

CHANGING MASKS:  
The Unsympathetic Protagonist's Point of View

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## **Changing Masks: The Unsympathetic Protagonist's Point of View**

Unsympathetic protagonists are those characters that readers normally may not like. They are often recognizable by the way they behave and what they say, and they have a tendency to cross moral boundaries. Many blogs and articles about unsympathetic protagonists warn writers away from such characters and offer techniques for making them sympathetic in order to hold the reader's interest. Novels by Suzanne Berne, Melanie Rae Thon and Lois Phillips Hudson, as well as short stories by Louise Erdrich, Ernest Hemingway, and Alice Munro illustrate techniques that can be used to balance a protagonist's unsympathetic qualities with sympathetic ones.

These authors share some methods for rendering their characters sympathetic. Some of the more prevalent techniques include revealing the character's dreams, fears and/or vulnerabilities. Others include the use of the character's voice to strengthen or lessen sympathy, first-person narration to give a closer glimpse of the protagonist's thoughts and emotions, and the juxtaposition of an unsympathetic protagonist to a character who is equally or more unsympathetic. Whichever method these authors prefer, their texts include at least one technique that sets them apart from the others.

What makes the story of an unsympathetic protagonist so compelling? And why, despite their often questionable and sometimes horrific behavior, do we keep reading?

*The Ghost at the Table*, by Suzanne Berne, is one of the first novels that I read where I became aware that the protagonist was unsympathetic. In this novel, Cynthia and her older sister Frances reunite with their estranged father during Thanksgiving at Frances's home in Concord, Massachusetts. Throughout the novel, Cynthia reflects on

her past—the early death of her mother and the resulting abandonment by their father—while simultaneously confronting Frances about their conflicting accounts of childhood and their responsibility for their now divorced, elderly father. The story is a portrait of sibling rivalry and parent-child relationships, misunderstandings, unreliable memories, and loneliness.

As the narrator, Cynthia is a subjective observer mostly concerned with making others see things her way. Readers may feel a lack of sympathy for Cynthia because of her thoughtless attitude toward others. Convinced that the best way to live life is by “getting your own back” and “by acquiring, at all costs, a flying attitude,” she makes passes at both her niece’s tutor and Frances’s husband, gets into arguments during Thanksgiving dinner, allows Frances’s living room to catch fire, and watches their father die without calling for help (Berne 114).

Berne’s choice of first-person point of view accomplishes two things: it helps explain some of Cynthia’s behavior, while at the same time rendering her more sympathetic. First-person point of view offers a more intimate look at Cynthia, connecting the reader to her memories, her emotional state, and her rationale for her behavior. Direct access to Cynthia’s thoughts and memories gives the reader a chance to look into her childhood, which includes a frequently absent father committing adultery while his wife slowly dies. According to Cynthia, he also spends more time with one daughter (Frances) than he does the other two, while her mother spends much of her time in her sick room at home. Frances and Cynthia are not close and the eldest sister is often gone. Berne reveals a very lonely girl and, as she says in her novel, “Usually it was loneliness that was hinted at, and of course loneliness is where a person is most easily

understood” (9). The depth of loneliness that Cynthia experiences in her childhood may make her actions as an adult more understandable, if not forgivable.

In addition to first-person point of view as a means of generating sympathy, Berne also makes use of the dream. In the August 2011 Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University, Kent Meyers taught the class “Buying into the Dream,” in which he introduced the idea that “one of the major reasons readers will sympathize with unlikable characters is that they buy into that character’s dream of the future.” Meyers explained that each unsympathetic character has a dream, and that the dream defines the limits of the world where things are not possible; otherwise, the dream would have come true.

Cynthia’s dream is that Frances will acknowledge her version of their childhood. “I grew up feeling like no one cared whether I existed or not,” she tells Frances near the end of their vacation (Berne 280). Cynthia blames her feelings of loneliness and abandonment on her father: “Anything we had trouble with, it was because of him. He was weak, selfish, cruel, just this side of venal.... The perfidy of our father was an absolute, like the speed of light” (Berne 103). But she has trouble making Frances understand her feelings—making her buy into her dream—for many reasons: the sisters are not close until after their mother passes away, Frances has a good relationship with their father while Cynthia does not, and Frances continues to hope that he and Cynthia will reconcile, whereas Cynthia is adamant that such a thing will not happen. Cynthia’s desire to have her childhood memories and emotions validated is also complicated by the mystery surrounding her mother’s death. In a flashback to her childhood, Cynthia reveals that she was the last one to see her mother alive the night that she died, and that she used evidence that she saw in her mother’s bedroom to concoct a story about their father

killing their mother. During the Thanksgiving reunion, Frances admits that she once thought Cynthia had done it, and that their father thought Frances had. The sisters are unable to unravel themselves from a complicated knot of lies, emotions, and unreliable memories. In the end, Cynthia gives up trying to argue with Frances and acknowledges that her dream will never be realized: “My account of our past was officially shut, hers flung wide open—soon to be the accepted story” (Berne 282-283).

