

STORIES AND STORYTELLING
IN ALICE MUNRO'S FICTION

By

J. CHRISTINE SOMERVILLE

B.A., Queen's University at Kingston, Ont., 1959

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Department of English

The University of British Columbia
1956 Main Mall
Vancouver, Canada
V6T 1Y3

Date April 25, 1985.

Abstract

References to stories and storytelling appear throughout Alice Munro's five short story cycles: DANCE OF THE HAPPY SHADES, LIVES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN, SOMETHING I'VE BEEN MEANING TO TELL YOU, WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? and THE MOONS OF JUPITER. This thesis contends that stories--mentioned briefly or recounted at length--provide counterpoint to experience for Munro's characters. Oral and written stories influence them throughout life, but especially in youth, when they eagerly identify with, and imitate, fictional figures. In LIVES and WHO, storytelling becomes central because their protagonists are a writer and an actress. Occasionally, the narrators in all five works reflect on the difficulty of expressing truth in fiction, but SOMETHING raises this issue repeatedly. By embedding stories within her narratives, Munro imitates the workings of memory; moreover, she draws attention to her narratives as texts rather than glimpses of reality. A feminine perspective on narrative gradually emerges, in which the woman narrator sees her task not as imposing order, but as discovering order that already exists.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Short Titles	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction	1
Chapter One	7
Chapter Two	43
Chapter Three	73
Chapter Four	102
Chapter Five	126
Conclusion	164
Bibliography	168

Short Titles

The following short titles for Alice Munro's works are used in the text:

DANCE for DANCE OF THE HAPPY SHADES

LIVES for LIVES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN

SOMETHING for SOMETHING I'VE BEEN MEANING TO TELL YOU

WHO for WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

MOONS for THE MOONS OF JUPITER

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Introduction

Forrest L. Ingram defines the short story cycle as "a set of stories so linked to one another that the reader's experience of each one is modified by his experience of the others".¹ The separate stories within the cycle exhibit greater autonomy than do chapters in a novel, but still form a unified whole. For the reader of a short story cycle bi-focal vision is required in order to see clearly both the individual story at close range and the entire work at a distance. For the writer too, the form is a demanding one, in that the inner pattern of the individual story must be balanced against the unifying pattern of the entire work. According to Ingram, the unity of a short story cycle may be apparent (where a single narrative consciousness is used) or hidden (where the stories are linked through theme, setting, or imagery, rather than narrative voice). Alice Munro has published five short story cycles between 1968 and 1982. *LIVES* (1971) and *WHO* (1978) show apparent unity as a result of the narrative focusing on a single protagonist; *DANCE* (1968), *SOMETHING* (1974) and *MOONS* (1982) exemplify hidden unity.

This study of Munro's short story cycles seeks to explain why the word "story", as well as related words such as "legend" and "tale", recurs so frequently in her fiction. As these words proliferate, they signal the importance of

stories in the lives of Munro's characters. Moreover, by repeatedly mentioning stories, she draws attention to her own text as a text, and reminds the reader that the narrator is an interpreter of truth whose point-of-view is not entirely objective. By offering numerous realistic details to her readers, Munro brings them close to her characters. But, the stories her characters tell one another are often so exaggerated, grotesque, or otherwise unconvincing as to draw the reader back from the text and arouse his skepticism.

Frequent references to stories appear in all five cycles, establishing a motif which offers a way into Munro's prose, which, while generally admired by critics and general readers alike, has an elusive quality that baffles analysis. Even the author herself claims to be unable to understand how her stories work. Discussing Munro's 1981 interview with Tim Struthers, Eva-Marie Kröller observes that Munro seems reluctant to articulate the secrets of her craft.²

It may be that Munro is unable, rather than unwilling, to analyse her own work. Her approach to writing is more like that of priestess to sacred spring than craftsman to craft. As she admits in an essay she wrote to accompany two of her early stories in *THE NARRATIVE VOICE*, "Writing or talking about writing makes [her] superstitiously uncomfortable".³ Her attitude to the creative process is one of gratitude for gifts received; she neither claims responsibility for inventing her stories, nor inquires into

the wellspring of her writing. The one thing that she always claims is that stories embody the truth. She pays tribute to their importance by giving narrative anecdotes prominence in all her fiction.

Often she treats storytelling at length, when the narrator describes a character retelling an incident from the past, or reciting a poem from memory, reading a newspaper story, writing or reading a letter. At other times, the reference to storytelling may be as cryptic as a book title mentioned in conversation or glimpsed on a shelf. Even more subtly, the reference may appear in the story cycle as a metaphoric pattern which runs parallel with a myth or a fairytale.

Everyone, these story cycles suggest, is a storyteller because everyone remembers his own past, and looks for meaning in his memories. The professional storyteller--the writer, actress or other artist--differs from others only in succumbing to the temptation to tell his story to a wider audience than the self or immediate family. Of course, storytelling that aspires to be art must satisfy stricter aesthetic standards than would be applied to the average storyteller recounting an anecdote; however, both the ordinary person and the artist share a common desire to discover truth through their fictions.

The assumption that the essence of being alive is having a voice in which to tell one's story underlies all of Munro's fiction. Therefore, words are respected, held

almost in awe: they are italicized, repeated, their sounds and meanings discussed; they puzzle children who misuse and misunderstand them; they continue to struggle out of the mouths of the old, the sick, and the confused. In these stories, people go on talking as long as they are able to utter words. A senile old woman who can no longer carry on a conversation will still respond to a word said in her presence by spelling it; a man who has lost the ability to form words clearly as a result of a stroke will still grunt anh-anh-anh, in a travesty of speech. Even when the aged stop talking, as the once garrulous Flo does in *WHO*, their silence is eloquent.

This study examines Munro's five published collections separately and in chronological order. Chapter One considers *DANCE* (1968), in which stories influence children as they learn about the world around them, form personalities and store up memories. Chapter Two is devoted to *LIVES* (1971), in which stories influence the development of a young writer, Del Jordan. Chapter Three analyses *SOMETHING* (1974), in which Munro experiments with point-of-view and explores the limits of storytelling. Chapter Four examines *WHO* (1978), in which storytelling becomes a compulsion. Finally, Chapter Five, discusses *MOONS* (1982), in which stories reveal differences between male and female ways of thinking.

Storytelling, then, is a common thread which runs through Alice Munro's fiction. Frequent references to

stories show how, as children, her characters are influenced by stories they hear or read and, as adults, become storytellers themselves when they remember and interpret their past. At the same time, her characters take their individual places within the larger story in which the narrative incorporates them, a story whose structure is circular and whose themes reach back to classical myth. Without the embedded stories which either augment or undercut experience, Munro's story cycles would be less like memory, and it is memory that she imitates. Oral stories and stories from books appear in Munro's fiction because they rightly belong in the memories of her characters, influencing them in ways they may not understand, but influencing them powerfully.

Notes

1

Forrest L Ingram, REPRESENTATIVE SHORT STORY CYCLES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p. 13.

2

Eva-Marie Kröller, "Craft and Criticism," rev. of PROBABLE FICTIONS: ALICE MUNRO'S NARRATIVE ACTS ed. Louis K. MacKendrick, CANADIAN LITERATURE, No. 103 (1984), p. 129.

3

Alice Munro, "The Colonel's Hash Resettled," in THE NARRATIVE VOICE, ed. John Metcalfe (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson), p. 183.

Chapter One

How Stories Shape Perception, Personality and Memory

Beguiled by accuracy of detail in the settings of the fifteen short stories that comprise *DANCE*, the reader is drawn into the rural Ontario kitchens of the past.¹ Almost imperceptibly, domestic order gives way to wildness and violence as fox pens and meat houses begin to displace linoleum and rag rugs. Although Alice Munro selects vivid specific details to refer the reader to an actual time and place--Southwestern Ontario in the nineteen-thirties and forties--she gives reality mythic significance through references to stories and legends. The title, *DANCE OF THE HAPPY SHADES*, for example, points to the Gluck opera, *ORPHEO*, based on the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice which colours the entire collection.

For the mainly youthful protagonists of *DANCE*, growing up means discovering the layered texture of reality. The narrators are resolutely unsentimental: they look back on their pasts courageously, striving to avoid the trap which Helen sums up in "The Peace of Utrecht": "Cowardly tender nostalgia, trying to get back to a gentler truth" (p.202). These narrators never manage to lay the ghosts that haunt their memories, but only to reinterpret them from the

perspective of maturity.

"Images", "Boys and Girls" and "The Peace of Utrecht" are three key stories which illustrate how Munro uses remembered stories to convey the texture of reality as it appears to her protagonists. For them, living is not only experiencing the world, but also reflecting upon experience, comparing it with stories they have read, heard, or invented themselves. Their longing for meaning in existence surpasses even their hunger for direct experience, and their minds constantly scan the raw material of their daily lives, rearranging it into recognizable narrative patterns.

The female protagonists in the chosen stories are observed at different chronological stages: the child in "Images", the adolescent in "Boys and Girls", and the young matron in "The Peace of Utrecht". Sharing characteristic curiosity and determination, the narrators attempt to understand the outer world, but their deeper concern is the inner world of their own natures and possible choices. At these early stages in their lives, their personalities have not yet hardened; they are in the process of creating identity. Therefore, private family legends, as well as stories in the public domaine from folklore, history and literature, supplement their limited experience. Not surprisingly, comparing their lives with stories is harmful as well as helpful, in that their expectations based on fiction are frequently higher than their actual circumstances can satisfy. Although the pleasures and

corresponding dangers of self-dramatization are a staple of the literature of growing up, few Canadian writers capture as well as Munro does the subtle weave of fact and fantasy that is the sensibility of bookish young girls. Not only do her heroines tend to see themselves as living out narrative patterns, but also they become hyper-sensitive to language. An abiding pattern in *DANCE* is the protagonists' growing awareness of the preeminence of language as the medium for relating to others and forming a self. Repetition of words and phrases and the use of italics draw attention to the slipperiness of language, which conceals as well as reveals. Although the voice is an adult woman's, the eyes and ears are frequently a child's, whose confusion and sense of being powerless are still painfully evident when her older self relates her earlier impressions. In "Images", for example, a child is helpless when her own observations contradict the reassuring explanations she receives from adults for the behaviour of Mary McQuade and Joe Phippen, whose destructive power she feels strongly. She tries desperately to protect her parents from the danger she senses, but she cannot express herself well enough to articulate her sense of living inside a fairytale, of being under a spell. It is the older narrator whose remembering voice is finally able to express the dread she suffered earlier.

"Images" explores the time in early life when the child first becomes conscious of being separate from her mother, and, almost from the moment she knows she has a self, learns

to fear death. Sense impressions are supplemented by brief indirect references to myths and fairy tales. Designed not to form a continuous allegorical pattern, but to flicker in and out of the text, the fairy-tale elements suggest the way fantasy merges with reality in a young child's mind. Yet "Images" is more than a character study of a child in the process of coming to terms with mortality; it is the verbal equivalent of an optical illusion. Like the black and white squares which invite one interpretation when the viewer concentrates on the black, and another when he concentrates on the white, the child's view of what is happening contradicts the father's. Since there is no resolution of the discrepancy between their views, the range of possible interpretations does not narrow in the end, as is usually the pattern in short stories. Instead, implications multiply, leading the reader not outward, but back inside the story. The persistence of paradox in the story again suggests optical illusion because the design is itself a comment upon the difficulty of transcending subjectivity and arriving at objective truth.

