

Alice Munro  
and the Anatomy  
of the Short Story



# Alice Munro and the Anatomy of the Short Story

Edited by

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## INTRODUCTION

# ALICE MUNRO'S SHORT STORIES IN THE ANATOMY THEATRE

ORIANA PALUSCI

Like all of the great short story writers of the past from E.A. Poe to Anton Čekov, Alice Munro is a fascinating experimenter. Following the explosion of the literary journals in England at the end of the twentieth century, which drew accomplished novelists, such as Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, H.G. Wells, towards the short story, the development of the genre in theme and setting was finally established at the beginning of the following century by the Modernist perspective of James Joyce and Katherine Mansfield. In American literature, the genre was consolidated by Ernest Hemingway and by a number of women writers, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor.

The feminine perspective of the Modernist movement resonated in the short stories of Katherine Mansfield, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf. The short stories by the latter Modernist writers hold an atmospheric, partly autobiographical flavor for they aimed at capturing the atomized, subtle, almost invisible "moments of being" which were so central to Woolfian aesthetics. Even more so in Elizabeth Bowen's war stories, where female characters, excluded from the tragic events of the front line madness, confront the experience of war with dignity and with the awareness that the expectations –not always fulfilled and often denied– of homecoming and mental sanity need to be grounded on a regained sense of domesticity embodied in the short narratives of everyday life.

In Canada, the short story has a long tradition connected, at the end of the nineteenth century, to the realistic wild animal stories by Ernest Thompson Seton and Charles G.D. Roberts. The latter created a uniquely Canadian genre, based on scientific research and observation, in which animals are just animals in relation to their place in a natural habitat, quite different, for instance, from Kipling's *The Jungle Books* (Seifert 2007).

Moreover, it was thanks to Stephen Leacock and his humorous “sketches” that Canadian literature was put on an international literary map in 1912. However, the Modernist short story, from Raymond Knister, to F.P. Grove, Morley Callaghan and Sinclair Ross, rooted on Canadian soil, grew in a terrain which marginalized its fruits due to the literary supremacy of the British and American output. Women short story writers in Canada had to face the same fate, if not even worse. Yet, they had been exploring the potentialities of the genre already in the years before 1880 in what was British North America. As Lorraine McMullen and Sandra Campbell outline, in their 1993 anthology, pioneering women did write short fiction, including Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill, and Isabella Valancy Crawford, setting their stories in the Maritimes or in Upper Canada. McMullen and Campbell are also responsible for editing other two collections of Canadian women short stories —*Aspiring Women: Short Stories by Canadian Women 1880-1900* (1993) and *New Women: Short Stories by Canadian Women 1900-1920* (1991) — in which they resurrect a multiplicity of female voices from oblivion, drawing attention to a narrative tradition contemplating fertile ground for the future Canadian women writers of short stories.

Contemporary Canadian women writers of short fiction played a significant role in shaping the genre, while enriching it with topics connected to sexuality and gender, and by setting them in an unmistakable Canadian landscape. The list of female authors is long, suffice it to mention Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood and, of course, Alice Munro, who, differently from her fellow writers, was exclusively a short story writer, although longer narratives, or rather, chapters springing from a novel in progress, can be unearthed in her production, for instance, more evidently in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) or, more recently in the three Juliet stories, collected in *Runaway* (2004), republished together after the *Julieta* film by Pedro Almodóvar (Munro 2016).

In the case of Munro, we should remember that she is not a voice programmatically involved in delineating a theoretical approach, as Margaret Atwood is; she is not explicitly interested in literary genealogies or ideological instances, but, more humbly draws her inspiration from her middle-class rural Canadian background, enlivened by her marriage with first husband, James Munro, and their life together in West Vancouver from 1952 till 1963. In between, she realizes how hard it was for her to reconcile the traditional role as a wife and mother of two small girls (later three) and her vocation for a fictional world, at the same time encompassing and eluding the territory of her family and social duties. I would like to start from the picture in the newspaper article devoted to Munro housewife and



writer (a paradox indeed) published in the *Vancouver Sun* in 1961 and quoted by Alice's daughter Sheila in her memoir, *Lives of Mothers & Daughters. Growing Up with Alice Munro* (2001: 85). The young woman is sitting in the midst of her girls, with Sheila perched up on maybe a stool, with her head above her mother's but leaning on it. Alice is holding the smaller child in front of her. The triptych ideally forms a triangle which reinforces Alice's central role as a mother. The photographer, Moira Farrow, who authored the article as well, almost seems to regret that the Vancouver mother has undertaken such a task. Anyhow, this stereotype —also used for Munro's friend writer, Margaret Laurence, who had lived in Vancouver suburbs at the beginning of her career— registers what it meant to be a female author in the 1960s in Canada. Virginia Woolf's warning, in her feminist pamphlet published in 1929, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (1983, 6), was still a problem for the thirty-year old Alice. However, leaving aside economic independence, Munro would admit, in a 1984 interview that she had "never had a studio or room to write in", a thought that would "paralyze" her and that she had always written "in a room which had another function":

I wrote *Lives of Girls and Women* in the laundry room because I put the laundry in and the room would warm up (it was a very cold house) so I had a table up there and a typewriter. Somehow I felt less uneasy about writing because I was doing it in a room that wasn't a study. Now I work in the bedroom (in Horwood 1984, 131).

A sign of the times was also the fact that she decided not to use her family surname —Laidlaw— but her husband's for her writer's identity, even after her divorce and second marriage.<sup>1</sup> It is true that in the meantime readers knew her as Alice Munro, and probably the publishers wanted to keep the same surname on the cover of her books.

