



Analysis of the Functions of Plants in the Literature—Taking *Nettles* by Alice Munro as an Example

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Abstract: *Alice Munro (1931-) is famous as a short story writer worldwide. This study is an analysis of Alice Munro's short story "Nettles", focusing on the functions of plants in this story. "Nettles" is a type of story from the collection of Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, and Marriage. Nettle is a kind of plant, and Munro used it as a title, which caused it to have deep meanings. While studying plant images, we have more perspectives from which to study Munro's stories. Plants can evoke emotional responses in a story, so this paper is a conscious effort to study the connections and connotations between plants and the writer's main idea. To study images to learn epiphany for middle-aged women, love, marriage, and relationships between people. Munro uses metaphor (figure of speech) and uses "Nettles" as the title and the key throughout the story. There are main meanings and functions of nettle's images in this story: the symbol of normal women (especially middle-aged women), the value and effect in modern society of women, and unexpected frustration or misery in life (because it is a kind of stinging plant). This paper focuses on analyzing the details of text and learning the functions of plant images in this short story. While combining the plant image with the narrator's life experiences and the author's writing background and intention, this paper studies Munro's "Nettles" from a new perspective.*

Keywords: *Nettles*; Plants image; Emotional resonance; Alice Munro.

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1. Introduction

This study focuses on Alice Munro's short story, *Nettles*, and aims to identify evidence supporting the functions of plants in the literature.

This study is an analysis of Alice Munro's short story, *Nettles*, and focuses on the functions of the plants in this story. *Nettles* are stories from the collection of *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, and Marriage* (2001). Plants can evoke emotional responses in the story, so this paper is a conscious effort to research the connections and connotations between plants and the writer's thesis. Alice Munro's short stories are worthy of research. Thus, this paper chooses a new perspective from *Nettles*, with the expectation of studying Munro's works.

According to statistics, the studies of Alice Munro have been performed for more than 30 years. In China, most studies focus on the perspectives of feminism, narrative modes, text analysis, or contrastive analysis. A few people paid attention to her before she won the Nobel Prize in Literature. According to the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), only 60 papers were published at the end of 2013. In addition, most people prefer to study Munro's *runaway*. However, the number of studies increased sharply several months later. As a Chinese lecture, studies by Alice Munro in China pointed out the limitations of Alice Munro and waited for a new perspective to study Alice Munro (Yang, 2016).

In the literature, many emotional resonances are caused by characters, narrators' tone and dialog, narratives and even descriptions of the environment. However, plants can also evoke emotional responses, as reported in the literature. In traditional Chinese literature, especially in poems, plants take over a special position. For example, when one mentions "poplar and willow", the sentimental and sad mode of farewell arises from one's heart;



“bamboo” is straight and hollow in the middle of itself, so that “bamboo” is always regarded as a symbol of modesty; and “plum blossoms” are always a symbol of fearlessness and pride.

This paper is a conscious effort to work on plants and determine the connection between plants and emotions that are hidden in the description of plants. There are some breakthrough and creativity items, including focusing on Alice Munro’s other story rather than the long novel *Runaway* and choosing a new perspective on plants to study Nettles. In addition, this study pays attention to the details of the short story, which not only provides new insight into Alice Munro’s short stories but also offers new respect for other writers. Studying Alice Munro’s short stories could allow more people, especially more Chinese readers, to know such a great modern writer and feel a different environment of stories from those of British and American literature works.

2. Introduction and Themes of *Nettles*

Like Munro’s other short stories, the themes of the story *Nettles* concern the crisis and problems of a middle-aged woman—the confusions, dilemmas, and passions that middle-aged women often confronted with problems of color or nationality in modern society. In this story, the author described that the narrator meets her childhood lover, who called Mike by chance. This was a very stage of her life while she faced troubled relationships between her husband and children after divorcing.

