

The Love of a Good Story

A Critical Reading of Alice Munro's "Jakarta"

Sean A. McPhail

Volume 41, Number 2, 2016

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl41_2art11

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

McPhail, S. A. (2016). **The Love of a Good Story: A Critical Reading of Alice Munro's "Jakarta"**. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 41(2), 201–216.

The Love of a Good Story: A Critical Reading of Alice Munro's "Jakarta"

SEAN A. MCPHAIL

IN HER INTRODUCTION TO Alice Munro's 1998 volume *The Love of a Good Woman*, A.S. Byatt notes that "Munro is fluidly inventive in her use of time and tense, as she is in her point of view. She makes long, looping strings of events between birth and death, recomposing events as memory does, but also with shocking artifice" (xv). Indeed, the collection's opening and title story presents the reader with these confusions of time and tense so thoroughly that, since its first publication, Robert Thacker has described it as "a central Munro text," and Dennis Duffy has lauded it as a "pivotal work in the structure of her fiction" (qtd. in Ross 786). In confining itself to the title story, however, this criticism has missed the equally multifaceted enigma that is the volume's next story, "Jakarta." As Catherine Sheldrick Ross argues, *The Love of a Good Woman* "offers . . . readers eight stories that seize us by the throat," and together they represent Munro's return "to earlier material . . . [but] in a form that is more complex and multilayered" (786). "Jakarta" is no exception. In Byatt's opinion, the story is "[o]ne of Munro's great achievements" because of its "steady, quotidian, inexorable movement of time" and its "giddy shifts of point of view" (xv). Similarly, though Ross's next assertion again concerns the title story, it is as crucial to any understanding of "Jakarta" as it is to her reading of "The Love of a Good Woman": Munro, Ross posits, "challenge[s the reader] to make sense of a text that contains so much and that refuses to subordinate the plurality of its detail within a single frame" (786).

The multiple frames that Ross highlights refer of course to Munro's ever-shifting narration — in particular her use of focalization. As Isla Duncan, borrowing from Gérard Genette, explains, "the holder of the point of view in a narrative is the focalizer, . . . while the character, scene, or event presented in terms of the focalizer's perspective is the focalized" (10). She notes that in cases of "objective narration," which she labels "external focalization," the focalizer/narrator necessarily remains independent of the focalized (11). Conversely, according to

Gerald Prince, in “internal focalization” “information is conveyed in terms of a character’s conceptual or perceptual point of view” (qtd. in Duncan 11). It is this second type of focalization that is most relevant to a reading of “Jakarta.” Rather than emulate the title story by providing three seemingly disparate timelines that eventually centre on a single act, the competing narratives of “Jakarta” significantly examine one major *sequence* of events — a series of summer get-togethers that a pair of couples share with their friends sometime around 1959. Its four sections move twice between the internal focalization of Kath Mayberry in the years before 1960 and that of her husband, Kent, as he strives to recall the same summer (though not necessarily the same sequence of events) in the 1990s — more than thirty years later and after a divorce. Thus, while Munro employs a third-person narrator throughout the story, the reader experiences “Jakarta” as two iterations of one unique narrative, focalized through two distinct perspectives that confront the narrative’s key moments either in the present or by distant recollection. Michael Gorra’s argument that “Munro will not . . . allow us to see one moment as the background to the other, to say that the story is about one and not the other,” might serve as a strong starting point for a consideration of a story such as “The Love of a Good Woman,” in which Enid’s lengthy focalization cannot definitively establish itself as the story’s main concern. In the case of “Jakarta,” however, Gorra’s assertion must be expanded since Munro will not allow her readers to see one *perspective* as the background to another — each must be considered in turn.

By looking at each of the story’s four sections, I will examine how Kent’s memories compare with Kath’s experience of the events during that pivotal summer of their lives together, with particular emphasis on their increasingly uncomfortable marriage. A closer consideration of the Mayberrys’ complicated relationship will unravel Munro’s use of focalized narrative throughout “Jakarta,” and thereby contribute to Ross’s and Duncan’s discussion of her narration. Moreover, the focalizer’s unique use of language relative to each character demonstrates that the central crisis of the story is one of identity. Whereas Kath struggles throughout to reconcile her established individual self with her lately adopted roles of wife and mother, Kent is entirely comfortable with who he is, and he changes in opinion and action only in slow accordance with evolving social expectations. Indeed, though both protagonists’

overt actions support this reading, in each case it is the inflected language of the focalizer that most betrays the disparate mental states of Kath and Kent.

