the Ettrick Valley, south of Edinburgh. She quotes a Laidlaw diary describing the crossing to Canada in 1818, and selections from her father's novel *The Macgregors*." 2006. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/eating-and-talking-at-alices-restaurant/article12674739/>.

like some giant wombat, lolling around in a prehistoric landscape” (Munro 2007, 316). As the narrator and her geographer husband follow the guidance of a geological map, the deathscape journey leads them to a prehistoric past, where “[t]he landscape is a record of ancient events” (Munro 2007, 318). As the narrator moves beyond the surface and digs deeper into the past, her efforts symbolize a profound desire to connect with the eternal, enduringly timeless natural formations of the primeval land. Her admiration for the “chocolate burgundy color kame moraines that show where a heap of dead ice sat, cut off from the rest of the moving glacier, earth-stuff pouring through all its holes and crevices” evokes a deeper form of awe for the “wild”, “bumpy” and “unpredictable” surface that has “a look of chance and secrets” (Munro 2007, 321). Paradoxically, it is this geologically distant landscape that helps to resolve some of the family secrets when the traveller eventually discovers the crypt, but more importantly, she attains a deeper form of unity when she finds a living witness to her family. The scene when she acknowledges that “I am happy to find somebody who can see me still as part of my family” (Munro 2007, 332), once again foregrounds the symbolic sense of seeing that testifies to and confirms the narrator’s sense of belonging and her rightful membership in the family. In addition to spiritual transformation, this life-affirming journey also delivers physical healing, since the narrator’s breast lump turns out to be benign. In reference to the title-question of the chapter, “What Do You Want to Know For?” Morra notes: “The fact that Munro locates her queries and observations about glacial geography extends the nature and implication of the question” and “situates human curiosity within larger existential questions about why knowing is important and what ends it will serve” (2017, 265).

Deathscapes also form the narrative frame of the collection. As with the opening scene of the book in the Ettrick graveyard, the last story recounts the narrator’s search for the grave of the immigrant great-great-grandfather, who was known to have died in the United States in a place called Joliet, outside Chicago. Even though this search fails to bring the expected results, it provides an insightful paradox on the motifs of the narrator:

We are beguiled. It happens mostly in our old age, when our personal futures close down and we cannot imagine – sometimes cannot believe in – the future of our children’s children. We can’t resist this rifling around in the past, sifting the untrustworthy evidence, linking stray names and questionable dates and anecdotes together, hanging onto threads, insisting on being joined to dead people and therefore to life. (Munro 2007, 347)

The words “beguiled,” and “stray,” and the notion of “closing down,” allude to the inevitable losses and the general sense of decay and futility that accompany old age, yet the narrator also recalls that as human beings, we yearn to belong and “hang onto threads” that connect us to our past. In relation to the circular structure of the narrative, Miller concludes that graves and cemeteries meld to create a “rare and fascinating work, in which the past makes sense of the present and the present makes sense of the past” (2007, 21). In *The View from Castle Rock*, deathscapes on the one hand, serve as epistemological devices in the narrative, but more importantly, they also establish spatio-temporal connections between past and present and feature as emotional gravity centres along the narrator’s quest for her ancestral past.

## 4 Homes

In the most general sense of the word, a home is a place where one lives and most commonly refers to one's birthplace or homeland. In addition to identifying home as a place, Mallett emphasizes that home is "a space inhabited by family, people, things and belongings [...] where particular activities and relationships are lived" (2004, 63). Besides being real places, homes are also imaginary spaces that provide essential experience for the development of identities, selves, and relationships. In the literary use of the word, home is variously described "as conflated with or related to house, family, haven, self, gender, and journeying" (Mallett 2004, 62). *The View from Castle Rock* reveals several meanings of home in relation to the physical location of the family house, the formative experience of home as a haven for gender, family relations and marriage, and home becomes a place of origin as well as a point of destination (Mallett 2004, 63).