The form of "Images" dictates the absence of a conclusive ending: its three sections, separated by gaps in the text, function as do stanzas in a poem. The parts are related thematically through their common preoccupation with death, and metaphorically through two villains, Mary McQuade and Joe Phippen. The narrator remembers her feelings about these adults when she was a child. Her perception of them

as evil and dangerous may have been distorted because of her anxiety over her mother's illness, or it may have been accurate because of her innocent, unclouded vision. By allowing both possibilities to persist in the ambiguous ending, Munro is able to suggest the perplexing character of human life, the insoluble problem of separating reality from image, truth from illusion.

Occasionally, Munro has attempted to explain her intuitive approach to writing short stories. Expressing misgivings over symbolic interpretations of her work, she denies deliberately setting up symbols in her fiction:

I do think symbols exist, or rather, that things are symbolic, but I think that their symbolism is infinitely complex and never completely discovered. Are there really writers who sit down and say yes, well, now here I need a symbol, let's see what I have in the files?²

Such notions, Munro would agree with Annie Dillard, reduce fiction writers to "cold-blooded manipulators and gadgeteers who for genius substitute a bag of tricks".³ While prose fiction is undoubtedly artifice--or "illusion", to use the term of which Munro is fond--it has a solid basis in the writer's remembered experience. Joe Phippen is not a mere puppet, whose strings, when tweaked, activate the ancient figure of Pluto, lord of the underworld. Rather, as she goes on to explain, he is a composite portrait of men who once existed: "His ancestors were a few old men, half hermits, half madmen, often paranoid, occasionally

dangerous, living around the country where I grew up, not living in the woods but in old farm-houses, old family homes".⁴ A figure belonging to rural Ontario in the Depression years, he is true to history as well as myth.

Discussing the relation between truth and fiction in interviews and essays, Munro agrees with D.H. Lawrence's observations:

The curious thing about art-speech is that it prevaricates so terribly, I mean it tells such lies. I suppose because we always all the time tell ourselves lies. And out of a pattern of lies, art weaves the truth.⁵

The storyteller's paradox Munro accepts as given, using it as a source of tension in her work. At times, her comments on the creative process recall statements made by the Romantics, who saw the poet as possessing heightened insight into universal truth, and expressing it through art. The creative process, as she understands it, does not lend itself to discursive analysis, but is almost mystical. Munro is hard-pressed to explain why she juxtaposes certain scenes or chooses certain details from her memory:

But the fact is, the minute I say to show I am telling a lie. I don't do it to show anything. I put this story at the heart of my story because I need it there and it belongs there.⁶

She cannot say why she knows something belongs in a story, but she rewrites each story many times searching for the pattern which she will recognize when it finally emerges.

Therefore, attention to even the smallest detail in a Munro short story rewards the reader because her numerous revisions have condensed the material until what remains is a distillation of a much longer work. Clearly, each element in the final draft is bonded to the others at the deepest level of the writer's consciousness.

The first pattern that emerges in *DANCE* is the obvious one of faithfully recorded events taking place in a specific time and place. As Alan Twigg says in his interview with Alice Munro, "Your writing is like the perfect literary equivalent to a documentary movie".⁷ In the case of "Images", however, the movie camera is held by the protagonist. The illusion is of a child's perceptions remembered with a completeness and vividness unlikely in actual experience, but plausible as Munro renders it, using the flat tones of everyday speech. The child's impressions are appropriately blended from reality and fantasy, the distinction between them blurred, as is often the case in early childhood. The child's mind feeds on fantasy and creates its own fantasies as it struggles to understand its world. In *THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT*, Bruno Bettelheim explains how fairy stories not only nurture the child's imagination, but also encourage him to confront vicariously and in simplified form the urgent existential questions he will meet later:

It is characteristic of fairy tales to state an existential dilemma briefly and pointedly. This

permits the child to come to grips with the problem in its most essential form, where a more complex plot would confuse matters for him. The fairy tale simplifies all situations.⁸

The existential question the child protagonist confronts in "Images" concerns her own mortality, but it presents itself in the form of fear of becoming separated from her mother and father, just as she has been cut off from her grandfather. When he died, she was too young to comprehend death. It seems to her that he has disappeared. First his name disappeared, as people began calling the house "Grandmother's house", and then he himself disappeared. What actually became of her grandfather remains a mystery; she understands only that his departure is linked to Mary McQuade's arrival. Therefore, her instinctive response to the dead muskrat discovered in her father's trap is a longing to touch this "fact of death" (p. 36). The dead animal finally reveals death as presence rather than absence. Only by handling the lifeless body can she begin to appreciate what dying means. Although her understanding is limited by her inexperience, an early mention of her mother's storytelling establishes that she already has access to stories and legends. The stories she remembers her mother telling her are the single concrete instance of the closeness which once existed between herself and her mother before her mother's illness:

She had forgotten all her stories which were about Princes in the Tower and a queen getting her head

knows in these narratives, and it is plain that she enjoys hearing them. The gap between mother as storyteller and as character in her stories adds to the child's interest. The same point is made again by the narrator of "The Shining Houses", who is curious enough about the old egg woman to sit on her porch listening to her life history:

And Mary found herself exploring her neighbour's life as she had once explored the lives of grandmothers and aunts--by pretending to know less than she did, asking for some story she had heard before . . . (p. 19)

Mary's subsequent loyalty to the egg woman, evident in her refusal to sign the neighborhood petition against her, arises out of the bond between storyteller and listener. Through her stories about her past, Mrs. Fullerton establishes her right to remain in her tumbledown house against the wishes of the suburbanites to enhance their property values. In this instance, the storyteller-listener bond becomes an objective correlative for a relationship which is not friendship but a complex feeling of kinship, based partly on class loyalty, and partly on respect for individuality. In the highly condensed short-story form there is not sufficient room to do more than suggest the bond between the narrator and Mrs. Fullerton; nevertheless, Munro's instinct for the one necessary detail is unerring. By confiding the story of her husband's departure and failure to return, Mrs. Fullerton develops from a two-dimensional neighborhood eccentric into a three-dimensional individual with hopes and dreams as valid

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Similarly, in "Images", the mother's stories develop both setting and theme. Not only do they accurately reflect the bias of Canadian schools of the period for British, rather than Canadian history, but they also suggest--through references to the murdered princes and beheaded queen--the child's growing preoccupation with death. When the mother stops telling stories, the child assumes that she has forgotten them, just as she forgets the afghan squares which she crochets. Like the afghan's purple squares, the colour of mourning, the silenced storyteller implies death; the storytelling mother recalls Scheherezade, who postponed her death by continuing to tell stories:

Scheherezade must go on telling stories--stories that compel the listener--or that same mad and sane listener, that king, her husband, will put her to death. She must invent life,

literally, by telling stories.⁹

Linking the mother in "Images" to Scheherezade need not depend on Munro's conscious intention. As Northrop Frye has shown, the process of reading inevitably leads back and forth between the individual literary work and literature as a whole; the implications of a story derive not from relevance to life, but rather from relation to literary tradition: "Literary shape cannot come from life, it comes only from literary tradition, and so ultimately from myth".¹⁰ Nevertheless, the search for meaning is not confined to literature. By writing from the viewpoint of a reflective narrator looking back on her past, Munro conveys the familiar experience of attempting to see meaning in one's life. Munro does not so much create "real people, situations and places who come to life in the hearts and minds of the reader",¹¹ as she creates a sense of being inside the narrative consciousness. Whereas critics marvel at Munro's total recall of the past, they often overlook her gift for evoking a child's way of perceiving. For this purpose she has invented a kind of shorthand based on word association, through which she suggests how the child understands and misunderstands its world. Repeatedly, Munro shows the child reacting to language, hearing in it nuances that the adult misses or tunes out through familiarity:

She spoke of herself gloomily in the third person, saying, "Be careful, don't hurt Mother, don't sit on Mother's legs." Every time she

said Mother I felt chilled, and a kind of wretchedness and shame spread through me as it did at the name of Jesus. This Mother that my own real, warm-necked irascible and comforting human mother set up between us was an everlastingly wounded phantom, sorrowing like Him over all the wickedness I did not yet know I would commit. (p. 33)

By discussing nuances of meaning suggested by the word, "Mother", Munro makes the child's feelings of estrangement and guilt distinct for the reader.

Critics such as Helen Hoy have examined Alice Munro's use of paradox and oxymorons in order to express the mysterious and contradictory texture of life. The title story in particular expresses the extraordinary beneath the ordinary surface of Miss Marsalles' music recital by means of oxymorons. The music which the retarded Delores Boyle plays so beautifully produces "unemotional happiness" (p. 222), the faces of the Misses Marsalles are "kindly and grotesque" (p. 214), and their old family home in Rosedale is "poetically ugly" (p. 213). These examples support Hoy's contention that Munro's linking of linguistic incongruities is not merely a quirk of style, but reflects her double vision of reality, at once ordinary and extraordinary.¹²

Another rhetorical device which acts as a structural link is zeugma, the repetition of the same verb in a following sentence, but with a different meaning. When the narrator of "Images" says that her mother forgot about her afghan squares, and adds in the next sentence that she had forgotten all her stories, the two meanings of the verb are

not really the same: the squares lie neglected among the bedcovers, while the stories cannot be recalled to mind. Not only does the repetition unify the narrator's scattered memories, but also it strengthens the illusion of a child's mind attempting to understand what is happening to her mother, but drawing wrong conclusions as a result of inexperience in interpreting language. Similarly, the child's distrust of Mary McQuade is consistent with her associative habit of mind. Too young to comprehend cause and effect, she fears Mary because of her memory of Mary's presence in the house when her grandfather died.

Again, in "The Office", Mr. Malley misunderstands the narrator for similar reasons. Although he has no previous experience with writers as tenants, he has preconceived ideas of how writers behave. As the narrator says, "Writing and lewdness had a vague delicious connection in his mind" (p. 67). Like the child in "Images", he does not reason logically, but links ideas through association.

Language, then, which must be used as the medium of thought, is itself a source of confused thinking. In "Images", asking Mary to rub her back, the mother says, "Mary, I'm dying for you to rub my back" (p. 33). This, literally, is the child's view of what is happening. By focusing on the child's literal response to language, Munro shows how anxiety is distorting her perception and exaggerating the danger she feels surrounding her. Her view of the situation is consistent with Bruno Bettelheim's

account of the way young children see their world:

A young child's mind contains a rapidly expanding collection of often ill-assorted and only partially integrated impressions: some correctly seen aspects of reality, but many more elements completely dominated by fantasy. Fantasy fills the huge gaps in a child's understanding which are due to the immaturity of his thinking and his lack of pertinent information.¹³

The fantasy which the child in "Images" invents out of the confusion of language and direct experience is a fairy tale concocted from a medley of familiar fairy tales, but not adhering strictly to any one plot. It has a giantess, Mary McQuade, whose presence in the household casts a spell over its occupants, and a journey through a dark wood, where a series of trials successfully undergone leads to an eventual happy outcome.

Mary McQuade, the giantess, is power personified: the big bullying adult who enters the household, comes between the child and her mother, and later, between the child and her father. The narrator constantly enlarges Mary's size because size implies power. In her white uniform at the grandfather's bedside, she is "big and gloomy as an iceberg" (p. 31), an object associated with death through the Titanic disaster, as well as the deathlike coldness of ice. Later, playing practical jokes on the father, Mary swells up like a bullfrog. The narrator accentuates the impression of a large, looming figure by focusing on separate parts of Mary's body, enlarging and distorting them until her legs,

rising out of a basin of hot water, become "round as drainpipes" (p. 32), and her head casts a huge shadow on the kitchen wall: "My father and Mary McQuade threw gigantic shadows, whose heads wagged clumsily with their talk and laughing" (p. 35). Because he has fallen under Mary's spell, the father's shadow enlarges too. When his enormous head appears next to hers, the father becomes Mary's accomplice, joining the legion of duped fairy-tale fathers misled by witch-stepmothers whose evil powers are obvious to their daughters.