I: Kath

Gorra begins his review of *The Love of a Good Woman* by asserting that Munro's "subject has always been the lives of girls and women"; fittingly, "Jakarta" opens with Kath and Sonje, the two women whom it will consider at length, visiting a Vancouver beach with Kath's newborn daughter. As she does throughout "Jakarta," Kath here struggles to reconcile her identity as a woman with her newly acquired status as a mother, and these concerns inform her focalization throughout sections I and III. Of immediate interest is the language with which the narrator condemns a group of women whom Kath and Sonje refer to as "the Monicas." These women daily invade the beach with their "umbrellas, towels, diaper bags, picnic hampers, inflatable rafts and whales, toys, lotions, extra clothing, sun hats, thermos bottles of coffee, paper cups and plates, and thermos tubs in which they carry homemade fruit-juice Popsicles" (67). As the narrator admits, "They are either *frankly pregnant* or look as if they might be pregnant, because they have lost their figures" (67; emphasis added). With their haul of consumer goods and ruined figures, the Monicas thus represent a version of motherhood that Kath herself fears she might come to embody. This fear is so tangible for her that she is "nursing so that she can shrink her uterus and flatten her stomach, not just provide the baby — Noelle — with precious maternal antibodies" (68). As I will explore in detail later, the focalization's colourful language here provides more information about Kath than she herself can articulate: she is afraid that her new role as mother will obliterate her prior, individual existence — if she should lose her feminine figure, she fears, she too will simply become another Monica at the beach.

Although it might seem paradoxical at first, a further consideration of her conception of these roles demonstrates why Kath believes her individual identity as a woman to be incompatible with her new identity as a wife and mother. Crucially, she considers marriage and motherhood as two parts of a series of lifetime achievements:

It seemed to her that life went on, after you finished school, as a series of further examinations to be passed. The first one was getting married. If you hadn't done that by the time you were twenty-five, that examination had to all intents and purposes been failed. (She always signed her name "Mrs. Kent Mayberry" with a sense of relief and mild elation.) Then you thought about having the first baby. . . . Then down the road somewhere was the second baby. (70)

Thus, in her marriage and now with her new baby, Mrs. Kent Mayberry has cause for "relief and mild elation": her life is progressing on course and in due time. But while she is living the life that she has planned, there is also cause for alarm. The Monicas too have "reached a stage in life," one that "Kath and Sonje dread" reaching themselves (68). Fully subsumed in their maternal identities as Monicas (for, aside from the matriarch, they are all nameless), they have sacrificed an individual identity for an identical status. Despite her anxiety, Kath does not appear to resent her newfound role: though her devotion to the baby and to Kent is not comfortable, neither is it feigned. That said, it is equally clear that the prescriptive nature of this course of life, as evident in her vehement attitude toward the Monicas and her conception of life as a tedious process of matriculation, also threatens Kath with suffocation.

This becomes even clearer after an examination of her conception of herself as a woman, which expresses itself throughout the story via gender-specific markers (e.g., her feminine figure). Meanwhile, Kath also equates it with the realization of a woman's individual self, as evident in her interpretation of the texts that she is reading. Her reaction to D.H. Lawrence's *The Fox* and Katherine Mansfield's "At the Bay" shows how confined she feels within her marriage. Discussing Mansfield's story, the narrator seemingly speaks from within Kath's head when wondering "How is it that no woman could love Stanley Burnell?" and concludes that it must be "his pushy love, . . . his self-satisfaction" that so repulses them (70). When Kath does convey her feelings, they affirm the narrator's assertions: although she "can't mention it or think about it," it "bothers Kath" that Kent might be "something like Stanley" (71). Lawrence's text, meanwhile, offers her little to calm her troubled mind. Speaking of the novella's end, she argues, "The soldier knows that they will not be truly happy until the woman gives her life over to him" (71). To Kath, the protagonist's "female nature must live within his male nature" for them to "have achieved a true marriage" (71). Kath,

of course, “thinks this is stupid,” but for sexual and maternal reasons: “He’s talking about sex, right?” she asks Sonje (71). “Sex leads to getting pregnant. I mean in the normal course of events,” she posits, “So March has a baby. She probably has more than one. And she has to look after them. How can you do that if your mind is waving around under the surface of the sea?” (71). For Kath, March’s impending marriage boils down to one existential choice: “You can either have thoughts and make decisions,” she declares, “or you can’t” (71). As a newlywed who has already “passed the test” — that is, the first baby — Kath is beginning to feel a growing incompatibility between herself as a mother and herself as a woman whose “female nature,” or identity, is not subsumed directly in the identities of her husband and family.