Notwithstanding her scanty public appearances, which make her a sort of anti-Atwood, Munro's writing increasingly found its way to readers and to a widespread recognition thanks also to literary prizes both in Canada and abroad, from the Governor General's Literary Award for English language fiction (won three times) and the Trillium Book Award, to the Man Booker International Prize (2009, UK) and the Nobel Prize in Literature (2013).<sup>2</sup> Little could the 1961 journalist have known that the pretty

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<sup>1</sup> The same happened to Doris Lessing.

<sup>2</sup> Among the many prizes won by Alice Munro, I would like to mention the "Premio Flaiano" (July 2008) that the writer surprisingly decided to collect herself in Pescara (Abruzzi, Italy).

housewife surrounded by her girls would appear once again on the *Vancouver Sun* (22 April 1969) as the winner of the Governor General's Award for her first published collection of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, even though the newspaper persisted on toying with the image of the mother-writer as the headline clearly shows: "B.C. Mother of Three Wins Top Literary Award".

Alice Munro was Canada's first Nobel Prize winner in Literature.<sup>3</sup> She was the first winner for the short story and the thirteenth woman to win the prize. The eighty-two year old Alice, who was forced to video her Nobel Prize speech, because of health problems, had in the meantime reshuffled and deeply transformed the short story in her fourteen collections.

Yet, the young Alice lives in the older Munro; the housewife and the writer do too. What I mean is that Alice's creative strength is always grounded, on a surface level, in everyday experience. Munro shows the reader phases of the process, the inner life of her characters, their entangled emotions, favouring her female protagonists. We might say that, while the housewife is in the kitchen, chopping up food, for physical survival and nourishment, the writer prefers an anatomy theatre, in which to dissect the short story. I am thinking of a Renaissance amphitheatrical anatomical theatre used for teaching anatomy to students at universities, a place surrounded by tiers where observers could view the autopsy. It seems to me that Munro subtly performs her operations with imaginative tools and literary skills, while, at the same time, asking her keen spectators (her readers) —who deal with more and more sophisticated texts— to fathom each single story, each single layer of each single story, engaging in the innumerable nuances and clues which emerge and are left on the surface of her 'textual' table:

It seems as if I want to get a lot of layers going. I want the story to have a lot of levels, so that the reader can draw back and perhaps instead of thinking about what happens in this story as far as development of plot goes, to think of something else about life (in Smith 1994, 24).

Obviously, not all participants will have the same perspective and/or perception, attention or the intertextual knowledge required to make sense of the endless resonances in Munro's stories. If the writer has to literally dirty her hands —as it happens in "The Turkey Season" (1982), where the animals are cut into pieces and gutted, in order to be sold as Christmas

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<sup>3</sup> Saul Bellow, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1976, was born in Canada, but had moved to the United States when he was twenty-three and became a naturalized US citizen soon after in 1941.

meat, or in the skinning of foxes (see *Lives of Girls and Women* or *The View from Castle Rock*)— the readers in front of the dissecting table in Alice's theatre must look carefully, probe, passionately unveil the dark insides of the matter, without hoping to grasp an ultimate explanation, as her narratives remain rich in ambiguities. Indeed, details, everyday minutiae become vital, yet simply collected together they resist a clear-cut interpretation.

Munro's writing and re-writing of her stories, many of which were first published in literary journals, also reiterates her relentless and laborious anatomical process in the analysis of the formal structures of the genre. As she states in a 2013 interview:

I do rewrite a lot, and I rewrite and then I think it's all done, and I send it in. And then I want to rewrite it some more. Sometimes it seems to me that a couple of words are so important that I'll ask for the book back so that I can put them in (in Awano 2013).

Munro creates variant versions of her stories, making continuous changes, sometimes substantial, sometimes minimal, in the guise of a chemist in a distillery or a witch in her den. For instance, she produced eight versions of "Powers", the final story in *Runaway* (Close and Awano 2006, 102). Her writing process is relentless; she inserts a detail, a keyword, an image, a metaphor, an incident, which will lock and unlock her narrative, making the story almost banal, yet ambiguous and complex, balancing one layer on top of the other, one text above the other. As Ventura argues: "Munro's art of storytelling rests upon a power of recall which vivifies historical and literary memory through a strategy of partially acknowledged and partially clandestine encoding of intertextual and intermusical references" (2016, 155). Anyhow, the final result must be unique and effective in Munro fashion. Time, space, voice, plot, theme, climax are set together in an architecture which makes sense after examining each pillar and architrave, the different strata of her multi-layered texts. Episodes, often "constructed elliptically, shift around in time and space" (Cox 2004, 30). As Nischik suggests:

The format of the short story most congenially unites Munro's literary views by privileging snippet-like views of the flow of life, episodic and condensed time structure, fragmented presentation, and open endings (2017, 78).

Indeed, Munro's stories are not fairy tales with a final positive ending. Far from that, as the majority of her stories leave an open, often inconclu-

sive ending, an ending which hints at a possible conclusion, yet is inconclusive, and is left to the reader to decipher.

Munro's craft, growing and branching out from her first collection of stories *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) to her latest one *Dear Life* (2012) implies a deep understanding and a keen curiosity for the short story, its potentialities, exploring the formal and thematic grouping and regrouping of stories, moving from a few pages to elaborate and technically sophisticated extended lengths, between autobiography and invention, between diversity and continuity, beyond the strict conventions of the genre, and deploying meta-narrative interrogations on the relationship between short storytelling and life –the life of the artist and the life of the community she interprets and interacts with.

