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## ALICE MUNRO'S *THE VIEW FROM CASTLE ROCK* (2007): AN EXAMPLE OF "HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION"

### **Abstract**

Linda Hutcheon coined the term "historiographic metafiction" in *Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History* (1989) to denote one of the key features of postmodernist literature, the omnipresent interconnection between history and fiction. The literary works of "historiographic metafiction" prove that historical events are transformed into facts by relying on the interpretation of documents that are merely representations of the past and subject to the attitudes of the person that recorded them. Thus the idea of history as an objective science is completely demystified. In the paper, Hutcheon's insights are applied to Munro's *The View from Castle Rock* (2007) that depicts the immigrant experience of the author's ancestors from 18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland to Canada. Though based on the outline of a true narrative, Munro herself claims that the initial idea of writing her family history has expanded into fiction thus validly exemplifying Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction". Munro's narrative technique combines the realist method of portraying historically accurate facts, events and persons and postmodernist method of deconstructing historical figures and events by fictionalizing them. Other characteristics of postmodern historical fiction present in *The View from Castle Rock* (parody, irony, didactic rhetoric, linear narrative, etc.) are further explored in the paper.

### **Keywords**

"historiographic metafiction", history, fact, postmodernist literature.

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## 1. Introduction: Postmodern Theoretical Framework

Linda Hutcheon coined the term “historiographic metafiction” in *Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History* (1989) to denote one of the key features of postmodernist literature, the omnipresent interconnection between history and fiction. Though Hutcheon had particularly the novel form in her mind when she created this phrase, the aim of this paper is to expand its meaning and possibly apply it to the genre of short fiction, i.e. Alice Munro’s collection of short stories *The View from Castle Rock* (2007) that depicts the immigrant experience of the author’s ancestors from the 18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland to Canada.

According to Hutcheon, the mere definition of the term postmodern has continuously been open to diverse, frequently ambivalent interpretations. In literature, postmodernism generally denotes the artistic works characterized by “intense self-reflexivity and overtly parodic intertextuality” (Hutcheon 1989: 3). She validly claims that in the absence of proper, precise definitions of the postmodern phenomenon, literary critics and theoreticians usually equate metafiction with the postmodern. Originally devised by an American author and critic William Gass in 1970, the term metafiction also reflects a myriad of possible meanings. Perhaps the most plausible definition of literary metafiction is given by Patricia Waugh who regards it as a

term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictitiousness of the world outside the literary/fictional text. (Waugh 1984: 2)

In other words, the actual and imaginative worlds are inescapably intertwined so that it is rather difficult for a reader to discern a proper borderline between them. Furthermore, the mere existence of the ‘real’ world is constantly questioned and definitely not taken for granted, but with a great dose of reserve concerning its factual, accurate and objective, dimension.

Though Hutcheon in general includes the metafictional domain in her comprehension of the postmodern phenomenon, she also claims that the equation of metafiction and the postmodern, though often accepted without questioning, is basically incomplete. In order to further clarify the postmodern phenomenon, she adds to its unavoidable metafictional feature “an equally self-conscious dimension of history” (Hutcheon 1989: 3). Only with the historical dimension inserted does the definition of the postmodern respect the principles of precision and consistency, asserts Hutcheon:

The term *postmodernism*, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional *and* historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it “historiographic metafiction.” (Hutcheon 1989: 3)

The literary works of “historiographic metafiction” prove that historical events are transformed into facts by relying on the interpretation of documents that are merely representations of the past and subject to the attitudes of the person that recorded them. Since factual characters and documented incidents are as a rule distorted and fictionalized in literary works, the idea of history as an objective science is completely demystified. This claim goes hand in hand with the main postulates of postmodernist theory that rely on the notions of constant questioning, multiplicity of meanings and interpretations, as well as omnipresent skepticism. Thus, the ultimate goal of the works of “historiographic metafiction” is to plausibly demonstrate that the past itself is a variant of fiction since our knowledge of it is completely based on diverse forms of representation or of narrative.