The final key to truly understanding her conflicting emotions lies in her feelings for Sonje, with whom Kath spends much time. Critically, Sonje remains an enigma for much of the story because her husband, Cottar, largely decides her identity on her behalf. For example, Cottar has decided that “if she has to read fiction . . . she should be reading” the communist fiction of Howard Fast (68). Fast, a prolific novelist with communist sympathies, severed his ties with the American Communist Party only a few years after winning the Stalin Peace Prize in 1954 (Homberger). Although these events happened in the years just before section I is set, they say nothing of Sonje’s own convictions. Does reading Fast make Sonje a communist? Does his recent rejection of the Communist Party mean that she is not? Tellingly, the reader cannot know. Although Sonje never openly espouses communist ideology, neither does she deny having communist convictions. Likewise, Kath’s guarded thoughts never allow the reader to see her opinions of her friends’ political affiliations. Instead, Kath has noticed that Sonje “never wore any makeup, [since] Cottar was against makeup,” presumably for idealist (but certainly not feminist) reasons (70). Rather than balk at his hypocrisy, Kath “thought she was wonderful looking — both seraphic and intelligent” (70). As will be confirmed in greater detail in section III, this is the first hint that Kath is attracted not to Cottar himself but to his domination of Sonje.¹ By subsuming her identity in his own, Cottar strips his wife of the burden of choosing what kind of woman she wants to be. This simple denial of agency is not something that Kent can offer Kath, who cannot articulate her feelings in speech or thought and must continue to struggle. Her attraction to Sonje and

Cottar therefore demonstrates her inability to form an identity that will allow her simultaneously to be *Mrs. Kent Mayberry*, loving wife and mother, and *Kath*, independent woman with a unique identity.

But while Kath continues to agonize between different possible iterations of herself, before transitioning to Kent's first section, it is important to note how Munro inflects the text of section I with language characteristic of the era in which it is set. The only section of the story narrated chiefly in the present tense, it is studded with language from the period. For example, the narrator's use of the term "Red China" (69), a phrase whose popularity grew steadily throughout the 1950s until 1965 and then declined in the years before the end of the Cold War ("Red China"), is significant. The importance of China's Communist status was therefore at its height at the time in which the story is set. Similarly, this preoccupation with ideology affects the language that the characters use to describe one another. Kent refers, for example, to Sonje and Cottar, his ostensible friends, as "[t]hose types," and he notes how they "love to feel persecuted" (in section III, also set around 1959, he twice calls their circle of friends "pinkos") (69, 80-81). Cottar, too, cannot leave communist jargon alone: criticizing Sonje's wish to become a ballet dancer, he dismisses her ambition entirely as that of "another little bourgeois girl hoping she'll turn into a dying swan" (70). With its careful use of period-specific language, this section confirms Gorra's assertion that Munro "writes from after the change about the world that was before." As the object of focalization shifts to Kent in section II, "Jakarta" also shifts from the world before the change to the world after it. In so doing, it provides a pronounced move away from the lexical frame of the late 1950s and toward a vocabulary roughly reflecting the time of the publication of the story; likewise, it presents Kent's attempt to recall the language of the late 1950s from a distance of over thirty years.

