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Alice Munro's short stories: Gender and girls

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the young girl who is typically the first-person narrator in Alice Munro's short stories, especially in the collection *Dance of the Happy Shades*, acquires a gender identity during childhood. The objective of this paper is to examine the possibilities for this narrator to establish her own principles based on women's special qualities and personalities and to build a community for women. The organization of this paper follows the girl's experiences through the mother's domestic space and the father's working space. Most of all, I focus on the characteristics of the narrating girl who does not understand the exact meaning of her parents' behavior and attitude, but describes all that happens to her and reveals the hidden reality beyond the obvious world. Also, I pay attention to the gap between her dissatisfied moment with her mother and her unintentional disclosure of how her gendered identity has permeated her everyday life. I propose that the discordant relationship between the mother and the daughter gives rise to the possibility of her considering how to become an adult in future. In conclusion, this paper explores the possibility in Munro's fiction to develop a new female figure that penetrates both gendered spaces. The most remarkable characteristics of characters that do so are the attention they pay to their everyday lives and their transformation into political subjects who face reality and have the ability to analyze their situation in their own voice.

Keywords: Munro, first-person narrator, girl, gender identity, uneasiness, duplicity, women's community

Introduction

Canadian writer Alice Munro has written numerous notable short stories since the publication of her first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, in 1968. She has been lauded as a modern-day Anton Chekhov and won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013. As Brad Hooper writes, "she has developed her own brand of the short story" (Hooper, 2008, p. viii) [7]; what distinguishes her short stories are the particular function of the narrator and the recurring theme running throughout her work.

The first and most important characteristic of Munro's fiction is its first-person narration (Thacker, 2005, p. 19). Twelve of the fifteen stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* have first-person narrators who recount personal stories and experiences that appear familiar to the reader. The narrators' interests, anxieties, and afflictions, which are rooted in their everyday lives, seem realistic, but their stories "condense a wealth of implication and detail within a minute space" (Duncan, 2011, p. 3) [3]. On the surface, the reader can easily follow the plot of the story, but sooner or later, he/she realizes how intricate the structures of the stories are and how densely the subjects of the stories are developed (Duncan, 2001, p. 2). Therefore, the reader requires the ability to sort out the main subjects among trivial events and familiar meanings, especially gender issues that affect women's conditions and communication gaps between individuals of different ages, education levels, classes, and family backgrounds. The narrators do not seem to have any particular intention, but they reveal just how deeply these problems, which the character unconsciously experiences, penetrate everyday life.

The second remarkable characteristic of Munro's fiction is the attention paid to the lives of women in patriarchal societies. As a woman, Munro creates female characters who reflect her thoughts about the gendered norms governing women's lives. She also depicts women's secret desire to be free from society and their struggle against myths about women. Conversely, Munro's male characters usually portray the prototypical father figure of patriarchal manhood and symbolize the unknown world in which a father hides his thoughts and desires. In Munro's stories, male characters and their positions carry ambivalent values and meanings that expose male characters' endeavors to retain their masculinity.

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Consequently, “the juxtaposition of the two worlds: neat vs. disheveled” arises in some of Munro’s stories (Pfaus, 1984, p. 16). Superficially, patriarchal society is a neat society, which male characters always control. As the narrator peers more deeply

into society, she can see a strange world, the underbelly of which is full of disorder and violence, thus running contrary to the neat world of the father.

The third distinguishing characteristic of Munro’s fiction is the creation of a narrator on the boundary between childhood and adolescence who can easily participate in the worlds of both the father and mother. In Munro’s stories, this girl exists as an innocent, vulnerable child who has limited knowledge of the world and needs a safe space. The concept of innocence that I see in Munro’s narrator is not that of a child being idealized by adults who try “to protect the characteristics of innocence and to teach them to the child” (Kincaid, 1992, p. 72)^[11]. Instead, her child narrator uncovers her inability to describe characters and events lying at “the very limits of representation, especially in language” (Heble, 1994, p. 4)^[5]. She cannot analyze anything that happens to her, but she can describe everything, even the confusing circumstances she does not understand. Munro designs a narrating girl to reveal the tension between the superficial and the hidden reality, between the visible and the invisible substance, and between gendered identities.

The final notable characteristic of Munro’s fiction is the heavy attention it pays to how girls acquire their gender identities. To Munro, the concept of gender is based on the “myth of home and family” in which a “father and mother [are] devoted to the moral and/or spiritual well-being of their offspring” (Thiel, 2008, p. 5). Encountering very clear traditional male and female roles, the narrator decides how to respond to them, even though she is still a child herself, in order to become a member of society. The action of her responding to them implies that she achieves “a more broadly conceived sense of order and generality that comprises adult society” (Jenks, 1996, p. 3). Therefore, to the main character, childhood is not merely a “space sheltered from adult corruption and responsibility” (Hintz & Ostry, 2003, p. 5)^[6]. Instead, her childhood is a critical, intense political

space in which she has to learn about gender identities.