In her article about “historiographic metafiction”, Hutcheon tirelessly claims that fiction and history have always been absorbent genres and, although scholars have been consistently trying to separate the two, their attempts mostly prove unsuccessful since their theories refer mostly to the similarities rather than the differences between the two concepts. This is what Hutcheon also stresses:

They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. But these are also the implied teachings of historiographic metafiction. Like those recent theories of both history and fiction, this kind of novel asks us to recall that history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time. (Hutcheon 1988: 105)

The idea of a permanent interrelatedness between history and fiction, as well as their continuous changes of perspective through time, is essentially postmodern, but can also be perceived in various literary and critical domains and genres. For instance, it is rather conspicuous in nowadays popular presentist criticism. For Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, the creators of “presentism”, the potent bonds between past and present, history and fiction, are most vividly seen in Shakespeare's history plays, since the questions raised in them are inevitably shaped by contemporary concerns. Though the Renaissance playwright did not change the already established course of history in his plays, he purposefully

inserted numerous non-existing historical details (not recorded in official chronicles) and in this way both actualized and fictionalized them:

Of course we should read Shakespeare historically. But given that the term history develops out of a never-ending dialogue between past and present, how can we decide whose historical circumstances will have the priority in the process, Shakespeare's or our own?... (Our) contact with the actualities and particular contingencies of the past is felt to have been contaminated by the critic's own situatedness in the present...For we can never, finally, evade the present. And if it's always and only the present that make the past speak, it speaks always and only to – and about – ourselves. It follows that the first duty of a credible presentist criticism must be to acknowledge that the questions we ask of any literary text will inevitably be shaped by our own concerns, even when these include what we call 'the past'. The irony which that situation generates constitutes a fruitful, necessary and inescapable aspect of any text's being. (Grady, Hawkes 2007: 5)

The conspicuous duality that Grady and Hawkes mention in the previous passage, the inevitable decoding of history by relying on current concerns, vividly reflects Hutcheon's notion of intertextual parody of "historiographic metafiction" that offers "a sense of the presence of the past" (Hutcheon 1989: 2) that can be approached from both its literary or historical texts. Intertextuality is alongside metafiction one of the most significant features of a postmodern literary work. Initially conceived by Julia Kristeva, intertextuality implies a creative transformation of literary texts in diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. In Kristeva's opinion, the originality of the author when choosing a topic of the literary work is almost non-existent since every text is ultimately constructed "of a mosaic of quotations" (Kristeva 1980: 66), i. e. it represents a mere absorption and transformation of another. Thus the role and function of the author is thoroughly undermined since the text does not account for his product, but exists within specific literary and cultural contexts that enable it to be open for diverse interpretations.

Another important feature of postmodern literary work is the use of parody and irony. The aim of postmodern parody is not intentionally to mock the author or the style of the text. Furthermore, it frequently lacks the mocking feature and relies on irony to emphasize a potent gap between the past and present. In Hutcheon's view, postmodern parody becomes most observant in the use of irony:

Postmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation – in any medium. (Hutcheon 1991: 228)

However, Hutcheon further adds that

as a form of ironic representation, parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies...Parody can be used as self-reflexive technique that points to art as art, but also to art as inescapably bound to its aesthetic and even social past. (Hutcheon 1991:231)

The act of rewriting and placing a literary work in unexpected modern contexts with the necessary parodical elements is basically meant to creatively reconstruct the past stories in order to show an (ironic) difference between the traditional and modern approach to forms of art, as well as life philosophies.

By rewriting and recreating the existing literary works, postmodern parody offers an alternative vision of reality that serves as a potent countermove to the official version of history or tradition. The ultimate aim of offering alternatives to real history is a creative artistic reconsideration and relativization of official history by creating an awareness of the process of representation. This is also the reason why postmodern authors often parody histories, religious books, biographies of authors, myths, works of traditional and popular literature, etc. It is also worth noting that postmodern parody often criticizes different aspects of national identity, mostly combining literary elements such as didactic rhetoric and linear narrative in the process.

As previously demonstrated, in the works of “historiographic metafiction”, the official version of history is constantly subverted and different variants are offered in order to relativize the problematic concept of uniformed, unequivocal established truth. In her insightful study *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Hutcheon validly observes a great similarity between postmodern theory of fragmentation and Foucault’s theory of discontinuity and fervently proposes a new approach to both historical texts and contexts:

We are no longer to deal, therefore, with either “tradition” or “the individual talent,” as Eliot would have us do. The study of anonymous forces of dissipation replaces that of individual “signed” events and accomplishments made coherent by retrospective narrative; contradictions displace totalities; discontinuities, gaps, and ruptures are favored in opposition to continuity, development, evolution; the particular and the local take on the value once held by the universal and the transcendent. For Foucault it is irregularities that define discourse and its many possible interdiscursive networks in culture. For postmodern history, theory, and art, this has meant a new consideration of context, of textuality, of the power of totalization and of models of continuous history. (Hutcheon 1988: 97)

In Hutcheon’s view, one of the potent benefits of both Foucault’s and postmodern theory was obvious in the case of the empowered (the low classes and women,

for instance) who did not have power to write their own versions of history. This was afterwards insightfully used by the Marxist and feminist theories which employed specific contexts in order to justify the absence of these marginal groups from the official version of history.