II: Kent

"Never before has [Munro] seemed so autumnal, so concerned," proclaims Gorra, "with mediating between the way we live now and the way we lived then." This much is immediately apparent in the stark contrast between the language of Kent's focalization in section II and that of Kath's in section I. Here Red China has simply become China,

and Howard Fast has dropped off the textual map (73). Humorously, since Cottar's mysterious death shortly after the events of section I, Sonje (the "little bourgeois girl") has actually become "a dying swan," opening her own school of dance and slowly growing too old in the interval to run it any longer. Indeed, though there is mention of the "young families" with "lots of money" that once paid for Sonje's ballet lessons, the narrator does not mention the classist implications of such a clientele for Sonje and Cottar's social circle (75). But if the section's lack of overtly political language bears little significance to the classist implications of its setting in the 1990s, this is because the narrative here does not primarily consider the characters' lives in that decade. Rather, beginning with two simple yet crucial words ("Kent remembered"), the section's focalization repeatedly resorts to "textbook" 1950s terms because it explicitly concerns his recollection of that era (73). In so doing, it unmistakably colours the few details that Kent remembers of events that transpired more than three decades earlier. With this in mind, I will now examine his focalization more closely and show how his often misplaced but ever-present self-assurance contrasts with the existential problems that afflict Kath in sections I and III.

Indeed, this self-assurance is evident during the argument that Kent remembers² engaging in with a few of Cottar and Sonje's friends at a party one night just before the beach scene that opens the story. Kent recalls that in Cottar and Sonje's house "there were books, pamphlets, everywhere" (77). Not incidentally, the only one that Kent can *now* remember seeing is Marx's *The Civil War in France*. It is unlikely that Cottar and Sonje read only Marx (they also read Fast), but Kent, with self-admitted pride in his ability to quote *Time* magazine, can only remember this book because Marx was the only author who made any impression on him at the time (78). Likewise, the narrator tells of Kent having argued about the most pertinent issues of the era: "capitalism [itself], the Korean War, nuclear weapons, John Foster Dulles, [and] the execution of the Rosenbergs" (78).³ Seeing Marx on the bookshelf confirms for Kent "the hostility, the judgment, in the room" (77). He feels "[j]ust as you'd feel in a room full of gospel tracts and pictures of Jesus on a donkey, Jesus on the Sea of Galilee, a judgment passed down on you" (77).

The language employed in his focalization also indicates that the insult Kent feels is as much a fantasy that he remembers as a factual

account of what happened. This much is clear when the party guests decry the newspaper as a “[t]ool of the capitalist classes, mouthpiece of the elite” (77). Commenting on how Kent defended the newspaper, the narrator asserts that “They were just waiting for something like that” (78). Of course, the stark use of language here reveals that Kent is the one truthfully judging the others:

He didn’t even take these people seriously, as the enemy. . . . [They] had no solidity, when you compared them with the men Kent worked with. In the work Kent did, mistakes mattered, responsibility was constant, you did not have time to fool around with ideas about whether certain chain drugstores were a bad idea or indulge in some paranoia about drug companies. That was the real world and he went out into it everyday. (78-79)

The careful blend of second-person (“you”) and third-person (“Kent,” “he”) nouns and pronouns here suggests that these are Kent’s thoughts. In this way, Kent’s own thinking is repeated when the narrator explains that “He did not disagree with his younger self now. He thought he had been brash maybe, but not wrong” (79). Herein lies a further clue about the relationship between Kent and Kath: whereas she is both anxious and relieved to be Mrs. Mayberry, he recalls taking pride in going out into the “real world,” “with the weight of his future and Kath’s on his shoulders” (79). Likewise, he seems to have eagerly subscribed to her conception of life as a series of exams, naming their starter home “The Glorified Shack” and “walk[ing] around some subdivision or other with” the baby, looking “at all the new houses” as if window shopping (79). In the same way, thirty years later, he still maintains an air of humble dignity toward The Glorified Shack when speaking with Sonje, as it was all “anybody [could] afford, for a start” (79).

If Gorra is correct to claim that Munro’s stories “so reinforce one another as to amount to nothing less than the portrait of a generation . . . that came to adulthood with one set of rules and then found it could live with another,” then it follows that, to remain conventional, Kent himself has necessarily changed. The most obvious example is his divorce from Kath and his subsequent remarriage — something that it is hard to imagine 1950s Kent accepting. Conversely, Deborah is 1990s Kent’s *third* wife, and is “in fact a year younger than Noelle,” his daughter with Kath (73-74). Perhaps most surprisingly, Deborah has also “introduced him to yoga, as well as the prescribed exercises, and

now she had him taking vitamins and ginseng as well" — all of which surely would have felt alien to the Kent of the 1950s (74). Yet he accepts these changes and attributes them to the march of time. For example, his new wife "was tactful and incurious almost to the point of indifference" (74). Although this is something that 1950s Kent could not have explained, Munro's internal focalizer makes it clear that 1990s Kent understands how "a woman of her generation took it for granted that everybody had a well-peopled and untranslatable past" (74). He thus seems to have accepted that his world will continue to change around him — if this is not cause for alarm in Deborah, then in all likelihood it is no threat to him either.

