THROUGH HER THREE BOOKS, two volumes of short stories and a novel, Alice Munro's vision has been modified and complicated. Yet, the groundwork of its dynamics remains strikingly consistent, clearly basic to Munro's art. The essential tension between two sets of values, two ways of seeing, two worlds, is always apparent, as central in her last book as her first. In the story "Dance of the Happy Shades," which gives its title to the volume of short stories that won the Governor General's Award for Fiction in 1968, all the basic ingredients of Munro's peculiar vision are strikingly present, and Munro herself supplies the best terminology with which to discuss her art. Considered in some detail, this story provides a valuable introduction to the Munro canon.

In "Dance of the Happy Shades," Miss Marsalles, an aging piano teacher, is giving her annual concert to which all her pupils and their mothers, in many cases former pupils themselves, are invited. At one time, when Miss Marsalles' address was in Rosedale, the annual concert "had solidity, it had tradition, in its own serenely out-of-date way it had style. Everything was always as expected" (p. 214). The cautious mothers had felt assurance that their attendance was part of a socially approved ritual of safe and known value. In recent years, however, along with Miss Marsalles' aging and her

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1 Alice Munro, Dance of the Happy Shades, with a foreword by Hugh Garner (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1968). Subsequent references will be given within the text.
undeniably pinched circumstances, the old assurance has given way to a
nervous "feeling that can hardly be put into words about Miss Marsalles' parties; things are getting out of hand, anything may happen" (p. 212). There is also the major fear that no one else will show up, and the unwary mother who has missed the signs or whose "instincts for doing the right thing have become confused" (p. 213) will find herself alone in an intolerable situation, a situation that has jumped the rails of social custom. The narrator of "Dance of the Happy Shades" is one of Miss Marsalles' older pupils, and her mother is typical of the nervous mothers who are beginning to suspect that Miss Marsalles' concerts have moved beyond the pale. This year, the narrator's mother, whose social instincts may have been confused by life in the suburbs, in spite of hesitation, attends the concert as usual. The house is shabbier than in any other year; Miss Marsalles' poverty is no longer muted; upstairs her sister lies ill; in the dining-room, flies buzz around sandwiches made too long beforehand. But these signs are merely omens of the greater disaster. As the narrator sits chopping dutifully at the piano, she senses the bustle of new arrivals and also, underlying the surface noise, "a peculiarly concentrated silence. Something has happened, something unforeseen, perhaps something disastrous" (p. 221). The concert has finally and irrevocably placed itself in the realm of social taboos, has produced the unacceptable. Miss Marsalles has been teaching children from a school for the retarded, and it is these children who have just arrived.

Making polite efforts to avoid looking at these children, the now terrified mothers are inwardly calling them "little idiots" (p. 222) and screaming "WHAT KIND OF PARTY IS THIS?" (p. 222). Outwardly, their social masks remain undisturbed. Yet, the final blow is still to come. Dolores Boyle, one of the retarded youngsters, takes her place at the piano and, to the amazement and consternation of the mothers, plays well, better than well. What she manages to do with the music is something that, given these mothers and their hysterical rigidity, must be more disturbing than anything to this point. "And all that this girl does—but this is something you would not think could ever be done—is to play it so it can be felt" (p. 222). The music is "fragile, courtly and gay" (p. 222) and "carries with it the freedom of a great unemotional happiness" (p. 222). In the face of this onslaught on their carefully schooled emotions, "the mothers sit, caught with a look of protest on their faces, a more profound anxiety than before, as if reminded of something they had forgotten they had forgotten" (p. 222). When the ordeal is over, the mothers leave, certain this time never to return, unwilling to discuss or recognize what they have just been forced to know, that an idiot girl has shown a greater gift for beauty and feeling than either they or their children. "To Miss Marsalles such a thing is acceptable, but to other people, people who live in the world, it is not" (p. 223). And in that sentence is the key to much that is dynamic in Alice Munro's vision. There are those of "the world," of
society, of the accepted norms, and those “from the other country” (p. 224), people such as Miss Marsalles whose innocence has made her, at the best, a fondly tolerated anachronism and, at the worst, a social embarrassment. Miss Marsalles, with this terrible faux pas, has placed herself in the same category as idiots, seniles, eccentrics, criminals, and the fatally ill, all of whom are uncontrollable, unpredictable, and, therefore, painful, embarrassing, and plainly unacceptable by “the world.”