Just as Snow White's wicked stepmother works her black magic by means of a poisoned apple, Mary McQuade's sinister power alters not only the food she prepares, but also all food eaten in her presence. The child recognizes the presence of a witch by the strange taste of the food, as well as the strange smell in the house. The spellbound parents, however, are unaware of what is happening. The mother calls the child silly when she mentions Mary's characteristic odour, and the father wholeheartedly endorses the changes Mary makes in their diet, telling her, "Mary, you know what it is a man ought to eat!" (p. 34).

Mary's duplicity is another familiar characteristic of fairy-tale witches. The child doubts everything Mary says. She is convinced that though Mary pretends to help, she really intends to harm. Astutely, she realizes that Mary has her own suppressed reasons for adopting the role of nurse-confidante to the family, and that, "If she had never

come my mother would never have taken to her bed" (p. 33). If Mary had not been available to take over the household, the mother might indeed have struggled longer before succumbing to her illness.

Because a witch can always prevail through her supernatural power, the child obeys Mary, who forces her off her mother's bed and out into the yard, where she puts her to work hanging up clothespins. The motif of outward obedience and inner rebellion is familiar in fairy tales about children captured by witches. Traditionally, the only way to overcome a witch is to outwit her. When the child pretends not to remember Mary from the previous summer, she is using her wits in her attempt to break free of the spell. As she explains, "It seemed the wisest thing to do" (p. 30). The ploy seems effective, because Mary counters by attempting to make the child admit remembering her. From then on, the child sees Mary as her adversary: every encounter becomes a contest. The more Mary forces the child to submit, the more the child sees her as inhuman and witchlike. Although Mary's behaviour is never unequivocally supernatural, the narrator never repudiates the childish conception of her as a witch; therefore, these fairy-tale elements remain attached to Mary's characterization.

For much of the story, Mary is a central character; however, she is not present during the fairy-tale journey which forms the middle section of "Images". Although Munro does not retell any particular tale, she uses elements

common to many fairy tales: the setting in a wood, the sudden appearance of a threatening figure and the visit to a sinister dwelling. At the end of the journey, when the child returns home, she discovers that she has stopped fearing Mary.

Disregarding the journey's fairy-tale elements, the reader may also interpret it as the father does, as a walk around his trapline, an encounter with an eccentric neighbour and visit to the cellar of his burned-out home. The double focus persists to the end of the story. Unlike the pattern that Margaret Laurence employs in *A BIRD IN THE HOUSE*--that of a protagonist maturing into fuller understanding which enables her to finally see the truth--Munro's stories suggest that truth always remains elusive. Maturity is likely to bring not greater certainty but greater awareness of complexity. The characters who get nearest the truth are frequently those whose simplicity clarifies their vision. In *DANCE*, Munro assigns penetrating insight to children or the innocent old, like Miss Marsalles in the title story, who is not surprised when one of her retarded students proves to be a talented musician:

But it seems that the girl's playing like this is something she always expected, and she finds it natural and satisfying.
(p. 223)

The saintly Miss Marsalles accepts talent as a mysterious blessing which may crop up anywhere. It is the middle-class

mothers in the audience who are disturbed by the discrepancy between the young pianist's mental handicap and her superior musical ability. Appropriately enough, the piano solo which confounds the audience is from Gluck's opera, ORPHEO, based on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. The Dance of the Happy Shades occurs in the second act of the opera after Orpheo has succeeded in winning the sympathies of the Furies by the sweetness of his music, and they have permitted him to enter the Valley of the Blest:

After the gloom and terror of the last scene, we pass to the golden calm of the Elysian Fields. The short introductory minuet strikes at once a note of serene beauty which reigns unbroken.¹⁴

By choosing this selection for the retarded girl's recital piece, Munro implies that the young pianist and Miss Marsalles share the serenity of the blessed spirits of the Elysian Fields.

Other classical allusions also appear in "Images", where they are combined with elements of medieval romance. Like the lady of romance, the child is protected by her knight (father). Later, in the visit to Joe Phippen's underground home, she recalls Persephone, who bound herself to the Underworld by eating pomegranate seeds. Joe gives the child candies that "had a taste of nails" (p. 41). Joe Phippen himself suggests Pluto, King of Hades, and Ben Jordan evokes classical heroes like Orpheus, who descend to the Underworld on rescue missions. Even Joe's cat is a

comic version of Cerberus, the three-headed dog at the gates of Hades.

Another link between classical myths and the journey in "Images", lies in its dreamlike atmosphere, as if it were taking place outside time and space. When the child awakens after being carried by her father, she is astonished to discover that the woods she sees now are the familiar ones she has seen from the windows of their own house. Just as Miss Marsalles of the title story is beyond pity because she inhabits "the other country" (p. 224), the child has been living on a different plane from her everyday one.

The journey has served its ritual purpose: like the knight's journey in medieval romance, it was to provide a trial through adventure, "the real meaning of the knight's ideal existence".¹⁵ Accordingly, the child's claim that she no longer fears Mary is believable; her fear of death has been conquered by her visit to, and safe return from, the underground house, a metaphor of death and rebirth.

Undoubtedly, the text of "Images" also supports a common-sense view of Joe Phippen, just as it supports a common-sense view of Mary McQuade as bossy spinster rather than witch. But the supernatural aura around both characters which results from Munro's use of fairy-tale, romance and classical patterns adds further dimensions to the story. Even the title, "Images", encourages speculation along symbolic lines, and the strong statement in the concluding paragraph, "our fears are based on nothing but

the truth" (p. 43), confirms the view that both fairy-tale and realistic elements are reflections of the truth. If not deliberately, Alice Munro unconsciously exploits the motifs of old myths and tales to suggest mysterious depths below the surface of ordinary life. Ambivalent feelings about her art, as shown by a certain distrust of storytelling, are already evident in this first collection. In "Images", she calls attention to the ease with which the storyteller may alter the truth when she shows the father persuading his daughter not to tell her mother and Mary McQuade the whole story of their encounter with Joe Phippen: "After a while he said, 'What are you not going to mention about?' and I said, 'The axe'" (p. 42). Obviously, the axe is crucial to the story; leaving it out changes Joe from a dangerous figure to a comic one.

The storyteller possesses considerable power, and is able to use language not only to describe events but also to influence them. In "Boys and Girls", the narrator's influence over her younger brother is strengthened by the tales of bats and skeletons which she tells him at bedtime. When he is very young, she forces him to act out a role in one of her stories: she urges him up the barn ladder so that she may have the thrill of reporting to her parents that he is in danger. Laird is too young to tell them that climbing the ladder was her idea, but he is older when she persuades him to hide in the barn and watch their father and the hired man shoot an old horse. Since the older sister must rely on

Laird's promise to keep the secret, her power diminishes once Laird is capable of putting the experience into words. In fact, Laird's growing ability to tell parallels his growing physical strength. Shortly after the fight in which he nearly succeeds in physically overpowering his sister, Laird surpasses her to become the dominant child in the family when he tells their father that she opened the gate and allowed the horse to escape. Power, the theme of "Boys and Girls", is conceived as a balance with Laird on one side and his sister on the other: as one rises, the other must fall. Even the boy's name, Laird, meaning the proprietor of a landed estate, has connotations of power. It is a name which foretells the outcome of the brother-sister struggle: the male heir must succeed.

Not only does the narrator tell stories to her brother, but also she tells them to herself. Her fantasies reveal hopes and fears at odds with her bossy and belligerent behaviour. Restless and frustrated by her mother's increasing pressure on her to help with the housework, she escapes into romantic daydreams in which she accomplishes daring wartime rescues and feats of shooting and horseback riding. Although these fantasies are commonplace, their very banality is poignant, suggesting the universal resistance of the young to the constraints and repetition of adult life. The daydreams are obviously influenced by American Western novels, a genre in which Munro herself was well read as a girl:

I used to make up these stories which were imitations of things I read. I read Zane Grey and so I used to make up a lot of stories in which I was a shooting from the hip western cowgirl and things like that.¹⁶

Just as Munro drew on her reading, the narrator of "Boys and Girls" incorporates the vicarious experience gained from books into her fantasies, creating an alternate world in which possibilities are limitless. Moving from the world of imagination back to the actual world is a difficult adjustment for the narrator, as it is for all children who lose themselves in books, completely identifying with the characters. The historian W. L. Morton has described how, as a prairie youngster who read constantly, he felt as though he lived in two separate worlds:

Thus my actual landscape, the one my neighbours had made and worked in with apparent content, and my literary landscape from the banks and braes of Bonnie Doon to the long beaches of Coral Island, were in conflict. I had no single vision for both, but had to refocus like one passing from dark to light. Nor was the conflict to cease for many years.¹⁷

As a child, the narrator of "Boys and Girls" experiences the same conflict; her reading encourages her to see herself in roles incompatible with the limited future a girl of her class in her time and place can reasonably expect. Later in life, however, she uses her reading to help her to interpret experience. She can compare her father's arrangement of his fox pens to a medieval town, and his satisfaction that he

derives from farm work to his delight in ROBINSON CRUSOE, his favourite book. To convey the frustration she felt as an adolescent, the remembering narrator ponders the connotations of the word, "girl", thereby suggesting the conflict between her vague longing to express both the dominating and submissive sides of her nature, and the opposing forces of her society expecting her to repress her aggressive tendencies and become passive. Her dual nature has now become a source of guilt:

The word girl had formerly seemed to me innocent and unburdened like the word child; now it appeared that it was no such thing. A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become. (p. 119)

The erosion of the narrator's earlier confidence is shown convincingly by her uneasiness over the word, "girl". From her grandmother, she learns that a girl must be good-tempered, modest and incurious about everything outside her narrow sphere. From her mother she learns that her sphere is limited to the house, where she must perform repetitive and unimportant work:

It seemed to me that work in the house was endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing; work done out of doors, and in my father's service, was ritualistically important. (p. 117)

Since she resents helping her mother with housework, she wonders whether she can call herself a girl.

The same notion of a word acquiring such a heavy

burden of meaning that the narrator is reluctant to use it recurs in "The Office". The writer-narrator finds it difficult to state her profession simply and naturally:

But here comes the disclosure which is not easy for me: I am a writer. That does not sound right. Too presumptuous; phony, or at least unconvincing. Try again. I write. Is that better? I try to write. That makes it worse. Hypocritical humility. Well then? (p. 59)

Like the word, "girl", the word, "writer", is not merely descriptive, but has become a normative term. The claim to be a writer is a tacit declaration that one not only writes but writes well; not only writes well but is published. By focusing on the connotations of the word, "writer", Munro suggests the problematic nature of the fictionalizing process. She extends the irony by having the landlord make up stories. Since his stories are delusions, they raise doubts about the truth of all stories, "The Office" as much as the rest.

