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The Permanent Impermanence of Human Knowledge In Munro's *The Moons of Jupiter*

In its entirety, the chronology of human history can be passable as a continuous strive to learn in both realistic and intangible fields. Regardless of the topic of interest, this accumulation of learning ultimately guides the learner towards the feeling of certainty and absolutes. As seen in the short story *The Moons of Jupiter*, Alice Munro depicts this concept of culminating awareness by integrating flashbacks and self-discovery regarding her relationship with her multigenerational family. Beginning with a hospital visit to a dying father, the reader follows the narrator Janet through a gradual uncovering of the tension and distance in her father and daughters' relationships and the lasting damages on their reunion. Through Janet's discoveries of new information and memory retrieval, Munro provides valuable insight into the consequences of flawed insights and the personal and collective strives toward perpetual certainty.

Janet's battle with self-doubt and fragmented information lingers as the node of her identity issues. Munro's technique of recalling Janet's memories in tandem with ongoing experiences reveals her lingering doubts about her status with the family. During Janet's reunion with her daughter Judith at the airport, she impulsively questions her older daughter Nichola's status. By doing so, Munro begins implying the existence of unsolved family tension. At this point, the reader also learns of Janet's fragmented information regarding Nichola: "She used to be a student at the Conservatory, then she became a cocktail waitress, then she was out of work. If she had been at the airport, I would probably have said something wrong." (Munro, 221). By depicting Janet's recall of hazy and troubling memories during a family reunion, Munro highlights the degree of impact on self-identity resulting from an incomplete family schema. While Janet struggles with her past recollections, her current family relationships are just as unresolved. Munro continues with Janet's query about Nichola through Judith's

dismissiveness, where she remarks: "I knew the first thing you'd say would be about Nichola." (Munro, 221). By establishing a tension between mother and daughters, Munro reveals Janet's concerns about her lack of knowledge of Judith's personal family dynamic. When meeting Judith's husband Don, Janet expresses discomfort with his presence, stating: "I thought of the conversations they must have had, Don and Judith... They would have talked about me. Judith and Nichola comparing notes, relating anecdotes; analyzing, regretting, blaming, forgiving." (Munro, 222). To justify her concerns, she reminisces about a college backstory, reminding herself of: "How thoroughly we dealt with our fathers and mothers, deplored their marriages, their mistaken ambitions or fear of ambition", remarking on how confidently she "filed them away, defined them beyond any possibility of change." (Munro, 222). Through Munro's flashback to Janet's lighthearted youth, she sets a comparative "reference point", aiding the reader in visualizing her transition to a loss of confidence, identity, and knowledge in her present day.

Following the consequences of missing information and doubt, Munro elaborates on the role of regret and the future through Janet's dying father. Primarily introduced as a hospital patient with cardiac issues, Janet recollects her father's childhood working on a poor farm. She brushes upon a remnant of regret by revealing their fruitless quince tree expedition, briefing: "He had not been able to eat the fruit, of course, but he had been impressed by its existence." (Munro, 220). Afterward, Janet returns to the present, weighing in on her father's senility: "The escaped child, the survivor, and old man trapped here by his leaky heart..." (Munro, 220). When paired with the flashback, Munro's comparison drives the point that Janet's father has reached the near end of his life "expedition", and can only search the past for comfort instead of the future. After returning to the hospital, Munro also reveals the father's repressed thoughts to the reader through Janet's reflection: "I used to tell people that he never spoke regretfully about his life, but that was not true." (Munro, 225). She elaborates that her father wanted to become an army tradesman or a carpenter, remarking: "A wasted life, eh?" half-jokingly (Munro, 225). Despite his dissatisfaction with his life, the father continues seeking certainty through his will, knowing it would ease Janet's uncertainties after death. By introducing characters from multiple generations, Munro compiles the stages of identity loss originating with self-doubts to the ending of regret, foreshadowing Janet's awaiting future

issues if her current uncertainties remain unresolved.

In juxtaposition with the personal and minuscule nature of Janet's family struggles, Munro uses astronomy as an unforgiving/apathetic allegory for humanity's collective efforts toward a definitive answer. While Janet visits the planetarium module at a museum, she observes the ceiling with a flow of projected stars in awe, taking note of their overwhelming number of variations: "And that distance—a few frozen light-years—is only about a thousandth part of the distance from the sun to the center of our galaxy...which itself contains about two billion suns...one of millions, perhaps billions, of galaxies. Innumerable repetitions, innumerable variations." (Munro, 231). Through the unfolding of cosmic imagery aimed at transcending human perception, Munro instills a sensation of futility in the reader while leading Janet to question the uncertainty of knowledge regarding the billions of displayed galaxies. As seen earlier with her college flashback, Janet justifies this suspicion by referring to her knowledge of astronomy in parallel with the updated models, querying: "Moonless Mercury rotating three times while circling the sun twice; an odd arrangement, not as satisfying as the old one, for once. No perpetual darkness after all. Why did they give out such confident information, only to announce later that it was quite wrong?" (Munro, 225). With the ongoing discoveries of new galaxies converging with outdated information on celestial scales, Munro's concept of impermanence becomes omnipotent on all levels of size. Readers are brought to the ruling that while the definitive solutions appear perpetually distant, the sheer presence of an answer fuels the continuous passion for discovery and expedition.

Although *The Moons of Jupiter's* resolution dims with Janet exiting the hospital, readers leave aware that the characters continue to be plagued by their unresolved issues. While Janet will continue to endure her lack of knowledge and position in her remaining family, her father can only lament timidly in a hospital bed at his untaken opportunities while confronting a cardiac death. Munro's atmospheres depicting accumulated uncertainties, despair, and regrets across multiple generations illuminate the process of losing one's figurative identity in an ever-changing world. However, amid the transient perception of the universe and its moving parts, Munro also appraises the importance of the absolute, and humanity's adaptability and endeavors to reach a conclusive answer.

Works Cited

Munro, K. *The Moons of Jupiter*. Accessed April 23, 2023, from [Munro - The Moons of Jupiter.pdf](#)