If Cynthia is sympathetic because of her desire, she is also sympathetic because of her vulnerability. Reunited with her father, she becomes less stubborn and more vulnerable. She is not sure what to expect from him after their long estrangement: “I was waiting for him to shout at me, as he had done so often when I was younger, pointing and snapping his fingers, growling at me to be quiet.... I even expected him to hit me with one of his limp-looking hands...” (Berne 66). This scene puts Cynthia in the role of the vulnerable daughter and the father in the role of the unsympathetic character, even though he is wheelchair-bound and she is the one who later will wreak havoc in her sister’s home.

As Cynthia’s destructiveness increases, the level of sympathy that readers feel toward her may decrease. So why would a reader want to continue a story about a protagonist who is destructive and desperate for attention? Part of the fun of *The Ghost at the Table* is the irony that Berne creates by having Cynthia think in ways completely at odds with her behavior and with the actions of those around her. Cynthia’s niece makes scathing remarks about her behind her back, yet Cynthia convinces herself that her niece must be talking about someone else. But Cynthia also makes her own ironic statements. For example, she returns to Frances’s house for Thanksgiving on the condition that they

“don’t get into a lot of old stuff,” but, as soon as she arrives, she launches into old family scandals with Frances’s husband Walter, including the suspicion that her father killed their mother (Berne 10). When Walter warns her not to broach such subjects around Frances, Cynthia thinks to herself, “No need to warn *me* to behave myself. I was no wallower in the past” (Berne 20-21). All evidence points to the contrary—much of her life is spent dwelling on the past. Cynthia writes historical fiction that focuses on the childhoods of famous sisters, portraying them as remarkable and devoted, while secretly taking an almost tabloid glee in their dark secrets and discontent. “I liked to collect unsavory facts about my subjects; I related better to them that way,” she confesses (Berne 8). She whips these little tidbits out to share with her sister’s Thanksgiving guests. Cynthia fills her narrative with many side-trips into childhood memory as she compares family members such as Frances, her father, and her step-mother as they are now with her memories of them. The entire Thanksgiving visit has to do with the past and how it has affected Cynthia.

In the article, “The Unsympathetic Protagonist” in the *2010 Novel & Short Story Writer’s Market*, Janice Hussein writes, “The novel is often better for having a character who verges on being a villain...because we feel compelled to read further, watch further. We want to know how this interesting, perhaps slightly unpredictable character responds to conflict, how the story plays out...” (49). Cynthia is certainly unpredictable—one moment she kisses her niece’s tutor; the next, her sister’s husband. In one scene, she suffers a migraine from arguing with her sister about their past; in another, she laughs uncontrollably after a car accident in which she sustains a neck injury. Her behavior leaves one feeling both unsettled and intrigued.

This unsettled feeling may prevent some readers from connecting with an unsympathetic protagonist. Hussein explains, “They have qualities we don’t like or admire.... Further, they may have also *done* something we don’t like or that we find reprehensible—their actions are disquieting” (46). This unsettled feeling can itself be a compelling reason to continue the story, though. Unsympathetic protagonists are not passive characters; they generate conflict and energy. Cynthia’s actions keep the story clipping along.

*Sweet hearts* is another example of an unsettling story with unsympathetic characters, one made more so because children are involved.

Like *The Ghost at the Table*, Melanie Rae Thon’s *Sweet hearts* explores family relationships. This is the story of Flint Zimmer and his half-sister, Cecile, narrated by their deaf aunt, Marie. Flint has spent most of his childhood in juvenile detention, where he is sent at age eight for arson, and again at age 11 for breaking, entering, and theft. When he escapes and returns to his mother’s house in western Montana, he finds himself unwanted by anyone but his sister Cecile. Together they make a run south for the Montana/Wyoming border, hoping to evade the authorities hunting down Flint. Their escape turns into a spree of violence that ends in the murder of Lucie Robideau, a young and devout mother, in front of her small child.