It is around this division of “the world” and non-world or “other country” that Munro’s interest and irony centres. In this story, for instance, the title of the piece Dolores Boyle plays is, Miss Marsalles tells the mothers, “The Dance of the Happy Shades,” Danses des ombres heureuses. The narrator remarks that this information “leaves nobody any wiser” (p. 223). Yet, in this title is contained Munro’s illuminating irony, an irony briefly perceived by the mothers in Dolores Boyle’s music and which they have promptly repressed, that Miss Marsalles and the “idiot” children, though strictly excluded from “the world,” are, nonetheless, happy ghosts who know a measure of feeling and freedom lost to the nervous mothers in their social garrison. In fact, what Munro asks is, “Who are the real handicapped?” The answer is clear; as the mothers, not one of whom “has ever expected music” (p. 222), leave Miss Marsalles’ neighborhood, hurrying back to the safety of their social routines, the reader understands that the retardation of those children who are “not all there” (p. 221) has been a symbolic externalization of the hidden, but ultimately graver, retardation of those smug social survivors, the nervous mothers and their normal children.

Sadly and realistically, many of Munro’s stories in Dance of the Happy Shades recognize that not all the inhabitants of “the other country” are happy or have the compensations of Dolores Boyle’s talent. In “Day of the Butterfly,” Myra Sayla is first placed beyond the realm of the social norm by her foreign background and manners and then by her fatal illness. As is so often the case in Munro’s writing, the narrator is an individual fighting for precarious social survival, in this case one of Myra’s classmates. She walks into town from the country to go to school, and this alone marks her as different and makes her cautious: “I was the only one in the class who carried a lunch pail and ate peanut-butter sandwiches in the high, bare, mustard-coloured cloakroom, the only one who had to wear rubber boots in the spring. . . . I felt a little danger, on account of this; but I could not tell exactly what it was” (p. 108). Unconsciously aware of her own danger, perhaps because of it, the narrator finds

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As employed in this article, the term “the world,” supplied by Munro’s “Dance of the Happy Shades,” is interchangeable to a great extent with the term “garrison” as it is used by Northrop Frye in his “Conclusion” to Literary History of Canada, edited by Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), and by D. G. Jones, in his full-length study of Canadian literature, Butterfly on Rock (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970). Though Jones does not deal with Munro in his book, her work clearly supports one of his central theses, “that Canadian literature exhibits . . . a sense of exile or alienation from a vital community,” p. 15.
herself establishing a tentative bond with Myra, the outcast. Part of her cannot resist the admiration offered by Myra, an admiration the narrator herself offers to girls more safely of “the world” than she. In a moment of generosity, she gives Myra a tin butterfly from her crackerjack box and immediately senses that she has endangered her own shaky position within the norm. “I realized the pledge as our fingers touched; I was panicky, but all right. . . . I can go and talk to her at recess. Why not? Why not?” (p. 106). Of course, the narrator subconsciously knows why not and is instantly relieved that Myra does not wear the pin on her dress; “If someone asked her where she got it, and she told them, what would I say?” (p. 106). The narrator is saved from exposure by Myra’s illness. The next time she sees her is when a delegation of girls from the class visit Myra in the hospital. The girls have been chosen by the teacher for the visit, and this process of selection of few and exclusion of many has made the visit “fashionable” (p. 107). “Perhaps it was because Gladys Healey had an aunt who was a nurse, perhaps it was the excitement of sickness and hospitals, or simply the fact that Myra was so entirely, impressively set free of all the rules and conditions of our lives. We began to talk of her as if she were something we owned, and her party became a cause!” (p. 107). If special circumstances have made Myra momentarily and superficially acceptable, the narrator, with her improved social status, has developed her survivor’s intuition and realizes a new threat from a Myra who is fatally ill and, therefore, clearly not of “the world.” So, when the other girls have left the hospital room and Myra suggests a future meeting after she is better, the narrator glibly says “Okay,” but this time she defends herself against dangerous involvement. “All the presents on the bed, the folded paper and ribbons, those guilt-tinged offerings had passed into this shadow, they were no longer innocent objects to be touched, exchanged, accepted without danger” (p. 110). When a nurse interrupts, the narrator is happy to have an excuse to leave, and she recognizes “the treachery of my own heart” (p. 110). Myra has leukemia and dies. This death of the body has been preceded by another death, Myra’s social murder at the tongues of the same girls who happily played the role of chosen bedside visitors. And, just as at the end of “Dance of the Happy Shades” Munro seemed to ask, “Who are the real handicapped?”—at the end of “Day of the Butterfly” she asks, “Who or what has really died?” Part of the answer is a portion of the narrator’s freedom and integrity. In her conformity to the demands of “the world,” in her choice of survival within the norm, the narrator has had to repress or even destroy an impulse towards generosity and individuality. Therefore, Myra’s death becomes a symbol, on a different level, of the death of the narrator.