## **2. Postmodernist Literary Features in Alice Munro's *The View from Castle Rock* (2007)**

In one of her rare interviews after receiving the prestigious Nobel Prize in literature in 2013, Alice Munro emphasized its paramount significance, not for herself personally, but, as she proudly stated, for her art form: "I really hope that this would make people see the short story as an important art, not just something that you played around until you got a novel written" (Munro, CBC Interview, October 2013). Although unfairly neglected by contemporary critics in their discussions of postmodern literary phenomena, the works of short fiction undoubtedly offer a solid illustration of aforementioned postmodern elements.

For instance, Munro's *The View from Castle Rock* (2007) describes her forefathers' immigrant experience from Scotland to Canada in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Though based on the outline of a true narrative, the author herself claims that the initial idea of writing her family history has expanded into fiction thus validly exemplifying Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction". Munro's main narrative technique combines the realist method of portraying historically accurate facts, events and persons and postmodernist method of deconstructing historical figures and events by fictionalizing them. Thus, the author's use of the linear narrative method, her exploration of the family history and Scottish national roots, has not been presented here in a rigorously factual way. Munro frankly confesses in the Foreword to *The View from Castle Rock* (2007) that her family history has unintentionally expanded into fiction:

I put myself in the center and wrote about that self, as searchingly as I could. But the figures around this self took on their own life and color and did things they had not done in reality...In fact some of these characters have moved so far from their beginnings that I cannot remember who they were to start with. (Munro 2007: x)

The fact is that Munro starts her collection of stories as a historical chronicle by a vivid depiction of her ancestors' dwelling place, the Ettrick Valley, based on the actual documents from the 18<sup>th</sup> century (such is the statistical account of Scotland from 1799), its unfavourable geographical features and harsh climate. It is also a historical fact that this parish was described in the 18<sup>th</sup> century official documents as the place with "no advantages" (Munro 2007: 3). Munro symbolically uses precisely this phrase to entitle the first story, as well as the

first group of stories within the family collection, in order to purposefully clarify and even justify the possible reasons of her ancestors to immigrate to a promised land of Canada. Apart from the “ungrateful” land, “fit for nothing” (Munro 2007: 3) and weather inconvenience due to the long-lasting snow season that disables a proper communication with the nearby parts of Scotland, a great disadvantage of the parish is also the lack of bridges that make this part of the world literally cut off from the rest of civilization. Likewise, its geographical location, fifty miles from the south of Edinburgh and thirty miles north of the English border (close to the Hadrian Wall erected in the II century AD to keep out the barbarous people from the North) contributes to the notion of a thrifty immigrant seeking good fortune in the promised land where, supposedly, the climate is milder, land more grateful and people more easy-going and kind.

It is not a coincidence then that in the first story from this collection the author visits the graveyard of Ettrick Church, looking for tombstones of her ancestors, the Laidlaw family, and is struck with the notion that “past and present lumped together here made a reality that was commonplace and yet disturbing beyond anything I had imagined” (Munro 2007: 7). Of course, we might here recall Hutcheon’s view on the inevitable interrelatedness of history and fiction, past and present, as one of the main features of postmodern sensibility. Munro’s disturbance at the place where her family past and present are intertwined testifies to her artistic inclinations to mold her personal experience into fiction that would keep the valuable sanctity of this inescapable union. Or, to be precise, at least one variant of it.