Munro's short stories seeped slowly but steadily in the Italian literary landscape, thanks to enlightened publishers such as Serra e Riva, which translated in 1989 *Il percorso dell'amore/The Progress of Love* and, some years later, the feminist publisher La Tartaruga presented to the Italian public *La danza delle ombre felici*, i.e. Munro's first collection, edited by and with an afterword by Oriana Palusci (1994). Afterwards, Einaudi did decide to translate all her works, recurring to one expert translator, Susanna Basso. Two conferences, both in 2007, were pivotal: the International Conference of the "Forum Lou Salomé-Donne psicanaliste in rete", entitled "Casa di Parole: Alice Munro", organised by Adalinda Gasparini; the other in Siena on "Alice Munro - the art of the short story", promoted by Laura Ferri (Centre Siena Toronto) with Caterina Ricciardi (University of Rome3) in collaboration with Francesca Balestra (University of Siena), later published as *Reading Alice Munro in Italy* (2008). Although Munro's literary expertise does not resound so deeply in Italian culture, as it does in France, where *Dance of the Happy Shades* was chosen for the "Aggregation" exam in 2015, the awareness that Alice Munro is a great narrator –a very difficult one to translate— is growing in Italy. As a matter of fact, the Symposium, from which this book was born, was held at the University of Naples 'L'Orientale' (2-4 October 2014) as the annual conference of the Italian Association for Canadian Studies to celebrate Alice Munro after she won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

*Alice Munro and the Anatomy of the Short Story* investigates the writer's art as a storyteller, the processes she performs on the contemporary short story genre in her creative anatomical theatre. It is a collection of scholarly chapters which offer textual insights into a single story, compare two or more texts or cast a more panoramic view on Munro's literary pro-

duction, embracing stories from her first collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* to her last published *Dear Life*. Through different critical approaches that range from post-structuralism to cultural studies, from linguistics and rhetorical analysis to translation studies, the authors insist on the concept that no fixed patterns prevail in her short stories, as Munro has constantly developed, challenged, and revised existing modes of generic configuration, while discussing the fluidity, the elusiveness, the indeterminacy, the ambiguity of her writing.

This edited volume is divided into five topical interconnected sections dealing with crucial readings of Munro's stories, which enrich each other. The first section, "The Resonance of Language", opens with Héliane Ventura's paper, which addresses onomastics, polysemy and paronomasia, with a focus on "Sunday Afternoon" (1968) and "Night" (2012), respectively from her first collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* and from her last one, *Dear Life*. By raising the question of the subject's place, the linguistic analysis unveils remotivation of language, reconceptualization of experience, and reconfiguration of text genre. Examining structure and content of *Too Much Happiness* (2009), Janice Kulyk Keefer stresses the role and function of curiosity, positioned in-between a desire for forms of happiness, and the aesthetic and erotics of risk. While happiness, ultimately, seems ungraspable and often destructive, risk shapes Munro's fluid and elusive narrative. The tension also affects issues of aging, mortality, and language.

The section entitled "Story bricks" includes four papers which engage in the technical devices of the architecture of Munro's short stories. By casting a panoramic gaze upon Munro's fourteen collections, Sabrina Francesconi re-examines the Nobel Academy's motivation for the 2013 prize attribution, and acknowledges Munro as the master of storytelling, as being mainly concerned with the narrative pleasure as process, rather than with its material outcome. Biancamaria Rizzardi insists on how Munro's writing superbly achieves the magical in the ordinary by balancing the familiar and the unfamiliar within the same narrative structure. Thus, she studies *Dance of the Happy Shades* and *Lives of Girls and Women* outlining figures of speech such as paradox, oxymora, as well as comic and grotesque elements. Monica Bottez's paper starts from the premise that the artful ordering of the events in the narrative is one of the main strategies that Munro uses in order to obtain her specific effect of always surprising the reader with a new insight into the mysterious resources of the human psyche, of unexpected chains of causes and effects revealed through an awareness of new focalizers or narrators, or of a dim sense of predetermination. Bottez then recurs to Mieke Bal's rhetorical analysis to put forth

textual illustrations taken from the collection *Too Much Happiness*. Instead, Maya Ćuk singles out and explores symbolic allusions to Greek mythology in *Runaway* (2004), as it reconfigures postmodern and post feminist points of view, by raising cultural and political issues related to gender, identity, and morality. Particular attention is devoted to the female characters of Carla, Sylvia, Juliet, Grace, Lauren and Nancy.

“Disempowerment and Re-empowerment” is the title of the third section, in which Bigot and Palusci work on these contradictory problematic issues. Acknowledging substantial differences and significant specificities, Corinne Bigot examines echoes between “Dimensions” (2009) and “Runaway” (2004), both defined by patterns of entrapment and lines of flight; both relying on tragic images revolving around a murderous night; both enacting strategies of survival and closure deferral. On the other hand, Palusci focuses her attention on “Dimensions”, showing how the short story is the author’s most relevant text approaching the issues raised by the representation of the Shoah. She explains how Munro masterfully engages with “dimensions” and points of view by connecting the victim and the perpetrator to discourses of breathing/not breathing in a narrative elaboratively ‘pieced’ together through continuous and disorderly time shifts.

The thematic motifs “Food, Animals and Death” (Section 4) join together three papers. Cristiana Pugliese inspects the symbolic function of food in “Amundsen” (2012), seen as the means to assemble characters and setting, as marking key moments in the story (e.g., before Vivien’s first sexual encounter with Dr Fox), and thus, casting light on a complex narrative structure. Instead, Carla Comellini traces images of disease, death and food, which pervade Munro’s stories, influence the seemingly ordinary and familiar lives of her female characters, and generate a multifold tension between individual facts, actions, memories and the Canadian history, landscape, society. The section ends with Eleonora Sasso, who adopts Lakoff’s notions of cognitive poetics and conceptual metaphors to study “Boys and Girls” (1968), “Working for a Living” (2006), and “Runaway” (2004). Sasso explores Munro’s ‘animalizing’ imagination, whereby men and animals are linguistically blended, and illuminates gender roles and animal representation against the Canadian socio-cultural backdrop.