The objective of this paper is to study how the young girl, the first-person narrator, acquires a gender identity during childhood and becomes a gendered subject in a patriarchal society that reproduces the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity. To examine how the girl responds to gender identity, I study the different qualities of fathers and mothers portrayed by the first-person narrator, especially as she is presented as a girl who does not have enough experience about the world, but who wants to transform herself into an ideal adult. To make clear the reason she chooses a narrator between father and mother, Munro puts the families in remote rural areas where traditional gender roles are regarded as the natural order of things: the father works outside the home to support the family while the mother performs domestic duties in the home. Simply stated, the father symbolizes confidence and certainty, displaying a visible occupation to his daughter, whereas the mother usually exists in an unsatisfied state characterized by negative conditions such as nervousness, tiredness, and hysteria. The reason Munro creates these distinct gender

roles that are already familiar to the reader is because she wants to lead the reader into the hidden world beyond these two roles.

I also examine the opportunity for Munro’s narrator to establish her own principle by exploring women’s special qualities and personalities throughout her childhood. In other words, I aim to investigate the different connotations of women’s words, properties, and places that are usually ignored or viewed negatively and to suggest the possibility of building a community for women in Munro’s short stories. In this paper, the *Dance of the Happy Shades* collection is the main text studied; and *Lives of Girls and Women*, Munro’s only novel, is the secondary book.

I investigate the distinguishing characteristics of the mother’s and the father’s spaces in section II “The Mother’s Uneasiness” and section III “The Father’s Ambivalence,” respectively. These two sections discuss how the mother struggles to adjust to her situation and the father’s persistence in

maintaining a masculine society. Next, section IV “The Daughter’s Selection” focuses on how the daughter changes into a different subject and the qualities she selects as her identity after experiencing “the quest pattern-departure/return” (Redekop, 1992, p. X). Finally, I conclude by discussing the importance of her awareness of her new life and of the necessity for her to have a community.

In some stories, Munro’s narrator can probe inside the surface of reality and test the authenticity of things she once took for granted. Among the most interesting changes, she can establish her own principles that run counter to typical gender identities and the interests of the community. The reason she can be powerful is because she has grown up all along experiencing the back seat of an everyday life overlaid by a mother’s hysterical world and a father’s bifacial world as well as because she is no longer naïve and immature in her yearning for physical and emotional support. By moving from the mother’s world into the father’s outside, the daughter recognizes the reasons behind her mother’s anxiety in society and her father’s disguise. Therefore, the female narrator is not the same as the young girl who blindly admired her father and can now see the “dialectic between present and past, between experience and understanding” (Duncan, 2011, p. 19)^[3].

For example, in *Lives of Girls and Women*, Ruth turns down a scholarship offer and decides to stay at home instead. The mother of the narrator, who does not appreciate Ruth’s situation, regards her as a coward because the mother believes that one must go to college to succeed in society. The narrator, though, thinks that Ruth knows what is best for her life and determines to go her own way. From the perspective of the girl narrator, Ruth does not follow the rules and principles of others. Rather she makes her a model of self-reliance who seeks freedom from gendered norms and breaks down the general expectation of a society in which people believe a college degree ensures success.

Similarly, the narrator of “The Office,” who is a housewife as well as a writer, rents an office to write and rest. Her demand for an office sounds unrealistic and absurd to others as she explains, “it was really the sound of the word ‘office’ that I liked, its sound of dignity and peace. And purposefulness and importance” (Munro, 2001, p. 60)^[13]. In “The Office,” the narrating character is not as concerned about others and expresses her need for an office. She argues that the house provides her with shelter where she

does not feel “a fierce and lawless quiver of loneliness” (Munro, 2001, p. 61) ^[13] but also demands her time and labor so that she becomes “the house” itself (Munro, 2001, p. 60) ^[13]. Thus, she needs a separate space from the house, which is closely related to the dominant gendered norms. Moreover, she assigns meaning and value to her works as a writer, which are not visible to others: she seeks her own sanctuary, expresses her own ideas about the world, and achieves freedom of which other mothers never dreamed. She also obtains safety, which “allows them to ask difficult questions, and uncomfortable issues and to face ‘critical self-analysis’” (Kramarae, 1996, p. 319) ^[9]. For her, to possess dignity is to severely criticize her situation and to know precisely what she needs, not merely to complain or blame others.

Whereas the narrator in “The Office” needs a separate space to build her identity and to maintain her dignity and purposefulness, Mrs. Fullerton, an old obstinate woman, prizes her shabby house in “The Shining Houses.” The main character, Mary, thinks that although her house is not considered good enough in industrialized society, it should be preserved due to individual rights. After listening to Mrs. Fullerton’s story, Mary understands that a house is not merely a tangible, material piece of property but exists as an intangible memory and emotion to people such as Mrs. Fullerton. She thinks that Mrs. Fullerton is not a stubborn, outdated elder who fails to adjust to modern society; rather, she is an interrogator who questions how easily people lay claim to individual rights. Understanding Mrs. Fullerton’s situation and intentions, Mary advocates for the other woman’s interests against those of the community.

