

An Analysis of the Symbolic Meanings in “Nettles” Based on Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism

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Abstract

Alice Munro is a Canadian short-story writer who won Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013. In her conspicuous short stories, “Nettles” is really fascinating, for the interpretation of story resembles the interpretation of a puzzle. This complex story has been studied by many scholars and the explanation of the story, including the explanation of the symbols in it, seems to be various. This paper tries to interpret the symbols and the title of this story from a brand-new angle in which psychoanalytic literary criticism is involved. Based on the textual analysis of the story, the author concludes that the narrator’s remembrance of her old memories is the impetus to the creation of the story and the title symbolizes the reunion and departure between Mike and the narrator, with joys and pains combined together.

Keywords: Symbols; Nettles; Psychoanalytic analysis; Alice Munro

I. Introduction

Alice Munro is a Canadian writer, who was born in 1931 and married to James Munro in 1951. Then, she moved to British Columbia with her husband, where she opened a successful bookstore in Victoria. Following her divorce in 1976, Munro moved back to Ontario. Alice Munro is the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature for her outstanding talent in writing short stories. All of her stories draw on her childhood and adolescent experiences and from the lives she observed around her (Pfaus 3). Besides, Munro’s childhood experiences in the small town have taught her to expose the predicament of women in the form of stories and her stories voice woman’s feelings towards society from feminist perspective (Prabhakar and Venkat 58). “Nettles” as an example of her masterpieces shows her inspiring writing style to all the readers. Since the publication of the story, numerous studies on “Nettles” from different aspects have been conducted, but the perspective of psychoanalytic literary criticism is not much involved.

The story begins with a scene happened in the kitchen, where a man was making himself a ketchup sandwich. Years later, the narrator looks for a house where the above scene happened, although she knows the selling of the house. Then, the narration of the story starts again with her childhood memories, including her memories towards her farmyard, her little playmates and games. In all these memories, Mike seems to be the very first one in her recalling her old memories. On her visit to her friend Sunny, she meets her childhood playmate Mike McCallum. Since the very reunion, she wants to be with Mike again, although she knows that Mike is married. After her experiences with Mike, especially after a storm, she learns what happened in Mike’s life and the burden Mike bears. At last, she understands the true meaning of love and her feelings to Mike. She then represses her love and her feeling towards Mike and never asks for the news of Mike.

“Nettles” is a rather perplexed short story. Different researchers have studied the story from sundry aspects. Fan Molan studies the story by analyzing the importance of rhetoric for the construction of literary text (65). She believes that different ways of rhetoric enable readers to realize an conversion between time and space which helps the development of the plots of the story (Fan 65). Besides, the application of certain ways of rhetoric enables the plots to be smooth, coherent and cohesive (65). In her analysis, she also believes that the storm is a turning point in the development of the plot (65). Having experienced the storm with Mike, the narrator found the true meaning of the relations and emotions between herself and Mike. Regarding the storm, Zhang Hongwei shows her similar opinion.

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She believes that the narrator learns Mike and Mike's wife's common experience after the storm and realizes that her own trifling things are nothing compared to their common experiences(2). Since then, the narrator represses her deep feelings to Mike and regards Mike as her "soul mate"(Zhang 2). In Zhang's ethical interpretation, she concludes that the ethical morass and emotional experiences are common to every woman in the world, thus the theme of the story passes the national borders(8). In Xue Xiaohui's "Epiphany of a Middle-Aged Woman: An Analysis of Alice Munro's 'Nettles' from the Perspective of an Initiation Story", Xue Xiaohui mentions that the storm is another natural guide for the narrator which purifies her mind and removes her lust for Mike as Christian baptism(29). Xue studies the story from three aspects: the content, the characters and the structure. Xue concludes that "Nettles" is an initiation story about a middle-aged woman from immaturity to maturity(Xue 31). Besides, the researcher believes that sometimes distance makes love eternal(31). In "On the Strategy of the Narrative Time in Alice Munro's Nettles", Yin Yuan studies the strategy of the narrative time of the story. In the study, Yin believes the use of strategy of the narrative time in the story makes it possible for the story to be profound instead of simple. Yin also believes that the description of the storm in the story makes the narrator's emotional changes to Mike more natural and persuasive(69). Gao Hui analyzes the story from a marital perspective in which Gao believes that "Nettles" mainly explains Alice Munro's marriage concept, including selflessness, responsibility, tolerance and forgiveness(138).