But though many of Munro's minor characters, such as Deborah, are themselves untranslatable, it is important to consider Gorra's assertion that her stories "are never just about one character, one situation. They open out, always, into other lives and other moments. These are stories marked by shifts in time or point of view that one barely notices." This noted, I will now take advantage of one of Munro's rare demarcated transitions and consider Kath's perspective once again in section III.

III: Kath

I have already noted how Kath both relishes being Mrs. Kent Mayberry and fears what this title might entail. Whereas section I focuses largely on her inability to reconcile her identity with her new role as wife and mother, in section III this problem expands beyond the reach of her nuclear family as she struggles to find stable ground between the ideals of Kent and those of her friends. While the guests "tied Kent up in knots" during the argument that he recalls in section II, Kath's focalizer flatly conveys that "Kent was asking for most of this [abuse], as far as Kath could see" (80-81). The narrator, however, reflects her inability to take a side in the debate by refusing to place all of the blame on Kent. As the narrator explains, his interlocutors do not act impartially: "The older man was bitterly amused, and the woman was full of moral repugnance, as if she held Kent personally responsible for Hiroshima, Asian girls burned to death in locked factories, for all foul lies and trumpeted hypocrisy" (81). Meanwhile, one of the guests accuses Sonje — who will not reveal her own opinions and instead offers the guests more curry — of playing "the tactful hostess. . . . Like somebody in Virginia Woolf" (81). Kath, who also will not make her convictions known, wonders here

if “Virginia Woolf was at a discount too” (81). Of course, Woolf is not “at a discount”; rather, Kath’s desperate attempt to understand where she fits between the convictions of Kent and those of Cottar demonstrates her inability to choose between their opposing lifestyles.

Although Kent’s conventionality might seem constricting, significantly Kent does not dictate his wife’s reading material. Meanwhile, Cottar’s radicalism — especially as it concerns Sonje — remains both exciting and threatening to Kath. In addition to prohibiting his wife from wearing makeup, for example, “Cottar liked Sonje to go without a brassiere, as well as without stockings or lipstick” (83). While micromanaging his wife’s very dress, however, he advocates “unfettered unjealous sex” for himself and pursues it with a “generous uncorrupted appetite” (83). When Kath implores Sonje at a later party not to let Cottar “sleep with Amy . . . if it makes [Sonje] feel awful,” she can only respond that “it isn’t a question of let” — Cottar will do as he pleases (86). This “uncorrupted appetite” both attracts and repulses Kath. For example, she deliberately provokes Kent after the first party by noting how “the older couple had lived with Cottar and Sonje in the communal house,” where “there had been an orderly exchange of sexual partners. The older man had an outside mistress and she was in on the exchange part of the time” (81). Kent is predictably appalled, but the narrator confides that “Kath found the idea of those stipulated and obligatory copulations exciting as well as disgusting. To pass yourself around obediently and blamelessly, to whoever came up on the list — it was like temple prostitution. Lust served as your duty. It gave her a deep obscene thrill, to think of that” (82). As noted earlier with Kent, the blend of the second-person (“yourself,” “your”) and third-person (“Kath,” “her”) narration alters the passage from a mere description to something approaching a confession. Indeed, a look into Kath’s conscience directly follows this admission: “*For all the tempting thoughts that came into her mind*, Kath believed that she could only, ever, sleep with Kent. Sex was like something they had invented between them. Trying it with somebody else would mean a change of circuits — all of her life would blow up in her face” (82; emphasis added). Just as she cannot decide whether married life with Kent is a snare or a sanctuary, so too does their sexual history both bore and comfort her; while outwardly Kath expresses her repulsion of Cottar’s sexual appetite, Munro’s use of internal focalization shows that Kath is also attracted to the blameless nullification of her sexual identity that his presence seems to offer.