Thon provides an objective observer in Marie, a deaf woman able to show both sides of the story without necessarily passing judgment. Although written in first-person point of view, Thon’s technique makes the narrative read more like it has been written from an omniscient point of view. Marie shows the reader scenes from her own life, from Flint’s and Cecile’s, and from her family history. The result is a balance of action and

exposition. Toward the end of the novel, Thon writes, “It is easy to judge a life if you don’t have to live it” (132). Likewise, the narrative style in *Sweet hearts* prevents the reader from making hasty judgments of an unsympathetic character. Thon, like Berne, balances her protagonist’s behavior with reasons why he might be acting out. Flint’s violent, rootless existence is countered by Marie’s telling of their family history, a story that contains missing, neglectful, or deceased parents; wanderlust; and the culture of their people, the Absarokee.

The scene in which Flint returns to his mother Frances’s house after his escape from juvenile detention is a sad one, but it is also the one in which Flint earns the most sympathy. Frances cannot look at Flint without seeing his fathers, two brothers who raped her when she was fifteen. For a short time after his escape, Flint lives in the cold and mud beneath the porch before confronting Frances; however, his step-father orders her to get rid of him within 24 hours, and she offers Flint money to leave:

Frances tells Flint she can spare a hundred dollars; and Flint says, *How far do you think that will get me?*

He means he’s tired. He wants to eat every day, stretch his stomach, take a bath, sleep under blankets. *Like a person.* (Thon 6)

Flint is the invisible boy. His sister smells his arrival before she sees him, and finds the prints he has left on her window and his nest underneath the porch. He becomes sympathetic because of his desire simply *to be*. His circumstances also make him sympathetic—he is still technically a child, living outside in the cold and mud, rejected by his parent.



Flint's vulnerabilities also make him a sympathetic character. He is, in fact, one of the most vulnerable characters I have encountered, especially to outside influences. He admires people who have the skills necessary to survive—an unfortunate necessity for a boy cast off by his parent. Flint feels that “he knows so little that’s useful,” like how to steal for sustenance but not how to kill for it, how to break into a car but not how to drive it, how to read the signs that indicate where people have hidden their treasures, but not how to read words (Thon 28). He admires people who know how to do these things, which is partly why he takes Cecile with him—she knows how to calm the dogs that protect the houses he wants to break into and the people whose cars he wants to steal. She also knows how to shoot a gun, and he does not. Flint is vulnerable to those things that are delicate and beautiful as well, his sister being one of them. The most poignant scene occurs toward the end of *Sweet hearts*, when Flint has been imprisoned. Having spent some time in isolation and maximum security, Flint is allowed to walk in the prison yard and discovers that someone has planted flowers:

White blood drips from each tiny bleeding heart, sweet hearts, lush and delicious—you could put them on your tongue; you could taste them, bite your own sweet lip; you could fill your mouth with a hundred hearts, a thousand—you could tear them pink from the vine and crush them. And if you dare to touch, will the gardener kill you with his yellow spade? (Thon 214)

There is something both terrible and beautiful in this paragraph, which sums up what Flint is learning about the value of life, including his own. Hussein notes that stories written from an unsympathetic protagonist's point of view often contain “a statement

about humanity and/or redemption” (49). For me, this scene exemplifies that moment of redemption, and how difficult it is to judge an unsympathetic character when a writer balances that character’s likeable and unlikeable qualities so skillfully.

Cecile’s dream is to have the brother she remembers from childhood: “She’s looking for a boy lost long ago, the soft one who slept beside her all those nights...the one whose fingers smelled of chocolate and whose breath smelled of milk” (Thon 46). In trying to hold on to her brother, though, Cecile gets caught up in his violence and her dream becomes her nightmare. When Flint is captured and imprisoned for the last time, Cecile ends up testifying against him in court rather than confessing her part in their spree of breaking and entering, destroying property, and stealing. Her attitude toward Flint becomes both fearful and hopeful:

How else can she explain?

She fears and mourns him.

She wants him dead. She wants him to come home and sleep beside her.

