

# Epiphany of a Middle-Aged Woman: An Analysis of Alice Munro's "Nettles" from the Perspective of an Initiation Story

Xiaohui Xue<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

Correspondence: Xue Xiaohui, School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China. E-mail: xxh709@aliyun.com

Received: June 23, 2016 Accepted: July 10, 2016 Online Published: August 28, 2016

doi:10.5539/ells.v6n3p26 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ells.v6n3p26>

*This article is part of the phased objectives of the Planning Fund Project of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China on the study of Humanities and Social Science in the year 2013, the project title is "The Part Nature Plays in American Initiation Stories," the project number is 13YJA752025.*

## Abstract

"Nettles" is a short story by the famous contemporary Canadian female writer Alice Munro. It is a multi-thematic story since many scholars have done research on its themes from such angles as love and marriage, the perplexity about life and feminism, etc. Nevertheless, few critics have studied it as an initiation story. Thus, by employing textual analysis as the research approach, this article studies "Nettles" from the perspective of an initiation story in terms of its content, characters and structure. Finally, the research draws the conclusion that "Nettles" is a typical initiation story about a middle-aged woman, depicting how she turns from a spiritually immature woman into a mature one.

**Keywords:** "Nettles", Alice Munro, initiation story, epiphany

## 1. Introduction

Alice Munro is one of the most reputable contemporary female writers in Canada, who is "considered the Canadian Chekhov" (Bethune, 2014, p. 3). She is good at writing short stories, and she won the 2013 Nobel Prize of Literature for her outstanding short stories. Her works focus mainly on female characters and describe mostly their ordinary domestic life. The themes of the majority of her short stories are love, marriage and perplexities about life. There is no exception for "Nettles." Critics have studied this short story from various angles, but few have explored it from the perspective of an initiation story—this is just what this essay attempts to do.

"Nettles" was published for the first time in *The New Yorker* in 2000. It portrays a middle-aged woman who loses her purpose of life and lives unhappily. Then, she is lured by her lover and finally divorces her husband. After divorce, she determines to search for happiness on her own. She abandons her family and lives a life alone in different places. One day, when she visits her friend Sunny, unexpectedly she meets her childhood sweetheart Mike McCallum. Then she loses her heart to Mike again, so naturally she wants to live with Mike although she knows that Mike is a married man. However, after she experiences a rainstorm with Mike and learns what has happened in Mike's life, she understands what true love and real life are—she gets an epiphany and achieves spiritual maturity. As a result, she not only has a new understanding of life and love, but also re-discovers herself—she does not feel confused and puzzled any more, instead she finds her direction of life.

An initiation story is equal to a bildungsroman and it is a literary genre in terms of theme, which has its root in Germany. According to Sun (2015), "Bildungsroman is a typical genre in German literature, which emerged in the mid-17th century with Hans. J. C. von Gimmelshausen's *The Adventurous Simplicissimus* as his representative work" (p. 319). An initiation story, in its simplest sense, is a story about the moral and psychological growth of a young man or young woman. The American scholar Marcus (1978) points out in his work "What Is an Initiation Story?" that "Initiation stories obviously center on a variety of experience and the initiations vary in effect" (pp. 222-223). That is to say, the protagonist of an initiation story must experience something and then he or she becomes mature by finding his or her true self.

In *A Study of American Initiation Stories*, Rui (2004) summarizes the characteristics of an initiation story as follows:

In terms of content, 1) most initiation stories include autobiographical elements; 2) the protagonist of the story must undergo alienation from his or her surroundings; 3) the story must end with an epiphany of the protagonist. In terms of characters, there are some initiation guides who influence the initiation of the protagonists. They are classified into three kinds: the positive initiation guides, the negative initiation “guides” and natural guides. Initiation guides always play important roles in the protagonists’ initiation. In terms of structure, initiation stories have a similar plot pattern—the protagonist must undergo a process of becoming a mature person from an innocent one, and the gaining of the epiphany is usually the climax of the story. (pp. 80-124)

The above-mentioned characteristics are only a generalization of the common features in most initiation stories. Of course, not all initiation stories possess all these characteristic. However, Munro’s story *Nettles* possess almost all of these features. So, it is worth my efforts to analyze it from the perspective of an initiation story.