With these conflicting forces threatening to “blow up in her face,” the second party presents a crisis of opportunity for Kath. There, the polyamorist old man recites Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” for her. “The sea of faith was once too at the full,” he begins, “[a]nd round the earth’s shore, lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled” (85). What he says next explicitly frames the story’s early events as occurring just before Gorra’s perceived “change”: “I was married to a completely different woman then” (85). His assertion is vague, perhaps deliberately so. Does the old man imply that he has divorced and remarried, literally to a different woman, or simply that the sexual behaviour of his wife has so thoroughly changed that she is unrecognizable as the same person? The answer is irrelevant. In either case, societal and sexual mores are beginning to change within the Mayberrys’ social circle and indeed within their generation’s culture at large. Divorce and (to a lesser extent) polyamory constitute the “new rules” by which, according to Gorra’s assertion, Munro’s generation would soon find that “it could live.” Kath and Kent’s marriage will not survive this change; the first sign of her coming break with Kent is evident when Kath continues the poem herself from memory: “But now I only hear . . . its melancholy long withdrawing roar, down the vast edges drear and naked shingles of the world” (85). The “sea of faith” (for her, those faithful to one another) is on the wane. Kath, in her personal crisis, now reaches the part of the poem that seems to offer her an answer, but she cannot bring herself to recite the lines, for they seem “too much to go on with” (85):

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain. (Arnold 29-34)

The poem, significantly composed after Arnold visited Dover Beach on his honeymoon, thus urges Kath to “be true” to Kent, for if she leaves him she will find “neither joy, nor love, nor light.”

Crucially, whether or not she realizes that her marriage is ending, Kath never finishes the poem or reflects on Arnold’s advice. Instead, she soon finds herself daubed with makeup and drunkenly flirting with the men at the party. It is here that she makes her first effort to break

from Kent. With a final combination of second- and third-person pronouns, the narrator again provides insight into her thoughts, and Kath thinks only of Kent even while making a tangible move away from him. Dancing with strange men, she reflects on their sexual life together:

The sex Kath had with Kent was eager and strenuous, but at the same time reticent. They had not seduced each other but more or less stumbled into intimacy, or what they believed to be intimacy, and stayed there. If there is only to be the one partner in your life nothing has to be made special — it already is so. They had looked at each other naked, but at those times they had not except by chance looked into each other's eyes. That was what Kath was doing now, all the time, with her unknown partner. (88)

Kath experiences intimacy here with another man and is surprised to find herself acting with him almost as she used to act with Kent (the exception being that, her actions made bolder by alcohol and her provocative makeup, she looks her “unknown partner” directly in the eyes). It is not yet clear what Kath stands to gain here, but in displacing the “one partner” in her life she necessarily loses “nothing [having] to be made special.” Intimacy with Kent, she realizes, is no different from intimacy with any other man. The change in Kath is immediately apparent when the babysitter interrupts the pair, crying “*Mrs. Mayberry, Mrs. Mayberry*” (89). Where Kath once met this title with “relief” and “mild elation,” now it is cause for alarm. Has the babysitter seen her actions with the stranger? Has Kent? In perfect Munro fashion, the text never answers these questions. Likewise, though it is clear that Kath will soon no longer be Mrs. Kent Mayberry, “Jakarta” never declares whether she finally manages to reconcile being Kath with being a mother. This way, if to Deborah Kent has an untranslatable past, then to the reader Kath has an unknowable future.

IV: Kent

The story now concludes with a short return to Kent in the 1990s, and Kath has become a stranger not simply to the reader but also to him. He does not think it worth his time to visit her in Ontario, but he cannot decide whether this is because he fears “[t]o see her a stranger that he couldn't believe he'd ever been married to, or to see that she could never be a stranger yet was unaccountably removed” (97). Instead, Kent