Both desires are true. (Thon 225)

One of the most remarkable characteristics of *Sweet hearts* is the shifting role of the protagonist and antagonist. The novel illustrates how, when the protagonist is unsympathetic, the line between protagonist and antagonist becomes unclear. Cecile begins to understand that her brother plays both roles; he is both loved and feared. Unsympathetic protagonists have a similar reaction—they begin to see as antagonists those people who may actually be trying to help. Flint wants his sister with him but eventually becomes annoyed by her when she shows affection toward another man. He casts her out along with Lucie Robideau’s child. Cecile becomes, in his mind, someone

untrustworthy, just as she is no longer able to trust him, and fears what he might do to her if he were to escape from prison. From a writer's standpoint, this shifting of protagonist and antagonist creates conflict and tension in a story. The tension in *Sweet hearts* continues into the final pages, as Flint battles family, authority, strangers, addiction, his sister and, finally, himself and his own fears.

In her short story, "Saint Marie," from the collection *The Red Convertible*, Louise Erdrich shows, like Thon, how the roles of protagonist and antagonist become interchangeable. The story is literally a battle of good and evil between Marie, a girl from the reservation, and Sister Leopolda, a nun at the Sacred Heart Convent on the reservation. Marie decides to join the convent with dreams of sainthood, but she must first get past Sister Leopolda, an elderly nun who is convinced that the devil resides in Marie and who uses physical violence to drive him out. These two characters take turns abusing one another, each hoping to gain power over the other.

Which character in "Saint Marie" is good and which is evil? They take turns. As narrator of the story, Marie gives Leopolda the qualities of a witch, from the "big, stark, bony nose stuck to the front of her face, for smelling out brimstone and evil thoughts" to fingers "like a bundle of broom straws, so thin and dry," and eyes like "two deep, lashless hollows" (Erdrich 56-58). On the other hand, Leopolda is convinced that Marie is possessed by the devil, and uses that excuse to lock the girl in a dark closet, pin her to the floor, and pour scalding water on her. Marie, in turn, tries to push the nun into an oven, and Leopolda stabs a bread fork through her hand. Marie is no saint in this story, but neither is Leopolda. The back-and-forth action between these two figures generates momentum and questions. Which of these characters will win? And is it right that either

of them does? There are a lot of conflicts in this story, not just between good and evil, but in the relationship between a young woman and an older woman, and conflicts regarding beliefs and cultures.

How, then, does Erdrich make her narrator appear sympathetic? Like Thon and Berne, one of her methods is the use of the dream. Marie dreams of becoming a saint: “They never thought they’d have a girl from this reservation as a saint they’d have to kneel to. But they’d have me. And I’d be carved in pure gold. With ruby lips. And my toenails would be little pink ocean shells, which they would have to stoop down off their high horse to kiss” (Erdrich 53). Beneath this fanciful dream lies another, more ordinary one—Marie’s desire to get into town, where her parents rarely take their children except on Sundays. Erdrich writes that Marie and her siblings “were so anxious to get there we would have walked in on our hands and knees. We just craved going to the store, slinging bottle caps in the dust, making fool eyes at each other” (53-54). In the first dream, Marie longs to be idolized, but in the second, she wants to experience a normal childhood moment.

In his “Buying into the Dream” class, Kent Meyers also noted that woundedness, if not overdone, can be used to make an unsympathetic character sympathetic. Similarly, one of Hussein’s tips in “The Unsympathetic Protagonist” is to “show that the protagonist has somewhere in his or her background been wronged, betrayed or hurt by someone” in order to gain the reader’s sympathy (48). When Marie goes to the convent, she puts her trust in Leopolda: “I was that girl who thought that the hem of her black garment would help me rise” (Erdrich 55). Marie earns the reader’s sympathy when Leopolda wounds

her and betrays her, and that sympathy is deepened when Marie is able to forgive Leopolda in the end.

“The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” by Ernest Hemingway, shows how woundedness can be used in a different way to elicit sympathy. In this short story, the main character, Harry, is dying from a gangrenous leg. On safari in Africa with his wife, he cut his leg and, not properly treated, it becomes infected. While the couple waits for a plane to arrive and rescue them, Harry takes turns reflecting on his regrets and abusing his wife. He insults her by telling her he married her for money and sex and by calling her a “rich bitch” and “destroyer of his talent,”—she supposedly destroys his ability to write (Hemingway 45). The story alternates between Harry’s present and scenes from his past that include events and landscapes that he wishes he could have written about.

Harry’s wound gives him time for reflection and self-revelation. He begins to realize how *he* is at fault for not fulfilling his dream. He had hoped to write about his many experiences in life but, realizing that he is dying, he understands that

he would never do it, because each day of not writing, of comfort, of being that which he despised, dulled his ability and softened his will to work so that, finally, he did no work at all.... Now if this was how it ended, and he knew it was, he must not turn like some snake biting itself because its back was broken. (Hemingway 45)

Harry earns sympathy for his ability to admit his own fault in the situation.

