

## PRE-READING

**1 Individually or 2 In Pairs**

1 Translate the following text about Alice Munro into English:

**Alice Munro** er hvad man kunne kalde for forfatternes forfatter. Hun er en af de mest læste forfattere i sit hjemland, Canada, men i udlandet har hun endnu ikke fundet en stor læserskare. Alligevel fremhæves hun af andre forfattere verden over som en af vor tids bedste historiefortællere – "vores Tjekhov", som hun er blevet kaldt – og i 2013 fik hun Nobelprisen i litteratur. Munro skriver primært novellesamlinger, hvilket kan være grunden til, at hun endnu ikke er blevet en international bestsellerforfatter. Hendes fokus er altid mennesker, og med stor generøsitet og et lynskarpt blik skildrer hun deres skæbner med en sådan indsigt og fortælleglæde, at "hun taler til dig og mig, lige her og lige nu", som den amerikanske forfatter Jonathan Franzen har beskrevet hendes fortællinger.

FRA: FORFATTERWEB.DK

## READING INSTRUCTIONS

**1 Individually or 2 In Pairs**

1 Read the text, focusing on the characters. Mark when you get interesting information about the characters and when you hear about their relations.

Furthermore, you have to be able to remember the structure and overall content when you have finished reading as you have to write a summary of the story with some of your classmates afterwards.

## Gravel (EXCERPT)

ALICE MUNRO

At that time we were living beside a gravel pit. Not a large one, hollowed out by monster machinery, just a minor pit that a farmer must have made some money from years before. In fact, the pit was shallow enough to lead you to think that there might have been some other intention for it—foundations for a house, maybe, that never made it any further.

My mother was the one who insisted on calling attention to it. "We live by the old gravel pit out the service-station road," she'd tell people, and laugh, because she was so happy to have shed everything connected with the house, the street—the husband—with the life she'd had before.

I barely remember that life. That is, I remember some parts of it clearly, but without the links you need to form a proper picture. All that I retain in my head of the house in town is the wallpaper with Teddy bears in my old room. In this new house, which was really a trailer, my sister, Caro, and I had narrow cots, stacked one above the other. When we first moved there, Caro talked to me a lot about our old house, trying to get me to remember this or that. It was when we were in bed that she talked like this, and generally the conversation ended with me failing to remember and her getting cross. Sometimes I thought I did remember, but out of contrariness or fear of getting things wrong I pretended not to.

It was summer when we moved to the trailer. We had our dog with us. Blitzee. "Blitzee loves it here," my mother said, and it was true. What dog wouldn't love to exchange a town street, even one with spacious lawns and big houses, for the wide-open countryside? She took to barking at every car that went past, as if she owned the road, and now and then she brought home a squirrel or a groundhog she'd killed. At first Caro was quite upset by this, and Neal would have a talk with her, explaining about a dog's nature and the chain of life in which some things had to eat other things.

"She gets her dog food," Caro argued, but Neal said, "Suppose she didn't? Suppose someday we all disappeared and she had to fend for herself?"

"I'm not going to," Caro said. "I'm not going to disappear, and I'm always going to look after her."

"You think so?" Neal said, and our mother stepped in to deflect him. Neal was always ready to get on the subject of the Americans and the atomic bomb, and our mother didn't think we were ready for that yet. She didn't know that when he brought it up I thought he was talking about an atomic bun. I knew

