

## **Bigotry in Alice Munro's short story "Too Much Happiness"**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The historical backdrop of the short story is loaded with logical inconsistency, a trademark which can be believed to have a two-fold impact on the genre, without a moment's delay imbuing the short story form with a sort of abstract vitality, while in the meantime destabilizing its status in the literary group. This article is an analysis on the story "Too Much Happiness", which mainly focuses on its thematic features. In general Munro typically magnifies social issues taken from real life by submerging this reality into dimensions of dream, fantasy and even horror. The focus on Munro's stories on a strong, female protagonist who are condemned by the brutalities of love and life yet deliberately choose to lead a life with superior individuality.

**Key Words:** Gender, feebleness, personality, death, struggle, etc.,

Alice Munro, an unpretentious housewife, had just been working independently as an ingenious non-casualty by exposing the ordinary day to day life encounters of Canadian women in the early 1970s, while the Canadian writers were still learning from Atwood's works based on the survival about the requirement for defeating the conventional part of victim-hood. Unlike Atwood, Munro was not dynamic in the Women's Movement of the late sixties and mid-seventies, however she was predominantly compared with Atwood, her first short story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), won the Governor General's Award, and *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) was acclaimed by Canadian critics for its genuine depiction of the

craftsman as a young women and furthermore made business progress in the United States. In the collection *Too Much Happiness*, Alice Munro once again renders multifaceted, challenging events and emotions into stories that shed light on the random ways in which men and women accommodate and often surpass what occurs in their lives.

The story “Too Much Happiness” is not set on the European continent. “On the first day of January, in the year 1891, a young woman and a man are walking in the Old Cemetery, in Genoa”, these are the beginning lines of the story. The woman mentioned here is Sophia Kovalevsky, “not only a great mathematician, but also a writer and activist of women’s rights in the nineteenth century”. Munro has reworked the last days of Sophia’s life based on *Little Sparrow: A Portrait of Sophia Kovalevsky* (1983), at a time when she finally seemed to have achieved some happiness both on a professional and personal level, she has also overcome the deaths of her sister and husband, and she is about to remarry.

However, being written in a typical Munroian style, from the very first pages the reader is challenged with a depressed and intimidating atmosphere, “One of us will pass away this year...Since, we have gone walking in a graveyard on the first day of the New Year” (247). “A black cat obliquely crosses their path” (253), is again a similar instance which makes the reader even more alert to a bad ending. Throughout the story, the reader is given hints that Sophia’s mental and physical health is worsening rapidly.

The man in the graveyard is Maxsim Maximovich Kovalevsky, her boyfriend and a cousin of her deceased husband. Sophia feels elated these days because of what she calls her “two triumphs – her paper ready for its last polishing and anonymous offer, her lover growling but cheerful, eagerly returned from his banishment and giving every indication, as she thought, that he planned to make her the woman of his life” (249). However, it is important to pay attention to the words “as she thought” in this line, for this marriage is probably only some romantic fantasy of the protagonist. The narrator gives several clues that Maxsim has rejected her, suggesting that she should not visit him however, joins her students and friends in Sweden, and most importantly, her little

daughter. When Sophia received the Bordin Prize, Maxsim had “felt himself ignored” (49), not being able to bear the idea that his wife would be more successful than him.

Thus, Munro emphasises the difficulties an intellectual woman with a career would have in those days to find a man, although Sophia once had a proposal from a German, but she refused, doubting him of “wanting a hausfrau” (252). In his letter, Maxsim refers to Sophia’s faulty motherhood and he finishes with the lines “If I loved you I would have written differently” (250). At first, Sophia is shattered by this news, but then she decides to “swallow her pride” (251) and to ignore his refusal. She keeps deceiving herself by saying that they are going to marry in spring, and makes plans to visit him in the summer, when her courses are over.

After her trip to see Maxsim, she takes the train to Paris to visit her dead sister’s husband Jaclard. Later, she travels more to Berlin to visit her old teacher Weierstrass. During these travels, Sophia falls asleep and dreams of her past. Through these flashbacks, the readers mainly get to know Kovalevsky’s entire life, although the reader has to fit the pieces together to arrive at a coherent story. At first, she dreams about her sister Aniuta, a beautiful girl fighting for women’s rights, who fell in love with the French man, Jaclard. During the French-Prussian war, Jaclard becomes captive as a Communard in Versailles, but then he is rescued by Sophia’s husband Vladimir.