“The Snows of Kilimanjaro” balances cruelty with beauty. While Harry’s cruelty makes him unsympathetic, the beauty he reveals through memories of specific landscapes makes him sympathetic. There is beauty in his connection to the land:

...looking down he saw a pink sifting cloud, moving over the ground, and in the air, like the first snow in a blizzard, that comes from nowhere, and he knew the locusts were coming up from the South. Then they began to climb and they were going to the East it seemed, and then it darkened and they were in a storm, the rain so thick it seemed like flying through a waterfall, and then they were out...and there, ahead, all he could see, as wide as all the world, great, high, and unbelievably white in the sun, was the square top of Kilimanjaro. (Hemingway 56)

Some of the places Harry wishes he could have written about are mountainous and snowy, distant and cold. These landscapes are a reflection of Harry's personality, a man who keeps others at a distance, including the reader. They are also places where war and death have occurred, and offer a foreshadowing of Harry's fate.

George Armstrong Custer, the unsympathetic protagonist of Lois Phillips Hudson's novel, *The Bones of Plenty*, is similar to Harry in that he shows more connection to land than to people. Custer is a North Dakota wheat farmer trying to earn a living at the height of the Depression and Dust Bowl. He hopes one day to own his farm outright and build his own house rather than remain a tenant farmer. Unfortunately, his efforts are undermined by the economy and advancing technology that outstrips his ability to compete with larger farms. The story depicts the failed dreams of many small farmers, including George's in-laws and neighbors.

Written from an omniscient point of view, the reader witnesses George's reactions to the drought, government agents offering federal assistance, the law, middlemen, fellow farmers, and his family. His thoughts toward most of them tend frequently to jealousy

and violence. George becomes convinced that “it was going to take bloodshed to change things for the farmer” (Hudson 84). With no one to fight physically, however, George often unloads his temper on his wife Rachel and his daughter Lucy.

*The Bones of Plenty* is similar to “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” in that the author describes a protagonist who is sensitive to the needs of the land but less so to the needs of his family. George Custer, like Harry, finds fault easily in others before he does in himself. He criticizes Lucy so often for being a girl that she begins to wish she were a boy, and he assumes a similar attitude toward Rachel, countering any arguments of hers with an exasperated, “Women!” George accuses Rachel of being unsupportive, wasteful, and a spoiler. Just the opposite is true. Meanwhile, Lucy works as hard as she believes a boy would in order to please her father. Once again this novel, like *Sweet hearts* and “Saint Marie,” shows the unsympathetic protagonist treating his supporters as if they are antagonists.

George’s connection to the land makes him both sympathetic and ironic. This man, who can be so brutal to his family, softens toward the land and some, but not all, of the creatures living there:

There was no land like this North Dakota prairie anywhere else in the world, he thought. But it was no good if it never got water, or if it was all allowed to blow away.... A man who wanted to farm that land had to do what the land did. He had to explode with the spring explosion, and work as close to all the hours of the day as he could, just as the thawing winds and the germinating seeds worked all the hours of the day. And in the fall he ought to leave the ground strictly alone...to hold the sleeping soil in the

clasp of an ancient root system while the winds blew through the fall and winter and spring. (Hudson 78-79)

George understands what the farm needs and feels frustrated by other big-time farmers who rape the land in order to get as much produce as they can. And yet, he is unable to apply this sensitivity toward his wife and child. He cannot find passable compliments for Rachel, Lucy, or his in-laws; instead, he wears them down with his arguments and opinions.

Thankfully, Hudson offers other perspectives, including Rachel's and Lucy's. Third-person point of view makes the reader aware that George stands to lose more than he realizes, but also creates curiosity about an unsympathetic protagonist through the use of secondary characters. I continued reading this story, not so much for George's sake, but for the sake of those lives he affects, including his wife and child. My curiosity about George is similar to theirs. Through Rachel's eyes, we see her wondering when her husband became a monster: "How is it that she had gone on living with a man who could turn into an insane wild beast? She couldn't believe it.... What was there to do? End her marriage?" (Hudson 177). And, like Lucy, I simply wonder what it is her father really wants: "The thing she couldn't stop thinking about, as she lay in bed, too excited to sleep, was how hard it was to understand what her father wanted" (Hudson 294). *The Bones of Plenty* was, for me, just the opposite of *The Ghost at the Table*—I was not compelled to continue reading because I wanted, as Hussein writes, to see how George responds to conflict or how the story plays out for *him* (49). Rather, I was more interested in how the story would play out for his family, whether their questions about George would be answered, and whether their feelings toward him would be resolved.