In summary, Gao believes that Alice Munro's works mainly explore the ordinary woman's complex psychological and emotional state(140). As what have been shown above, many researchers have explored this short story from different perspectives and their explorations may be conducted on the basis of their own understanding in reading the story. Their studies focus on the use of rhetorical devices, on the ethical interpretation, on a woman's growing from immaturity to maturity, on the interpretation of narrative time, on the reflection of author's own values on marriage. These researchers interpret this short story from different perspectives and they have their very points on the explanation of the theme, the structure, the images and the symbols. Although Gao points out that Alice Munro's works mainly explore the ordinary woman's complex psychological and emotional state, she does not extend her opinion or develop her paper from this aspect. Her study and others' studies involved in this paper have no much relevance to the further study of the narrator's psychological aspect. In this article, the researcher will focus on the narrator's inner thoughts and emotional changes in relation to Mike. Most importantly, the article will study some symbols in this story, including the narrator's childhood memories and the title "Nettles". Besides, the study will be based on psychoanalytic literary criticism in combination with her early memories to Mike.

II. Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism

In M.A.R. Habib's *A history of literary criticism: from Plato to the present*, a masterpiece of literary theories, the author believes that the psychological dimensions of literature has always been the researching field of critics, rhetoricians, and philosophers since Aristotle. In the study of the psychological dimensions of literature, an author's motivations and intentions to the effect of texts and performances on audience are mainly analyzed(571). The psychoanalytic principles are initiated by Freud and later developed by other psychologists and literary critics(571). According to M.A.R. Habib, the psychoanalytic criticism includes the analysis of the motives of an author, the analysis of readers and fictional characters, relating a text to features of the author's biography such as childhood memories, relationship to parents, the analysis of the nature of the creative process, the analysis of the psychology of reader's responses to literary texts, the analysis of the interpretation of symbols in a text, the analysis of latent meanings, the analysis of the connections between various authors in a literary tradition, the examination of gender roles and stereotypes, and the functioning of language in the constitution of the conscious and unconscious(572). In this paper, the analysis of the symbols in the story will be based on some aspects of psychoanalytic criticism.

In "Nettles", when the narrator was very young, she had a special feeling to her childhood playmate, Mike. At the beginning of her younger age, she met Mike for the first time. They played the game of war and did something joyful, like washing the dog. But as a son of a well-drier, Mike had to leave with his father when the work had been finished. when reading the story, it is facile to learn that the narrator had already loved little Mike at that time. The feelings she had when she was with Mike, the feelings she had when Mike was absent and the feelings she had when she heard the name are all the evidences to this ascertainment. Years later, when her marital relation ended, she encountered Mike again. This time, she fell in love with Mike again, even though she had known that Mike was married. During this visit to her friend, the narrator experienced a storm together with Mike, after which she knew the death of Mike's son and what Mike and his wife had experienced together. This time, the narrator changed her feelings to Mike. As Zhang Hongwei said, "her experiences were of no account compared to those of Mike and his wife's(2)." So, the narrator decided to repress her feelings to Mike and ask for nothing.

In reading the story, the narrator's personal feelings may impress every reader of the story. Comparing to the psychoanalytic criticism, the narrator's personal feelings can be interpreted accordingly. Firstly, the narrator depicted her childhood memories, especially the memories when she was with Mike. Secondly, the symbols in the story all have latent meanings. For example, storm, water and nettles are three major symbols in the story. Another interpretation should be connected with the narrator's language in writing this story which refers to the functioning of language in the constitution of the conscious and unconscious. Considering these aspects, a further study based on textual analysis should be conducted. Thus, the following part will center on textual analysis.

III. Textual Analysis of the Symbols in "Nettles"

The textual analysis of the symbols in this story will be interpreted from two aspects. The first one is the narrator's childhood memories, considering the description of the moments the narrator and Mike spent together. The second aspect centers on the plant "nettles", or simply the title of the story.

A. Childhood Memories

In this story, the narrator's childhood memories cover a lot of paragraphs with many plots in the description. The primary memory the narrator held is in a summer during which the narrator met Mike, played with Mike and loved Mike.