The second story revolves around the voyage of the Laidlaw family to Canada. The mere description of the voyage is preceded by a memory of the event when James Laidlaw took his ten-year-old son Andrew to the top of the Rock of Edinburgh Castle to show him the coast of America (as it turns out later, it was the coast of Fife that the boy was actually looking at). Again, postmodern features of parody and irony are potently employed here to denote a vivid gap between the wishful appearance and crude reality of an immigrant experience. James Laidlaw has wanted all his life to go to America with his family. He is described as a man with a keen sense of humour, urging not only his gullible family members (his ten-year-old son, for example), but also his friends and acquaintances to mount the highest point of the Rock of Edinburgh Castle in order to enjoy the beautiful scenery and, presumably better life conditions on this distant continent. However, once he embarks the ship to the New World, James completely loses interest in it and starts behaving as a proper man of Ettrick, with all nationalist, conservative, traditionalist and nostalgic views coming to the surface, as if they had been buried deep in his bosom throughout his life before. Munro insightfully adds here that except for certain journals and letters, the story of her ancestors’ voyage to America is completely her own invention,

thus purposefully mingling, in a proper postmodern fashion, factual evidence and imaginative elaboration in the story.

After so many difficulties and losses experienced when crossing the ocean the Laidlaws finally settle in Blyth, Ontario. Munro wittily portrays the immigrants' struggle to create a new home and symbolically, their lives become a part of the history of the land that they emigrated to. The New World, as it seems, is not so different from the old one; the geographical location and climate in Canada are also uninviting, harsh and hard to endure, the family is encountered with the difficulties of everyday life (James soon dies, a newborn baby is allegedly kidnapped and miraculously appears again, etc.). Their lives, as well as the lives of their offspring, in the supposedly promised land are presented as intentionally joyless, as if the mere act of ripping them away from the mother country instilled in them a constant feeling of despair, melancholy and hopelessness:

Without any pressure from the community, or their religion...they had constructed a life for themselves that was monastic without any visitations of grace or moments of transcendence. (Munro 2007: 118)

The narrator of the book remembers her father's surprise with the rapid change of his family's first immigrants to Canada – from adventurous enthusiasts to cautious settlers: “To think what their ancestors did . . . To pick up and cross the ocean. What was it squashed their spirits? So soon” (Munro 2007: 126).

In order to answer the question posed by the narrator's father in Munro's family history, Hutcheon resorts to (postmodern) irony, as a particularly important feature of Canadian identity in general and literature in particular, because it “voices the contradictions that the outsider can see, even within a seemingly homogeneous culture” (Hutcheon 1992: 18). Her notion of “double vision” basically recognizes (postmodern) irony at the margins of the contemporary Canadian society that highlights a creative tension between “insiders and outsiders, otherness and difference”:

Some marginalized or minoritized groups within Canadian society still do feel the need for subversive tactics to fight the ethnocentrism perhaps latent in all social discourses... [I]n this age of postmodern re-valuing of borders and margins as preferred sites of articulation of difference, many feel that the margins are indeed where the action is: that resistance and contestation make for more exciting art than centrisms of all kinds. (Hutcheon 1992: 18–21)

Hutcheon's arguments about the ironical double vision (centre/margin, insider/outsider) as a dominant trait of contemporary Canadian postmodern literature reflect, to a large extent, the themes discussed in Munro's short stories dealing with the position of immigrants as memorized and comprehended by their offspring, but also point to their unhappy relation to native Canadians.



In other words, immigrant status inevitably implies life at the margins of the Canadian society which makes for the offspring of the Laidlaw family feel isolated from the rest of the community, literally embracing the alleged safety of secluded, rural life and the policy of not interfering into the main social or political currents of the New World. However, the mere fact that Munro writes about the hardships of her immigrant forefathers and their attempts to accommodate to a life in a promised land testifies to the validity of Hutcheon's claim that "the margins are indeed where the action is" (Hutcheon 1992: 18). By following her creative impulses and writing about her immigrant family heritage, Munro consciously makes a significant move from the margin to the centre of the Canadian society.

The first part of the collection ends with the story "Working for a Living" in which Munro's main character is her own father. His daughter sadly remembers him as a man obsessed with his failures such as debts, his invalid wife and the children that will remain after him. Though Munro portrays him as a heroic man in spite of his personal difficulties, she also asserts that she was growing up with a constant pressure of economic difficulties her family frequently experienced. Another important trait of the author's family life is implied in this story: even though they have not been perceived as immigrants any more, their inferior social status has been transferred from generation to generation and thus remained a potent mark signaling a continuous, ubiquitous gap between the centre and margins of the Canadian society. The family still finds itself on the underprivileged (financial) margin of the community, thus pointing to the disappointing fact of a severe social class clash that has remained a valid feature of supposedly open-minded, democratic and tolerant Canada. From this point onwards, the book focuses on the character of the author herself and her artistic ways of resistance to constraining family and social norms.