My strong aversion to George is grounded in his unwillingness to allow anyone else to have a voice. His physical and verbal attacks weaken those characters who try so hard to be strong for him. He is the type of man, in the beginning of the novel, whose voice dominates everything—he has a comment/answer/argument for every situation and everyone. But one of the ways he becomes more sympathetic is that, as his financial situation worsens, his voice diminishes. He responds with less venom and more calm. An example of this is his relationship with Lucy. In one scene, he hollers at Lucy for allowing the cows to escape, accuses her of back-talking when she attempts to defend herself, whips her until she is screaming and bruised, and then kicks her away (Hudson 175). The only voice George wants from Lucy is one of compliance and meekness. Later in the story, Lucy confesses to her father that she was playing ball in the house and accidentally cracked a window. She expects “to have him upon her as if he were the black wind itself, to feel his hand holding her arm and the razor strop falling again and again and again” (Hudson 404). Instead, George reacts calmly. He investigates the damage, makes what repairs he can, and offers to buy glass to replace the broken window the following day. Ironically, the moment that improves my estimation of George makes Lucy feel worse. Seeing that her parents refuse to speak to one another after this incident, Lucy reflects that “she must have done a much worse thing than she had ever done before.... So bad that it wouldn’t even do any good to beat her for it.... How much better it would have been to get a beating” (Hudson 405). This is a moment in the novel that is both sweet and heartbreaking—sweet because George Custer has finally learned to react with some patience, and sad because Lucy assumes the blame for everything that has gone wrong between her parents.

If George is similar to Harry from “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” because of his connection to the land, he is also similar to Flint from *Sweet hearts*. Will he, at any point, begin to show signs of redemption? He progresses, slowly, from unsympathetic to sympathetic, from the accuser to the accused. In the final pages of the novel, he begins to realize that he, along with the other small farmers, are as much to blame as the middlemen and the government for their situation:

It was Custer’s own neighbors he’d been fighting, all right. They’d been climbing all over each other—competing, trying to get into that meaningless top fifty percent.... When would little men stop slitting each others’ throats? What was the difference between competing with a man and slitting his throat? George had slit throats himself, probably.... But he hadn’t ever really wanted to slit another little farmer’s throat, had he?

(Hudson 420-421)

Having given up on his dream and the farm, as well as losing the love and faith of his wife, he begins to realize that the violence he hopes for to remedy his situation actually turns on him, and that he is part of the problem, not the solution.

These authors—Berne, Thon, Erdrich, Hemingway, and Hudson—make use of the dream as a technique to elicit sympathy for an unsympathetic protagonist; however, Alice Munro’s use of this technique in two of her short stories actually causes the protagonists to be unsympathetic. Their dreams are more likely to leave the reader unsettled. Munro has other methods of creating sympathy for her unsympathetic protagonists.

Munro's short story "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You" from her collection of the same name depicts the rivalry between sisters Char and Et, who have spent all their lives in the small lake town of Mock Hill, formerly a summer destination for wealthy couples. Et, the younger sister, cannot abide mystery or confusion. To her, appearances are everything. When Char's old flame returns to Mock Hill, Et suspects them of resuming their affair, and she begins to stir up trouble for her sister in order to protect Char's husband Arthur.

Whereas the use of the dream in other stories tends to give characters a sympathetic quality, here it causes a lack of sympathy. In this story, Et has two desires. The first is explicit—she wants to “throw things into confusion” for Char, assuming that Char has rekindled a romance with Blaikie Noble, with whom she had a brief fling as a teenager that ended when Blaikie ran off with another woman (Munro 22). Et begins taunting Char with information about him, even lying to her, claiming at one point that he has run off again with another woman. Et's second implicit desire is Char's husband, Arthur. Et spends a significant amount of time at Char's house either visiting or caring for them, especially for Arthur. She wakes in the night worrying about his declining health while Char dismisses it, and she recalls the feel of his hand on her waist after he gives her a companionable squeeze (Munro 17). The closest she comes to stating her attraction is during an evening word game, when the admission might not be taken seriously. In front of Char, Et says, “I love my love with an A, because he is absent-minded. His name is Arthur, and he lives in an ashcan” (Munro 14).