seems to have learned something of “life after the change” in the decades since his divorce from Kath. Sonje remarks that “young people seem unimportant to me. As if they could vanish off the earth and it wouldn’t really matter.” Kent immediately responds, “Just the opposite. . . . That’s us you’re talking about. That’s us” (98). Although his life has had intense meaning to himself, his wife cares little about his past, and his ex-wife likely cares nothing for his present; meanwhile, “his grown-up children were caught up in their own lives” (93). Of course, “That was only natural and not a surprise to him,” so that “these lives, the lives his sons and daughter were living, seemed closed in now, somewhat predictable” (93). Kent has therefore accepted the change noted by Gorra and adjusted his life accordingly. Indeed, shifting back in its closing paragraph to the present tense in which it begins, “Jakarta” implies that slow change will continue to be Kent’s fate in the coming years.⁴ Here the narrator explains how Kent’s “thoughts stretch out long and gauzy and lit up like vapor trails. He travels a thought that has to do with staying here, with listening to Sonje talk about Jakarta while the wind blows sand off the dunes. A thought that has to do with not having to go on, to go home” (98). Comfortable for the time being, and reasonably happy with Deborah, why should Kent not also be content to allow life to continue around him, as it inevitably will once he is gone?

Conclusion

What, then, of the larger struggle to decode “Jakarta?” I have demonstrated here how Munro’s story relays one sequence of events via two distinct focalizations — one relating the narrative “before the change,” the other reflecting on it from well after that change (Gorra). I have also shown that Munro’s use of split focalization provides more insight into the characters of Kath and Kent (together and apart) than do their own words or indeed their own actions. This way, though it has been possible to piece together some information from the text about the Mayberrys’ lives outside that summer around 1959, any investigation is limited to what Munro’s protagonists know about themselves and their interlocutors at a specific moment in time and by what her narrator chooses to reveal. It should come as no surprise, then, that “Jakarta” leaves the reader with many questions about “what actually happened” in the years between the sections devoted to Kath and Kent. When, exactly, did the Mayberrys divorce, and how did they undertake it? It is likely that Kath

initiated the split sometime in the early 1960s, but there is no way of knowing more. Where was Sonje and Cottar's marriage headed while Kath and Kent's marriage was beginning to splinter? Because of Cottar's untimely and only briefly glossed death in Jakarta⁵ — and because c. 1959 Kath and 1990s Kent do not know themselves — the reader never learns. Likewise, "Jakarta" says precious little about Deborah, even less about Noelle,⁶ whose very existence crucially makes section I possible, and almost nothing of Kent's sons from his second marriage.

To compound matters, though the distinctive language that permeates each of the story's sections might help the reader to follow its difficult shifts in perspective, it offers only limited information beyond the protagonists' experiences: a familiarity with Red China, pinkos, or even Howard Fast provides little ammunition with which to decode Kath's or Sonje's political beliefs. Similarly, the illiberal, even radical, nature of Cottar and Sonje's social circle means that they do not directly anticipate the social changes soon to follow in the 1960s, so Cottar's communism cannot be said to have any wider political relevance to the time in which Munro sets the story. This is to say nothing of Kath's inability to take a side between Cottar's and Kent's competing convictions. Rather than scorn these mysteries, however, we can agree with Byatt's assertion: they are inherent to Munro's fiction. In *The Love of a Good Woman*, Byatt declares, Munro "is partly examining the formation of highlighted and significant memories, and partly showing how these memories are selective, partial, and obscuring" (xvi). Although it ostensibly concerns the dissolution of Kath and Kent's marriage, therefore, the narrative is truly preoccupied with their unmistakably "selective, partial, and obscuring" experience of the story's events. This preoccupation manifests itself throughout "Jakarta" by means of Munro's shifting internal focalization and ultimately declares the text's central crisis to be a conflict between the evolving and competing, but ultimately irreconcilable, selves of Kath and Kent.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am indebted to Tracy Ware for several conversations on "Jakarta" that eventually produced this essay. Likewise, I am grateful to Kimberley Adams for her suggestions on "Dover Beach."

NOTES

¹ Also relevant is Sonje's frank admission that her "happiness depends on Cottar" (72). Although this statement shakes Kath, who "would never have said it about Kent," she covets Sonje's devotion to Cottar even as she reviles it (72). In section III, when Sonje declares that she loves Cottar "agonizingly," Kath's instinct is to mentally defend her relationship with her husband (82). In the end, the narrator informs us that, despite these efforts, Kath "could not say she loved Kent agonizingly" (82).