The memory she had when she was washing the dog with Mike:

One day when Ranger was with us he chased a skunk, and the skunk turned and sprayed him. Mike and I were held to be somewhat to blame. My mother had to stop whatever she was doing and drive into town and get several large tins of tomato juice. Mike persuaded Ranger to get into a tub and we poured the tomato juice over him and brushed it into his hair. It looked as if we were washing him in blood. How many people would it take to supply that much blood? we wondered. How many horses? Elephants?(Munro 130-131)

The memory she had when she was playing with Mike in the game of war.

I don't suppose, either, that I had ever played in a group, like this, before. It was such a joy to be part of a large and desperate enterprise, and to be singled out, within it, to be essentially pledged to the service of a fighter. When Mike was wounded he never opened his eyes, he lay limp and still while I pressed the slimy large leaves to his forehead and throat and—pulling out his shirt—to his pale, tender stomach, with its sweet and vulnerable belly button.(Munro 135)

The memory she had when Mike was away with his father.

One day weeks afterwards, when I was wearing my fall coat, I was standing by the door of the shoe store while my mother tried on shoes, and I heard a woman call, "Mike." She ran past the store, calling, "Mike." I was suddenly convinced that this woman whom I did not know must be Mike's mother—I knew, though not from him, that she was separated from his father, not dead—and that they had come back to town for some reason.(Munro 137)

All the memories the narrator had when she was young are relevant to Mike. When she was washing the dog with Mike, she noticed more than what they were doing. As she said in the text, "Mike persuaded Ranger to get into a tub and we poured the tomato juice over him and brushed it into his hair. It looked as if we were washing him in blood(Munro 130)." When she was playing with Mike, she was different from other girls, as she thought, "at least it was so for me who, unlike the other girls, owed my services to only one warrior(Munro 135)." When Mike was absent, the narrator had special feelings.

I woke up every morning hungry for the sight of him, for the sound of the well driller's truck as it came bumping and rattling down the lane. I worshipped, without any show of it, the back of his neck and the shape of his head, the frown of his eyebrows, his long, bare toes and his dirty elbows, his loud and confident voice, his smell. I accepted readily, even devoutly, the roles that did not have to be explained or worked out between us—that I would aid and admire him, he would direct and stand ready to protect me(Munro 136).

Freud said that "a strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfillment in the creative work(James et al. 151)." Therefore, for one thing, the experiences of the narrator, such as divorce, the quarrels between her and her husband, recalled her early memories she spent with Mike. For another, all the childhood memories appeared in this story may symbolize her pursuit of a happy life and her flaming love to Mike, with so many details attached. Moreover, her hunger for the sight of Mike appears to be another evidence of her special feelings to Mi**B. Nettles**

The title of the story is “Nettles”. However, the word is only mentioned in some small cases, such as in the bushes. A notable feature is that the word only appears at the ending of the story. The title of an essay usually precedes the beginning and should clarify the subject and arouse interest (Kane 58). But how the title “Nettles” clarify the subject is worth discussing. Before the advent of the storm, the narrator and Mike, they meet nettles for the first time. Then, nettles appear when they have their prickling, itch or burning, on their bare forearms, the backs of their hands, and around their ankles. The second appearance is after the storm and her understanding of what Mike has experienced as well as of her incapability in Mike’s memories and experiences. The last appearance is her understanding of the true nature of the nettle-like plants and her never asking Sunny for the news of Mike during all the years of their dwindling friendship. In summary, the title “Nettles” is miraculously in relevant to the changes of the narrator’s feelings to Mike. Specifically, at the the first appearance, the narrator wants to be with Mike and she can not repress her love to Mike. She does not know what Mike has experienced. The above can be proven by the description of her observation when they are in the bushes, from water to weeds, from soil to rain.

The water was steel gray, and looked to be rolling, not breaking in a chop the way pond water would do, in this rush of weather. Between it and us there was a meadow of weeds, all of it seemed in bloom. Goldenrod, jewel-weed with its red and yellow bells, and what I thought were flowering nettles with pinkish-purple clusters, and wild asters. Grapevine, too, grabbing and wrapping whatever it could find, and tangling underfoot. The soil was soft, not quite gummy. Even the most frail-stemmed, delicate-looking plants had grown up almost as high as, or higher than, our heads. When we stopped and looked up through them we could see trees at a little distance tossing around like bouquets. And something coming, from the direction of the midnight clouds. It was the real rain, coming at us behind this splatter we were getting, but it appeared to be so much more than rain. It was as if a large portion of the sky had detached itself and was bearing down, bustling and resolute, taking a not quite recognizable but animate shape. Curtains of rain—not veils but really thick and wildly slapping curtains—were driven ahead of it. (Munro 150)

Besides, in this expression of her inner thoughts, she says “what I thought.” In this section of the story, the narrator goes to golf course with Mike. She says she misses her children, while Mike says nothing, which may infer that what she thinks and what Mike thinks are different.