She was filled with delight of the unexpected reunion. She quickly pleased to turn into an ambiguous feeling and tender toward Mike—a passion and desire that herself was not sure whether it existed or not. Narrator and Mike went to play golf while they experienced a wild storm on a golf course by accident. Thus, to avoid being knocked by violent winds and torrential rain, they entered the bushes; during that moment, they held each other firmly. When the wind finished, they kissed each other to celebrate their survival from the rainstorm. At this moment, Mike told the narrator his deepest secret of his little child’s death; she realized that “he was a person who had hit rock bottom” (Contemporary College English, vol.6,86). She was glad that Mike could treat her as “a person he had, on his own, who knew. (ibid. “The other things that have happened, or rather, what has not happened between them, which made her gain the epiphany of a new understanding of love, “love that was not usable, that knew its place. Not risking a thing yet staying alive as a sweet trickle, an underground resource.” (ibid.87)

3. The Plant Images in the Literature

3.1 Examples in the Chinese literature

This work aims to study the functions of plant images in *Nettles* to determine whether they can be studied. According to studies of Chinese literature, especially in poems, plant image functions are involved in many places. For example, in the earliest anthology of verses in China, the *Book of Songs* (Xu Yuanhong, who was a famous translator in China, translated it the *Book of Poetry*) was compiled 2500 years ago. Taking one poem of the collections as an example:

The peach tree beams so red,
How brilliant are its flowers!
The maiden’s getting wed,
Good for the nuptial bowers.

The red peach flowers are blooming brilliant, which highlights the great desire for a brilliant and beautiful marriage. Moreover, the beauty of flowers is also the metaphor of bride, which praises the beauty of bride by describing peach blossoms.

In modern Chinese literature, *Lotus Creek*, which is written by the famous writer Sun Li, the first paragraph describes “rushes”: A woman was sitting in the yard, plating long soft rushes with nimble fingers. The thin, fine strands leaped and twisted in her arms (Sun Li et al.2003, 516). In this situation, rushes could be regarded as hard work and harvest because of the ability to place rushes as great mats and the efforts of women.

With respect to the plant images in Chinese literary works, many people have studied them through the *Book of Songs*, *300 Tang poetry*, and *300 Songs*. They embed plants with different meanings and unique emotional connotations according to their shape, characteristics, and growth environment. Where there are some plant images in poetry, there are special meanings of the plants. For example, “bamboo” is straight and hollow in the middle of

itself, so “bamboo” is always regarded as a symbol of modesty. This is a main symbol of a gentleman, who has modest and upright features. The “lotus flower” is representative of integrity and purity for its growth from mud; however, it is still white and flawless. The plum grows in the winter, and the flower blooms in cold weather but is not afraid of cold winds. Thus, “plum blossoms” are always symbols of fearlessness and pride.

3.2 Certain Examples in the Foreign Literature

In foreign works, describing plants is also very common; however, research on plant images is far less common than Chinese literary studies. Some researchers have researched Shakespeare plays from the perspective of plant images, and it is easy to determine how rich the usage of images in Shakespeare plays is. Shakespeare often gives different meanings to plants, such as the different meanings of flowers and garlands, in his famous play, *Hamlet*. In the section Ophelia had become crazy, she scattered flowers with different meanings to people around, and each flower was a different symbol:

Ophelia: There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember. In addition, there is pansies, that’s for thoughts.

There’s fennel for you and columbines. There’s rue for you, and here’s some for me. We may call it an herb of grace o’ Sundays. O, you must wear your rue with a difference! There’s a daisy. I would give you some violet, but they withered all when my father died. They say he made a good end (1600--1601. 202).

In this play, “rosemary” is the symbol of memory; it is said that the smell of rosemary could increase a person’s memory of some things; “pansy” is the symbol of a longing for thoughts; “fennel” is the image of flattering others; “columbine” is to behave ungratefully and treacherous; “rue” is sorrow and penitence because of its bitter taste; and on Sunday, the penitent would be forgiven by God. “Daisy” is a symbol of the disloyalty of love; however, on the contrary, “violet” means loyalty.

It is not only clear that examples in Shakespeare’s plays can be identified but also that they can be discovered in other famous poets, such as John Keats. Keats showed his praise of harvest “to bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees” (Keats,2012:33). Taking one length of his *Ode*:

Underneath large blue-bells tented,
Where the data are rose-scented,
And the rose herself has got
Perfume which on earth is not (ibid. 188).

Keating mixed daisies with the smells of rose, however they were two kinds of different flowers, it would not come true. Therefore, he aimed to point out that this phenomenon could not exist in the world, which indicated his disappointment and pessimism of reality. Moreover, the perfume of rose is a symbol of the spirit of a poet’s persistence, which indicates that regardless of how the world changes, there must be some spiritual things that exist forever.

4. The Functions of Nettle in This Story

The author uses nettle as the title, and nettles appear in the text. There are four meanings and functions of nettle’s images in this story: the symbol of normal women (especially middle-aged women); the value and effect in modern society of women; unexpected frustration or misery in life (because it is a kind of stinging plant “that we must have got into are more insignificant plants, with stalks wickedly outfitted with fine, fierce, skin-piercing and inflaming spines.”) (Contemporary College English, vol.6,86); subtlety and complexity of life and human relationships.