## 2. Analysis of “Nettles” in Terms of Its Content

A typical initiation story usually contains the following general characteristics in terms of its content. First, the story should contain autobiographical elements; second, the protagonist of the story must experience alienation from his or her surroundings; third, whatever the protagonist experiences, he or she will eventually gain epiphany about life.

### 2.1 Autobiographical Elements

In terms of its content, an initiation story always contains autobiographical elements of the author’s own life, such as his or her living environment and emotional experiences.

Dahlie (1978) says that Alice Munro’s fiction “is rooted tangibly in the social realism of the rural and small town world of her own experience” (p. 56), and this is also true in “Nettles.” The protagonist in “Nettles” is a middle-aged Canadian woman, who spends her childhood in a small beautiful town near the city of Ottawa—this echoes the childhood experience of Munro since Munro also grew up in a small Canadian town.

Besides, the protagonist’s later life experience also resembles the author’s. The author is a female, who divorced her first husband and married again. In “Nettles”, the protagonist is a housewife, yet later she also becomes a writer; like Munro, the protagonist marries her first husband and has two daughters, but with time going by, she gradually finds her married life miserable, so she finally escapes from her family in order to look for another life, “leaving husband and house and all the things acquired during the marriage (except of course the children, who were to be parceled about) in the hope of making a life that could be lived without hypocrisy or deprivation or shame” (Munro, 2001, p. 127)—these are true reflections of the author’s inner mind. After the protagonist leaves her family, she becomes a full-time writer. Like Munro, she eventually divorces her first husband in order to start a new life and find true happiness.

### 2.2 The Protagonist’s Alienation from the Surroundings She Lives in

In initiation stories, the protagonists’ alienation from the surroundings is also one of the general characteristics. They are always in conflict with the people around and the society. Gao (2011) says, “all protagonists go through a stage of struggling with their identity and wondering how they fit in with their family, their peers, and the rest of the world. And then the protagonists will feel alienated or disconnected from the world (p. 23).”

In “Nettles,” the protagonist is totally alienated from her surroundings: After she gets married, she cannot actualize her dream in life—to become a writer, and the only thing she can do is to chat with her girl friend Sunny, “launching out on a rampage of talk—about our marriages, our fights, our personal deficiencies, our interesting and discreditable motives, and our foregone ambitions” (Munro, 2001, p. 252). Her life is so boring that she can only distract herself from the reality by reading Jung so that she can keep track of her dreams. Obviously, except talking with Sunny, reading is the only way by which she can temporarily relieve herself. It’s self-evident she not only loses her self-identity but also feels little happiness in her marriage because her husband does not understand her ideas and pursuit, which she also expresses in her talk with Sunny, “our husbands were not in this frame of mind at all. When we tried to talk about such things with them they would say “Oh, that’s just literature” or “You sound like Philosophy 101” (Munro, 2001, p. 184). The alienation from her husband is the major cause that eventually leads to her divorce with her husband.

### 2.3 Initiation of the Protagonist

In an initiation story, the story must end with the protagonist’s initiation. After experiencing a lot of things, the main character in the story will gain new perceptions about the society and life.