The last section is devoted to “Munro in Translation”. Deborah Saidero explores intralinguistic, interlinguistic and intersemiotic translation in “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” (2001) and in its film adaptation *Away from Her/Lontano da lei* by Sarah Polley (2008), pinpointing shifts and losses implied by each distinctive translation process, from English into Italian, from page to screen. Translation issues are also at the centre of the last chapter of the volume, in which Isabella Martini studies the inter-

linguistic translation from English into Italian of “Deep-Holes” (2009), in order to display the writer’s multilayered discourse and her refined style in the story.

It is true, the reading of Alice Munro’s short stories takes time and concentration, in order to better observe the anatomical process at stake under the surface of everyday experience. This volume illustrates, how, thanks to her sophisticated narrative tools, Munro enriches us in the knowledge of the human heart, of the contradictions of the female world, of the art of storytelling.

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## **SECTION I**

### **THE RESONANCE OF LANGUAGE**



## CHAPTER ONE

# DANCE OF HAPPY POLYSEMY: THE REVERBERATIONS OF ALICE MUNRO'S LANGUAGE

HÉLIANE VENTURA

From the first critical volume on her work, Judith Miller's *The Art of Alice Munro: Saying the Unsayable* (1984), up to Robert Thacker's biography *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives* (2005) and beyond, Alice Munro has been represented as the writer who put southwestern Ontario on the literary map of the world, as Faulkner did for Yoknapatawpha, or Hardy for Wessex. Thacker argues that the founding moment in her career is the time when she returned to southwestern Ontario in 1972 after the collapse of her first marriage and started writing about her native Huron County from the vantage point of having returned to it, after twenty years of absence. He propounds the hypothesis that she would never have written the work she has written, had she not returned to Huron County at that particular juncture. Useful as the biography is, I find it very difficult to agree with this hypothesis, first because it is founded on biographical data, second because it looks like a prophecy after the event. There is no knowing what Munro's work would have been if she had not returned to Huron County, because she has.

My argument is that Munro inhabits southwestern Ontario but that she inhabits her part of the world as a poet: she dwells in the clearing of being through poetic language, through the reverberations of her polysemous discourse in which the meaning of words is not fixed but open to continual redefinition and remotivation. Hers is a language founded on multi-acculturality which produces an enriching ambiguity and a revivifying of dormant meanings, particularly in the case of recurrent homophones, as will be demonstrated in this essay.

Munro's stories reverberate with intertextual and intermedial allusions: they make overt or clandestine references to fiction, to drama, to photography, to painting, to the cinema or to opera. Her first volume of short

stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), from which the title to this essay is derived, is a case in point. It refers to a ballet in Christoph Willibald von Gluck's opera, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, an opera performed for the first time in Austria with an Italian Libretto by Ranieri de Calzabigi in 1762. This libretto was subsequently revised and translated into French by Pierre Louis Moline and the opera performed in Paris in 1774. This second version was eventually revised almost one century later by Hector Berlioz in 1859 (Gluck, Opera de Montpellier). The piano partition of the ballet which is played by Dolores Boyle, in Miss Marsalles's living room, belongs to either the second or the third version of the opera since Miss Marsalles quotes the French name for the Ballet which occurs in Act 2, scene 2. This ballet evokes a particular place: the Elysian Fields, an enchanted setting which is described by Eurydice herself in these terms:

Cet asile/Aimable et tranquille/par le bonheur est habité/ C'est le riant séjour de la félicité/Nul objet ici n'enflamme/l'âme/ Une douce ivresse/laisse/Un calme heureux dans tous les sens/ Et la sombre tristesse/Cesse/ dans ces lieux innocents (Libretto, Internet Archive).

The evocation of this blissful place inaugurates Munro's work. She has not chosen to use the name of her native place, or any other heteronyms for the title of her first collection, as Sherwood Anderson did with *Winesburg, Ohio*. She has not chosen to designate it through a periphrasis either, as Sarah Orne Jewett did with *the Country of the Pointed Firs*. Like Eudora Welty with *The Golden Apples*, Munro has mediated her rendering of life in Canada in the twentieth century through an allusion to Antiquity and Mythology and she has alluded to one of the most canonical and transgressive journeys in Western literature: the journey to the underworld. This journey is a topos to be found in Homer's *The Odyssey* but also in Plato's Myth of Er, in Hesiod's *Theogony*, in Virgil's *Eneid*, in Dante's *Comedy*, in Céline's *Journey to the End of Night*, or Joyce's *Ulysses* or the narrator's journey in Marcel Proust's *Remembrances*. Munro situates herself in one of the most canonical adventures of Western thought, an adventure which leads to the greatest reservoir of evil in the universe but she reverses the trajectory of this journey in a most telling way. By choosing the Elysian Fields in the Inferno, she opts for the most radiant place in the most evil one. Right from the start of her career, this is indicative of the ambivalence, irreverence, and contradictoriness which characterize her.

At the start of her career, she invites us to find meaning and enchantment in the heart of darkness because she does not choose to rewrite the Orpheus myth: "Not Orphée." "No. Never him", as Pauline says in "The Children Stay" (Munro 1998, 214). She chooses to rewrite the Orpheus

myth as Gluck and Calzabigi and Moline and Berlioz have revised it, through song, through dance, and through victory. In the canonical versions of the myth, Orpheus is represented as undertaking the journey to the underworld in order to bring his beloved back to the world of the living and failing to do so for not having complied with the injunction he received: not to turn back and not to look at Eurydice before he is out of the underworld. Lacking the strength to refuse to look at his imploring wife, he eventually turns back and loses her for good. Gluck's version, as opposed to those from Antiquity, allows Orpheus to win over the powers of darkness and to bring back his beloved on earth.