The prevalence, then, in Munro’s work, of idiots, senile old people, suicides, the fatally ill, and that recurring image of the mother who is attacked by Parkinson’s disease are guides to her controlling vision. Munro sees society and life as cruel and deforming. Those who appear to adapt
or cope and survive are, in her eyes, more deformed in an internal, spiritual way, than those who are clearly retarded or maimed and unable to enter the struggle. In some stories, the obviously defective people seem better off and freer than those who have found acceptance in a “normal” world. In most cases, they work as a symbol or externalization of the suffering and deformity of the apparently healthy and adjusted characters. They are also a deflecting release valve for the tension that builds up from the reader’s sense of repressed pain in Munro’s world.

So, in “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” old, blind Mrs. Cronin, who sits passively in her easy chair and from the hollows of whose eyes comes “a drop of silver liquid, a medicine, or a miraculous tear” (p. 12), suggests the long accepted sorrow of her daughter Nora who could not marry the narrator’s father because of a difference in religion. In “Thanks for the Ride,” another old woman, the grandmother of Lois, a girl the narrator has picked up, is surrounded by a darker, more sinister aura. “She was . . . as soft and shapeless as a collapsed pudding, pale brown spots melting together on her face and arms, bristles of hairs in the moisture around her mouth. Some of the smell in the house seemed to come from her. It was a smell of hidden decay, such as there is when some obscure little animal has died under the verandah” (p. 51). The evocative image of the little animal that has died is as clearly connected to the granddaughter and the narrator as to the grandmother. Lois, who the narrator discovers can be a “mystic of love” (p. 57), is trapped by her environment and used by the people of “the world,” chiefly men who never accept her whole offering. Her voice, “abusive and forlorn” (p. 58), yelling after the narrator’s car, suggests the internal deformity and horror which the image of the grandmother externalizes. Also externalized in the grandmother is the repulsion and guilt of the narrator who is from a “nice” family. Though he senses the girl’s pain, he is unable to do more than use her: “All the things I wanted to say to her went clattering emptily through my head. Come and see you again—Remember—Love—I could not say any of these things” (p. 57).