“I can’t sign that,” she said. Her face flushed up, at once, her voice was trembling. Steve touched her shoulder.

“What’s the matter, honey?”

“I don’t think we have the right. We haven’t the right.”

“Mary, don’t you care how things look? You live here too.”

(Munro, 2001, p. 28) ^[13]

When she advocates for Mrs. Fullerton’s rights to other community members, her face “flushed up.” Her red face indicates that how difficult it is for the individual, especially for a woman, to express her own idea that does not match up with others’ expectation. Mary, however, does not limit her attention to her own business or family but is willing to take responsibility for her neighbor and community and takes care of others. The attention Mary pays to Mrs. Fullerton’s situation transforms the otherwise invisible and weak elder into an important subject who drives Mary to think about her ideas about her neighbors and to change her attitudes toward industrialized society, which had formerly been consistent with the patriarchal viewpoint.

Some relationships between the women in Munro’s work offer the possibility of building a “supportive world constructed by women” (Foss, Sonja, & Cindy, 1999, p. 49) ^[4]. In “The Shining Houses,” the narrator, Mary, criticizes the tendency to ignore individual rights in the name of the good of the community. These female characters have their own voice to tell their thoughts and emotions and to select their way of living. Moreover, they become guardians, protecting others from indiscriminate attacks against individual rights, and appear sufficiently independent and

confident to enjoy their own lives and freedom. Furthermore, these relationships among women engender “interactions that are characterized by trust. The participants freely admit their lack of knowledge of their need for help and trust that others will not take advantage of the vulnerabilities they reveal” (Foss et al., 1999, p. 49) ^[4]. The relationship between Mary and Mrs. Fullerton shows how each woman supports the poor position of the other and tries to live together with her in society. Mary realizes how happy she is to communicate with others and how valuable it is to share her emotions and thoughts with others. Although Mrs. Fullerton reveals her weaknesses to Mary, she never worries about it because she trusts Mary. The relationship between them emerges as an ideal relationship. In conclusion, the relationships between women portray how vulnerable subjects grow up together and demonstrate the possibility of building a supportive community full of mutual trust among women. My reason for focusing on mutual trust among women is because a girl might easily grow

up into a distorted woman who is controlled by the male-dominated values inherent in the gendered identity, which devalues a woman’s ability and power. Such a woman should struggle to give careful attention to another woman who is confused, discouraged, and powerless. These women can help each other because, as underestimated beings in patriarchal society, they know the other woman’s common sufferings despite their living in different places.

Conclusion

To understand how a girl becomes a controversial, challenging figure who precipitates discussion of gender issues, I investigated the characteristics of the first-person narrators in Munro’s short stories. These narrators are usually young girls who find it easy to travel into different gendered spaces whose metaphors are “partially figured in myths and fantasy” (Howells, 1998, p. 5) and affect the narrating girl’s mind and behavior. Thus, she is prone to keeping a distance from her mother and describes her mother’s works and character in an objective manner. Conversely, she admires her father’s work and space and believes that if she follows his rules and tries to imitate him, she will grow up to be like him. Exploring this world, however, she realizes that gendered roles are applied strictly even to children’s lives and faces the harsh reality that she is only a weak, useless girl who “is treated in terms of [her] potential (or actual) womanliness and sexuality, in terms of child-bearing as well as sexploitation” (Burman, 1994, p. 17) and should be obedient to the rule. Also, she uncovers that the reason she regards herself as a negative being in society is because there is the irrational definition of woman as possessing a negative, hysterical nature.

Munro conceives of an escape for girls who experience injustices due to the irrational ignorance and unfair treatment. She suggests that the ideal woman figure neither severs relationships with other women nor naively joins the father’s world. Instead, she interacts with women, faces reality,

and finally engages in self-analysis about her everyday life. By emphasizing this new awareness of building relationships with others and analyzing oneself, Munro builds a female “counter-discourse, suggesting alternative maps for women’s destinies beyond traditional pattern of male authority and gender stereotyping” (Howells, 1998, p.

4). Her most important resource is to look back on her life in connection with other women around her and to communicate with them to understand their minds. They can also take care of themselves and do not have to depend on the man's care and protection, which can have a negative impact on a woman's independence. Although she focuses on connections among women, Munro does not pretend to solve all gender issues in their lives. Rather, her suggestion has to do with how to live everyday life by transforming her characters into political subjects: she thinks women should take the initiative to improve each other's lives, not just leaving from another's space. One of the best ways to do so is to communicate with those ready to share their experiences and emotions. This act will help them heal their physical, mental, and emotional pain. Women should also re-examine their own particular qualities and define them as positive abilities in terms of the power to act. Through this process, women can assert their voices and fight against unfair treatment stemming from gender identity. Women thus continue "the endless negotiation of a crossroads" (Fraiman, 1993, p. 131).

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