Stooping, butting his head through the weeds and against the wind, Mike got around in front of me, all the time holding on to my arm. Then he faced me, with his body between me and the storm. That made as much difference as a toothpick might have done. He said something, right into my face, but I could not hear him. He was shouting, but not a sound from him could reach me. He had hold of both my arms now, he worked his hands down to my wrists and held them tight. He pulled me down—both of us staggering, the moment we tried to make any change of position—so that we were crouched close to the ground. So close together that we could not look at each other—we could only look down, at the miniature rivers already breaking up the earth around our feet, and the crushed plants and our soaked shoes. And even this had to be seen through the waterfall that was running down our faces. (Munro 150-151)

In the above excerpt, the narrator regards every tiny move of Mike’s as the showing of his love and fondness to her. She enjoys the company of Mike and the feelings with Mike. Perhaps she hopes that Mike has the same feeling to her. The following excerpt can also be the support of the above. In other words, she can not repress her love and fondness to Mike through the description of her observation. “Mike released my wrists and clamped his hands on my shoulders. His touch was still one of restraint, more than comfort (Munro 151).”

Mike releases her. But she still says “his touch was still one of restraint, more than comfort (Munro 151).” Up to this moment, the narrator is still in believe of her fondness to Mike. In relation to Mike’s behaviors, she can imagine his fondness to her. Based on psychoanalytic analysis, to unearth latent meanings of the symbols in this story relating to nettles is to unearth narrator’s latent feelings. Therefore, when the narrator goes to the golf course with Mike and when they are in the bushes, her inner thoughts and feelings are the latent meanings of this kind of plant. Considering the development of the plot, before the knowing of the death of Mike’s son, the title “nettles” is likely to symbolize the narrator’s love and fondness to Mike. Also, her desire of being with Mike seems to be another symbol of nettles.

In mentioning the death of Mike’s son, the narrator has her special feelings, as it is said in the story: “His voice surprised me, like the sun. But in the opposite way. It had a weight to it, a warning—determination edged with apology.” When the narrator says that she misses her kids. Mike says nothing to her. She thinks it may be not appropriate to talk about children. But after knowing the death of his son, she begins to realize the burden he bears and the remorse he holds. Then, she writes:

I knew all that. I knew now that he was a person who had hit rock bottom. A person who knew—as I did not know, did not come near knowing—exactly what rock bottom was like. He and his wife knew that together and it bound them, as something like that would either break you apart or bind you, for life. Not that they would live at rock bottom. But they would share a knowledge of it—that cool, empty, locked, and central space.(Munro 152)

Again, the narrator's talking of her children arises the old memories of Mike's remorse on the death of his son. This is likely to be the reason why Mike says nothing to respond. Then, Mike tells her after the storm which may symbolize a long-lasting painfulness in Mike's heart, especially from the narrator's mention of her children to the ending of the storm when Mike finally tries to tell her. According to psychoanalytic analysis, it can be concluded that the narrator's mention of her kids arises Mike's memories of the death of his son and his painfulness. When the narrator knows what Mike and his wife have experienced, her feelings to Mike begin to change. Later, although they feel a prickling, an itch or burning, and they feel the same. When they have this common feeling and experience, the narrator deems that she has the same experience with Mike just like the common experience Mike and his wife had. Naturally, through the pain, the narrator remembers the nettles and recalls her being together with Mike in the bushes. Naturally, the narrator recalls the nettles through the uncomfortable feelings on the skin. Through the nettles, the narrator unconsciously recalls what happened between her and Mike in the bushes. Thus, the nettles become an unconscious bridge by which the narrator recalls other things and by which the narrator enjoys her feeling and happiness when she was with Mike.

In summary, nettles' symbolization can be divided into two stages. In phase one, the narrator uses nettles as a symbol of her fondness and love to Mike. However, nettles may also symbolize that her own feeling on their relationship is different from their relationship in reality. Perhaps this is the reason why the narrator says, "the things Mike remembered were different from the things I remembered(Munro 143)." Stage two is a complete epiphany of her understating of her love and feelings to Mike. She loved Mike and she loves Mike, but she can not be with Mike. The feeling is happy, but painful. Then, she decides to repress her feelings to Mike. Principally after knowing the death of his son and what Mike and his wife experienced.