'gravel pit (subst) -  
grusgrav  
'hollow (vb) - udhule  
'shallow (adj) -  
lavvandet  
shed (vb) - skille sig  
af med  
'barely (adv) - knap nok  
re'tain (vb) - bevare  
'trailer (subst) -  
skurvogn  
cot (subst) - seng  
cross (adj) - sur  
con'trariness (subst) -  
genstridenhed (at  
være på tværs)  
'squirrel (subst) - egern  
'groundhog (subst) -  
murmeldyr  
fend (vb) - sørge for  
sig selv  
de'flect (vb) - aflede

st) - bolle  
 s'tation (subst) -  
 kning  
 'astic (adj) -  
 stret  
 '(subst) -  
 rpak  
 aising (subst) -  
 sindsamling  
 '(subst) - plac  
 viser folk hen til  
 pladser i teatret)  
 (subst) - sjal  
 ing style -  
 rt/afslappet stil  
 (vb) - krumme  
 ation (subst) -  
 ndegivelse  
 e (vb) - forudse  
 reer (subst) -  
 lig  
 vb) - græde  
 '(subst) - porcelæn  
 ating scheme  
 st) - systematisk  
 etning

that there was something wrong with this interpretation, but I wasn't about to ask questions and get laughed at.

Neal was an actor. In town there was a professional summer theatre, a new thing at the time, which some people were enthusiastic about and others worried about, fearing that it would bring in riffraff. My mother and father had been among those in favor, my mother more actively so, because she had more time. My father was an insurance agent and travelled a lot. My mother had got busy with various fund-raising schemes for the theatre and donated her services as an usher. She was good-looking and young enough to be mistaken for an actress. She'd begun to dress like an actress, too, in shawls and long skirts and dangling necklaces. She'd left her hair wild and stopped wearing makeup. Of course, I had not understood or even particularly noticed these changes at the time. My mother was my mother. But no doubt Caro had. And my father. Though, from all that I know of his nature and his feelings for my mother, I think he may have been proud to see how good she looked in these liberating styles and how well she fit in with the theatre people. When he spoke about this time later on, he said that he had always approved of the arts. I can imagine now how embarrassed my mother would have been, cringing and laughing to cover up her cringing, if he'd made this declaration in front of her theatre friends.

Well, then came a development that could have been foreseen and probably was, but not by my father. I don't know if it happened to any of the other volunteers. I do know, though I don't remember it, that my father wept and for a whole day followed my mother around the house, not letting her out of his sight and refusing to believe her. And, instead of telling him anything to make him feel better, she told him something that made him feel worse.

She told him that the baby was Neal's.

Was she sure?

Absolutely. She had been keeping track.

What happened then?

My father gave up weeping. He had to get back to work. My mother packed up our things and took us to live with Neal in the trailer he had found, out in the country. She said afterward that she had wept, too. But she said also that she had felt alive. Maybe for the first time in her life, truly alive. She felt as if she had been given a chance; she had started her life all over again. She'd walked out on her silver and her china and her decorating scheme and her flower garden and even on the books in her bookcase. She would live now, not read. She'd left her clothes hanging in the closet and her high-heeled shoes in

their shoe trees. Her diamond ring and her wedding ring on the dresser. Her silk nightdresses in their drawer. She meant to go around naked at least some of the time in the country, as long as the weather stayed warm.

That didn't work out, because when she tried it Caro went and hid in her cot and even Neal said he wasn't crazy about the idea.

What did he think of all this? Neal. His philosophy, as he put it later, was to welcome whatever happened. Everything is a gift. We give and we take.

I am suspicious of people who talk like this, but I can't say that I have a right to be.

He was not really an actor. He had got into acting, he said, as an experiment. To see what he could find out about himself. In college, before he dropped out, he had performed as part of the chorus in "Oedipus Rex." He had liked that—the giving yourself over, blending with others. Then one day, on the street in Toronto, he ran into a friend who was on his way to try out for a summer job with a new small-town theatre company. He went along, having nothing better to do, and ended up getting the job, while the other fellow didn't. He would play Banquo. Sometimes they make Banquo's ghost visible, sometimes not. This time they wanted a visible version and Neal was the right size. An excellent size. A solid ghost.

He had been thinking of wintering in our town anyway, before my mother sprang her surprise. He had already spotted the trailer. He had enough carpentry experience to pick up work renovating the theatre, which would see him through till spring. That was as far ahead as he liked to think.