Neither of these desires makes Et a particularly sympathetic character. But Munro's juxtaposition of the unsympathetic protagonist with a character equally or more

unsympathetic may help the reader support Et's cause. Both she and Arthur are aware that Char does not love her husband, as seen in this passage, when he accuses Char of thinking him a fool:

Char didn't deny it, though his eyes on her, his wide smile, were begging her to. Her mouth twitched at the corners, in spite of herself. Contempt. Fury. Et saw, they both saw, a great wave of that go over her before she could smile at him and say, "Don't be silly." Then her smile and her eyes were trying to hold on to him, trying to clutch onto his goodness (which she saw, as much as anybody else did, but which finally only enraged her...). (Munro 16)

Knowing that Char is a bit hard-hearted toward her husband may soften the reader toward Et, for a time, at least.

Others may fall into the same trap that I did when first reading this short story. At first, I did not realize that Et was an unsympathetic character because she spends so much time casting suspicion on her sister. Munro uses a red herring as a literary device. In other words, suspicion is placed on someone other than the protagonist. When Et finds rat poison in her sister's cupboard, her thoughts immediately turn from the bottle to Arthur: "He would drink anything you handed him. Naturally" (Munro 13). Et feels that Arthur is "too good" while she is aware that "there were those you could not trust," i.e., Char (Munro 13). Et takes on the role of Arthur's protector. Her suspicions seem sensible, at first, especially when combined with her awareness that Char does not love Arthur and that Char has used poison before—on herself. Through flashback, Munro reveals that Char attempted suicide after the first time Blaikie jilted her. The reader may be

compelled to continue reading to see whether Et's suspicions come to fruition, which they do not. On a second reading, I began to see how Et, not Char, is the real tormentor—taunting her sister about Blaikie, worrying more about Arthur than about Char, not pausing to consider whether or not her taunting could provoke a second suicide attempt, and taking a perverse interest in other people's faults. The townspeople say of her that "she's a terror... Et's a terror. She had them at a disadvantage. She had them in their slips and corsets" (Munro 18). Munro generates false sympathy for Et by having her look with suspicion on her sister and Blaikie's behavior and not questioning her own. This technique is similar to looking at a painting and seeing one image on first glance and something completely different on the second. Munro creates the illusion of sympathy. Et becomes a complex and intriguing character. Munro's technique allows readers to explore the ways in which a person mentally justifies her suspicions and behavior and absolves herself of any wrongdoing.

A similar situation occurs in Munro's short story "Child's Play" from her collection *Too Much Happiness*. Marlene, the narrator of this story, meets her doppelganger Charlene at summer camp as children. Caught up in a game of describing something "sickening," Marlene tells Charlene about Verna, a girl with an apparent mental disability, referred to as one of the "Specials." Marlene's family used to live in a shared house with Verna and her grandmother. Marlene's family moved away, but she still could not escape Verna, who continued to walk past her house on the way to school. Marlene's description of Verna takes on grotesque qualities. She appears reptilian, with flat black hair, squinting eyes, and hands with "fingers like so many cold snouts" (Munro 196-198). When Verna shows up at summer camp, Charlene assumes the role of

Marlene's protector and attempts to shield her from the other girl. After summer camp ends, the "twins" fall out of contact with one another and lead separate lives until Charlene's terminal illness draws Marlene back to her side and forces her to recollect that summer at camp that ended with Verna's drowning.

Marlene becomes progressively unsympathetic, but in the beginning she does not appear to be, for the same reason as Et in "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You." Marlene places the blame on Verna and portrays herself as the victim. Along with her reptilian characteristics, Verna is described as someone to be afraid of, the way children are frightened of "certain house faces, or tree trunks, or very much about moldy cellars or deep closets," a type of uncanny fear with which readers can identify (Munro 196). In addition, Marlene feels that she cannot escape Verna, that the girl is always interfering and overbearing. She even uses the word "persecute" to describe how Verna treats her. Marlene cannot discuss Verna with her mother, who is already upset with her for blaming Verna "for the way she was born" (Munro 197). Readers may sympathize with a child who feels as though she is being stalked by a strange girl and who is surrounded by adults who just do not understand.

While Marlene cannot stand to be around Verna, she becomes quite close with Charlene. In her article about unsympathetic protagonists, Hussein suggests that showing that the protagonist cares about another character will make him/her appear redeemable (48). Marlene loses touch with Charlene after summer camp. Many years later, she receives a note from Charlene's husband indicating that she is dying, would like to see Marlene, and has one last request of her—that she find a specific priest and send him to Charlene. At first, Marlene resists the urge to see her old friend, but she does so anyway.