In the story “Nettles,” the protagonist has a puppy love Mike, and they spent a period of time together in their childhood which leaves beautiful memories in their minds. During this period of time, even though the protagonist was only a little girl, she had special “feelings” for him (Munro, 2001, p. 184), although she did not show it to him. Many years later, after she has separated from her husband, she meets Mike again by chance in Sunny’s house. This time her special feeling for him turns to erotic love and she wants to be together with him. However, after she knows what has happened to Mike, she realizes that something (Mike has ran over his own four-year son by accident when he was backing the car) will bind Mike and his wife together forever—he must be responsible for his wife and his family. More importantly, the protagonist grows spiritually because she understands how she should treat the love between her and Mike—“Love that was not usable, that knew its place. Not risking a thing yet staying alive as a sweet trickle, an underground resource. With the weight of this new stillness on it, this seal” (Munro, 2001, p. 234). In addition, she also understands that life consists not only of happiness, but also of unhappiness because “marriage sometimes is not the final result of love” (Ma, 2015, p. 73).

The protagonist achieves initiation, and she has a new understanding of the true meaning of love and life, so she marries again later on and starts a new life.

### 3. Analysis of “Nettles” in terms of Its Characters

According to Rui (2004), a person’s initiation largely results from the influence of the people or things around him or her. These people or things, good or bad, enrich the protagonist’s life experience and his or her knowledge about the society. They can be called initiation guides, including positive initiation guides, negative initiation “guides” and natural guides respectively (p. 124).

#### 3.1 The Positive Initiation Guide—Mike

The positive initiation guides of the protagonist point out the right direction of life for him or her, and when he or she is puzzled, they will help him or her to get rid of the confusions. Of course, the positive initiation guides should have good qualities which exert favorable influence to the protagonist. In a word, the positive initiation guides play an essential role in the protagonist’s initiation journey.

In the story “Nettles,” Mike is the positive initiation guide on the way of the protagonist’s initiation. Not only does he guide the protagonist to the right path when she gets lost in her life, but also he has some good qualities which influence the protagonist greatly. Firstly, Mike is an honorable man. On the night in Sunny’s house when the protagonist is sleeping on the bed that Mike used the night before, she feels sexually aroused since she has erotic feelings for Mike and hopes Mike can go to her room and have sex with her, but Mike does not do that because it is not only socially rude to the host and hostess but also morally low. This makes her realize that Mike is not a man who takes sex lightly and he has his own moral codes to observe. More importantly, Mike makes her ponder on her own previous way of life. Secondly, Mike is a man of responsibility. When Mike has the opportunity to be alone with the protagonist, his “touch was still one of restraint” (Munro, 2001, p. 174). Mike killed his youngest son by accident, but he is willing to be permanently responsible for it, which demonstrates his good conscience and sense of responsibility. Compared with Mike, the protagonist realizes that she lacks responsibilities for her family and herself. So, Mike makes her know that she should learn to be a responsible woman. Thirdly, after Mike tells her his deepest secret—he ran over his four-year son accidentally when backing the car, she knows that Mike is at the rock bottom of his life and this catastrophe will either bind him and his wife together forever or break them apart. But she believes that the relationship between Mike and his wife will be strengthened as he is willing to be permanently responsible for this “uncharacteristic act” (Munro, p. 182). So, Mike’s life experiences make the protagonist understand that real life is not smooth but disturbing, frustrating, and unsettling.

To sum up, Mike serves as the positive initiation guide for the protagonist. Because of him, the protagonist begins to see life from another perspective, which paves the way for her later self-initiation and spiritual maturity.

#### 3.2 The Negative Initiation “Guide”—Her Lover

In an initiation story, the negative “guides” also play an indispensable role in the protagonist’s initiation. They mainly provide the following “guidance” for the protagonist: First, they always lead the protagonist to a wrong way, and endow the protagonist with some incorrect concepts or ideas; second, the negative “guides” are the negative examples, who can serve as a foil to the good qualities of the positive guides; third, they usually make the protagonist gain wisdom while the protagonist loses his or her innocence (Rui, 2004, p. 135). In “Nettles,” the protagonist’s lover is the negative initiation “guide” for her.