In "Boys and Girls", the phrase, "only a girl", brackets the action of the story. First used by the feed salesman, whose opinion is unimportant, it is finally repeated by the father, whose opinion is crucial to the daughter's self-esteem. Repetition of a key phrase is a favourite rhetorical device in DANCE, enabling Munro to unify the narrator's memories to further her theme. In "Thanks for the Ride" as well, the phrase "I always think it's lovely for people to have things" (p. 50) is used by

Lois's mother first, and then picked up again by the male narrator, annoyed at Lois for her vulgarity in discussing her clothes and their cost. The narrator, who earns a slap for mocking Lois for her pretensions, later realizes that he had no right to belittle her standards, and regrets having revealed his contempt. In "Boys and Girls", however, the story ends with the girl narrator accepting the only-a-girl label. She gives way to her brother, who has achieved manly strength through ritual slaughter, of which the blood on his hands is tangible proof. In contrast to his, her own maturation process is one in which she grows gradually weaker in response to the expectations of her family and her awakening sexuality. As she loses power and self-confidence, she adjusts her fantasies from heroic adventures in which she casts herself in the central role, to sexual fantasies in which her role is passive. Similarly, in "Red Dress--1946", the teen-age girl protagonist acts on advice in a magazine article which suggests ways to attract boys by adopting a suitable manner: "Be gay! Let the boys see your eyes sparkle, let them hear laughter in your voice!" (p. 154). Although "Boys and Girls" may be read as an account of the frustration of growing up female, its feminist implications are extrapolations from its central concern that restricting behaviour according to gender denies the full range of human possibility. Whereas childhood is characterized by androgynous freedom, womanhood is characterized by the limitations of being female. As

Helen remarks in "The Peace of Utrecht", children live "without time and in perfect imaginary freedom" (p. 196); therefore, growing up is always a fall from grace. It is notable how in "Boys and Girls", as young children, both the narrator and her brother can admit to fear. Later, however, Laird will be expected to overcome his fear, just as the narrator will be expected to suppress her anger, which could be displayed as long as she was a child.

In an interview published in CHATELAINE, Alice Munro comments on the last paragraph of "Boys and Girls":

Well, it was intended to convey the girl accepting her femininity in all its complexity; which implies that if she's a girl, she's allowed to protest, her mind is freer than if she were a man. She doesn't have to undergo the brutal conditioning that her brother does. So there's a sort of irony there. "Oh, you're only a girl," but maybe it's better to be a girl in these circumstances. But. . . her protest doesn't count, because she has no power. And it's the lack of power that gives her the freedom to speak. I really feel that, in all civilizations, probably the slaves see things most clearly.¹⁸

In "Boys and Girls", the point of view is female, but the problem is not restricted to the female sex. Growing up forces both boys and girls to conform to separate roles imposed upon them by their culture and encoded in the language.

The interrelation of reality and language is further developed in "The Peace of Utrecht". When Helen and Maddy tell Fred Powell stories of their past, they use him as a

buffer, and the stories as a means of avoiding facing the truth of their estrangement from each other:

Maddy surprised me by bringing him home to supper the first night I was here and then we spent the evening, as we have spent many since, making this strange man a present of our childhood . . . (p. 193)

Their stories are not designed to repossess the past, but to make remembering bearable by concentrating on pleasant or amusing recollections. It is the same impulse which prompts Alva to write so resolutely cheerful a letter home in "Sunday Afternoon":

Don't worry about me being lonesome and downtrodden and all that maid sort of thing. I wouldn't let anybody get away with anything like that. Besides I'm not a maid really, it's just for the summer. I don't feel lonesome, why should I? I just observe and am interested.(p. 167)

The gap between Alva's letter and the narrative of her life in the Gannett household which frames it is not simply the irony of the audience knowing more than the character. Alva herself realizes that the Gannetts are exploiting her, but she exploits them too in order to learn the manners of a class above her own, information which she may later put to her advantage. The purpose of Alva's letter, then, is partly to prevent her mother from spoiling these plans, and partly to convince herself that she has not demeaned herself by allowing the Gannetts to treat her as a servant.

The similarity between storytelling and lying,

approached indirectly in "Sunday Afternoon", is discussed directly in "The Peace of Utrecht", when Helen recalls Fred's attitude to the stories she and her sister tell him:

"You girls have got good memories," Fred Powell says, and sits watching us with an air of admiration and something else--reserve, embarrassment, deprecation--which appears on the faces of these mild deliberate people as they watch the keyed-up antics of their entertainers. (p. 193)

Amused, but with reservations, Fred typifies the conservatism of their society, which suspects individuals who draw attention to themselves, and values reticence as an outward form of inner strength. The storytellers, Maddy and Helen, are outsiders in the town. Helen has travelled twenty-five hundred miles for this visit, and Maddy, despite living in the small town where she grew up, declares that Fred is her only real friend. The strength of her relationship with him is expressed by Maddy's saying that he alone speaks the same language as she does.

Language, the medium for telling stories, calls attention to itself in "The Peace of Utrecht". The phrase, "your mother" reminds Helen of the shame and anger her Mother used to cause her. Years later, the mere mention of "your mother" re-awakens the resentment she used to feel at being linked through the possessive pronoun to a mother whose illness was so conspicuous that it made her daughters conspicuous too. Similarly, in "The Time of Death", the appearance of the old man who comes around to sharpen

scissors releases Patricia's unexpressed grief over her brother Benny's death. The scissors man and Benny were linked through language because "Bram", Benny's name for him, had been one of the few words Benny could speak. In "The Peace of Utrecht" too, the narrator is sensitive to language. Hearing her sister speaking with the local accent she feels reproached for having escaped the responsibilities Maddy assumed for their sick mother. Maddy's lost hopes for a life beyond the confines of the small town where they grew up are suggested by the loss of the educated accent she once cultivated.

When Maddy and the narrator were young, they eased the pain of being misfits by mimicing the local accent, and the burden of waiting on their mother by transforming her into "Our Gothic Mother" (p. 195). In the same way, Ben, the father in "Walker Brothers Cowboy", turns the unhappy circumstances of his job as door-to-door salesman into anecdotes and songs: "And have all linaments and oils,/For everything from corns to boils" (p. 4). Transforming humiliation into vaudeville comedy, he renews his own courage and reassures his family. Since he refuses to act like a failure, he forestalls pity even from a sympathetic former girlfriend. Not contained by his roles as fox farmer or salesman, he is an artist manqué who dramatizes his experience and presents it to an audience composed of his family and close friends. Ben Jordan is more than a salesman; he is the hero of his own life-story.

"Walker Brother's Cowboy" is not the only story in Munro's first collection which suggests the resemblance between real life and theatre. In "Day of the Butterfly", when the narrator visits a dying schoolmate in hospital, she is struck by the theatricality of the occasion. A well-meaning teacher has contrived a mock birthday party for the dying child, and, although the girls play out their assigned parts, the joy which is usually associated with a birthday celebration is missing, and the ritual of gift-giving is hollow. Myra, the sick girl, succeeds in making the only spontaneous gesture when she singles out the narrator as her special friend and calls her back to choose one of the presents for herself; however, even this moment seems oddly artificial to the narrator, who senses that the deathbed occasion inevitably over-emphasizes the importance of Myra's action. As Helen admits to herself, she did not return Myra's affection. She acknowledges "the treachery of my own heart" (p. 110); she preferred the popular girls to Myra, who was always "set apart for legendary uses" (p. 110), in other words, significant more as an unusual memory--the foreigner, the girl who died young--than a friend. Moreover, the ending of the story, the nurse returning and Helen's realization that she cannot enter into Myra's "unknown, exalted, ether-smelling hospital world" (p. 110), calls attention to the limitations of subjectivity.

Throughout "The Peace of Utrecht" too, a narrator

confronts the limitations of her subjective viewpoint. She and her sister are unable to overcome the falsehoods and evasions which they have incorporated into their stories of the past, "that version of our childhood which is safely preserved in anecdote, as in a kind of mental cellophane" (p. 193). The properties of cellophane, transparency coupled with strength and impermeability, make it an apt image for the barrier between the sisters. The image is extended by the cut-glass bowl which Maddy plans to use to serve raspberries. By refusing to acknowledge her guilt over her mother's death, Maddy herself has become as brittle as glass. Finally, the bowl shatters on the kitchen floor after she admits that she sacrificed her mother's wish to remain at home to her own overwhelming desire to break free of her: "'I couldn't go on,' she said. 'I wanted my life'" (p. 210). Having confessed her selfishness, Maddy may succeed in making a new life, but her prospects are doubtful when, as she says, "I've got a whole shelf full of glass bowls. I've got enough glass bowls to do me the rest of my life" (p. 210). One moment of self-revelation, so the shelf of glass bowls seems to imply, is not sufficient to overcome a burden of remorse accumulated over a lifetime. Nevertheless, the breaking of the glass bowl provides the occasion for Helen to urge her sister to forget the past. Fragmentation, then, perhaps implies the possibility of wholeness. Significantly enough, fragmentation in the form of dismemberment is the fate of Orpheus in the myth which

loosely structures DANCE. Orpheus is eventually torn apart by the Maenads, his head thrown into the river Hebrus and the rest of his body buried at the foot of Mt. Olympus by the Muses.

Throughout DANCE, Munro consistently embeds stories within the text. From infancy to old age, these narrators listen to and tell stories. This characteristic storytelling counters the realistic surface of drab and predictable small-town and rural life since the embedded stories are more exotic and surprising than one would expect in this milieu. Frequently too, their origins are European rather than Canadian. Moreover, the fairy-story motifs, as well as elements of medieval romance and classical myth, provide a larger frame for the everyday experience of child protagonists. "Images" is typical of Munro's technique of weaving fantasy with personal experience until the atmosphere changes, becoming mysterious and menacing. Although the child's fears are temporarily increased because her imagination has fed on stories, by passing through imaginary ordeals, she ultimately becomes stronger and more self-assured.

As adolescents, the female protagonists of DANCE use stories as models: stories influence the way they see themselves, and also determine the future they imagine for themselves. Unfortunately, stories may tantalize them by suggesting possibilities which can only be realized in fantasy, and lead to disillusionment and a retreat from

action into the passivity of daydreams.

With the passing of time, stories become more fixed; whatever lies they contain acquire a spurious truth. Older protagonists like Helen in "The Peace of Utrecht", are uncomfortably aware of the divergence between the stories they tell of their past lives and the truth. These problems of storytelling which Munro raises in *DANCE* are reflected in problems of language. Certain phrases reveal mysterious depths of ambiguity and paradox. In "The Peace of Utrecht", for example, the phrase "a little blind window of coloured glass" (p. 197), suggests the contradictions within the sisters' relationship. The strain in pairing the adjective, blind, with the noun, window, reflects the strain Helen feels when she and her sister try to talk together. Words may also turn into charms which evoke strong feeling, as is the way with "your mother" in the same story. Language's emotive as well as descriptive properties make it sometimes the controller rather than the vehicle of thought. Munro's narrators manipulate words as they must, but they are also manipulated by words--as Helen is in "The Peace of Utrecht", when Maddy holds her at a distance by confining conversation to anecdotes about the past which are suitable to share with an outsider.

Storytellers are noteworthy in *DANCE*, where they form a sub-class of outsiders who reject, or are rejected by, their society. Generally they are female, although Ben Jordan in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" is a significant exception.

Frequently, they express ambivalent feelings about their storytelling, and admit to uneasiness over transforming experience into stories. They believe a line should exist between storytelling and lying, but they are not sure where to draw it.

Notes

1
Alice Munro, *DANCE OF THE HAPPY SHADES* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1968). Subsequent references appear in the text.

2
Alice Munro, "The Colonel's Hash Resettled," in *THE NARRATIVE VOICE*, ed. John Metcalfe (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 182.

3
Annie Dillard, *LIVING BY FICTION* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1983), p. 29.

4
Munro, "The Colonel's Hash Resettled," p. 182.

5
D.H. Lawrence, "The Spirit of Place," in *STUDIES IN CLASSIC AMERICAN LITERATURE* 1924; rpt. in *D.H. LAWRENCE: SELECTED LITERARY CRITICISM*, ed. Anthony Beal (London: Heinemann, 1964), p. 297.