IV. Unconscious or Conscious of the Nettles

In psychoanalytic literary criticism, the functioning of language in the constitution of the conscious and unconscious is mentioned(Habib 572). In the first time of the mentioning of the nettles, the narrator misunderstands this kind of plant. Later she says that "I have discovered that they are called joe-pye weed(Munro 151-155)." Considering her observation of Mike's behaviors when they are in the bushes, this misunderstanding may symbolize her misunderstanding of Mike's protection of her, which is to say, Mike's protection of her is an instinct of the strong to the weak. Naturally, when she does not realize her misunderstanding of this plant, she remembers the nettles and all things relating to the nettles, including her feelings to Mike. This may be an explanation of the functioning of her language in the constitution of her unconscious mind. Later, at the end of the story, she says:

Those plants with the big pinkish-purple flowers are not nettles. I have discovered that they are called joe-pye weed. The stinging nettles that we must have got into are more insignificant plants, with a paler purple flower, and stalks wickedly outfitted with fine, fierce, skin-piercing and inflaming spines. Those would be present too, unnoticed, in all the flourishing of the waste meadow.(Munro 151-155)"

Why does she say that the stinging nettles that we must have got into are more insignificant plants? Why does she use the word "insignificant" as a modifier? According to what M. A. R. Habib says, "Reasoning that everything forgotten by a patient must have been somehow distressing(alarmed, painful, shameful), Freud concluded that this was precisely why it had been expunged from the conscious memory(574)." From this aspect, the word "insignificant" may symbolize the impossibility of her being together with Mike. Besides, when recalling the nettles, she inevitably recalls her time spent with Mike which results in a painfulness. Therefore, the narrator decides not to ask Sunny for the news of Mike. This is another deliberate deletion of her old memories with Mike in accordance with Freud's theory.

V. Conclusion

The story is a rather complex one. Besides, the first-person narration is used in writing this story. Linda Pillière believes that using the first-person narration "offers her the opportunity to introduce a multi-layered perspective that resists closure within the compact space imposed by the genre of the short story; multi-layered both in the number of voices that are present in the text and in the lack of a single linear perspective(52)." A multi-layered perspective may enable readers to perceive and analyze this story from different angles and to unearth different symbolic meanings in the text.

In the beginning of the story, a flashback is used and her childhood memories cover many pages which may also indicate Mike's importance to the narrator and the necessity in the development of the plots. Considering the necessity of the character, Mike, this paper studied two major symbols in this story concerning the interactions between Mike and the narrator, including her early memories with Mike and the nettles. There is a palpable feature in this story, which means that the narrator's old memories are full of Mike. In her memories, she depicted her meeting with Mike, her leaving with Mike. The memories are essentially indispensable to the narrator in her interactions with Mike. Considering psychoanalytic literary criticism, these memories are likely to be the source of the creation of this story. Moreover, according to Freud, "a strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfillment in the creative work (James et al. 151)." Therefore, these memories are very likely to be significant. The word "Nettles" is used as the title of the story.

The title of a story is usually regarded as a center of the story, although the word "nettles" appears only five times and the appearance is mainly at the end of the story. Considering this title, the conclusion will be that the title also bears some latent meanings. First, the title symbolizes the narrator's painfulness that she can not live with Mike. As what mentioned above, through the nettles, the narrator unconsciously recalls what happened between her and Mike in the bushes. So, it is acceptable to say that she can recall something joyful and something painful relating to Mike. Then, the title symbolizes her misunderstanding of Mike's protection. Mike is married. He did not come for her when she was lying in his bed which tries to tell readers that Mike is not casual and is not unobservant to the traditional loyalty between husband and wife. Therefore, Mike's protection of her in the bushes is an instinct of the protection of the strong to the weak. At the moment, Mike maybe has nothing in his mind. In summary, the narrator wrongly regards joe-pye weed as nettles which is similar to her misunderstanding of Mike's behaviors. When she thinks that Mike has the same feeling to her, she feels happy. When she thinks that Mike has different feelings to her, she feels painful. The title is just like a double-sided wall. Being with Mike pleases her, while leaving is painful. The nettles are like her memories with Mike, happy but painful. She can not cease to recall when she is trying to forget. To conclude, the title is as complex as the symbolic meanings the author wants to reveal.

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