By relying on this significantly altered version of the myth, Munro signals from the start her interest in the metanarrative of Antiquity and her ambivalent ethos. She rejects the versions from Antiquity in favour of the eighteenth century one, giving evidence of her capacity to revise and not revise the canon at the same time. Her work is less a revision than a selective reviving of world literature through the revitalising of language, a point which I will demonstrate through the close analysis of two stories, one from her first book, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), and one from her last one, *Dear Life* (2012).

The story from the first book, "Sunday Afternoon", has been originally analyzed by Canadian critics as pertaining to the tradition of sketches or literary portraits (Miller, McKendrick, Martin). I would like to suggest that, more than a double portrait of a maid and a mistress, it is a fable, because it transforms the two women portrayed into a bird and a fish through the use of polysemous language and transferred epithets.

Mrs. Gannett, the lady of the house, is a supercilious patrician who looks down upon her employee. She is also someone who literally belongs to another species. The play with onomastics is particularly revelatory in Munro's stories and the name of the mistress is a case in point. The homophonic reference to the gannet cannot be ignored: the gannet is the largest seabird in the North Atlantic, a white bird with a yellowish head, and the largest colony in the world lives off the estuary of the Saint Laurence River. Mrs. Gannett is literally endowed with a way of walking which does not seem to belong to the human species:

Mrs. Gannett came into the kitchen walking delicately to a melody played in her head, flashing the polished cotton skirts of a flowered sundress (Munro 1968, 161).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All further references to *Dance of the Happy Shades* are to the 1968 edition, henceforth quoted as *DHS*.

The alliterative couples “**f**lashing”, “**f**lowered” based on the fricative “f” and the couple “**f**lashing” “**p**olished” based on “sh” function upon the principle of imitative harmony. With the hushing sibilant sounds repeated throughout the sentence, the reader is made to hear the rustling of the birds’ wings. The sounds herald the woman’s appearance and her qualification. Dressed in a flowered cotton dress and walking delicately to the sound of a melody she is the only one to hear, Mrs. Gannett is a delicate being far removed from terrestrial heaviness, cut off from commoners and as ethereal as gannets. Stylistically, the figure “polished cotton skirts” is a hypallage which transfers the epithet from the person to the skirt. Someone who is polished is someone who has style and confidence and this is the qualification given to Mrs. Gannett from the start through the recourse to this figure of speech.

Yet this first appearance is belied by the subsequent description: “she was wearing her hair pulled up into a topknot, showing her neck very thin, brown and rather sun-coarsened; her deep tan made her look sinewy and dried” (*DHS* 162). The sounds which the reader hears in this subsequent qualification are based on hissing sibilants not hushing ones: “**s**un coarsened” “**s**inewy”. There is something coarse and rudimentary about her which is reinforced by the use of synesthesia and hypallage: “Alva [...] envied her this brown and splintery elegance”. Mrs. Gannett’s “brown elegance” gives her the appearance of a desiccated splinter. Mrs. Gannett is not pictured as blossoming out but rather imprisoned in the superior strata where she lives: “Mrs. Gannett had a look of being made of entirely synthetic and superior substances.” The alliteration in “s” underlines her deterritorialisation from the earthly world of commoners and her reterritorialisation in an elevated but artificial world. There is something inhuman and inauthentic in the character of Mrs. Gannett which is repeatedly highlighted.

In her description of Alva, the young maid working for Mrs. Gannett, whose portrait is pitted against her mistress, Munro first takes up a distinction which dates back to the Roman Empire since she uses the term “plebeian” and she also relies on the difference created by a foreign affiliation:

She had to wear stockings too, and white Cuban-heeled shoes that clomped on the stones of the patio-making in contrast to the sandals and pumps, a heavy purposeful, plebeian sound (*DHS* 164).

The figure of style “plebeian sound” transfers the adjective plebeian from the condition of the young girl to the sound produced by her shoes. This transfer is a hypallage which can be envisaged as a metonymic displacement for it indirectly pits two types of women one against the other:

patrician women decked out in pumps and sandals and plebeian women in Cuban heeled shoes. Through the flaunting of status symbols belonging to the dominant class or through the prohibition to flaunt them, it is the construction of the self as a woman and a subject which is ultimately designated. Pumps and sandals are elegantly designed and becoming, Cuban-heeled shoes are heavy, solid-looking and not delicate. Through reciprocal implications, they designate those who wear them as graceful or heavy-set. Moreover those who wear Cuban shoes are indirectly, through a process of metonymic displacement, branded as foreign, not belonging to the place and not enjoying the privileges of those who belong to the group, the class or the country.

In addition to Cuban-heeled shoes, Alva is made to wear a scalloped apron (*DHS* 164). Her “scalloped apron” further removes her from the sphere of elegant humanity. It draws her close to a scallop and defines an exogenous affiliation, a symbolic belonging to another universe, linking her with a submarine world she keeps commenting on. Of the house where she works she says: “those long curtained and carpeted rooms, with their cool colours, seemed floating in an underwater light” (*DHS* 163). The world she finds herself in is alien to her. It is a world where people do not walk but sail gracefully in and out of the house. Even on the sidewalks of the neighbourhood, Alva feels out of place: “Alva had felt a little conspicuous, the once or twice she had walked along it; you never saw people walking” (*DHS* 166). Alva becomes more and more alienated, depersonalised; turned into a mere scallop.