6
Alice Munro, "What Is Real?" in *MAKING IT NEW*, ed. John Metcalfe (Toronto: Methuen, 1982), p. 226.

7
Alan Twigg, *CONVERSATIONS WITH 24 CANADIAN WRITERS* (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour, 1981), p. 15.

8
Bruno Bettelheim, *THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT* (New York: Knopf, 1976), p. 8.

9
Robert Kroetsch, "Contemporary Standards in the Canadian Novel," *ESSAYS ON CANADIAN WRITING*, No. 20 (1980), p. 17.

10
Northrop Frye, *FABLES OF IDENTITY* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 36.

11
Hugh Garner, Pref., *DANCE OF THE HAPPY SHADES* by Alice Munro (Toronto: Ryerson, 1968) n. pag.

12
Helen Hoy, "Dull, Simple, Amazing and Unfathomable: Paradox and Double Vision in Alice Munro's Fiction," *STUDIES IN CANADIAN LITERATURE*, No. 5 (1980), pp. 100-15.

13
Bettelheim, p. 61.

14
Paul England, *FIFTY FAVOURITE OPERAS*, 5th. ed. (New York: Harper, n.d.), p. 23.

15

Eric Auerbach, *MIMESIS* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 136.

16

John Metcalfe, "A Conversation with Alice Munro," *JOURNAL OF CANADIAN FICTION*, 1, No. 4 (1972), 54.

17

W.L. Morton, "Seeing an Unliterary Landscape," *MOSAIC*, 3, No. 3 (1970), rpt. in *CONTEXTS OF CANADA'S PAST*, ed. A.B. McKillop (Toronto: Macmillan, 1980), p. 19.

18

Alice Munro, as quoted in Kem Murch, "Name: Alice Munro, Occupation: Writer," in *CHATELAINE*, Aug. 1975, p. 71.

Chapter Two

Turning Life Into Fiction

The opening paragraph of "The Flats Road", the first story in *LIVES*, introduces a character called Uncle Benny, only to add in the second paragraph the following disclaimer: "He was not our uncle or anybody's".¹ While the sentence refers to the custom of allowing children to address family friends as "uncle", it also implies that language is not trustworthy, and that illusion is easily confused with reality. Since these themes have already emerged in *DANCE*, it is not surprising to discover them again in *LIVES*, which is primarily concerned with the feminine experience of childhood and youth.

The two story cycles differ, however, in the way in which Munro unifies the individual stories within them. The stories in *DANCE* are often linked thematically and occasionally geographically, but they do not cohere as tightly as do the stories in *LIVES*. In *LIVES*, through the innovation of a narrator who is an apprentice writer, Munro unifies the stories within a single unfolding consciousness. Since Del Jordan is always the narrator, the segments are bound together by common themes, and her experiences as she grows up allow thematic development and provide the rationale for the country and town settings.

Since *LIVES* is a narrative of substantial length, has a roughly chronological development, and observes unities of geographical setting and narrative voice, it was initially mistaken for a novel. The term, novel, is, however, a misnomer that made early reviewers uneasy and distorted their critical response. James Polk, for example, identified Alice Munro's theme in the resonant sentence, "People's lives, in Jubilee as everywhere, were dull, simple, amazing, and unfathomable--deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" (p. 249). Reviewing *LIVES* as a novel, Polk found the epilogue top-heavy and deplored the tendency of minor characters to draw attention away from the protagonist.² Both would be weaknesses if *LIVES* were, in fact, a novel, but instead, they are strengths of the genre to which the work properly belongs, the story cycle in Forrest L. Ingram's term, or "open form", as J.R. Struthers calls it.³ The characteristic which marks *LIVES* as a story cycle is the balanced tension between the individuality of each story and the general pattern of the whole.

Since the conclusion is the interpretive key to a story cycle, the epilogue is appropriate, just as Del Jordan's observations of the other people in the town of Jubilee properly belong in a work which chronicles the apprenticeship of a young writer. Analysing the structure of *LIVES*, L.M. Leitch observes:

As with the delineation of a community, the episodic structure also lends itself to

autobiographical materials organized to indicate the selective workings of memory, a preoccupation found throughout Munro's work.⁴

Loose organization according to memory gives the work its distinctive flavour. Unlike novels which move forward in a straight line according to laws of cause and effect, these stories move in concentric circles according to laws of recollection. Episodes are grouped together by association, and acquire meaning through arrangement. Margaret Laurence's *A BIRD IN THE HOUSE* follows the same structural principle, and Laurence has expressed the difference between that work and her novels as a difference in their directions of lines of force: vertical in the short story cycle, and horizontal in the novel.⁵

As an embryonic writer, the protagonist, Del Jordon, is both like other young girls and unlike them. Her pronounced interest in words, the tools of her trade, appears when she is very young as a heightened response to language. Like Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN*, Del is sensitive to the sound of words as well as their sense. When Del and her cousin, Mary Agnes, come upon a dead cow, Del first traces the cow's eye socket with the end of a stick as she imagines piercing the eye itself. Unable to bring herself to do so, she settles for probing words instead: "'Day-ud cow,' I said, expanding the word lusciously. 'DAY-ud cow, day-ud cow'" (p. 44). Retreating from action into words is not typical of Del, however; she

is an enthusiastic participant in life as well as its chronicler.

A distinctive feature of her childhood is that she is surrounded by storytellers. Among them, two outstanding models of opposing narrative stances emerge: Uncle Benny and Uncle Craig. Uncle Benny is so immersed in the chaos of life that his tales rise up like bubbles of gas from the Grenoch Swamp which is his natural home; Uncle Craig has withdrawn from life so successfully by "preferring not", as his sisters proudly describe his self-effacing manner, that his book on the history of Wawanash County is a lifeless record of facts and figures. Neither approach is broad enough for the kind of writer Del aspires to be: she must incorporate elements of both uncles. Despite her youthful preference for the pungent variety of Uncle Benny's junkyard-swampworld, she ultimately learns to value Uncle Craig's passion for detail too, seeing it reincarnated in her own desire to document her past.

The proliferation of stories and storytellers in *LIVES* suggests that the desire to remember one's past and find meaning in it is not exclusive to fiction writers. The idea that each individual creates his own fictions and is the artist of his own identity permeates the work. The characters in *LIVES* define themselves not only through their actions but also through their stories about their past. One of the narrative's subtle ironies is that Del's aunts, who are ideologically opposed to the attention-seeking

inherent in being a writer like Del, are temperamentally allied with her through their imagination, playfulness and love of the ridiculous. Although the aunts obey the strictures of their society, which emphasizes hard work, good housekeeping, and, above all, conformity, they have shaped their lives artistically through their stories until they resemble a comic duet. Del, as artist, recognises the process: "each of their two selves was seen to be something constructed with terrible care" (p. 59). Like the fiction writer Del will become, the aunts invent and tell stories for themselves as well as their audience:

Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace told stories. It did not seem as if they were telling them to me, to entertain me, but as if they would have told them anyway, for their own pleasure, even if they had been alone. (p. 33)

The aunts detach themselves from experience in order to reflect upon it as writers do; moreover, they share the artist's urge to push events to imaginary conclusions, to ask, what if? They reveal these characteristics in their practical joking and readiness to join Del in a game of jumping in the piles of hay. After this episode, Aunt Elspeth shakes the bits of hay from her hair, "with little snorting sounds of pleasure" (p. 50), showing a side of herself at variance with her public persona of dignified rectitude. Auntie Grace's comment draws further attention to this difference, "'If a car had come by, wouldn't you just have wanted to die?'" (p. 50). While paying

lip-service to the proprieties, Auntie Grace implies, nevertheless, that the danger of being observed contributes to her pleasure. As more details accumulate, the incident reveals its complexity. Although the aunts join Del in her romp, their pleasure is not the same as hers:

Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace had come and jumped in the hay too, with their aprons flying, laughing at themselves. When the moment came they would hesitate, and jump with not quite sufficient abandon, landing in a decorous sitting position, hands spread as bouncing on a cushion, or holding their hair. (p. 50)

Unlike Del's spontaneous and wholehearted play, theirs is self-conscious. It is not the leap into the centre of the hay coil which they enjoy, but the idea of themselves leaping. Their action is more pleasing in retrospect than in actual experience; it becomes the occasion for recollecting themselves as spunky and girlish, daring to flout convention. Later, when Del reads *WAR AND PEACE*, she sees a resemblance between her aunts and Tolstoy's Natasha, in the way that all three see their brother's work as inherently more important than theirs. Although the aunts seem content in their mastery of housekeeping, the critical edge to their mimicry and joking suggests a degree of resentment, directed particularly against Del's mother: "Is that the hairbrush you use on your hair? Oh, we thought it was for the dog!" (p. 36). This kind of sniping is traditionally the resort of the powerless, suggesting that the aunts' apparent security is threatened by Del's mother's

differing view of the role of women. The aunts' convictions about their proper place in life cost them the attention they crave. Unconscious artists, they find their audience in Del, and ultimately she becomes their voice, relaying their stories to the wider audience they deserve.

As a child observing the women of her family, Del compares Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace with her mother, who "went along straight lines", whereas they "wove in and out around her, retreating and disappearing and coming back" (p. 36). Ada Jordan is direct and straightforward in expressing her disapproval of their way of life; Elspeth and Grace are no less disapproving of her, but show their feelings in subtle and devious ways, chiefly by undermining Ada when talking about her to Del. Since the aunts and Del's mother are diametrically opposed, they offer Del a choice of female models. The aunts try to make her practical, while her mother tries to make her intellectual. Although the order and comfort of the aunts' world is seductive, Del realizes that it is achieved through the sacrifice of personal ambition. She is her mother's daughter too, noticing the inconsistencies in their thinking. In her writing, Del can synthesize the opposing viewpoints of Uncle Benny and Uncle Craig; as a woman, however, she must choose between the options represented by her mother and the aunts. The only character who sympathizes with both viewpoints and mediates between them is Del's father. He can remain detached, but his detachment is not dynamic but passive: "The Flats Road

would do for him; Uncle Benny would do for his friend" (p. 8). In his proud refusal to seek a friend who would be his equal, he is closely allied with the aunts. Unlike his wife, who collides with difficulties head-on, Ben Jordan ignores or minimizes them:

My father started trying to persuade Uncle Benny that it was not such a bad thing to be rid of Madeleine, after all. He pointed out that she had not been a particularly good housekeeper and that she had not made Uncle Benny's life exactly comfortable and serene. He did this in a diplomatic way, not forgetting he was talking about a man's wife. (p. 20)

His weary tact has a moderating influence, but it places him at a distance. Like his humour, it is a way of avoiding responsibility and action. If Del's mother's besetting sin is her lack of restraint, her father's is excess of it. Following Ada's impassioned speech concerning the future possibilities of recycling parts of the body after death, he asks, "Were you planning to discuss these ideas with the folks at the funeral?" (p. 48). Although Ada needs to be brought down to earth, the gap between her viewpoint and her husband's is so great that it raises questions about their marriage, the strains of which Del senses but attempts to overlook:

But at this moment, seeing my mother go meek and bewildered . . . and my father touching her in such a gentle, compassionate, grieving way . . . I was alarmed . . . I was afraid that they would go on and show me something I no more wanted to see than I wanted to see Uncle Craig dead. (p. 49)

Even so curious an observer of other people's lives as Del draws back from analysis of their complex mutual dependence. Ignoring her mother's move to the house in town while her father remains most of the time on the farm, Del wants to believe that her parents are happy together. Her mother encourages her to believe in the myth of marriage as a happy ending by never discussing her present feelings towards Del's father, but telling Del stories of the past instead:

In the beginning of her story was dark captivity, suffering, then daring and defiance and escape. Struggle disappointment, more struggle, godmothers and villains. Now I expected as in all momentous satisfying stories--the burst of Glory, the Reward. Marriage to my father? I hoped this was it. I wished she would leave me in no doubt about it. (p. 78)

At this stage of Del's life, she has difficulty understanding the difference between life and stories about life. Unconsciously, she applies the shape of fiction to her mother's life. As her mother tells it, her life as a young girl is a fairytale; therefore Del anticipates the appropriate fairytale conclusion, marriage to her prince.