Caro didn't even have to change schools. She was picked up by the school bus at the end of the short lane that ran alongside the gravel pit. She had to make friends with the country children, and perhaps explain some things to the town children who had been her friends the year before, but if she had any difficulty with that I never heard about it.

Blitzee was always waiting by the road for her to come home.

I didn't go to kindergarten, because my mother didn't have a car. But I didn't mind doing without other children. Caro, when she got home, was enough for me. And my mother was often in a playful mood. As soon as it snowed that winter she and I built a snowman [...].

The snow dwindled magically. The trees were still bare of leaves and my mother made Caro wear her coat in the mornings, but she came home after school dragging it behind her.

My mother said that the baby had got to be twins, but the doctor said it wasn't.

su'spicious (vb) -  
 mistænksom  
 blend with (vb) - falde  
 i med  
 To'ronto (prop) -  
 Canadas største by  
 'wintering (vb) -  
 overvintre  
 'carpentry  
 ex'perience (subst) -  
 tømrer-erfaring  
 'kindergarten (subst) -  
 børnehaveklasse  
 'dwindle (vb) - svinde  
 hen  
 drag (vb) - slæbe

"Great. Great," Neal said, all in favor of the twins idea. "What do doctors know."

The gravel pit had filled to its brim with melted snow and rain, so that Caro had to edge around it on her way to catch the school bus. It was a little lake, still and dazzling under the clear sky. Caro asked with not much hope if we could play in it.

Our mother said not to be crazy. "It must be twenty feet deep," she said.

Neal said, "Maybe ten."

Caro said, "Right around the edge it wouldn't be."

Our mother said yes it was. "It just drops off," she said. "It's not like going in at the beach, for fuck's sake. Just stay away from it."

She had started saying "fuck" quite a lot, perhaps more than Neal did, and in a more exasperated tone of voice.

"Should we keep the dog away from it, too?" she asked him.

Neal said that that wasn't a problem. "Dogs can swim."

A Saturday. Caro watched "The Friendly Giant" with me and made comments that spoiled it. Neal was lying on the couch, which unfolded into his and my mother's bed. He was smoking his kind of cigarettes, which could not be smoked at work so had to be made the most of on weekends [...].

After the television was turned off, Caro and I were sent outside to run around, as our mother said, and get some fresh air. We took the dog with us [...].

We let the dog lead us, anyway, and Blitzee's idea was to go and look at the gravel pit. The wind was whipping the water up into little waves, and very soon we got cold, so we wound our scarves back around our necks.

I don't know how much time we spent just wandering around the water's edge, knowing that we couldn't be seen from the trailer. After a while, I realized that I was being given instructions.

I was to go back to the trailer and tell Neal and our mother something.

That the dog had fallen into the water.

The dog had fallen into the water and Caro was afraid she'd be drowned.

Blitzee. Drowned.

Drowned.

But Blitzee wasn't in the water.

She could be. And Caro could jump in to save her.

I believe I still put up some argument, along the lines of she hasn't, you haven't, it could happen but it hasn't. I also remembered that Neal had said dogs didn't drown.

o'bey (vb) - lyste  
toss (vb) - kaste  
hurl (vb) - hyle  
'founder (vb) - fyde  
rundt  
'reddish (adj) - redlig  
re'quire (vb) - forlange  
'incline (subst) - skråning

Caro instructed me to do as I was told.

Why?

I may have said that, or I may have just stood there not obeying and trying to work up another argument.

In my mind I can see her picking up Blitzee and tossing her, though Blitzee was trying to hang on to her coat. Then backing up, Caro backing up to take a run at the water. Running, jumping, all of a sudden hurling herself at the water. But I can't recall the sound of the splashes as they, one after the other, hit the water. Not a little splash or a big one. Perhaps I had turned toward the trailer by then—I must have done so.