Actually, the protagonist's lover is the direct cause for her divorce, and he lets her believe that leaving her family means she can enjoy freedom and thus acquire happiness. "I had known this man before I left my marriage and he was the immediate reason I left it" (Munro, 2001, p. 159), so it is he who leads her to the way of divorce. However, after her divorce, even though she gets freedom and lives in different places with different people, she still cannot feel happiness since she "would be frightened, not of any hostility but a kind of nonexistence" (Munro, 2001, p. 169). She believes that a real happy and meaningful life is not this kind. The protagonist hints that before her divorce, her lover "teaches" her some incorrect ideas about love and sex, as she says "I am learning to leave a man free and to be free myself. I am learning to take sex lightly, which is hard for me because that's not the way I started out" (Munro, 2001, p. 182). Obviously, the protagonist's lover tries to make her free herself—to take sex lightly, and to be an irresponsible woman.

So, It's self-evident that when she unconsciously compares her lover with Mike, she finds that Mike apparently is a more honorable man, whose valuable qualities deserves true love and devotion—that is why her love for him increases instead of diminishing after so many years' of separation. She longs to be together with Mike and desires to be "his wife" as she intentionally sits in the wife's seat when Mike drives her to the golf course. Even though she knows that Mike is a married man, she still is impassioned for him before she learns Mike's secret.

To sum up, her lover serves as the negative "guide" for the protagonist's initiation. Because of him, the protagonist loses her innocence and eventually realizes her own fault—this is growth and the gaining of wisdom, which paves the way for her later maturity.

### 3.3 *The Natural Guides—Nettles and the Rainstorm*

Rui (2004) also writes the words to the effect that natural guides are typical characteristics of initiation stories and the study on the functions of natural guides are an important tradition in the study of initiation stories (p. 130).

Like most initiation stories, natural guides also exist in Munro's short story "Nettles." The nettle-like plant and the rainstorm the protagonist and Mike come across in the golf course serve as the natural guides for the initiation of the protagonist.

Firstly, just as Ma (2015) writes in her article, the nettle-like plant has symbolic significance—love is like the stinging nettles, which can be better enjoyed from a distance than by touching it personally (p. 74). When the protagonist and Mike go to the bushes and the tall weeds to take shelter from the rain, they were hurt by the nettle-like weeds. Secondly, the protagonist says at the end of the story that those plants with big- pinkish-purple flowers are not nettles—they are called joe-pye weed. She asserts that "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" (Munro, 2001, p. 185). Although these weeds are not eye-catching, the protagonist says "those [nettles] would be present too, unnoticed, in all the waste meadow" (Munro, 2001, p. 185). The plant makes the protagonist understand that life, like nettles, is full of things that are often irritating and annoying (Xu, 2009, p. 73), and people should learn to adapt to it.

The rainstorm the protagonist and Mike experience in the golf course is another natural guide for the protagonist. The protagonist says, during the rainstorm, "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...with his body between me and the storm" (Munro, 2001, pp. 179-180). After they survive the rainstorm, "we kissed and pressed together briefly. This was more of a ritual, the recognition of survival rather than of our bodies' inclinations" (Munro, 2001, p. 180). Then, Mike tells the protagonist his deepest secret. Hearing his words, the protagonist says nothing—they have passed right by word, but a spiritual bridge has been established between them—they become soul-mates. The rainstorm purifies the protagonist's mind and their relationship and removes her lust for Mike—rain is water, and water is connected with Christian baptism, which can "wash off original sin and bring about rebirth" (Chen, 2010, p. 30).

To sum up, the nettle-like plant and the rainstorm the protagonist and Mike encounter in the golf course are the natural guides for the protagonist's initiation and spiritual growth.

## 4. An Analysis of "Nettles" in terms of Its Structure

Traditionally, in structure, initiation stories have a stereotyped plot pattern. In addition, an epiphany for the protagonist is needed in an initiation story. These two elements are the main characteristics of an initiation story in terms of its structure.

### 4.1 *The Stereotyped Plot Pattern*

All initiation stories emphasize the initiation of the protagonist, and they also share some fixed plot pattern.