For most people home is primarily linked to family, and it symbolizes the "birth family dwelling" (Mallett 2004, 73); as such, it also signifies family relationships (2004, 74). In the narrator's case the family house was situated on a nine-acre farm and was "an ordinary farmhouse" (Munro 2007, 182) with "an unusual location" (2007, 147):

To the east was the town, the church towers and the tower of the Town Hall visible when the leaves were off the trees, and on the mile or so of road between us and the main street there was a gradual thickening of houses, a turning of dirt paths into sidewalks, an appearance of a lone streetlight, so that you might say we were at the town's farthest edges, though beyond its legal municipal boundaries. [...] It was very seldom that you could see a stretch of country so empty, so seductive to the imagination, in our thickly populated farmland. (2007, 147)

The curious location occupies a liminal space that stretches beyond the town limits to the countryside of dirt paths yet is also within visible distance from the administrative and religious municipal centres. The description of the landscape foregrounds the seductive spiritual power the vast emptiness holds on the imagination, and in essence it may also symbolize a unique bond between the narrator's self-perception and the curious topography of her family-homeland.

The family home is a "place of intimacy" where human emotions are expressed (Bachelard 1969, 7); thus, the narrative shift from external to internal places also marks a subjective turn in the narrator's perspective when she recounts memories of her past life. Home is a place inhabited by the family and evokes mostly painful memories and many struggles at home and in the world outside. We learn that as a girl the narrator "was easily embarrassed [...] and could never stand up for anybody who was being humiliated" (Munro 2007, 184), including herself. Humiliation and shame are images that recur in the context of her most intimate relationships with friends and family. The protagonist describes shame as a perpetual feeling when "being beaten and of crying from the beating" (Munro 2007, 195), or as she projects her self-accusation onto her mother's allegedly "shameful behavior" because she was so much at ease with customers when selling them silver fox fur. As the narrator learns to identify herself with her family, she concludes that they "were decent people" (Munro 2007, 195),

and she blames herself for having a “self-important disputatious part that had to be beaten out of [her]” (194). By the time the narrator is eleven or twelve, the idealized father-figure has battered her three or four times (Munro 2007, 194), yet for the protagonist he remained “a man of honor and competence and humor, and he was the parent [she] sorely wanted to please” (2007, 195). The naïve child-like narrative voice that recounts the chapter “Fathers” reveals home to be a storehouse of repressed traumas that lay out a map of the narrator’s painful feelings, humiliation, and shame.

From a child’s perspective, an ideal home is a happy place with good family relationships and untroubled marriages. The chapter on “Home” is set at the time when the protagonist is nineteen years old and planning to get married. As she looks back on her life and tries to find out why she never had any boyfriends before, she reaches the conclusion that to become a desirable woman, she needs to get “away from home” (Munro 2007, 258). The young woman awaiting the great event of her life is anxious to find a suitable role-model as a wife, so she evaluates the various marriages she has witnessed at home, between her parents, grandparents and her aunt and uncle. She finds that her parents’ marriage was dramatically transformed when the mother developed Parkinson’s disease because of which she “began to seem more like his mother than his wife” and the former mother transfigured into an elderly relative who needed care and looking after (Munro 2007, 274). The grandparents’ marriage was similarly malfunctioning, because Grandmother Selina had not married the man she was in love with, and the “two of them were said to be as unlike as if they came from opposite sides of the moon” (Munro 2007, 275). While gathering these painstaking observations, the protagonist recalls the sharp emotional contrast she experienced in the vicinity of Uncle Cyril and Aunt Charlie:

the sense of obligation that grew monstrously around my father and my mother, and the stale air of irritability, of settled unease, that surrounded my grandparents—were absent from that one marriage, and that this was seen as something to comment on, like a perfect day in an uncertain season. (Munro 2007, 278)

The narrator also observes that the most striking aspect of the marriage that felt like “a perfect day” was that they “called each other by their first names, no Mother and Dad”, and the fact that they did not have any children “set them apart and linked them together not by function, but as their constant selves” (Munro 2007, 277). The narrator’s quest for love and companionship ends on the trope of a house in which marriage is compared to “a lighted and agreeable room you went into, where you were safe” (Munro 2007, 281).