At the end of “The Time of Death,” another girl, Patricia Parry, shrieks out her pain at the tortures of society, in this case represented by a garrison of women, “their faces looming pale and heavy, hung with ritual masks of mourning and compassion” (p. 91). Behind the masks are smugness, condescension, and hate, the weapons of “the world” in which Patricia wants desperately to find a place. “She did not play at being a singer, though she was going to be a singer when she grew up, maybe in the movies or maybe in the radio. She liked to look at movie magazines and magazines with pictures of clothes and rooms in them; she liked to look in the windows of some of the houses uptown” (p. 92). Patricia’s clumsy, misinterpreted attempts to win social approval never get her what she wants, only mark her more distinctly as an outcast, and the toll she pays in repression and guilt is killing. Her final hysterical fit expresses this, but not as vividly as the image of her little brother Benny who is...
retarded and who is accidentally scalded to death when Patricia spills boiling water. "Other little kids only thirteen, fourteen months old knew more words than Benny, and could do more things . . . and most of them were cuter to look at. . . . But he was good; he would stand for hours just looking out a window saying Bow-wow, bow-wow . . . ." (p. 193). Patricia, in her efforts to conform to the norm, also tries to be "good" and frequently suggests a little dog trying to please, even at the expense of not allowing herself a natural reaction to Benny's death. The title, "The Time of Death," therefore, implies one of Munro's typical questions: who or what really dies in this story? And the answer is Patricia just as surely as it is Benny. As Patricia stands screaming hysterically at the end of the story, the reader understands her pain in terms of the image of Benny crying and crying before he died.

In Lives of Girls and Women (1971), the distinction between "the world" and "the other country" remains central to the dynamics of Munro's vision. Many motifs from the first book recur in the second. Idiots, madmen, and suicides are prominent and are placed clearly outside the garrison of society's norms. The most compelling and tragic of these figures is the narrator's mother, Ida Jordan. Neither an idiot nor a suicide, she is, nonetheless, unquestionably, irrevocably, outside the social pale. Her intellectual frankness and social naivété amount to eccentricity and place her outside society like a child with her nose pressed yearningly to a toy shop window. On the other side of the glass are her husband's family whose disapproval "came like tiny razor-cuts, bewilderingly, in the middle of kindness" (p. 31), the ladies who do not return Ida's invitation to a party, the girls in the narrator's class who are always chosen for prestigious duties, and the girls to whom the narrator, Del, unsure of her social place, is "unfailing obsequiously pleasant" (p. 131).

Ida Jordan is the most complex of Munro's outcast characters. She is both admirable and pathetic, both scornful of "the world" and pitifully eager to be part of it. The reader quickly understands that for her there is no chance of acceptability. The narrator, Del, however, is more attuned to the demands of the social norm than her mother, and the effect of this on their relationship is one of the focuses of the novel. Like the narrator of "Day of the Butterfly," Del is a half-way character, neither safely in, nor definitely outside, the garrison. She identifies with her mother's exclusion and vulnerability, but constantly betrays this sympathy to her social instincts: "I myself was not so different from my mother, but concealed it, knowing what dangers there were" (p. 68).

In Lives of Girls and Women, no one idiot, invalid, or suicide externalizes the suffering of any one character; rather, they all reflect each other and compositely suggest the hidden illness of the apparent survivors. Ida's pain at social rejection is a variation on the stoic suffering of Mrs. Sherriff

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* Alice Munro, Lives of Girls and Women (New York: Signet, 1971). Subsequent references will be given within the text.
whose daughter has committed suicide and whose son is in an asylum. The price paid by both Ida and Mrs. Sherriff is expressed by the suicide of the eccentric teacher, Miss Farris. The garrison finds “no revelation” (p. 118) in this violent act and is mystified, but the reader, familiar with Munro’s vision, can see it as one more expression of the universal sorrow and hurt. It is significant that Del’s final encounter in the novel is with Mrs. Sherriff’s son, home on holiday from the asylum. By this time, Del has placed herself on the road to social conformity and cannot accept what this outcast has to offer:

Bobby Sherriff spoke to me wistfully, relieving me of my fork, napkin and empty plate.

“Believe me,” he said, “I wish you luck in your life.”

Then he did the only special thing he ever did for me. With those things in his hands, he rose on his toes like a dancer, like a plump ballerina. This action, accompanied by his delicate smile, appeared to be a joke not shared with me so much as displayed for me, and it seemed also to have a concise meaning, a stylized meaning—to be a letter, or a whole word, in an alphabet I did not know. (p. 211)

This scene recalls the mothers of “Dance of the Happy Shades” who could not respond freely to the idiot girl’s music.