Then she decides that she will not find the priest, but once again, she complies, even though she fears that Charlene's request has to do with Verna's death and their involvement. It becomes apparent that she cares about Charlene as she carries out her last wishes.

One of the compelling themes in this short story is the way that Munro explores, through Marlene, how differences between people can both attract and repel, which mirrors the reader's discoveries about what qualities make a narrator sympathetic and unsympathetic. Munro writes, "Children of course are monstrously conventional, repelled at once by whatever is off-center, out of whack, unmanageable" (Munro 196). She offers this as a way of helping the reader understand the repugnance that Marlene feels for Verna, who is *different*. And yet, after Marlene meets Charlene and learns all the ways they are alike, the girls set out to discover their differences. Munro writes that these "female exchanges" occur because the characters "feel a particular sympathy" and "great trust" toward one another (193-194). Marlene's reaction to these two girls defines her sympathetic qualities—her concern for and friendship with Charlene makes her sympathetic; her cruelty toward Verna makes her unsympathetic.

While Marlene is skillful at describing Verna and all the wrongs that girl has supposedly done her, she is less clear about her part in Verna's fate until the very end. It becomes apparent from the beginning that something goes wrong at the girls' summer camp, something "sad and awful," according to Marlene's mother (Munro 189). Munro gives just enough information for the reader to want to push open the door and reveal what is on the other side, no matter how horrific. The story is written in first-person point of view, though, and Marlene will not describe Verna's end until she is ready, until she

has offered all the reasonable, objective excuses that she can from her training as an anthropologist, including this one:

The past drops away from you easily and it would seem automatically, properly. Its scenes don't vanish so much as become irrelevant. And then there's a switchback, what's been all over and done with sprouting up fresh, wanting attention, even wanting you to do something about it, though it's plain there is not on this earth a thing to be done. (Munro 190-191)

Whereas Suzanne Berne uses first-person narration in *The Ghost at the Table* to give the reader access to Cynthia's childhood and emotions, Munro uses first-person point of view so that the adult Marlene can prevent the reader from seeing too quickly into her childhood. The narration allows the reader in one text to be a witness; in another, it allows the narrator to be the guardian. Like Et in "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You," the reader is given a chance to watch as this unsympathetic protagonist attempts to justify her actions and earn the reader's sympathy before the final scene.

Sympathetic or unsympathetic—many of the characters described in these texts seesaw back and forth between the two. Melanie Rae Thon describes this as "changing masks: first dark, then pale. Now the victim, now the killer" (194). These characters want someone to believe in them, but how they act often keeps other characters and the reader at a distance. Unsympathetic protagonists may also want people to believe they are the victim, and in some cases they are, but they can be the victimizers as well. In many cases, the unsympathetic protagonist's behavior continues to degenerate while the reasons for



the behavior become clearer. The result is that many of the authors have created balanced characters, neither too good nor too evil.

Stories such as these allow the writer to explore why unsympathetic people act as they do, giving readers greater insight into and compassion for people in real life whose behavior makes them repulsive. In order to accomplish this, the authors must make the characters compelling to the reader. Berne, Munro, and Thon show us the life of their protagonists before the act that makes that character, finally, unsympathetic; the protagonists' thought processes, memories, and emotional reactions to other characters help explain some of the protagonists' unsympathetic behavior. Hemingway's and Hudson's main characters begin their stories as unsympathetic protagonists and go on journeys of self-discovery that reveal their redeeming qualities. Several of these authors challenge a reader's definition of a protagonist and antagonist, as the characters in these roles begin to view one another as sympathetic or unsympathetic, or as obstacles to their goals. The way that these stories end—most of them, unhappily—is not as important as understanding how the characters arrive at that point, the extremes they go to and the desperation they feel in order to achieve their dreams. If readers find the unsympathetic protagonist's behavior disturbing, they may be lured deeper still into the story by the glimmers of redemption revealed by the protagonist. Unsympathetic protagonists never let anyone rest—not the characters whose lives they shatter, nor the person reading their story. Perhaps that is the writer's final gift to readers—preventing the reader from defining a character in black and white terms of good and evil. Instead, the writer creates an emotional connection to and a deeper interest in the complexity of an unsympathetic

protagonist. These are stories in which readers should watch and learn, and withhold judgment.

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