Later, in Del's relationship with Garnet French, she again retreats into a fiction of her own, heedless of her mother's warnings:

"You've gone addled over a boy. You with your intelligence. Do you intend to live in Jubilee all your life? Do you want to be the wife of a lumberyard worker? Do you want to join the Baptist Ladies Aid?" (p. 217)

Del refuses to consider her probable future with Garnet, and lives entirely in the present. Not until Garnet insists that she acknowledge his mastery of her in the struggle in the water does she admit to herself that the boy she loves is not Garnet as he is, but as she has created him in her own fiction. Once she understands that she had "meant to keep him sewed up in his golden lover's skin forever" (p. 234), she is released from the enchantment of being in love. With understanding comes shame at having "somehow met his good offerings with my deceitful offerings . . . matching my complexity and play-acting with his true intent" (p. 235). While Del has been experiencing love as fantasy, Garnet has been experiencing it as everyday reality, and has committed himself to Del not only for the present but for the future too. Del's attitude to Garnet is that of an artist superior to her creation; therefore, she is shocked when he makes demands of her. She finally realizes that through him she has been attempting to reject her artistic destiny since he attracts her on an entirely non-verbal level:

I could not have made sense of any book, put one word after another, with Garnet in the room. It was all I could do to read the words on a billboard when we were driving. It was the very opposite of going out with Jerry, and seeing the world dense and complicated but appallingly unsecretive; the world I saw with Garnet was something not far from what I thought animals must see, the world without names. (p. 218)

Garnet then, has appealed to her as an alternative to books

or even speech. In the joy of her first sexual fulfillment, Del is speechless for once: "Nothing that could be said by us would bring us together; words were our enemies" (p. 217). For a time, Del's sexual connection with Garnet replaces words and literature, but, when the relationship ends and she mourns its ending, she returns to literature when she quotes Tennyson's "Mariana", even though she calls it "one of the silliest poems I had ever read" (p. 238). In the same way, she simultaneously claims and disclaims the sentiment in Tennyson's line, "He cometh not, she said". Even as she grieves over losing Garnet, Del feels relief at having returned to the world in which words make sense: "I made myself understand that I was reading, and after some time I felt a mild sensible gratitude for these printed words, these strange possibilities (p. 238). Like the words in the want ads, the line from Tennyson's poem restores Del to the old way of life, as she lived it before she met Garnet. Quoting Tennyson, she also links herself with her mother, who adopts the pen name, Princess Ida, when writing letters to the editor in which she imitates the Victorian poet's idyllic description of nature.

Munro's references to Tennyson are characteristic of her artistic method in *LIVES*. The allusions are apt: Mariana for the daughter who waits in vain for the absent lover, Princess Ida for the mother who believes in education as the means of improving womens' lives. Princess Ida is a particularly appropriate heroine for Del's mother to invoke.

In Tennyson's poem, "The Princess", she is the founder of a women's college based on feminist principles succinctly described by the king, her father: ". . . knowledge so my daughter held,/Was all in all."⁶ Ada Jordan--whose first name is so conveniently close to Ida--gives Del advice that the princess herself would have endorsed: "Use your brains. Don't be distracted" (p. 173). Garnet French, of course, is a major distraction. By falling in love with him at a crucial point in her career, just before her final examinations at the end of high school, Del Jordan loses the scholarship she had hoped to win. Having alluded briefly and obliquely to a poet and two specific poems that stand in ironic relation to her theme and characters, Munro does not have the narrator reflect upon the parallels between them. It is true that Princess Ida, like Del's mother, is vulnerable through her maternal instinct, but the reader will not learn this in *LIVES*. Since both women allow themselves to be swayed from their goals as scholars and teachers by marrying, Princess Ida rightly belongs in the structure of Munro's story. Having placed her there, Munro stops short of didactic explanations on all but one occasion when Ada, who is inclined to lecture Del anyway, makes a speech which is memorable because it contains the phrase, "lives of girls and women" that becomes the title of the work. It is Ada's quoting from "Locksley Hall" in this speech which completes the chain of references to Tennyson's treatment of the theme of women's aspirations. Here too,

Munro uses Tennyson indirectly as a reflective surface:

There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women. . . . All women have had up till now has been their connection with men. . . . He shall hold thee, when his passion shall have spent its novel force, a little closer than his dog, a little dearer than his horse. Tennyson wrote that. It's true. Was true. You will want to have children though. (p. 173)

Despite the hope expressed at the beginning of the passage, Del's mother reminds her daughter that the position of women in relation to men has changed little since Tennyson's day. Munro makes Ada's statement the thematic centre of the work, using it as both story title and title of the entire cycle. Since Ada refers to "Locksley Hall" in the passage, Munro places the entire work within a Tennysonian frame, just as she places DANCE within a classical frame by referring to the myth of Orpheus.

The word, "women" of the title underlines the importance of Ada Jordan as well as her daughter, Del. Because Ada is presented through the eyes of a narrator who has ambivalent feelings about her, her character is always problematic. Her habit of dramatizing herself embarrasses the teen-age Del, who would prefer a less conspicuous sort of mother. But LIVES goes further than DANCE, examining the effect of this mother not only on a daughter, but also on a daughter who wants to be a writer. Del has been brought up on her mother's stories of her miserable childhood when she suffered from the bullying of a fiendish brother. Years

later, this brother visits them in Jubilee and provides Del with another opportunity to compare story with reality. After figuring as the torturer in Ada's stories, Uncle Bill surprises Del by his failure to behave in character. She finds it difficult to reconcile the middle-aged man who takes her on a grocery-shopping spree with the wicked figure of her mother's stories. He compounds her problem by telling his version of his childhood, in which he remembers his mother not as a religious fanatic, as Ada does, but as a kindhearted person who brings a cocoon into the house and shows the children the wonder of a butterfly emerging from it. Del is given a lesson here on the difference point of view makes in a story:

That was in the same house. The same house where my mother used to find the fire out and her mother at prayer and where she took milk and cucumbers in the hope of getting to heaven.
(p.88)

Although at this point Del is inclined to suspect her mother and believe Uncle Bill, gradually he falls under suspicion too. Ostensibly the visit is intended to heal the breach between him and Ada before he dies of cancer, but a more sinister interpretation of his motives is gradually emerging. By flaunting his young wife in her fox-fur coat, he demonstrates that he has not given up torturing his sister, but has merely refined his methods. The episode is prolonged and the character of Uncle Bill developed in a way that suggests the resemblance between Alice Munro's

narrative technique and that of magic realist painting:

In much the same way certain Canadian magic realist painters flood an object in a clear light until it seems to take on a new and strange life, fiction writers look at their subject until it starts to look strange, mysterious, fascinating.⁷

The longer the action pauses and the eye of memory gazes steadily at Uncle Bill, the more sinister his behaviour seems. Nothing short of absolute triumph will satisfy him; he wants to humiliate his sister and brother-in-law and denigrate fox-farming, their way of life in order to increase his satisfaction in his own material success. Like the cancer which is killing him, his resentment of Ada is a hidden malignancy. Outwardly beneficent, he fools even Ada, who believes his promise of a legacy for her in his will. The sum mentioned, three hundred dollars, recalls the small legacy their mother received and insisted on spending on Bibles.

Ada finally overcomes her hatred for her brother, and pities him because "he is a dying man" (p. 89). Her implied forgiveness is in keeping with her character. In analysing other people, she habitually gives them the benefit of the doubt. Accordingly, she rejects the darker explanation of her brother's motives in favor of the more hopeful one. By accepting his visit as a genuine attempt at reconciliation, she reveals her characteristic optimism about human nature and the capacity of an individual to change. As her account

of her life reveals, she sees herself as a self-willed individual who chose the self she would become by rejecting the values of her family and substituting new values based on reason. Her faith in education as salvation replaces her mother's religious faith. To Ada, reason is supreme and passion its subordinate.

The strengths and weaknesses of her position are important to Del the young woman, as well as Del the writer. The title, *LIVES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN*, refers beyond literature to centre the work in the lives of its female characters. Del's mother, Fern Dogherty, Naomi, Miss Farris, Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace are all important to Del not only as material for fiction but also as examples of differing approaches to life. Each woman has accommodated herself to life by suppressing some aspects of her personality and emphasizing others. Unlike them, Del hopes to avoid denying any part of herself to conform to her society. But, the stories that older women tell about their youth show Del that they used to be like her. The question their stories raise is, why do women give up their dreams? Del becomes obsessed with the gap between the Fern Dogherty who studied voice and the Fern Dogherty who is their boarder now:

"Did you plan to be an opera singer?" I asked.
 "No, I just planned to be the lady working in the post office. Well, I did and I didn't. The work, the training. I just didn't have the ambition for it, I guess that was my trouble. (p. 142)

This explanation is unsatisfactory to Del, who partly believes Naomi's story of Fern's illegitimate child, which would provide the kind of compelling reason she hopes to discover. To test Naomi's theory, Del tries to trap Fern into betraying herself:

I took to noticing pictures of babies in the paper, or in magazines, when Fern was around, saying, "Aw, isn't it cute?" and then watching her closely for a flicker of remorse, maternal longing, as if someday she might actually be persuaded to burst into tears, fling out her empty arms, struck to the heart by an ad for talcum powder or strained meat. (pp. 143-4)

The overwrought tone of the clichés belongs to a romantic novelette or one of Uncle Benny's tabloids. The test is a failure, but the search of Fern's room turns up evidence about her which is more complex and contradictory than Del's imaginings. Looking for Mr. Chamberlain's letters, Del finds three bundles of papers: a chain letter, birth control information, and smutty verses. Like the conflicting stories about Fern, these discoveries show Del how difficult it is to know another person. When she applies this insight to creating character in fiction, she tries to remove contradictions, but discovers that the results do not satisfy her. She is disappointed in her first novel, which she sees as, "an unreliable structure rising from this house, the Sherriffs, a few poor facts, and everything that was not told" (p. 247). Del's eventual

meeting with Bobby Sherriff forces her to compare her artistic creation with reality, whereupon she discovers that she is more interested in what really happened than in what she has made up:

And what happened, I asked myself, to Marian?
 Not to Caroline. What happened to Marian?
 What happened to Bobby Sherriff when he had to
 stop baking cakes and go back to the asylum?
 Such questions persist, in spite of novels.
 (p. 209)

Del wants her novel to be more than an invented melodrama; she wants it to connect with life. In adopting the role of mediator between experience and art, she is conscious of the magnitude of the task. She is attempting to conjure up an entire town from memory in a futile but glorious effort to transcend the selectivity which is built into art:

And no list could hold what I wanted, for what I
 wanted was every last thing, every layer of
 speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or
 walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack,
 delusion, held still and held together--radiant,
 everlasting. (p. 249)

The all-inclusive fiction Del wants to write is a practical impossibility but a worthy goal; out of close attention to the details of the past comes fiction with the documentary authenticity of Munro's own. In the epilogue, Del's relationship to her memories points outside the text to the author, but also inside the text to Uncle Benny's relationship to his possessions in "The Flats Road". Del hoards memories in the same way as he hoards material

things: "He valued debris for its own sake and only pretended, to himself as well as to others, that he meant to get some practical use out of it" (p. 4). The accumulation of two generations in Uncle Benny's house resembles the raw material of fiction which Del finds radiant and everlasting. It contrasts with Uncle Craig's manuscript which she refuses to store in the same room with her own writing:

I didn't want Uncle Craig's manuscript put back with the things I had written. It seemed so dead to me, so heavy and dull and useless, that I thought it might deaden my things too, and bring me bad luck. (p. 62)

The tendency of prose to deaden what is lively and interesting in its pre-written form in the writer's mind is one of the first problems confronting Del when she attempts to write a novel:

Nobody knew about this novel. I had no need to tell anybody. I wrote out a few bits of it and put them away, but soon I saw that it was a mistake to write anything down; what I wrote down might flaw the beauty and wholeness of the novel in my mind. (p. 241)

In transposing the novel from an idea in her mind to words on the page, Del is faced with the artist's dilemma: art gives form to life, but in so doing, robs it of its inclusiveness. How can the writer interpret experience when forced to discard so much and use so little? Del never claims to have resolved this question, which she raises in the final segment of the work, "Epilogue: The Photographer".

