

# Elements of Child Psychology in Alice Munro's "Deep-Hole": An Overview

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Nitin Malhotra

**ABSTRACT**--Short stories amplify a wider impact on the psychology of the reader as they have been developed over time from their parent form novel. In classical texts, the genre has received prominence in the form of tales of oral literature, but in English Literary writings it has blossomed with the writings of Edgar Allan Poe, translations of the short stories of Guy De Maupassant, Anton Chekhov and many tales translated from the classical texts of Indian origin. Short-stories limn the imperative of the human life in a perspicuous way. In the same vein, Alice Munro has gained fame to her credit as a short story writer portraying the problems, tensions and conflicts of the human relationships and their consequences in the present era. She touches upon the psyche of the human mind with her art of writing short stories. Her short story "Deep-Holes" deals with the psychological aspect of a child reflecting the conflicts and frantic situations. Freudian concept of 'id' procures the clear replica of Kent's state of mind. The finding indicates that the main character, Kent, passes the four most important of the developmental phases described by Erik Erikson as trust-versus-mistrust, autonomy-versus-shame-and-doubt, the initiative-versus guilt, industry-versus-inferiority. The events, dialogues and characters in the story overwhelm the reader to understand critically the aspirations, demands and familial misunderstandings happening in the present day.

**Keywords**--child psychology, short-story

## I INTRODUCTION

Man as a rational creature has been curious to know, "of what is past, or passing, or to come," and short story has been pertaining a significant role to quench his queries. Since time immemorial short story, as a mode of communication, is transforming the past heritage to its contemporary generation. As like its parent form novel, short story is also a dynamic genre which exhibits the gargantuan messages in a few words. It is not confined and rigid to its form and content but rather, exploring the various colors of human life in general, time to time it keeps changing in its form and subjects. As said by J.A. Cudden, it is "one of the most elusive forms," (Cudden 815) and it is difficult to claim any perfect definition of the genre. Critics have their own differences on its forms, content and subject matter. In the form of an established genre short story is a later origin. It is to some extent developed and popularized by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1949) in the second half of the nineteenth century. Poe handled it from a rough form of 'the tale' to a developed genre. As the short story is different from tale, anecdote, novel and novella, still it has a crucial place in the understanding of perennial issues of human lives. In modern period, due to the pace of time and a life full of hurry, short story has become the most conspicuous art

---

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer in English, Faculty of Humanities, St. Theresa International College, Thailand

form delivering the answers to the questions camouflaged under materialistic ideology. The present research paper is a humble attempt to critically analyze the elements of child psychology in the story 'Deep-Holes' by Alice Munro.

As literature and psychology are interrelated in accelerating the studies pertained to the human mind, as well as they give a chance to analyze the human mind on the whole. Peter Barry defines psychoanalysis as a 'form of therapy which aims to cure mental disorders', where the patient is encouraged to 'talk freely, in such a way that repressed fears and conflicts [...] are brought into the conscious mind' (Barry 96). Sigmund Freud divides the mind into the conscious mind (or the ego) and the unconscious mind. The latter is then further divided into the 'id' (or instincts and drive) and the superego (or conscience). In accordance to this theory, the unconscious refers to the mental processes of which individuals make themselves unaware. Such focus on speech already highlights the parallels between psychoanalysis and literature, for it is in talking that people construct narrative about themselves and their lives. A patient's diagnose is interpreted in much the same way that a reader might analyze a text. In his book *Understanding Psychology*, Robert S. Feldman discusses the self-determination theory which is necessary for individuals in order to develop a well-being psychological aspect of one's personality. He summons Karl Jung's theory of self-determination as "the three basic needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness". In the book, *Essentials of Psychology*, Douglas A. Bernstein and Peggy W. Nash also discuss Erik Erikson's theory of Psychosocial Development. According to Abraham Maslow "human behavior, underlying motivation, shapes by some needs that human beings have." (Maslow 36) Maslow asserts that these needs start from the very basic needs to the higher order needs. He adds that in order to fulfill the higher order needs, ones' basic needs must have been fulfilled. Basic needs which are primary are "needs for water, food, sleep, sex, and the like." In addition, he suggests that people also need a "safe, secure environment in order to function effectively". (Maslow 38) On the other hand, he categorizes higher-order needs, such as:

"...the needs for love and a sense of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Love and belongingness needs include the needs to obtain and give affection and to be a contributing member of some group or society. After fulfilling these needs, a person strives for esteem. [In Maslow's thinking] Esteem relates to the need to develop a sense of self-worth by recognizing that others know and value one's competence." (Maslow 135)

In respect to the course of social development, Erikson points out that the developmental changes occur throughout life could have a series of eight stages of psychosocial development: a) trust vs. mistrust, b) autonomy vs. shame or doubt, c) initiative vs. guilt, d) industry vs. inferiority, e) identity vs. role confusion, f) intimacy vs. isolation, g) generativity vs. stagnation, h) integrity vs. despair; from these eight stages four of them occur during childhood and are very important in psychological development. Indeed, psychosocial development involves changes in human beings interactions and understanding of one another as well as perceiving knowledge and understanding of members of society. To have a well-developed psychology, one needs to pass through each of these eight stages. Each stage has its own positive and negative crisis. These stages have been developed from the psychosexual theory being given by Sigmund Freud. Erikson also expanded upon Freud's stages by discussing the cultural implications of development; as certain cultures may need to resolve the stages in different ways based upon their cultural and survival needs. Through this model, Munro's story provides us with the insight of happenings in human world as they are. These psychological processes, majorly three stages

identity vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, integrity vs. despair, capture the period of childhood to adolescence which covers the heart of the matter of the present short story of Munro.

Alice Munro has achieved a prominent place in the writing genre of short-stories with her expression of the psychology of a child in a few of her stories whether she is known as a feminist writer. But as feminism opposed psychoanalysis just because of its masculine approach, still these feminists were also not able to write without the psychological development of their characters and their readers. Following the same, Munro's short stories have been written in a lucid style that provides the great message in a few words. In fact, Munro's stories are not fairy tales with a final positive ending. Far from that, as the majority of her stories leave an open, often inconclusive ending, an ending which hints at a possible conclusion, yet is inconclusive, and is left to the reader to decipher. Munro's writing and re-writing of her stories, many of which were first published in literary journals, also reiterates her relentless and laborious anatomical process in the analysis of the formal structures of the genre. As she stated in an interview in 2013:

"I do rewrite a lot, and I rewrite and then I think it's all done, and I send it in. And then I want to rewrite it some more. Sometimes it seems to me that a couple of words are so important that I'll ask for the book back so that I can put them in."(biographical, nobelprize.org, 1)

## II RELATED WORK

Alice Laidlaw Munro has been gradually developed as a short story writer. She achieved Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013 with the Swedish Academy lauding her as the "master of the contemporary short story" for her excellence in literary writings of the said genre. Her beauty lies in that she visualizes the invisible in her works also especially the short stories. She has always been considered as a painter of human mind. Even the title of her stories contains ambiguous meanings that can be penetrated only by a deep psychological insight of the reader. In her short stories, she does not only talk about the crevasses that are seen through physical eyes; but also, the coveted spaces related to the psyche that cannot be explored.

An immaculate artist, Munro has through her art sought to represent life in its true perspectives. Her narratives convey her vision of life, as also her reflections on the paradoxes of human existence. However, she voices her concern truthfully to represent life in fiction, as in her words: "And even as I most feverishly practice it, I am a little afraid that the work with words may turn out to be a questionable trick, an evasion...an unavoidable lies" (Osachoff 62). This attitude summarizes the artist's seriousness and need for perfection in the art and craft of story-telling. The most important aspect of Munro's narrative art is that, it delves into the human psyche, and tries to unravel the hidden-self in human beings. Almost all her stories can be re-read from a psychoanalytical approach. The childhood and the adolescent mind are examined in many of her short stories which lead to different analytical conclusions. Besides writing about her life and family, Munro wrote stories which are mostly set in and sketched from Huron County, Ontario—these stories provide elaborative details about people of that specific Ontario, their culture and the changes occurred through a course of time, as well as the way these people live. Through her stories, Munro tries to present the problems of the modern age and the consequences these problems bring with them. As Deepika Pant claims in her article "A Horneyan Analysis of Alice Munro's Deep-Hole" that Munro's stories lie between the center of understanding human problems. The