² Although it seems that on pages 77-78 the narrator simply relates what transpired at the curry party, as Kent transitions from the present in the 1990s back to that night, his thoughts demonstrate that he actually remembers the entire scene. As the narrator explains, Sonje's "books and papers stacked in the hall had reminded him of the house that Sonje and Cottar lived in above the beach. In fact the whole sense of discomfort, or disregard, reminded him. That living room had been heated by a stone fireplace at one end" (76). Here the narrative moves with Kent back to about 1959, discussing the room's contents before finally moving on to the debate in which he engaged. Its stark internal focalization suggests that he is all the while remembering what transpired that night.

³ One might note that Kent's focalization specifically enumerates what his interlocutors asked *Kent* about at the party: "He scoffed at the idea that American companies were persuading African mothers to buy formula and not to nurse their babies, and that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police were behaving brutally to Indians, and above all at the notion that Cottar's phone might be tapped" (78). Far from negating my point, these details demonstrate the depth of his focalization, for it is easier for one to recall the seemingly ridiculous things that others have argued at a specific moment than it is to remember one's own political convictions at that time, for they are always in flux.

⁴ In the original publication of "Jakarta" in the February 1998 issue of *Saturday Night*, the final paragraph omits this shift and continues in the past tense (60). It was only when preparing the story for publication in *The Love of a Good Woman* that Munro altered the paragraph so that the narrator speaks in the present tense. Although Munro frequently plays with the narration of her stories between publications (as she admits, "sometimes I'm uncertain, and I will [change] first person to third over and over again"), the significance of changing the tense of a single paragraph — the story's closing one at that — is self-evident (qtd. in Duncan 1).

⁵ "Jakarta" ranks high among Munro's stories with difficult titles. As Sonje informs Kent near the end of section II, Cottar "died very quickly of some tropical bug. . . . It happened in Jakarta. He was buried before I even knew he was sick. Jakarta used to be called Batavia, did you know that?" (79). This knowledge, however, provides little insight into Kath and Kent's crumbling marriage, or into Gorra's posited generational change, even when Sonje adds to it in section IV. There she explains her theory that Cottar could still be alive in Indonesia, having faked his death: "Now what they call old Batavia. . . . That's very geometrically laid out. Very Dutch. There's a suburb called Weltevreden. It means 'well contented.' So wouldn't it be a joke if I found him living there?" (95). Although Kent recalls that Cottar "had come up to him and asked him what he knew, as a pharmacist, about tropical diseases," he reasons that "[a]nybody going where he was going might have done the same" and gives little thought to Sonje's theory (96). Instead, he "waited for Sonje to speak of Kath again. But Sonje had not taken that tack. Instead it was all Cottar, and stupidity, and Jakarta" (97).

⁶ What little "Jakarta" does say about Noelle, however, is significant. For example, on page 73, the narrator explains that Noelle (like her mother) has relocated to Ontario, where she "was living in Toronto." Later the narrator explains that Noelle too is living her life

in the wake of Gorra's generational change, for she is "on the verge of leaving her second husband" (93).

WORKS CITED

- Arnold, Matthew. "Dover Beach." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. New York: Norton, 2012. 1387-88. Print.
- Byatt, A.S. Introduction. *The Love of a Good Woman*. By Alice Munro. Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2007. xi-xvii. Print.
- Duncan, Isla. *Alice Munro's Narrative Art*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.
- Gorra, Michael. "Crossing the Threshold." Rev. of *The Love of a Good Woman*, by Alice Munro. *New York Times*. New York Times, 1 Nov. 1998. Web. 2 Mar. 2015.
- Homberger, Eric. "Obituary: Howard Fast." *theguardian.com*. Guardian News and Media, 14 Mar. 2003. Web. 2 Mar. 2015.
- Munro, Alice. "Jakarta." Munro, *Love* 67-98.
- . "Jakarta." *Saturday Night* Feb. 1998: 44-60. *ProQuest*. Web. 4 Jan. 2016.
- . "The Love of a Good Woman." Munro, *Love* 3-66.
- . *The Love of a Good Woman*. Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2007. Print.
- "Red China." Search term in corpus of American English between 1940 and 2000. *Google Ngram Viewer*. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.
- Ross, Catherine Sheldrick. "'Too Many Things': Reading Alice Munro's 'The Love of a Good Woman.'" *University of Toronto Quarterly* 71.3 (2002): 786-810. *Project Muse*. Web. 27 Mar. 2015.
- Thacker, Robert. *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*. Toronto: McClelland, 2005. Print.