In Lives of Girls and Women, that important boundary between “the world” and “the other country” is marked not only by characterization but also by symbolic geography. In this novel, the division between town and outside-of-town that made the narrator of “Day of the Butterfly” nervous has become full-fledged. The Jordans live outside town on the Flats Road, a no-man’s land that is “not part of town . . . not part of the country either” (p. 5). On the Flats Road live various eccentrics, bootleggers, and two idiots. Given the context of Munro’s vision and such an accumulation of unmistakable outcasts in one geographical location, the Flats Road becomes a symbol for everything and everyone that the social garrison fears and does not approve. Ida, that complex and pathetic woman, though she will never meet the standards of the garrison, nonetheless, cannot accept relegation to “the other country,” and her walks to town represent her desperate futile struggle to be of “the world.” “The Flats Road was the last place my mother wanted to live. As soon as her feet touched the town sidewalk and she raised her head, grateful for town shade after Flats Road sun, a sense of relief, a new sense of consequence flowed from her” (p. 6). The pity is that Ida never realizes that “the other country” can offer compensations. Del’s father, on the other hand, feels at home and happy on the Flats Road; unlike his wife he has “that delicate special readiness to scent pretension that is some people’s talent” (p. 7). So when Ida moves into town to besiege the garrison, Mr. Jordan stays on the Flats Road.

Chief among the eccentrics of this symbolic “other country” is Uncle Benny, “the sort of man who becomes a steadfast eccentric almost before
he is out of his teens” (p. 2). Like many of Munro’s outcasts, Uncle Benny has gifts denied to inhabitants of “the world.” The most important of these is passion, the ability to feel strongly and spontaneously:

In all his statements, predictions, judgments there was a concentrated passion. In our yard, once, looking up at a rainbow, he cried, “You know what that is? That’s the Lord’s promise that there isn’t ever going to be another flood!” He quivered with the momentousness of this promise as if it had just been made, and he himself was the bearer of it. (p. 2)

This is the very quality that handicaps Ida in her fight for social acceptance, but she never recognizes its stigma or accepts its consequences. Ultimately what Benny has to offer is truth—the truth about life, that it is not regulated, secure, and rewarding as the garrison teaches, but rather an erratic, confusing, unordered wilderness:

So lying alongside our world was Uncle Benny’s world like a troubling distorted reflection, the same but never at all the same. In that world people could go down in quicksand, be vanquished by ghosts or terrible ordinary cities; luck and wickedness were gigantic and unpredictable; nothing was deserved, anything might happen; defeats were met with crazy satisfaction. It was his triumph, that he couldn’t know about, to make us see. (p. 22)

The ultimate reward of Benny’s vision could be what he himself has achieved, freedom from society’s expectations and demands, but even the Jordans are unwilling to accept the full darkness of Benny’s truth and end by laughing at it, labelling it, taking some refuge in the defenses of “the world,” by summing up and brushing aside his hard terrible wife as a comic “madwoman” (p. 23).

Later, in the chapter titled “Baptizing,” Garnet French, another character who lives significantly outside of town on a farm “miles through thick bush” (p. 184), offers Del “perfect security” (p. 181) and a talent for love that echoes Lois of “Thanks for the Ride.” However, Del realizes that these gifts belong to “the other country” and, unwilling to become an outcast, she uses him, meets “his good offers with my deceitful offerings, whether I knew it or not, matched my complexity and play-acting to his true intent” (p. 198). A brief sentence suggests what she gives up when she rejects Garnet and his life: “There is no denying I was happy in [his] house” (p. 188). Lives of Girls and Women shares the vision of Dance of the Happy Shades, a vision of man’s existence divided sharply into two countries: in each country people suffer for lack of the world on the other side of the barrier. Only the occasional genius, the rare visionary such as Uncle Benny, can fully accept and affirm the world in which he finds himself.

Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You (1974) is Munro’s latest book, and, in it, we find all the elements of her vision once again, not as obvious perhaps, less sure of the enemy perhaps, but still concerned with the way of “the world” and the way of “the other country.”

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4 Alice Munro, Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You (Scarborough: Signet, 1975). Subsequent references will be given within the text.
other guilty garrison character from whose viewpoint the story is told, is
disgusted by the passion she perceives when she happens on her sister,
Char, entangled in the grass with a man; “She was left knowing what
Char looked like when she lost her powers, abdicated” (p. 9). She is dis-
turbed that Char’s remarkable beauty has turned up unexpectedly, uncontrol-
lably, in real life. “This made Et understand, in some not entirely
welcome way, that the qualities of legend were real, that they surfaced
where and when you least expected” (p. 5). Like the Jordans, Et is un-
willing to face a world of chance and chaos. She loves Char’s husband
who is an ostrich hiding his head in the safe vision of the acceptable. “He
did not know why things happened, why people could not behave sensibly.
He was too good. He knew about history but not about what went on,
in front of his eyes, in his house, anywhere” (p. 11). Finally, to thwart
Char’s passion, Et lies to her about her lover. Char takes poison, and Et,
smugly inside the garrison of respectability, is left, close keeper of Char’s
“good” husband. “If they had been married, people would have said they
were very happy” (p. 19).

In “Winter Wind,” the narrator and her mother are clearly Del and Ida
Jordan retold. In this story, however, the focus falls on the father’s family.
The narrator, who has always seen her grandmother as a woman safely
and securely of “the world,” suddenly perceives the price this conformity has
demanded. “My grandmother had schooled herself, watched herself, learned
what to do and say; she had understood the importance of acceptance,
had yearned for it, had achieved it, had known there was a possibility of
not achieving it” (p. 165). Part of the price of achieving this acceptance has
been marriage to the wrong man. As in the earlier books, Munro continues
to use deaths and derangement as externalizations of hidden psychic pain.
At the end of “Winter Wind,” the story of the death by freezing of Susie
Heferman, a friend of the grandmother, is as much a reflection of the grand-
mother’s internal withering as the tale of an actual freezing.

It is apparent, then, that Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You
reveals the same divided universe as do Dance of the Happy Shades and
Lives of Girls and Women. And it asks Munro’s characteristic questions.
“Walking on Water” and “Forgiveness in Families” both play with the old
question, “Who or what is mad?” In “Memorial,” the central character,
who has been confronted anew with the rigidly defined world of her sister,
thinks “the only thing we can hope for is that we lapse now and then into
reality” (p. 178). The sister, with her absolute control of house and family
and friends, never lapses, and the toll this takes on her spirit is represented
by the ironic death of her son in a freak accident; even to this tragedy his
mother cannot respond spontaneously.

Alice Munro’s work bears the marks of a distinctive, vital, and unifying
vision. Though this vision shows itself more complex and subtle with each
of her books, the basic terms remain unchanged. Man finds himself divided
into two camps, and the price of this division for both sides is loneliness

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and pain. The external deformities and violations of "the other country," the place of outcasts, are simply transferences of the unseen, hidden disfiguration of "the world," place of "survivors." Which group suffers most is a question without significance in a universe where men, the pathetic victims of chance, offer each other not kindness or encouragement, but suspicion and hate. This is the truth that sets Patricia Parry screaming at the end of "The Time of Death." Hearing the scissors-man coming up the road, she is reminded of the dead Benny, and the man's cry becomes an expression of Munro's bleak vision:

In the first week of November (and the snow had not come, the snow had not come yet) the scissors-man with his cart came walking along beside the highway. The children were playing out in the yards and they heard him coming; when he was still far down the road they heard his unintelligible chant, mournful and shrill, and so strange that you would think, if you did not know it was the scissors-man, that there was a madman loose in the world. (p. 98)