Munro is not content with turning the short story into a fable through the metaphors of the seabird and the mollusc. She also incorporates inter-textual allusions to tragedy; she makes reference to a novel with a tragic ending by Stendhal *Le Rouge et le Noir* and to the tragedy by Shakespeare *King Lear*. Both the story of Julien Sorel and that of King Lear are stories of the ultimate dispossession and fall of the hero. The story of Alva and Mrs. Gannett is no mere literary sketch; it highlights a tragic process of depersonalisation: it is a cruel fable about the impossibility for the subaltern to express her feelings of humiliation and the impossibility for the mistress of the house to reconnect with humanity.

Strikingly enough, the story is about the failure of intersubjectivity but it finishes on a kiss, a kiss which is devoid of ambiguity. Indeed, Mrs. Gannett’s cousin is not King Cophetua bestowing a kiss on a beggar, and Alva will not marry the prince. She will encounter further humiliation, as overtly expressed in the last line of the story: “But things always came together; there was something she would not explore yet – a tender spot, a new and still mysterious humiliation” (*DHS* 171). The last line fundamen-

tally changes the traditional fairy-tale conclusion: Alva is no Cinderella, she wears Cuban-heeled shoes, not a little glass slipper. The last line picks up the theme of humiliation to demonstrate that the scullery maid's itinerary is not a glorifying ordeal or the initiatory journey of the princess to be. Alva's itinerary is one of partial exclusion from the sphere of the subject. When she is cynically ordered to say "thanks" and show her grateful submissiveness to the law of domination, Alva cannot utter the polite formula which is expected of her. She cannot speak gracefully or display her gratitude to those who do not recognize her humanity. In the words of Spivak, she is condemned to "elaborations of insurgencies" instead of "utterance" (Spivak 1988, 82). In the end, very paradoxically, the only elaboration of insurgency left to her is to comply with the cousin's kiss. Abjectly, the cousin's kiss subjects her into gratitude. With her usual ambivalence and play with literal meanings, Munro proposes a vision of Alva becoming a subject only when she is "subjected" but this subjection also defeats all expectations of fulfilment.

Like Mrs. Gannett, the nameless cousin is described as "moving with the graceful, rather mocking stealth of some slight people". All characters in this short story put on the disguise of other species than the human. In the final analysis, Munro has written a character sketch, which turns out to be a fable, in which the reader encounters a tragic script based upon a vulnerable scallop encountering predatory gannets in a marine world. The female gannet disdainfully ignores the scallop and refuses the right to recognition. The young male gannet finds his way to the scallop's tender spot and the scallop then experiences a confidence which appears reparative but is only short-lived. This fable does not allow the birds and the mollusc to turn into fully-fledged human beings. It condemns them all to a precarious in-betweenness, an indeterminate status, through which they find themselves half-subject and half-subjected because they have equally lost touch with the world of humanity.

The fear of losing touch with the world of humanity is voiced over and over again throughout Munro's works and finds its paroxysm in the last four stories of her last volume, *Dear Life* (2012). The second story in this final series, which is the antepenultimate story of her life so far, the story called "Night", adumbrates the process of remotivation of language in an exemplary manner. In this story about a particular summer, after her appendicitis had been removed and a tumor discovered in her body, the narrator, who is outspokenly assimilated to the author, provides the detailed account of her bedroom:

Now I have to describe the sleeping arrangements in the bedroom occupied by my sister and myself. It was a small room that could not accommodate



two single beds side by side so the solution was a pair of bunk beds, with a ladder in place to help whoever slept in the top bunk climb into bed. That was me (Munro 2012, 273-274).<sup>2</sup>

The protagonist provides a significant setting for the revelation which is about to occur: this setting can be regarded as a symptom because it already encapsulates the key to the protagonist's disorder. Positioned on the top bunk, above her sister, in this libidinally invested place, she is going to experience delusions of grandeur and omnipotence and become the prey to extravagant fantasies. The protagonist finds herself in a position where her lust for power and for knowledge are perversely activated to the extent that she wants to commit the worst possible deed in order to test the limitlessness of her power.

In this omnipotent desire, we acknowledge the failure of the normal control mechanism which is taking place in the protagonist's mind, a failure which is to be set in parallel with the one that has occurred in her body, with cancer cells inexorably developing excess growths and not conforming to the restraints imposed on the proliferation of normal body cells. She seems to be developing a metastasis in the brain as if, despite being removed, the growth had infiltrated neighbouring tissues and spread to a distant part of her body, forming a disorder of the mind which is built on an exactly symmetrical pattern to the tumour removed by the doctor. This disorder of the brain does not present altered biochemical characteristics but deviated psychological components. On the top bunk, the overheated, seething brain literally develops "bunk" meaning nonsense, something that is not true. There are a number of words in the English language which refer to "bunk" or nonsense and they are literally activated through the presence of the young narrator on the top bunk. The word "bunkum" for instance is equally relevant to her overheated condition on the top bunk. Bunkum was originally used to refer to "non-sensical oratory"; it is "now applicable to almost anything said or written if it is regarded as rubbish" (Cuddon 1979, 91).<sup>3</sup> Munro is reviving the latent or "dormant" possibilities of language; she uses the place where the body lies, the bunk bed, as the springboard for the literalization of her protagonist's most unruly and unutterable desires.

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<sup>2</sup> All further references to *Dear Life* are to this edition, henceforth quoted as *DL*.

<sup>3</sup> The word bunkum "derives from the name of Buncombe County in North Carolina, because a member of that district, while attending the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress debate on the 'Missouri Question', persistently declared, when pressed for a 'Question', that he was obliged to make a speech for Buncombe" (Cuddon 91).