“Even though not every story develops in the same way, the plots of almost all initiation stories include the following features concerning the protagonist, such as the initiation background, the initiation perplexity, running away from home, encountering trials, being trapped in troubles, acquiring epiphany and final salvation” (Rui, 2004, p. 80). To a great extent, the story “Nettles” also fits into this plot pattern.

The protagonist’s initiation background can be observed in the story. When she was a child, she lived in the countryside, where she met a boy named Mike. She played with Mike in the fields, and they also attended the same country school. Mike was so clever that gradually the protagonist developed puppy love for him. One day, Mike left with his family, but the protagonist’s puppy love for him has been deeply rooted in her memory.

Years later, she gets married, but the marriage life is different from what she expected, for she can feel little happiness and she believes that her life is meaningless. She is full of perplexities about what kind of life really suits her and what direction she should take in her life. Therefore, she divorces her husband and leaves her family. Then, she chooses to experiment with different life styles in various places in order to find her true self and real happiness. However, on the contrary, her life got worse, and she encounters trials as to whether she should live the kind of life as her lover hints. During this period of life, she suffers from loneliness and confusion.

Later on, the protagonist’s friend Sunny invites her to her home, where the protagonist meets her childhood sweetheart Mike again. After seeing Mike, the protagonist’s early love for him is aroused, and she wants to be together with him although she knows that Mike is a married man. Of course, since Mike has wife and children, the protagonist hesitates whether she should express her love for him or not—she encounters trials and is in deep trouble.

Finally, after they experience a rainstorm together in the golf course, Mike told the protagonist his deepest secret—he killed his own son by accident. The protagonist realizes that it is a tragedy Mike shared with his wife, which will bind them forever. At the same time, the protagonist saw the nettle-like plant near the golf course and finds that she and Mike have been both stung by it. Gradually, the protagonist acquires an epiphany that Mike has his responsibility to undertake and love is not all of life.

So, what has been discussed above shows that the plot pattern of this story is in accordance with the protagonist’s growing process: innocence (before she is seduced by her lover)—temptation (longing for love and new life)—leaving home (divorcing her husband and living in different places alone)—encountering trials (trying to take sex lightly)—falling into trouble (wanting to be together with Mike but not being able to)—epiphany (love is not all of life, and real life is disturbing, frustrating, and unsettling). Thus, it is safe to draw a conclusion that the plot pattern of “Nettles” basically corresponds with the model of initiation stories.

#### 4.2 The Epiphany

In initiation stories, the protagonist will obtain new and further understanding of people and life, which is called epiphany of the protagonist (Rui, 2004, p. 143):

in an initiation story, there are two ways to bring about an epiphany. One is spontaneous epiphany obtained from the protagonist’s daily life, and the other is brought about from some shocking incident in life, and usually the incident is awful. (p. 144)

In “Nettles,” two things help the protagonist gain the epiphany—One is the unnoticed plants which hurt them when they take shelter from the rain in the bushes along the golf course, the other is the catastrophe in Mike’s life which she learns from Mike.

The protagonist of the story meets Mike in Sunny’s home, and the next day she goes to the golf course with Mike. When they are in the golf course, they encounter a rainstorm so they take shelter from the rain in the bushes along the golf course, and in the bushes they are hurt by joe-pye weed, which she mistakenly takes as nettles. The plant makes the protagonist gain an epiphany that real life is more like the insignificant-looking nettles that are stinging and piercing and that irritate and annoy people from time to time.

After the rain stops, Mike tells the catastrophe in his life and he feels utterly self-condemned. From his words, the protagonist finds that “he was a person who had hit rock bottom” (Munro, 2001, p. 181). She has an intuitive feeling that this catastrophe will bind Mike and his wife together permanently. The protagonist understands that by telling her his deepest misery Mike has taken her as his intimate friend. Meanwhile, the protagonist knows that she cannot be together with Mike because morality stopped them, so she decides to retreat by sealing her love for Mike. She also acquires an epiphany about love: “Love that was not usable, that knew its place. Not risking a thing yet staying alive as a sweet trickle, an underground resource” (Munro, 2001, p. 184). Love is a heart-to-heart communication between people, and love should know its place.