LIVES ends ambiguously, yet hopefully, with Bobby Sherriff's parting gesture providing a metaphor which implies that Del can succeed in communicating her artistic vision just as this "plump ballerina" does:

. . . he rose on his toes like a dancer, like a plump ballerina. This action, accompanied by his delicate smile, appeared to be a joke not shared with me so much as displayed for me, and it seemed also to have a concise meaning, a stylized meaning--to be a letter, or a whole word, in an alphabet I did not know. (pp. 249-50)

Del does not understand exactly what Bobby is telling her, but his good will toward her comes through, and his example encourages her to make the equivalent effort to rise up on tiptoe and become a writer. By ending with Del saying, yes, the text leaves her at the point where she is about to begin writing, thereby implying a circular structure leading back to the first segment. Moreover, this opening story manages to suggest the mystery and ambiguity of actual experience by holding conflicting possibilities in suspension and raising unanswered questions. Is Madeleine beating her child? Is Uncle Benny a reliable narrator, or is the whole fabric of the tale a figment of his imagination?

Mystery and ambiguity first enter the story through Benny's tall tale of Sandy Stevenson, and are strengthened by the sensational headlines in the tabloid newspapers he keeps piled on his front porch. Together, they suggest a world which is not only diametrically opposed to Del's mother's kind of world but also is a world whose existence

she denies:

"But you don't believe that, do you?" said my mother with cheerful energy. She began explaining how it was all coincidence, imagination, self suggestion. (pp. 9-10)

Although Del's mother has an alternative vision of the world, its reliability is also called into question. When she belatedly realizes that Madeleine is beating Diane, her conclusion is based on the circumstantial evidence of marks she remembers noticing on the child's legs. These bruises recall the conclusion of Benny's story of Sandy Stevenson: "You go and ask Sandy Stevenson. I seen the bruises. I seen them myself" (p. 10). Since bruises have been used to corroborate a ghost story, their recurrence in the context of Madeleine and Diane introduces an element of doubt, which is reinforced by Ada's being the character who reaches the conclusion that Madeleine beats her child. Ada is naive in many ways; her judgement is repeatedly questioned by the narrator and her father. She believes, for instance, that the police would institute a search for Madeleine and Diane "nation-wide", and has a rationalist's faith that a solution exists for every problem:

"I don't know what the hesitation is about. It's crystal clear to me."
But what was crystal clear to my mother was obviously hazy and terrifying to Uncle Benny.
(p. 21)

The ironic repetition of her phrase "crystal clear"

emphasizes the gap between the extremes which she and Uncle Benny represent. In *LIVES* there is a persistent sense of distance between us and them: the members of Del's family at one pole, and the denizens of the Flats Road, particularly Uncle Benny and his mail-order family, at the other.

By repeatedly raising the question of its own truth, "The Flats Road" draws attention to itself as a literary text; however, it also refers beyond itself to comment on human loneliness. Each individual is likely to experience life as if he were inhabiting a private world, rather than sharing a world in common with other people. Because of this sense of isolation, communication between individuals often fails, sometimes in ways that are as tragicomic as the meeting of Ada and Madeleine at the grocery store. Madeleine refuses Ada's invitation to visit with this excuse: "I don't walk nowhere on gravel roads unless I have to" (p. 16). To this, Ada gives the matter-of-fact reply that she could come across the fields. There is more than incidental irony in their conversation since the plot turns on Madeleine's self-imposed isolation from the Flats Road community. By granting her the privacy she demands so fiercely, her neighbours become accomplices in whatever she is doing to her child.

Demonstrably, Ada is not the kind of person who uses ignorance as an excuse to evade moral responsibility. Once she suspects Madeleine of child battering, she wants to intervene to protect the child, and she is distressed to

think that she did not act sooner, asking herself, "Why didn't I think of it myself? If I'd known the truth I could have reported her" (p. 20). No wonder she is slow to realize what is happening. Since Madeleine is a creature belonging to Uncle Benny's tabloid world, Ada never quite grasps her. Finally the narrator admits the same defeat. She can only approach Madeleine at the distance of a story, recalling her "going down the road in her red jacket, with her legs like scissors" (p. 27). Even her violence transforms itself into a wry joke, "Madeleine! That madwoman!" (p. 27)

In retrospect, Madeleine and her abuse of her child seem part of a grotesque tale that cannot be true; but "The Flats Road" simultaneously asserts that it might be true: "So lying alongside our world was Uncle Benny's world like a troubling distorted reflection, the same but never at all the same" (p. 26). Del is troubled by the closeness of the Uncle Benny world where "luck and wickedness were gigantic and unpredictable" (p. 26). A nightmare sense of powerlessness pervades "The Flats Road", implying that the individual's area of effectiveness is extremely small. Once he leaves the country, which is his proper sphere, and approaches the city, Benny is helpless. Although Del's mother's common-sense solutions to the difficulties he encounters in the city occur to him as well, nothing works: the gas station cannot supply a city map, the heavy traffic frustrates his attempt to follow directions, and his

determination ebbs away. The futility of Benny's attempt to rescue Diane suggests that once the tenuous contact between individuals is lost, it cannot be regained. Only in childhood can Del move freely between alternate worlds. Growing up is a process of sealing off the passages that once provided access to different spheres. In "Heirs of the Living Body", Del gradually visits her aunts less often:

What could I ever say? Their house became like a tiny sealed-off country, with its own ornate customs and elegantly, ridiculously complicated language, where true news of the outside world was not exactly forbidden, but became more and more impossible to deliver. (p. 59)

But news of the world outside the imprisoned consciousness of the individual cannot enter except by means of messengers. In fact, the role of messenger is one of Del's most important functions as a child, and one which she takes on later when she becomes a writer.

Early in "The Flats Road", when she writes Uncle Benny's letter for him, Del becomes his amanuensis, a crucial preliminary step on the way to becoming a writer. The letter that he dictates and Del writes offers a home to a woman whom Uncle Benny has never met. By its exaggerated account of the comforts that he can provide for the mail-order bride, it proclaims itself as much a fiction as any of Del's later stories. By writing the letter which brings Uncle Benny and Madeleine together, Del acts as intermediary, a role she is well equipped to play because of

her youth and adaptability. She happily divides her time between Uncle Benny's home and her own in "The Flats Road", between her home and Jenkins Bend in "Heirs to the Living Body", and between her home and Naomi's in "Changes and Ceremonies". Del sees herself as occupying a special position with access to privileged information: "It often seemed then that nobody else knew what really went on or what a person was, but me" (p. 45). Because she has occupied more than one world, and people with differing viewpoints have confided in her, she is uniquely qualified to be a writer and speak for the people of her community. In "Epilogue: The Photographer", she explains how her concept of writing gradually expanded from an emphasis on imagining and inventing to an appreciation of observing and discovering. Summarizing her first novel, she ridicules her youthful tendency to exaggerate:

For this novel I had changed Jubilee, too, or picked out some features of it and ignored others. . . . People in it were very thin, like Caroline, or fat as bubbles. Their speech was subtle and evasive and bizarrely stupid; their platitudes crackled with madness. The season was always the height of summer--white brutal heat, dogs lying as if dead on the sidewalks, waves of air shuddering, jellylike over the empty highway. (p. 243)

Although Del is discussing her own novel, she alludes to it from the distance of memory further removed by irony. Unlike her letter on Uncle Benny's behalf, the novel itself does not appear in the frame, except for an occasional

phrase, "her womb swollen like a hard yellow gourd in her belly" (p. 243), to display its hyperbolic tone. As Del recalls her plot, characters and style, her novel shows itself to be pasted together from borrowings from other writers, with the result that it never compels belief. Not only are there faults in style, but also deficiencies in the would-be novelist's understanding of her subject. Although the Sherriff family is the original impetus for her novel, Del does not know them well. She is only attracted to them because of their strangeness, and the story she tries to tell is a daydream about them: "All pictures. The reasons for things happening I seemed vaguely to know, but could not explain" (p. 244). Such self-indulgent fantasizing is far removed from the transforming of reality into art, a process which demands analytical thinking as well as imagination.

Despite its excesses, however, Del's attempted novel has a dreamlike coherence on the level of metaphor. Her photographer embodies the qualities of the ideal artist. He is a seer in both senses of the word, observer and visionary. His photographs not only record experience but also interpret it.⁸ The photographer suggests that Del can already create powerful imaginary characters, but even he shows the characteristic vagueness of literary portraits not drawn from life. Moreover, he bears a close resemblance to Hawthorne's daguerreotypist whose picture of the judge reveals the ultimate truth about its subject in *THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES*.

Del sees her novel's failings most clearly in the implausible death she has arranged for her heroine, Caroline. Now Del is beset by "niggling considerations of fact", as common-sense objections to her plot begin to occur to her, such as the effect the low water level of the Wawanash River in summer will have on Caroline's suicide: "Instead of moving, head bowed, moonlight-naked, acquiescent, into its depths, Caroline would have to lie down on her face as if she was drowning herself in the bathtub" (pp. 243-4). The marked shift in her attitude to her novel in this passage is typical of the epilogue, in which she uses irony against herself more sharply than before. Clearly, she considers this attempt at novel-writing a failure, and since she rarely judges her past behaviour in terms of passing or failing, this final, self-critical note is a sign of change. Whereas she can pass through her sexual initiation process with Mr. Chamberlain, Jerry Storey, and Garnet, always insisting that she is undamaged and unrepentant, she must see the fundamental wrongness of her first approach to writing fiction before she can progress beyond fantasy to art.

In accepting Bobby Sherriff's invitation onto the porch, she takes an important artistic step: she forces herself to test her fantasy against reality. Until then, she has seen herself as the outsider, with the community as audience; but Bobby Sherriff hails her on the basis of their commonality, he as a former university student, and she as a

prospective one. He gives her advice: "When you go to college you must look after your diet. That is very important. . . . You have to nourish the brain if you want to use the brain" (pp. 247-8). Bobby's diatribe on nourishment and the brain culminates in Del's eating the cake he has baked, suggesting that she takes him into herself; therefore, she is enabled to express his truth in her fiction. Offered without icing, Bobby's cake implies ordinary life unembellished by the melodrama of cloaked photographers and suicidal nymphomaniac heroines. When Bobby rises on his tiptoes, he is saying two things: notice me, and use me in fiction. The closing incident is, therefore, a crucial one for Del as artist. Before she can find her artistic voice, she must change her attitude to the people in her immediate vicinity, and recognize in them the depth and vitality from which to make fiction which has the authenticity that comes of being rooted in personal experience. Whereas the photographer is an obvious and heavy-handed symbol of the artist, Bobby Sherriff is subtle and paradoxical, much like the people Munro describes in "Open Letter":

One of the things fascinating to a fiction writer about such towns is the way people live in the eyes of others. Every life is a drama, everybody is on stage. People are cast, they are defined, placed in roles which they tamper with at their peril. It is not true that such a place will not allow eccentricity. Oddity is necessary, just as much as sin is; it is just that both things must be classified, declared and appreciated, and that there is no way back

when this road is taken. Within these firm definitions--and touching them, perhaps at hardly any points--live bewildered and complicated people. They are driven to curious escape hatches, sometimes, or exaggerated performances. Which is something fiction can be made from.⁹

Bobby Sherriff is a prime example of a man who has taken on the role of town madman, and is now trapped within it. In a work preoccupied with storytelling, Bobby is the last storyteller. He offers a peculiarly unsatisfactory explanation for his madness and wishes Del luck with her life, a final benediction which completes the literary apprenticeship begun the summer when she was a child about to enter grade four, and Uncle Benny demanded an answer to the question, "Can you write?" (p. 10).