problems are as modern and cognizant of their display in words. Thus, her stories highlight inner actions of today's people and the attempt they do to explore human complications in an unsophisticated prose style. She pursues to discover and convey the mysteries of the human mind through her characters. Her story "Deep-Holes" also veneers the same. It presents the impact of conflicts, tensions and disturbed relationship on the psyche of her characters. She brings to light the darkness of human mind in a very revealing manner.

*Deep-Holes* is a story of a family of three children, and one of them that named Kent, who is the oldest son of the family, grows mysteriously alienated from his family. The story begins with a celebratory picnic journey of his family: Alex (father), Sally (mother), Kent (the older son), Peter (the younger son), and Savanna (the baby, daughter). The family went on to camping to celebrate Alex's achievement in honor of publishing his first solo paper in a journal *Zeitschrift für Geomorphology*. They went to a place called Osler Bluff where Sally and children haven't been for earlier. Alex was in search of a place to park his car, and he found one with no cars at that moment. Sally saw a sign with "Caution. Deep-Holes", but she didn't really pay attention to that, whether it was a considerable point in the story. It paves the way for unyielding ignorance of elders. They, ignoring the signboards, walked into a forest where they found deep chambers. Since the story explores the painful circumstances of a child rejecting his family and their way of life, Erikson's state of autonomy vs. shame clarifies the event of understanding the elaboration through deep holes become psychic spaces where one might fall into despair. In those psychic spaces there might not be enough hope of understanding, love and affection of growth of a child in an established manner of societal understanding. The beginning itself presents the sad and pessimistic tone and it leads to the broken hearts and unheard melodies of relationships. Kent thinks totally different to his father. When Sally points him out making fun of his father he only says, "I'm not. It's just that most geologists seem so grubby." It clearly reflects the differences in his thinking style to his fathers'. Alex too points him out as "No stupid showing off, you hear me? You understand? Answer me" and he considers Kent as a troublemaker and the possessor of dirty mind which influences Peter also. Alex had a clear vision towards the appearance of Kent in the middle of the story when Sally said to him that Kent wished to live in his own freedom so he abandoned the house. Alex harshly replied, "He can get a bellyful of it, as far as I'm concerned." (Munro 1-2)

The accident of Kent being fallen down in the deep holes flipped the horizon of thinking of all the characters in the story. It finds the place for Erikson's first stage of psychoanalysis as trust vs. mistrust. Whether it debars the context of age here, still it pursues to the overall development of the mind and thinking of Kent. Alex's point of view in the opening of the story paves the way to the thinking patterns taking place in building psychology of the character of Kent and on the same time, the other characters also get affected by. After Kent met with the accident and got fractured, he has been brought to the hospital. The doctor's comment made the situation more cogitable to understand the pullulation of a child under the umbrella of love of his parents. Doctor comments, "kids have to be watched every minute in there." (Munro 4) This made the parents feel ashamed but it has conveyed the essence of taking the receipt of psychological well being of a child being nurtured in a contrast family.

It is very clear that temporal relationships influence our perception of events. Kent is perceived as an individual who is unable to adjust to his self-ambience and life. This results in his neurotic growth, which is a strong understanding in the light of the theory of psychoanalysis. According to this theory in the concerned eventualization, a lack of warmth, affection, and love from the family are various reasons that resulted in one's

erratic behavior. Later, Kent aspired for his father's love and attention; resultingly, he made an idealized image of his father. He dreamt to be able to share a special bond with his father, in which he was given Alex's undivided affection being a father. He was very attentive and, "courteous to his father, bringing him the paper that had been rescued from Savanna and carefully refolded, pulling out his chair at dinner time." (Munro 5) He always praised his father and called him his hero. On the contrary, Alex still showed disregard towards Kent and never paid attention to his emotions and feelings. Kent's every word would by some means end up infuriating Alex. Kent regarded him as the savior of his life whereas Alex showed indifference towards him. Alex says when asked to love Kent, after he rescued him, as Kent feels thankful to him. Alex harshly replies: "Christ, I'd have rescued anybody." (Munro 6)