After her visit to Jaclard, she is back in the station where she realises that her throat that gets sorer and sorer. Waiting for her train, she sleeps again, and when woken by the noise of the arriving train, she sees a man that looks just like Maxsim, “Of course it could not be Maxsim. What could he be doing in Paris? What train or appointment could he be hurrying toward? Her heart had begun to beat unpleasantly as she climbed aboard her train and found her seat by a window” (265). She decides that it was just a hallucination; however, she does not want to face the reality again because she badly sticks on to her finally achieved happiness. For instance, the narrator records, “She must not think – she must not think that this is a roundabout way of saying he wished they would not marry in the spring. She had written to Julia, saying it is to be happiness after all. Happiness after all. Happiness” (253).

As the story progresses she reveals that, she married Vladimir Kovalevsky just because she was not allowed by her father to go abroad to study mathematics, and so it was just a “White Marriage” as they did not marry “for the universally accepted reasons but were bound by their secret vow” (274) never to live together and never to complete their marriage. She explains that “young women who wanted to study in a foreign country were forced to go through with this trick because no Russian woman who was unmarried could leave her country without her parents’ consent” (274).

Although it was a marriage out of selfish compromises, some years later Sophia ultimately falls for Vladimir, and she moves in with him and they have a little daughter. It is in these years that Sophia turns her interest from mathematics and starts writing fiction, enjoying a “celebration of life itself” (283). She finally feels like a normal woman and she learns that “life can be perfectly satisfying without major achievements” (283). However, things start to go wrong when Vladimir stops teaching and gets influenced by his employer in his idea about women, saying that “they are congenitally backwards and self-centered and if they get hold of any idea, any decent idea to devote themselves to, they become hysterical and ruin it with their self-importance” (284). It is then that Sophia goes back to Weierstrass. However, in the meantime, Vladimir gets in serious financial problems and he ultimately commits suicide, which shatters Sophia.

Later, she travels to Berlin, and decides to go back to Stockholm through Copenhagen. On the train, she meets a doctor, who identifies her as “the female professor” (280). Having already a “presentiment” (302) of her bad health, he tells her that she should not travel through Copenhagen, because there is a smallpox epidemic, but the authorities keep it quiet to avoid any panic. She promises she will take another way, and when they part, he gives her a small tablet, which will give her a little rest if she would find the journey tiresome.

Thus, changing her tickets, results in a journey which is much less comfortable. She has to take consecutively the train and the boat, both of which are not well heated, and Sophia’s sore throat is worsening. However, when she lastly arrives in Stockholm, she is incurably ill, although she herself is not aware of it.

At first, she is in a weirdly cheerful but at the same time has a gloomy mood. Late at night, she walks through the snowy streets of Stockholm, unable to feel the cold. She feels an “enchantment in her mind and body that she had never been aware of before” (300) and to her, the city looks like a city in a fairytale. On her death-bed, she loses consciousness, and calls the Danish doctor “my husband” (301). Two days later she dies of pneumonia, her last words being “Too much happiness”. Although this story is set with a historical protagonist and set in Europe, it is however different from many of Munro’s other stories.

There is always a typical struggle of an intellectual woman to achieve success and happiness. Like many of Munro’s other protagonists, Sophia is a persevering and idealistic woman who both wants a career and a family. In Roger Cooke’s biography of Kovalevsky, the readers could understand that after she had won the Bordin Prize, “The strain of preparing a long and difficult manuscript for the competition and revising it for publication were so great that she experienced a terrible depression immediately after the award ceremony, one that took her some time to recover from” (13). Munro does not really stress this depression, but she does make clear that Sophia is having some mental problems in that she suffers from misconceptions about a marriage that will never take place.

As in all her stories, the coming drama can be felt right from the beginning. In her memoir, Anne Carlotta Leffler, with whom Sophia worked together in writing, wrote the following beautiful lines that sums up the problem that many of Munro’s female protagonists are faced with,

As her mind craved absolute truth, absolute light, so her heart craved absolute love - wholeness which human life does not yield, and which her own character in particular rendered impossible. It was this discord that spent her. If we start from her own belief in a fundamental connection between all phenomena of life, we see that she was bound to die, not because some strong and destructive microbes had settled in her lungs, or because the chances of her life had not brought her the happiness she desired, but because the necessary organic connection between her inward and outward life was missing;

because there was no harmony between her thought and her feeling, her temperament and her character.

At a time when most women were still given a place in the house and the kitchen, Sophia Kovalevsky tried to escape from this pigeon-hole. According to Susanne Becker, this is what feminine Gothic is about, it is “domestic horror with no escape” (10).

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