4.1 Symbols of Normal Women

“Nettles” is the title of this story. When somebody reads an essay, the first thing to do is to read the title. The author uses metaphor (figure of speech) to draw an analogy between nettles and normal women. Given the growing environment, vitality of life, and growing state of nettles, it is easy to identify the same features between nettles and women.

“*Urtica* species grow as annuals or perennial herbaceous plants, rarely shrubs. They can reach, depending on the type, location and nutrient status, a height of 10–300 cm.”

Nettle, which is a type of ombrophyte, is a species of *Urtica*. Nettles’ exuberant vitality makes them grow quickly, and at the moment, they do not need a harsh growing environment. Nettle is a tenacious plant that always grows on hillsides, roadsides, or residential sides (semihumid places). It is easy to see nettles in the place. Why author uses “nettles” as the title while not “nettle”. It is easy to compare nettles and women. The author uses “nettles” because the plural nettles are the analogy of women (the plural form of woman). This means that the author writes not only a story of a woman—the narrator—but also a story of such women who have the same situation. For the women in the author’s story, the narrator represents these types of women who have a common identity. They have many trifling things to solve in their daily life, face some troubles with their husbands, and are treated with an unequal position in their family or society because of their gender roles. However, owing to their toughness and ability to withstand hardships in life, they can experience pregnancies, uncomfortable marriages, or misunderstand children. In the story, Sunny and narrators have been making friends for a long time, and they have the same experiences as their “pregnancies had dovetailed” (Contemporary College English, vol.6,78), so that they “had managed with one set of maternity clothes” (ibid.). They cook in their kitchen and are distracted by their children and “sometimes reeling for lack of sleep” (ibid.) They stoked themselves “on strong coffee and cigarettes and launched out on a rampage of talk” (ibid.), about their marriages, fights, personal deficiencies, interesting and discreditable motives, and forgone ambitions. They read Jung and try to keep track of their dreams. During that period of their life that is supposed to be “a reproductive daze, with the woman’s mind all swamped by maternal juices” (ibid.78), and they are still compelled to “discuss Simone de Beauvoir and Arthur Koestler and The Cocktail Party.” (ibid.78) The topics or the person they discuss which are relative to feminism and marriage.

Like the narrator and Sunny, there are many such women. They like nettles, which grow up with low requirements and are suitable for life with easy needs. However, they also take care of their mental world, discuss normal or secret things in daily life, share happiness or troubles with friends, and forget or keep their ambitions, which have already forgone. To ensure that they can grow strongly and have the strength of energy, they make different choices in their life.

4.2 Values and effects on women

The image of nettles, including their values and effects, reflects women’s values and functions in society.

Nettles can be used in various ways because of their special characteristics. The values of nettles could be expressed in medicine and textiles used as food or feedstuff. However, before the usefulness of nettles was discovered, people ignored them or paid little attention to them. Similar to women in modern society, they play different roles in different parts of society and have their own values. However, in a society dominated by most men, it is difficult for women to determine their equal position, especially in the past 20--30 years.

Author tells a story of a middle-aged woman. She divorced with her husband and moved to another city that was far from her past life. The narrator had great courage to leave her husband and children. Both the narrator and her friend Sunny had moved away from Vancouver. “However, Sunny had moved with her husband and her children and her furniture, in the normal way and for the usual reason—her husband had got another job. (ibid.78) However, the narrator moved for “newfangled” reasons. She did not want to suffer the circled life and tried to leave her husband and house and “all the things acquired during the marriage (except, the children who were to be parceled about)” (ibid.78). She held the hope of life to make a different livelihood without “hypocrisy or deprivation” or shame. Thus, after moving to the new place, the narrator felt no regretful of the unfamiliar English spoken accent, the sickening smells and frightening noise of the street, even if she felt very happy with all of things.

While facing the younger daughter’s wailing, “Why can’t you just live at home? (ibid.79)” She only bore the miseries alone because this connected with her children. She threw away all the things of past in a garbage bag to let herself remember less about the miseries. However, her husband might also have painful feelings because he already realized how important roles a woman plays in a family. Thus, he received the same answer—the hateship from his wife. Therefore, why did the narrator hate her husband? There must be some reasons for hatred. Some people studied early works of Munroe, which summarized that the stories mostly reflected the theme of domestic violence or female repression. The common characteristic of most works is that women always submit. Nevertheless, in this story, the narrator was brave enough to seek a new life.