We might go as far as saying that she represents her protagonist on the top bunk as going bonkers. The character/persona of Munro's story explicitly acknowledges her gradual move towards these borderline regions where the mind is no longer safely anchored in reality, loses its mooring, and drifts aimlessly, assailed by the force of uncontrollable desires. She allows her intelligence to lie dormant and she becomes the prey of primal urges. From that borderline position, the desire she is assailed with is connected to primal violence; her placement on the top bunk is a displacement, a destabilization which triggers her wandering away. Munro illuminates the question of "the subject's place: of [her] position with respect to the delusion" (Felman 1975, 222). As Shoshanna Felman declares "the position of the subject is not defined by what he says nor by what he talks about but by the place unknown to him from which he speaks" (ib.). The place unknown to her from which the narrator speaks is shown by the older author to derive from the congruence between the literal position she occupies in the referential space of the story, that is to say the top bunk, and the metaphoric positioning she is made to develop there, which is sheer bunk. The top bunk is in the words of Felman quoting Lacan: "the place from which she is spoken" (ib. 228). The narrator begins by saying "I was not myself" and very soon the first person pronoun gives way to effacement and replacement with someone else's agency: "something was taking hold of me", "Whatever it was was trying to tell me to do things", "it was informing me" (*DL* 276); as the revelation of her murderous drive towards her sister gradually comes into focus, the satanic nature of her inspiration becomes clearer: "the demons got hold of me again" (*DL* 280). What the narrator explicitly describes is an instance of possession, which is all pervading to the extent that it invades even the most ordinary description of her life: "I am not even sure that we possessed a key" (*DL* 277-78). The purposeless and gratuitous nature of her murderous drive is highlighted: "No vengeance, no hatred —as I've said, no reason, except that something like an utterly cold deep thought that was hardly an urging, more of a contemplation, could take possession of me" (*DL* 277). The state of possession she finds herself in is a fall into an archaic space, an infantile pre-symbolic space which is represented through the description of her parents' home at night: "it became a stranger place in which people and the work that dictated their lives fell away, their uses for everything around them fell away, all the furniture retreated into itself and no longer existed because of anybody's attention" (*DL* 276). The recurrence of the use of the verb "to fall" is matched by the recourse to the verb to "go under" to describe her attempt at "falling asleep": "I started saying rhymes, then real poetry, first to make myself go under but then

hardly of my own volition. The activity seemed to mock me. I was mocking myself, as the words turned into absurdity, into the silliest random speech" (*DL* 276).

What the narrator attempts to transcribe here is the *vertige* of the loss of meaning, the process of non-mastery over one's own language, the opening of "the fund without control" that Foucault describes as "words without language": "all those words deprived of language whose muffled rumbling, for an attentive ear, rises up from the depths of history, the obstinate murmur of a language which speaks by itself, uttered by no one and answered by no one, a language which stifles itself, sticks in the throat, collapses before having attained formulation and returns, without incident, to the silence from which it had never been freed. The charred root of meaning" (Foucault quoted by Felman 212). The fall into insanity is a fall from language through which language speaks. The recurrence of the verb "to hang" and specifically "to hang up" is significant because it indirectly connotes the fear and anguish that the narrator experiences at her lack of control and restraint upon her reasoning faculties: "Leaving behind the general clatter of things to be done, hung up, finished with" (*DL* 276), "the thought was there and hanging in my mind" (*DL* 277); there is a hang-up which invades the narrator's psyche and dispossesses her of sense and sanity because the thought that hangs in her mind is to strangle her little sister. There is a residue and a remainder in this use of the verb "hang" which is not only linked with putting laundry on the line and having idle thoughts. There also confusedly lurks the idea of hanging people by the neck in order to strangle them, a process the narrator fears she might engage in with regard to her sister but a process she might also envision for herself, as the fate of the murderess reverses into that of the victim once she has been tried and found guilty. In the word "hang", there hangs all the contradictions and fears of the hysterical body that is literally losing touch with reality, which is hovering above ground instead of being grounded.

By contrast, the idea of being grounded or sensible is remarkably highlighted in the phrasal verb the narrator uses after she has made her confession to her father about her fear of strangling her sister and after he has reassured her about the fact that such aberrant thoughts are not the product of a twisted mind but an ordinary deviancy that happens on summer nights. She says: "It set me down, but without either mockery or alarm, in the world we were living in" (*DL* 284). This sentence is outstandingly layered, the phrasal verb "set down" being the operative word which is open to polysemy. On the most obvious level, the sentence simply asserts the protagonist's reestablishing contact with the real: thanks to her father's wise and balanced response, she herself becomes level-headed, with both

feet on the ground and all the irrational unsound ideas she had developed are reduced to naught. The metaphoric tumour is punctured for good and done away with.

On a more implicit and clandestine level, to set something down refers to the act of writing or printing something, especially of recording it in a formal document and this is what the father symbolically does for her. When he says: "People have thoughts they'd sooner not have. It happens in life" (*DL* 286), he utters a general truth, an aphorism which reinstates her abnormal drift into normalcy. The father's aphorism is endowed with a benevolent and knowledgeable authority: he sets down the law, the law of the father which is also the table of the law. It inscribes her supposed irregularity into the regularity of a recorded occurrence and it deflates the bunkum she had indulged in. At a more metanarrative level, it also inscribes her experience in a communality which is not only that of shared life experience, but also of shared intertextual references. In a metonymic and a metaphoric manner, life cannot be separated from fiction. Literature is made of recorded experience: what happens in life is recorded in books and the experience undergone by the protagonist is not only an experience that happens in life, it is an experience that has been frequently recorded in world literature.