Moreover, Kent always wanted to hold an essential position in the eyes of his parents, but their negligence shattered his entire world. Alex keenly regarded him as a troublemaker. His hatred tone was very much clear in the beginning of the story. Even he finds the bad in Peter due to Kent's sneaky mind. Even when Alex and Sally moved to save him from the pit hole, Alex' belief has been assertively predicted,

"Kent had started that nonsense not because he was really thirsty but because he was crudely excited by the sight of Sally's breast." (Munro 2)

Both Sally and Alex regarded Kent as the menace in the family. They expected absolutely nothing from him, as they thought he was not capable of living up to their expectations. In his parents' perspective, he was just another impractical man with no potential. Kent, on the other hand, too expresses his annoyance by calling Alex as "bourgeois gentilhomme". The story has been cut right to the bone, when Alex took him out from the pit hole; they drove to the hospital because Kent had broken both of his legs. He couldn't go to the school for the next six months so he made some extra projects given by his teachers. In one of the projects, he had to write about a place. Sally, his mother, told him about some remote islands that nobody talked about. Before the accident, he seemed to be more mature than other kids of his age. He always wanted to hold an important position in the eyes of his parents. As he came to the realization, that he held no prominence in Alex's life, he was motivated to become independent. To finish, he left his family behind to attempt a fresh life with his new and improved true self. Therefore, the outcome of their indifferences proves that the metaphorical deep holes Kent fell into throughout the narrative molded his relationship with his father, and caused him to grow as an individual and move further away from his family.

Whether Kent did not write much to his parents, still his letters keep the interest in queue of his parents especially Sally in the story. The shift of materialism to search a spiritual identity was clear in his letters and dialogic conversations with Sally. Savanna's much interest while seeing him on the TV set makes her full of awe and she informs Sally about it instant. In the first letter Kent addressed to his parents after leaving, he aloofly acknowledged, "...one thing [Kent has] learned to give up is intellectual pridefulness". Kent turned into a beggar and moved far away from home. He changed his name to Jonah and detached himself completely from the family. He was living with poor people in the ghettos. The basic aim of Kent was to assert his individuality and to put the question on his family that always wanted to maintain its mannerism. He moved towards these poor people because he was getting the love and affection from them, which his family failed to provide him with. His talks were focused on them, and any diversion or disturbance that made him anxious and aggravated. He told Sally about his views on his past life when he was with his family. Although he was with the family, yet he was

all alone. No one could understand his emotional or mental state. He felt as if he was lost in his fake self, which was a shadow of his father. Earlier, he wanted to be like his father who was a successful man, but the mental pressures and tension that he got from his filial relationships turned him into an alienated being. It wholly depicts the sixth stage of psychoanalysis being provided by Erikson, defining the intimacy vs. isolation which later flags the way to the actions of Kent in the story. This alienation is visible in the lines where he is addressing to his mother, Sally, “My life, my life, my progress, what all could I discover about my stinking self. The purpose of me. My crap. My spirituality. My intellectuality. There isn’t any inside stuff anymore, Sally.” (Munro 16)

The shift from self-centered approach in Kent’s life has taken all attention of the story in the end which absolutely expressed the psychological structure being built up in the child to his adolescence. He was careful about his image in his society, his people and his life. Savanna, too, was also deprived of familial affection after the death of Alex, and Savanna and Peter has not been in the story once they moved for their law and medicine respectively. Kent’s thinking, subsequently, can be captured easily through his conversation with his mother Sally when she visits his place of living after watching him on the TV set. His gist of replies involves:

“I could hardly asks the others to do it if I wouldn’t. That’s something I had to overcome. Just about all of us have something to overcome. It can be shame. Or it can be the concept of ‘mine’?...the notion of private ownership kicks in...Whose is it?” (Munro 14)