The language of flowers in nettles indicates devotion. As a wife, the narrator dedicated herself to her family and husband (especially her brilliant youth and bloom life); as a mother, she dedicated the love of her mother and took care of her two daughters. To take care of her children, she stayed at her family until 1979, even though she faced a depressing life. In addition, as a woman, it is a great courage to end a marriage and to face difficulties in future life. However, the narrator started a new life. She is likely to be the nettles that can grow up in any situation. In addition, the experience of encountering the first love, she knew the deepest secret of Mike, and then she got an epiphany of love, “love that was not usable, that knew its place. Not risking a thing yet staying alive as a sweet trickle, an underground resource.” (ibid.87) After the trip, she ultimately harvested her own happiness with another man. By revealing the experiences of the narrator or women who have the same situation, feminism has undergone positive development in the new era, which occupies a different position in the community. Women play a variety of roles and have many functions, with different values. Since they are as tenacious as nettles are, they could have a brighter life.

4.3 Unexpected Frustration or Misery in Life

“Nettles” is not only the title but also the clue and key of the theme. The details of describing nettles in the story appear in two important places. Both of them are the acme of the story.

“Between it and us, there was a meadow of weeds, all in bloom—goldenrod jewelweed with its red-and-yellow bells, and what I thought were flowering nettles with pinkish-purple clusters, and wild asters.” (ibid.84)

“Places that had not been protected by our clothing when we crouched in the weeds. I remembered the nettles. However, those plants with large pinkish-purple flowers are not nettles. I have since discovered that they are called joe-pye weed. The stinging nettles that we must have got into are more insignificant plants, with stalks wickedly outfitted with fine, fierce, skin-piercing and inflaming spines.” (ibid.86)

Specifically, the metaphor of nettles suggests unexpected frustration or misery in life (because nettle is a kind of stinging plant “that we must have got into are more insignificant plants, with stalks wickedly outfitted with fine, fierce, skin-piercing and inflaming spines.”) (ibid.86)

Miseries and hardships always hide in life, while people regard life as calm. Suddenly, they caught off guard to bite people, similar to the experience in the story, which Mike and the narrator stung by nettles. While they bend over to get into the bushes, they are protected from violent rain. The narrator regards the plants with “pinkish-purple” (ibid.86) flowers as flowering nettles; she does not realize that the stinging nettles will sting them, where their skin is out of the protection of clothing. As a result, both of them are stung by stinging nettles. This special feature of nettles is the key point of study in the text.

For Mike, the death of his son is an unexpected misery in his life. Because he kills his youngest boy by accident. “He was run over,” (ibid.85) and Mike was the one who ran over his son while he was backing out of his driveway. Mike’s son called Brian and was only three years old. He has not looked carefully, so that causes his son’s death. This is painful and unbearable sorrow throughout life. However, with time, there was still a deep scar in his heart. He would never forget the misery. Mike’s wife and kids are away in Ireland because they moved their family house after the accident. It is suggested that the misery in their family is unforgettable. If it is easy to forget suffering and forgive themselves, they do not need to move to another place. All of their family members are afraid to mention the name of the dead child. They try to memorize him as little as possible to mitigate the pain. Mike and his wife, only if they have suffered the same painful misery, both of them will feel guilty and uneasy in the rest of their lives. They keep licking the scars with each other from time to time because they suffer together. Even if Mike meets the narrator and remembers the great childhood life and the sweet first love while facing marriage problems, he cannot leave his wife or family. They need to rely on each other because there are mutual responsibilities in their life. In addition to love, there is family affection.

For the narrator, the stinging nettles make her obtain the epiphany of life and love at that moment. In daily life, troubles and problems always exist. They may hide under clam water; however, they appear in an unexpected situation. Just the same as the story of Mike. Most people encounter and experience miseries due to accidents. Having been stung by the nettles and been bitten by life. However, after suffering or struggling, it is time to celebrate a new life. On the other hand, the narrator’s new understanding of love and marriage expresses that marriage may not always be perfect for everyone, that some people may have a wrong combination, and that sometimes, women should stand up and not be obedient to life. These painful experiences may be experienced by

couples together. Some of them will separate; in contrast, some will hold the relationship closer and closer.