When I dream of this, I am always running. And in my dreams I am running not toward the trailer but back toward the gravel pit. I can see Blitzee floundering around and Caro swimming toward her, swimming strongly, on the way to rescue her. I see her light-brown checked coat and her plaid scarf and her proud successful face and reddish hair darkened at the end of its curls by the water. All I have to do is watch and be happy—nothing required of me, after all.

What I really did was make my way up the little incline toward the trailer. And when I got there I sat down. Just as if there had been a porch or a bench, though in fact the trailer had neither of these things. I sat down and waited for the next thing to happen.

I know this because it's a fact. I don't know, however, what my plan was or what I was thinking. I was waiting, maybe, for the next act in Caro's drama. Or in the dog's.



## Gravel

## POST-READING

## K In Class

- 1 Look up the word "gravel" and discuss why you think it is the title of the story.

## L In Groups of Three

- 2 Write a summary of the excerpt of "Gravel" that is exactly 170 words. Remember that a summary is always in the present tense, that you can only include the most necessary information and that you cannot include quotes.

## K In Class

- 3 Share your summary with your class mates and read the summaries of the other groups.

You now have to vote for the best summary.

When you have found the winner, look closer at what makes this a good summary. What is it the winning group has done more successfully than the other groups?

## I Individually

- 4 Characterise the five characters in the short story. Write down notes for all of the characters enabling you to remember them:

- \* Neal
- \* Caro
- \* the narrator
- \* the mother
- \* the father

## K In Class or in Groups of 10 People

- 5 "The Hot Seat": You sit in a circle with a chair in the middle. One of you is placed in the middle and chooses the role of one of the characters from "Gravel".

Your fellow classmates can now ask questions to this character and you have to reply as if you were in fact the character.

After having answered two to three questions, a new student comes to the chair, chooses to be a character etc.

## K In Class

- 6 Discuss who the twisted mind is in this short story, and why.

How can we see that Alice Munro has depicted "people's destinies" (cf. the text piece you translated earlier in the chapter) in this short story?

What are the themes in the story?

(Continued on next page)

I don't know if I sat there for five minutes. More? Less? It wasn't too cold. I went to see a professional person about this once and she convinced me – for a time, she convinced me – that I must have tried the door of the trailer and found it locked. Locked because my mother and Neal were having sex and had locked it against interruptions. If I'd banged on the door they would have been angry. The counsellor was satisfied to bring me to this conclusion, and I was satisfied, too. For a while. But I no longer think that was true. I don't think they would have locked the door, because I know that once they didn't and Caro walked in and they laughed at the look on her face.

Maybe I remembered that Neal had said that dogs did not drown, which meant that Caro's rescue of Blitzee would not be necessary. Therefore she herself wouldn't be able to carry out her game. So many games, with Caro.

Did I think she could swim? At nine, many children can. And in fact it turned out that she'd had one lesson the summer before, but then we had moved to the trailer and she hadn't taken any more. She may have thought she could manage well enough. And I may indeed have thought that she could do anything she wanted to.

The counsellor did not suggest that I might have been sick of carrying out Caro's orders, but the thought did occur to me. It doesn't quite seem right, though. If I'd been older, maybe. At the time, I still expected her to fill my world.

How long did I sit there? Likely not long. And it's possible that I did knock. After a while. After a minute or two. In any case, my mother did, at some point, open the door, for no reason. A presentiment.

Next thing, I am inside. My mother is yelling at Neal and trying to make him understand something. He is getting to his feet and standing there speaking to her, touching her, with such mildness and gentleness and consolation. But that is not what my mother wants at all and she tears herself away from him and runs out the door. He shakes his head and looks down at his bare feet. His big helpless-looking toes.

I think he says something to me with a singsong sadness in his voice. Strange. Beyond that I have no details.

My mother didn't throw herself into the water. She didn't go into labor from the shock. My brother, Brent, was not born until a week or ten days after the funeral, and he was a full-term infant. Where she was while she waited for the birth to happen I do not know. Perhaps she was kept in the hospital and sedated as much as possible under the circumstances.

[...]

(2011)