The second major structural unit in *The View from Castle Rock* titled “Home” houses a subchapter with the same title that foregrounds the notion of a “a home within a home.” The protagonist returns to the family home after the death of her mother at the time when the father has remarried and lives in the old house with his new wife, Irlma. On this occasion homecoming takes the form of an exceedingly long and trying journey, including three separate bus rides. As the trip advances, roads and buses alike become smaller and less pleasant, reaching a culmination on an “old school bus with very uncomfortable seats which cannot be adjusted” (Munro 2007, 286). As the bus journey gets increasingly cumbersome, the narrator develops a growing sense of unease and anxiety that comes to a head when she

reaches her destination and enters the once familiar home. The description of the house exhibits numerous changes: the furniture is new, and so are the carpets and windows, the linoleum has been redone, and the old ceiling has been covered up and hidden. With the alteration of the original architectural design, the stylish old place has developed an ordinary look: “So it seems that this peculiar house—the kitchen part of it built in the eighteen-sixties—can be dissolved, in a way, lost, inside an ordinary comfortable house of the present time” (Munro 2007, 289). The loss and dissolution of the original design mark the new house-scape where the reminders of the long-dead mother “are not so easy to locate” (Munro 2007, 290). The new family member, Irlma, makes a final assault with a blunt remark claiming that the father “wished that she’d always been his wife, and not my mother” (Munro 2007, 300). In effect, the stepmother’s sharp pronouncement wipes out the family’s past and the narrator’s existence, and evokes a long line of painful memories and old feelings of guilt and regret in the character as she struggles to come to terms with her position as the eternal outsider:

Time and place can close in on me, it can easily seem as if I have never got away, that I have stayed here my whole life. As if my life as an adult was some kind of dream that never took hold of me. I see myself [...] like one of those misfits, captives – nearly useless, celibate, rusting – who should have left but didn’t, couldn’t, and are now unfit for any place. (Munro 2007, 312)

The protagonist’s desperate attempts to remain in control and her growing awareness of not belonging to the family culminate in the scene when the father is taken to hospital with a serious heart attack. Having to face the possible death of her remaining parent, the narrator realizes that this is not an ordinary visit, as “[t]he buses that run from place to place no longer seem so surely to connect with me” (Munro 2007, 311). Thus, the long and tedious journey reaches its destination when the middle-aged protagonist comprehends that her former home has become a place, a house that “does not mean as much to me as it once did” (Munro 2007, 290). This ultimate recognition helps the narrator to relinquish her dream for an ideal home and longing for acceptance. The visit turns into an epiphanic “journey of self-realization” that highlights “the traveler’s perceptions and the emotional impact of the journey on the self” (Botta 2018, 172). When the protagonist finally understands that “it was myself that I loved here—some self that I have finished with, and none too soon” (Munro 2007, 290), the long and painful passage ends on a hopeful note of acceptance.

## 5 Conclusion

Through its layering of stories, *The View from Castle Rock* maps a journey that explores forms of connectedness between place and self. Home, as a place of origin and return, structures the narrative between the ancestral birthplace of the family in Scotland and the narrator’s family home in Canada. The collection in many ways reads like a Bildungsroman recounting the protagonist’s journey of self-development from her early teens to middle age and reveals her many struggles to find her place in the female line of the family among Grandmother Selina, Aunt Charlie, and the ambivalent mother figure. In family histories homes and graves are both real and symbolic spaces, which connect times and places of the past to the present, and both represent the multi-layered richness of spatial images; this action is similar to the living

universe of fiction, where “space is marked by a myriad of associations and meanings in the past, present, and future” (Verraest and Keunen 2013, 35).

In the epilogue, titled “Messenger,” the disparate family burial places and homes are joined in the cemetery of Blyth, in Ontario, where the narrator visits the graves of the rest of her family. In the graveyard the storyteller recalls a vivid memory of a house that she once visited and where she saw

a big mother-of-pearl seashell that I recognized as a messenger from near and far, because I could hold it to my ear—when nobody was there to stop me—and discover the tremendous pounding of my own blood, and of the sea. (Munro 2007, 349)

Timelessness and the wonderful feminine symbols of mother and sea confirm the narrator’s powerful sense of belonging and connectedness. The “Messenger” also announces Munro’s artistic credo, and the ultimate role of the storyteller as a messenger between past and present times: a messenger who “has recorded all the names and stories of the different family members across the generations and joined them to the living people” (2007, 348).

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