

Record: 1

Walker Brothers CowboyHorn, Gregory D.. Masterplots II: Short Story Series, Revised Edition, January 2004, p1-3 Short fiction (Work Analysis) Abstract:A summary and analysis of Walker Brothers Cowboy. (AN: 103331MSS23989240001513)

Database: Literary Reference Center

Walker Brothers Cowboy**Alice Munro**

Given Name: Alice Anne Laidlaw

Born: July 10, 1931; Wingham, Ontario, Canada

Quick Reference

First published: 1968

Type of plot: Domestic realism, coming of age

Time of work: The mid-twentieth century

Locale: Lake Huron, Ontario

Principal Characters:

The narrator, a preadolescent girl

Ben Jordan, her father

Nora Cronin, her father's boyhood friend and possible lover

The Story

"Walker Brothers Cowboy" is told in the first person from the point of view of an adult woman recounting a significant formative experience from her preadolescent girlhood in which she meets a woman her father dated before marrying her mother. Through the encounter, she comes to view her father in a new light by realizing that he is not only a family provider but also a man with a colorful emotional history all his own.

The opening scene of "Walker Brothers Cowboy" establishes the geographic and psychological landscape of the story — rural Canada in the decade following World War II, where the narrator's family and most of their neighbors have fallen on hard times and struggle to maintain their dignity in the face of declining fortunes. As the story begins, the narrator describes her mother making homemade school clothes for her because her family can no longer afford store-bought ones. Her father, Ben Jordan, was earning a respectable living raising foxes for their fur but the fur market bottomed out, and he has had to take a job as a door-to-door salesperson. The narrator's father invites his daughter to join him for a walk along the shores of Lake Huron. This rare bonding experience unites the pair, who seldom share any time together because of the demands of Ben's work.

The narrator's mother — a disillusioned and emotionally reserved woman — minds to the everyday needs of her daughter and son while Ben spends long days on the road. Ben views his time with his children as precious and seizes the chance to spend an evening alone with his daughter. Although the narrator describes her relationship with her father in the ambivalent terms of a girl poised at the edge of adolescence, viewing their relationship as both nurturing and tedious, it is clear that the narrator appreciates her father's attempts to spend meaningful time with her. On the shore of the lake, he describes to her how it

was formed thousands of years ago by a receding glacier — a shallow but memorable pretext for a chance to share a moment with a daughter with whom he fears losing important connections.

In a further effort to remain an active force in the lives of his children, the next day, Ben invites them to accompany him on the road for a day's selling. Disillusioned by the abject poverty of the farm households to which he peddles everything from laxatives to soft drink syrups, the narrator likens her father's sales territory to the Depression-era country of the 1930's. She observes that "this kind of farmhouse, this kind of afternoon, seem to me to belong to that one decade in time." Because of her age, the narrator's conception of the 1930's can only have come from history books and classroom anecdotes. Nonetheless, she views the daylong trip with foreboding and disdain, at least until the threesome embarks on an unexpected diversion.

Near the end of his run, her father takes the children to visit the home of Nora Cronin, an unmarried woman who single-handedly runs her family farm and cares for her blind, elderly mother. Their familiarity with each other clearly implies that at some point in the distant past Ben and Nora were good friends, possibly even lovers. Nora welcomes his company eagerly, implying that this is more than a sales visit. Once Nora has invited the Jordans into her home, she excuses herself briefly to her bedroom, where she dons a conspicuously attractive dress and generously applies perfume.

As her father shares a round of drinks and comfortable banter with Nora, the narrator begins to realize that Ben also possesses a distinct identity separate from that of the father and provider she knows. He is a man with a past — one that he feels compelled, particularly now, to revisit. The narrator discovers something she had never even considered before — that her father has a life separate from her mother, her brother, and herself. He drinks whiskey with Nora despite the fact that her mother has told the narrator previously that her father never imbibes. Likewise, Ben has serious acquaintances of which the narrator has never before heard any mention. At the story's close, the narrator contemplates how such revelations have altered her perception of the differences between the worlds of the child and the adult, bringing her one step closer to growing up.

Themes and Meanings

"Walker Brothers Cowboy" primarily concerns three major themes: the consequences of economic decline on middle-class families in rural postwar Canada, the dilemmas and epiphanies of a young girl on the brink of adolescence, and the multiplicity of identities even the most commonplace of individuals may possess and even cultivate as a way to deal with material hardship and accompanying feelings of relative powerlessness. Alice Munro interweaves these themes into a tale that extends beyond the bounds of a mere coming-of-age story and explores how all people — regardless of age — deal with the struggle to assert and confront their ever-evolving notions of self.