The episode of incipient madness recorded in "Night" is primarily presented as circumscribed in a series of midsummer nights. The allusion to Shakespeare's play cannot be by-passed if only because the short story displays a similar structure, with a disruption of order followed by a return to harmony after a spell of madness. The narrator's experience at night among the maples, the beech tree, the elm tree, the oak tree in Ontario is implicitly set in parallel to the green wood outside Athens, where the two lovers, Hermia and Lysander, flee except that the protagonist does not attempt to flee the tyrannical law of the father, but her own tyrannical drives and depends on her father to put her right. Munro's story reverses the Shakespearian hypotext but does not highlight the green world as a space of renewal, a matrix from which one emerges rejuvenated. It is a darker story, including a brush with homicide, and the description of a canker eating away at the heart of a family unit.

This night story is more exactly "a night piece" implicitly fashioned after E.T.A. Hoffmann's tales, in particular the volume entitled *Die Nachtstücke* (*The Night Pieces*) from 1817 and, like Hoffmann's night pieces, it is about the essential connection between literature and madness. The first immediate clue which enables the reader to exhume the transatlantic connection of the story is derived from the title: Munro's piece is indeed a night piece but it so happens that "Night" immediately comes

after a story entitled “The Eye”, which features the supernatural look that the Laidlaw family maid is supposed to have cast on the young Alice from her deathbed. The contiguity of the story entitled “The Eye” with the story entitled “Night” is not contingent. In the first story of Hoffmann’s *Night Pieces*, the young Nathanael lives in fear of having his eyes burnt by “The Sandman”, a fear which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy since he eventually sees the eyes of the sandman in the crowd and jumps from on high to his death, in order to be reunited with his evil-seducer, his last words being “pretty eyes, pretty eyes”.

A number of additional clues attest to the influence of “The Sandman” on Munro’s night piece. For instance the narrator describes herself making fun of her younger sister and putting her mother’s old caked rouge and powder on her face so that it gave her “the look of a freakish foreign doll” (DL 274). In “The Sandman”, a Professor of Physics called Spalanzini proves capable of creating a doll, named Olimpia, who bears such a life-like semblance that she is mistaken for his flesh and blood daughter. Upon seeing the doll, Nathanael falls in love with it and abandons Clara, the young woman he was betrothed to at an early age. By comparing her little sister Catherine, whom she wants to strangle, to Olimpia, the simulacrum created by the professor, the narrator problematizes further the co-extensivity between life and death. Instead of trying to bestow animation upon inanimate matter, the young protagonist is intent upon reversing this trajectory and proceeding in the opposite direction. She wants to return to the origin of the spark of life not to light it up but to extinguish it. She is under the influence of deadly delusions which are not only similar to the ones experienced by the young Nathanael, but also by Robert Wringhim, the protagonist of James Hogg’s most famous novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) which is almost co-temporal with E.T.A Hoffmann’s *Night Pieces* (1817).

In Hogg’s novel as in Munro’s story, a devilish agency is responsible for prompting the character to commit murder upon the closest family members. Robert Wringhim, deluded by Gil-Martin, yields to the temptation and murders his own brother and his own mother. The young protagonist of Munro’s story does not act out her murderous fantasy; she returns to the world of sanity, cured from an evil influence that her father knowingly dispels and the story which narrates her temptation performs a very striking act of literary reverence. Taking her cue from her ancestor, Munro couches her story in the format of a simultaneous confession and a memoir, but she does not choose to mediate her tale through a fictional character. On the contrary she stage directs her own private memoir and confession, placing her own self in the limelight and creating confusion

between distinct ontological levels. She erases the distinction between life and literature, to try and articulate a fit of insanity, which she re-inscribes in the genealogy of Romanticism and that of her own family. Her declared ambition is to be truthful to what she experienced in real life and her truthfulness results in an articulation of madness which resonates with some of the major works from world literature across the ages. She not only reclaims her patrilineal descent from James Hogg but she also reclaims her descent from a character from his most famous novel. She makes her persona the heir to her cousin's fictional character.

She intertextualizes her life in a dizzying manner. For instance, the story begins with a snowstorm, a motif which is indigenous enough in Canada yet it should be remembered that Hogg wrote a description of a terrible snowstorm, which was first published in *Blackwood's Magazine*, while Emily Brontë began her most famous novel *Wuthering Heights* in the midst of a raging storm. In *The View from Castle Rock* Munro alludes to both Brontë's and Hogg's storms and even wonders whether Emily was influenced by James (Munro 2006, 24).

Beyond or before Hogg and Brontë's, the tempest is a time-honoured motif which Shakespeare borrowed from Antiquity. Ovid has described the tempests that sailors encountered on the Mediterranean and the unleashing of tempestuous wind is part of the aesthetic effects of heroic poetry and *chanson de geste* or novels from the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. Chrétien de Troyes has provided in *Le Chevalier au Lion* the first description of a storm in French Literature.

*Dear Life* is allegedly Munro's last volume and this set of four stories is the last one in her last volume. It is her final legacy to her readers, her final coming to terms with her process of the fictionalization of her own life. It is her final pronouncement about her childhood and the structuring influence it had on the development of her oeuvre. By contextualizing the opening of the story against the background of a real snowstorm, she intertextualizes her life, breaking through the boundaries of life and literature to simultaneously fictionalize life and realize stories. This breaking through is a metaleptic passage which can be regarded first as to-ing and fro-ing between life and art but it has much more complex implications. Through the comparison of her sister to a freakish foreign doll Munro does not simply allude to E.T. A. Hoffmann's tales: she transforms herself into a female Pygmalion to-ing and fro-ing between life and death and treading on the dangerous territory of forbidden knowledge, a knowledge which is articulated to language and its limitless possibilities. The last sentence of the story is a renewed case in point: "Never mind. From then on I could sleep" (DL 286). That a story hinging on the disorders of the mind should