In the second part of the book entitled "Home", Munro depicts her close family and her growing up on a small farm near Lake Huron. Perhaps the most personal stories from this section of Munro's book are "The Ticket" and "Home". "The Ticket" offers a powerful, but ultimately wrong message of marriage as the ticket out from the destructive patriarchal authorities of Canadian rural surroundings in which the author herself, as many other women before and after her, was growing up. Thus the voice of marginalized women is here presented as a potent reminder of the fact that old patriarchal sores hurt even more in the allegedly liberal and open-minded New World.

At this point in the book, it becomes clear that the author perceives herself as a marginal figure on two grounds: first, by the fact that she is a poor offspring of Scottish immigrants to Canada and second, by the biological determination of her gender. If we apply Hutcheon's critical insights on the empowered (the low classes and women), who did not have power to write their versions of history

and as such, could not be formally represented in documented statistical data, we can rightfully assert that Munro represents their willing spokesperson, the one who uses her specific family context to portray the conspicuous absence of these marginal groups from the official version of history.

In “Home”, the narrator visits the house where she grew up and witnesses an unexpected fusion of the past and present once again:

So it seems that this peculiar house – the kitchen part of it built in the eighteen-sixties—can be dissolved, in a way, and lost, inside an ordinary comfortable house of the present time. (Munro 2007: 289)

Though it is her father’s genuine belief that the narrator loved the house she grew up in, the daughter insightfully thinks to herself:

And I don’t tell him that I am not sure now whether I love any place, and that it seems to me it was myself that I loved here – some self that I have finished with, and none too soon. (Munro 2007: 290)

Thus, apart from the ever-present differences between history and fiction, the past and present, yet another significant set of postmodern opposites is added to Munro’s family history – the narrator’s former and new vision of the self. The latter represents an epitomy of traditionalist portrayal of women and their submissive acceptance of restrictive patriarchal norms, whereas the former (post)modern female easily disregards imposed harmful conventions, spitefully questions inflicted cultural standards and finds herself on a personal, intuitive quest of self-knowledge.

Finally, in the epilogue to the collection of her family stories, Munro generalizes on the notion of the past and present intertwined in the postmodern fashion:

We can’t resist this rifling around in the past, sifting the untrustworthy evidence, linking stray names and questionable dates and anecdotes together, hanging on to threads, insisting on being joined to dead people and therefore to life. (Munro 2007: 347)

The end of Munro’s book most potently illustrates Hutcheon’s notion of “historiographic metafiction”, that ultimately offers “a sense of the presence of the past” (Hutcheon 1989: 2). Munro’s book both legitimizes and subverts her personal history, her family history and the history of the Canadian nation in general. The main goal of the act of rewriting all these diverse aspects of history is to creatively reconstruct the past stories in order to demonstrate a potent difference between the author’s old and new self, the traditional and (post)modern Canadian society, and intentionally relativize the official history by consciously creating an awareness of the author’s representation of her family’s chronicles. These

features of Munro's *The View from Castle Rock* (2007) undoubtedly contribute to its postmodern literary perspective.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

After the repeated readings of the short stories from Munro's book about her family history, it seems that the persistent existence of binary opposites (history/fiction, past/present) is a valid depiction of the crucial features of contemporary Canadian postmodern literary sensibility. However, unlike the first part of the book that closely revolves around the immigrant issues, the second part of Munro's book indicates a rather universal, global and timeless component of "CanLit" at present. These stories discuss the everlasting artistic issues such as the existential mysteries of life and death, childhood and old age, sickness and health, love and hate, innocence and experience, all of which are enriched with the predominantly Canadian features (geographical, stereotypical, historical, cultural, etc). These qualities point to Munro's enduring imaginative urge to create by discovering inspiration in ordinary surroundings, by recognizing man's genuine sense of belonging to his natural environment, the urge that Frye defined as "the motive for metaphor", not solely having postmodern Canadian literature on his mind, but art in general:

The motive for metaphor... is a desire to associate, and finally to identify, the human mind with what goes on outside it, because the only genuine joy you can have is in those rare moments when you feel that although we may know in part... we are also a part of what we know. (Frye 1993: 48)

Hence, the striking unifying combination of conflicted stances – the regional and global, rural and urban, transitory and ageless, marginal and central, inside and outside aspects, and, for that matter, even the unexpected synthesis of the postmodernity of Hutcheon's irony and the universality of Frye's motive for metaphor, is what depicts Munro's short stories at its best.

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