With respect to love and marriage, marriage may not be perfect, and some may also be a wrong combination; however, when a couple experiences the pain of life being caught off guard, they may be more close, love always exists in their hearts, “love that was not usable, that knew its place. Not risking a thing yet staying alive as a sweet trickle, an underground resource.” (ibid.87)

For normal women, they are the same as the stinging nettles. In modern society and even in their families, women are inconspicuous. However, at some times, women resist and bite men. Only after you are injured may you discover how it is wrong to ignore them. The narrator divorces with her husband, which is a significant feature of such women who suffer enough in their position.

The same species of plants of nettles, and some will be used to make medicines, some will be used to feed animals, and some for textile printing and making clothing... Different nettles play different roles and have their own roads. This is the same case as the subtlety and complexity of life and human relationships. In one’s life, he/she has some great time with friends and has experienced some things together; however, when it is time for them to leave each other, memories have gone “during all the years of our dwindling friendship.”

4.4 Connection between *Nettles* and Author Life

“Many of Munro's stories are set in Huron County, Ontario. Her strong regional focus is one of the features of her fiction. Another is the omniscient narrator who serves to make sense of the world.”

While the readers read the fiction, they are likely to ignore or forget that this is story and that the narrator is just a character who is created by art. The author succeeds in building a bridge between reality and art and presenting the fictional character as a person in their life or even a friend. Thus, the reader can be apt to identify with the narrator, feeling what she feels and worrying about what she worries.

Although this is a fiction, not all the things are fictional. The author combines her life experiences with the story to make readers likely to have the same life. By reading the biography of Alice Munro and comparing it with the narrator’s life in the story, it is easy to determine the similarities.

Munro’s father, Robert Eric Laidlaw, was a fox and mink farmer. With the comparison in the text, the narrator’s father raises sliver foxes and mink. This is because the narrator’s family needs the well-driller that Mike’s father would work in the small town. They are acquainted with each other because of their fathers’ work, and the leaving of Mike is also due to this reason.

Alice Munro married James Munro in 1951 and divorced in 1972; she has three daughters called Sheila, Catherine, and Jenny. In 1976, Munro married Gerald Fremlin, who was a cartographer and geographer when she met on her college days. The story does not introduce when the narrator married her husband; however, it is known that the narrator divorced before 1979. In addition, she has two daughters who do not leave with her. She then moves to another place.

Nettles can grow up in common places because of their majestic vitality, and the life of nettles can be compared with that of the author. While she writes the story, she is already in her elderly age. In addition, the narrator in this story is in her middle-aged year. The author added her own feelings and understanding of life when she created this fiction.

The childhood memory of the narrator is very nostalgic. She has a deep impression of past life. The plants in her memory are “Each of the trees on the place had an attitude and a presence—the elm looked serene and the oak threatening, the maples friendly, the hawthorn old and crabby. Even the pits on the river flats had their distinct character.” The author described the details of her small town. This place is full of her memory by using the narrator’s introduction. To create brilliant memories in the story, Munro writes down a short story to make memories exist forever. “Plowing through mats of flat-leafed water lilies, trapping our legs in their snaky roots.” Munro and the narrator remember the past childhood and keep someone in their hearts.

5. Conclusion

Nettles is a short story different from Munro's early works. She shifts her attention to the travel of middle-aged women who were alone and of elderly women. She tells the stories of such women who are suffering from middle-aged crisis and struggling with a trivial life; however, all of them have desires and regret, strong and weak things in heart.

The author uses nettles to express her hidden intention in this story. While doing the analysis of the text, the connections between the nettles image and the deep meanings are as follows: the representatives of normal women (especially middle-aged women); the values and effects of normal women in modern society; unexpected hardships or miseries in people's lives (because nettle is a kind of stinging plant "that we must have got into are more insignificant plants, with stalks wickedly outfitted with fine, fierce, skin-piercing and inflaming spines."); and subtlety and complexity of life and the human relationship. After the plant images in this story are studied, the great importance of unscrambling thoughts is presented.

While readers read the fiction, they are likely to ignore or forget that this is story and that the narrator is just a character who is created by art. Although this is a fiction, not all the things are fictional. The author combines her life experiences with the story to make readers likely to have the same life.

By reading the biography of Alice Munro and comparing it with the narrator's life in the story, it is easy to discover the connections between art and reality.

The author tells the details of her small town, which is full of her memory, by using the narrator's introduction to create brilliant memories in the story so that they will exist forever.

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