The story paints a picture of life in rural Ontario in the 1940's and 1950's that is far from nostalgic. The narrator unflatteringly describes it as reminiscent of the Great Depression. Every locale in "Walker Brothers Cowboy," from the Jordans' home to the countless doorsteps on which Ben peddles his wares are described in terms of regretful decline. Ben has had to give up the family business as a fur trader and is forced to make ends meet through commission sales. Prospects are similarly bleak for his peers; Nora mentions that her brother-in-law also struggles to stay steadily employed and that she herself is struggling to support herself and her disabled mother. Her home is filled with furnishings that are well past their prime, and her front door threatens to fall from its hinges for want of repairs she cannot afford to make. Such revealing details say much about the economic landscape of this story; "Walker Brothers Cowboy" is set in a place where the residents struggle to hold onto what they have rather than hope for the promise of prosperity.

The narrator looks on the declining fortunes of her family and neighbors with regret and disillusionment. Although one might expect a story told from the point of view of a preadolescent girl to be naïvely hopeful,

the tone of “Walker Brothers Cowboy” is far from being playful or capricious. This suggests that life on the brink of poverty, especially when it comes after having tasted the fruits of even meager prosperity, forces people to seek gratification and fulfillment in the most desperate of places. The narrator seeks it in a sales run with her father, while Ben seeks pleasure in an unannounced visit to an old friend — even at the risk of such a visit looking suspicious to his wife. Although the narrator seems to apprehend little else about her father’s motives for taking his children to see Nora, near the end of the story she remarks — after exchanging a knowing glance with Ben — “that there are things not to be mentioned” about their afternoon digression. These are things the narrator will come to understand in time, perhaps as the result of composing this narrative as an adult.

Style and Technique

The most prominent stylistic achievements of “Walker Brothers Cowboy” include its particularly distinctive use of first-person point of view and its tendency to communicate through implication rather than overt statement. Munro relates the story through the eyes of a child even though no child could adequately comprehend the dynamics of its principal actions. The narrator, for example, is too young to fully understand the nature of Ben’s relationship to Nora. Any adult, however, would gather from the details she observes about them that Ben and Nora share a familiarity with each other that could have resulted only from a teenage romance left unresolved by time and circumstance. Thus, the central consciousness of “Walker Brothers Cowboy” is clearly adult despite the fact that its narrator is ostensibly a preadolescent child. This lends a marked sense of irony to the story that underscores its somber, pessimistic tone.

Munro exploits this irony to remarkable effect, using it as way to contrast the difference between the way children and adults perceive the world. A child relates the tale, but its intended audience is clearly adult. No child would see the need to revisit the past, particularly a person’s distant and perhaps obscured past, the way an adult would. However, exploring why people sometimes need to resurrect long-lost feelings and experiences is the thematic locus of the story. Thus, Munro writes “Walker Brothers Cowboy” from the unlikely point of view of a child to reinforce the paradox already inherent in her subject matter. In this way style and theme mirror each other perfectly in the story, which is both bold and memorable in its attempt to merge form and content in highly innovative ways.

Essay by: Gregory D. Horn

Bibliography

Franzen, Jonathan. “Alice’s Wonderland.” *The New York Times Book Review*, November 14, 2004, 1, 14-16.

Howells, Coral Ann. *Alice Munro*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1998.

McCulloch, Jeanne, and Mona Simpson. “The Art of Fiction CXXXVII.” *Paris Review* 131 (Summer, 1994): 226-264.

Moore, Lorrie. “Leave Them and Love Them.” *The Atlantic Monthly* 294, no. 5 (December, 2004): 125.

Munro, Sheila. *Lives of Mothers and Daughters: Growing Up with Alice Munro*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2001.

Ross, Catherine Sheldrick. *Alice Munro: A Double Life*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1992.

Simpson, Mona. “A Quiet Genius.” *The Atlantic Monthly* 288, no. 5 (December, 2001): 126.

Copyright of this work is the property of Salem Press and its content may not be copied without the copyright holder's express written permission except for the print or download capabilities of the retrieval

software used for access. This content is intended solely for the use of the individual user.

Source: Masterplots II: Short Story Series, Revised Edition

Accession Number: 103331MSS23989240001513