Why is the story entitled “nettles”? It probably implies the epiphany of the protagonist: Life is like the stinging nettles, which look insignificant and colorful but hurt every one now and then. Only when people experience that kind of pain, will they become more rational and stronger. The protagonist’s experiences of pursuing love consist of four stages: getting married, divorcing, pursuing Mike, and her final sealing of the love. The protagonist eventually realizes that life contains pain and love is not the only important thing in marriage—without responsibility, love will be frivolous and empty. However, we should also know that “although life is bound to be insipid, occasionally we can also see beauty in it” (Xu, 2009, p. 73).

## 5. Conclusion

Alice Munro is one of the most famous short-story writers in the world today, and her short stories are shining pearls in world literature. Most of her short stories are about females (This is also true of “Nettles”), and the dominating theme of her works is about the initiation of the female protagonists.

By using the method of textual analysis, this article has studied “Nettles” as an initiation story from three aspects: the content, the characters and the structure. First, in terms of its content, “Nettles” has the general features of an initiation story: the autobiographical elements, the protagonist’s alienation from the surroundings she lives in, and then her final epiphany about love and life. Second, in terms of the characters, we can find three kinds of characters in the short story: the positive guide—Mike, the negative “guide”—the lover of the protagonist, and the natural guide—the nettles and the rainstorm. These three guides lead the way of initiation for the protagonist, so the protagonist eventually gains an epiphany that everyone has responsibility to undertake, and everyone has the moral standard to observe. Third, with regard to the structure, “nettles” shares a similar structure with other initiation stories: the stereotyped plot pattern and the protagonist’s final epiphany about love and life. She has understood that love should know its place, and sometimes distance makes love eternal.

In summary, after analyzing the story “Nettles” from the perspectives of content, character and structure, a clear conclusion can be drawn that “Nettles” is a typical initiation story about a middle-aged woman, which depicts how she evolves step by step into a spiritually mature woman from an immature one.

## References

- Bethune, B. (2014). Alice Munro, Master of the Short Story. *English Pictorial* (Senior), 3, 3-5. Retrieved from [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)
- Chen, S. (2010). A Study of Archetypal Image of “Water” in Chinese and Western Cultures. Diss. Hunan University of Technology. Retrieved from [www.cnki.net](http://www.cnki.net)
- Dahlie, H. (1978). The Fiction of Alice Munro. *Ploughshares*, 4(3), 56-71. Retrieved from [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)
- Gao, X. (2011). The Demarcation and Definition of “Female Initiation Stories”. *Journal of Hainan University*, 25(2), 52-56. Retrieved from [www.cnki.net](http://www.cnki.net)
- Ma, J. (2015). Decoding Alice Munro’s Views on Love and Marriage—Take “Nettles” as an Example. *Appreciation and Analyses of Famous Literary Works*, 14, 73-74. Retrieved from [www.cnki.net](http://www.cnki.net)
- Marcus, M. (1978). What Is an Initiation Story? *Ploughshares*, 4(3), 56-71. Retrieved from [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)
- Munro, A. (2001). *Nettles. Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage Stories*. Toronto: Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency.
- Rui, Y. (2004). *A Study of American Initiation Stories*. Beijing: China Social Science Press.
- Sun, S. (2015). A Comparative Study of German Bildungsroman with American Initiation Stories. *Journal of Anhui Normal University*, 2, 3-4. Retrieved from [www.cnki.net](http://www.cnki.net)
- Xu, J. (2009). *A Guide to Contemporary College English*. Dalian: Dalian Maritime University Press.

## Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).