Kent’s concept of life depicted at the end of the story portrays his transformation into a stable being. He is happy with his new identity and wants to live his remaining life in the same manner. His confused state of mind is also resolved when he talks about money to Sally but at the same time mentions that he is happy with his resent. Relationships are as hypocritical for him as he asks Sally that she is not even smiling on the word because it is a “cant” word. He even suggested to Sally that she should also pursue her true self as Sally knows that she can only save herself. This statement made her contemplate her own identity. Throughout her life, she existed in a frame formed by Alex. He asks Sally even in a fury that “Don’t you get tired being clever?” (Munro 17) Kent’s advice made a significant mark on her mind. Now, after the death of Alex, she is found for the first time re-thinking herself. The different conceptions of Kent’s life expresses the Erikson’s concept of fifth stage of identity vs. role confusion as he says in the end of the story:

“My life, my life what all I could discover about my stinking self. The purpose of me. My crap. My spirituality. My intellectuality. There isn’t any inside stuff anymore.” (Munro 16)

### III CONCLUSION

Thus, the protagonist in the entire narrative is striving to find a substitute for his lost personality. Although he has degraded his condition, for him, it is a strategy to cope with the mental pressures he has been through and to find his true self.

### REFERENCES

1. Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; 3rd edition, 2009. Print.
2. Berstein, Douglas A. *Essentials Of Psychology*. 1st ed. [s.l.]: Wadsworth, 2013. Print.

3. Counselors, Association. "Children Are A Gift From God - 15 Encouraging Blessings In Scripture". *Bible Study Tools*.N.p., 2017. Web. 26 Mar. 2017.
4. RAJANI, N., & SIREESHA, G. MICRONUTRIENT–INTERACTION AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN.
5. Cuddon, J.A. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. New Delhi: Maya Blackwell Doaba House, 1998. Print.
6. Feldman, Robert S. *Understanding Psychology*. 1st ed. New Delhi: McGraw-Hill. 2008. Print.
7. CLN, J. M. A., & ADUBIKA, T. O. PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND THE GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION.
8. Freud, Sigmund. *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. Trans. G Stanley Hill. Independent Publications. 2019. Print.
9. Munro, Alice. *Deep-Holes*. *The New Yorker*.N.p., 2008. Web. 8 Mar. 2017.
10. Tinky, C., & Sunita, M. (2017). Inherited Factor Related to Childhood Obesity and Its Prevention. *IMPACT: International Journal of Research in Applied, Natural and Social Sciences (IMPACT: IJRANSS) ISSN (P)*, 2347-4580.
11. Osachoff, Margaret Gail. "Treacheries of the Heart: Memoir, Confession and Meditation in the Stories of Alice Munro". Ed. Downsview, Ontario. *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*. ECW Press. 1983. Print.
12. Pant, Deepika. "A Horneyan Analysis Of Alice Munro's Deep-Holes". *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies* 2.4 (2015): 25-28. Print.
13. Reddy, M. R. THE ESSENCE OF MORALS IN SUDHA MURTHY'S CHILDREN'S STORIES.
14. Waugh, Patricia. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.
15. Elmiawati Latifah, Susi Ari Kristina, Sri Suryawati, Satibi. "Overview of Drug Availability and Influencing Factors in Several Low, Lower and Upper- Middle Countries: A Systematic Review." *Systematic Reviews in Pharmacy* 10.1 (2019), 67-72. Print. doi:10.5530/srp.2019.1.11
16. Bisson, N., Tobin, S., Grondin, S. Remembering the duration of joyful and sad musical excerpts assessment with three estimation methods(2009) *NeuroQuantology*, 7 (1), pp. 46-57.
17. Gonçalves, C.P. Quantum neural machine learning: Backpropagation and dynamics (2017) *NeuroQuantology*, 15 (1), pp. 22-41.

#### Web Sources:

<https://positivepsychology.com/abraham-maslow/>

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2013/munro/biographical/>