Notes

- 1
Alice Munro, *LIVES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1971), p. 1. Subsequent references appear in the text.
- 2
James Polk, "Deep Caves and Kitchen Linoleum," rev. of *LIVES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN*, by Alice Munro, *CANADIAN LITERATURE*, No. 54 (1972), p. 103.
- 3
J.R. (Tim) Struthers, "Alice Munro and the American South," *THE CANADIAN REVIEW OF AMERICAN STUDIES*, 6 No. 2 (1975), p. 197; rpt. in *THE CANADIAN NOVEL HERE AND NOW*, ed. John Moss (Toronto: N.C. Press, 1978), p. 122.
- 4
Linda Margaret Leitch, "Alice Munro's Fiction: Explorations in Open Forms," M.A. thesis Univ. of Guelph 1980, p. 45.
- 5
Margaret Laurence, "Time and the Narrative Voice," in *THE NARRATIVE VOICE*, ed. John Metcalfe (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 128.
- 6
Alfred Tennyson, *THE PRINCESS* l. 134-5 in *THE POETRY OF TENNYSON*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans, 1969), p. 755.
- 7
Geoff Hancock, ed., *MAGIC REALISM: AN ANTHOLOGY* (Toronto: Aya Press, 1980), p. 10.
- 8
See also, Brandon Conron, "Munro's Wonderland," *CANADIAN LITERATURE* No. 78 (1978), p. 110 .
- 9
Alice Munro, "An Open Letter," *JUBILEE* No. 1 (1974), p. 6.

Chapter Three

Relinquishing Authority

SOMETHING, published between LIVES and WHO, is a short story collection whose organizing principle is not immediately apparent.¹ Whereas a single voice unifies LIVES as Del's story and WHO as Rose's, a variety of voices recount the stories in SOMETHING. Nevertheless, the separate stories are linked through the recurring theme of uncertain relations between the generations and the sexes, as well as a pervading tone of regret or bafflement. Like Janus, SOMETHING looks in two directions: back to a family like the Jordans of DANCE and LIVES, and ahead to women who are more like Rose, the central character of WHO. In "Winter Wind" and "The Ottawa Valley", the rural setting and the family dominated by its female members are familiar from Munro's previous works, but in "Tell Me Yes or No" and "The Spanish Lady", the new protagonists who begin to emerge are more disillusioned than Del Jordan. Unlike the irrepressible Del, they suffer disappointment at the hands of husbands and lovers, thereby learning painful lessons in self-reliance, a pattern which Munro later brings to its full development in WHO.

Not only the sensibility of the central character changes in SOMETHING, but also the tone of the narrative. In his 1982 interview with Alice Munro, Tim Struthers

comments: "SOMETHING I'VE BEEN MEANING TO TELL YOU . establishes a relatively new and more mysterious tone for your work." ² The mystery that Struthers discerns is reflected in the form of the stories. Although in *LIVES* Del talks about her sense of life as a mysterious process, *LIVES* is not a mysterious book because Del establishes herself as a reliable narrator, a young writer bent on getting at the truth of her past. Therefore, the reader can orient himself with her point of view. She tells what happened in a voice which remains separate from the narrative and slightly superior to it since this is her older and wiser self remembering an earlier period in her life. In *SOMETHING*, however, the narrators are less reliable guideposts; distinctions between what did happen and what might have happened become blurred. Compared to the youthful Del, who optimistically believes that she will eventually learn to express the truth, these narrators are jaded and confused, more aware of the limitations of storytelling than its possibilities.

One reason for the differences between *SOMETHING* and the earlier books is that it was written during a period of creative experimentation when Munro attempted to change her form from the short story to the novel. Although she began the title story intending it to be a novel, it gradually evolved into a short story:

You know I really wanted to write a novel of that story. Then it just sort of boiled down like

maple syrup. All I had left was that story. For me, it would have been daring to stretch that material out into a full novel. I wouldn't be sure it had the strength. So I don't take that chance.³

Although Munro's description of herself as a timid writer lacking the novelist's courage is too self-deprecating, she is probably right in choosing the short story as the better vehicle for the effects she wants to achieve. For her, writing in chapters proved disappointing:

But there always comes a point where everything seems to be getting really flat. You don't feel the tension. I can go on writing it so many words a day, and I pretty well know where it has to go, but I don't feel this pulling on the rope to get to the other side that I have to feel. And so I always do the same thing. I go back. I chop it up. I make it into these things that I can⁴

Her dissatisfaction with chapter writing stems from losing the tension produced by the greater compression of the short story. The analogy of pulling on a rope helps describe not only the writer's feelings but also the effect on the reader. The chopping Munro mentions is evident in sudden time shifts, the abrupt switch from experience to a dream or a story recalled from the past. She builds tension by juxtaposing memory and the present, nudging the reader to fit together the fragments and so discover their meaning. The greater formal complexity of Munro's later writing, expressed in her increased use of embedded stories, and experiments with voice and self-conscious narrators,

introduce ambiguity into stories whose fictional nature is disguised by a careful structure of everyday detail which reassures and convinces the reader that he is being told factual truth. Explaining how her imagination works, the narrator of "Tell Me Yes or No" sounds remarkably like Munro indirectly confiding her own artistic method:

Would you like to know how I was informed of your death? I go into the faculty kitchen, to make myself a cup of coffee before my ten o'clock class. Dodie Charles who is always baking something has brought a cherry pound cake. (The thing we old pros know about, in these fantasies, is the importance of detail, solidity; yes, a cherry pound cake.) (p. 109)

Undoubtedly, the roundness, redness, and sweetness of cherries compel belief not only in the authenticity of the cake, but also in the discovery of the lover's death in an article from the newspaper wrapped around the cake. The surprising revelation, made convincing by means of the homely detail, is typical of Munro's narrative technique. In the title story, for example, Blaikie Noble's bus passengers tour an Indian graveyard, limestone gardens, and a millionaire's mansion. These factual details promote belief in an actual town, but the town's name, Mock Hill, introduces an element of doubt. The reader is permitted the illusion of reality, but is reminded that it is an illusion. Contrary to Munro's assessment of herself as a writer who hesitates to take a chance, in *SOMETHING* she shows herself willing to take risks to push at the limits of storytelling.

As the title suggests, the collection is preoccupied with meaning and telling, exploring the paradox of telling as the means of hiding meaning, and silence as the means of revelation. Accordingly, in the title story, Et's major disclosures are less significant than the statements she omits: of her love for Arthur, her jealousy of Char, her guilt over Char's death. Structurally "Something" is much more complex than "Postcard", an earlier story from DANCE similarly concerned with a woman jilted. Possibilities multiply: Et discovers rat poison in a kitchen cupboard; Arthur is ill; Char is unhappy. The reader is invited to infer more than one possible narrative sequence. The narrative of "Postcard", which also concerns a love affair in a small town, is kept transparent to encourage the reader to forget that he is engaged in reading a story; "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You", however, deliberately raises the issue of fiction versus fact when Char is found dead: "There was no fuss about the cause of death as there is in stories" (p. 23). Blaikie Noble, over whom Char may have committed suicide, attends her funeral and keeps his remorse, if any, to himself:

He had come back to Mock Hill on the day Char was found. A few hours too late, like some story. Et in her natural confusion could not remember what it was. Romeo and Juliet, she thought later. But Blaikie of course did not do away with himself afterwards, he went back to Toronto" (p. 23).

Comparing illusion and reality in this fashion demonstrates

how difficult it is to know what is true in actual experience as well as in stories. Separating the truth from the illusion becomes the protagonist's compelling task.

The narrators in *SOMETHING* consider the ethics of storytelling and writing fiction. "Material" examines a writer, Hugo, through the eyes of a narrator who was once married to him. She ridicules the capsule biography which accompanies one of his short stories. To the jaundiced eye of a former wife, the legend of literary he-man, which the biography promotes, is not a true picture of Hugo: "But listen to the lies, the half-lies, the absurdities" (p. 29). She chides him for leaving out his former job as examination marker even though he preferred it to the robustly masculine occupations he is at pains to list. One after another, the narrator's memories of the period when she lived with him in a Vancouver apartment contradict the flattering self-portrait he has produced for publication. According to his ex-wife, he is selfish, unsympathetic, exploitive, irresponsible, a "filthy moral idiot" (p. 41); yet, she admits having participated with him in the game of transforming Dotty, who lived in the basement apartment, into a fiction. Like Hugo, the narrator referred to Dottie as "the-harlot-in-residence" and her mother as "the Green Hornet". But as she came to know Dotty better, she grew reluctant to make these jokes or report Dotty's remarks to Hugo: "I got fonder of Dotty, used to her, less likely to store up and repeat what she said" (p. 37). Because she was

kinder to Dotty, the narrator regarded herself as Hugo's superior; now, however, she is forced to re-examine their relative merits in light of an astonishingly perceptive story Hugo has written about Dotty:

There is Dotty lifted out of life and held in light, suspended in the marvellous clear jelly that Hugo has spent all his life learning how to make. It is an act of magic, there is no getting around it; it is an act you might say, of a special, unsparing, unsentimental love" (p. 43).

The revelation in Hugo's story of an unsuspected capacity for love takes the narrator by surprise. By calling Hugo's writing a manifestation of "unsentimental love", she implies that what she herself felt for Dotty was mere sentimentality. Whatever Hugo's past crimes against Dotty, he has redeemed himself by making her into a story which is as luminous as "clear jelly". This convincing defense of the artist's right to special status is emphasized by its position as a concluding statement which reverses the narrator's earlier declaration that Hugo's moral lapses are indefensible. Hugo's story of Dotty is the enabling spring which launches the unexpected ending; therefore, it is a structural necessity. The narrator does not explain the subtle ways in which Hugo's art changes her perceptions, but she alludes to the process in the phrase, "act of magic" one of several references to magic in this volume.

Magic also occurs in "Walking on Water", when Mr. Loughheed reacts to the books on his young friend Eugene's

shelves:

Mr. Lougheed's eyes had strayed to a shelf of another kind of books Eugene read, which did not seem to him to tie in too readily with the first kind. These books were by and about people who made prophecies, they were about astral bodies and psychic experiences and supernatural powers and every kind of hoax or magic, if that was what you wanted to call it. (p. 74)

By cataloguing the books' contents, the narrator not only suggests the particular ideas which threaten Mr. Lougheed's reasoned response to life, but also invokes the changed intellectual atmosphere of the decade, summed up by the kind of books which many young people were reading. Like the hippie trio, Calla, Rex and Rover, books on the occult help place the story in the nineteen sixties. Since Eugene's books on mysticism and related matters share his shelves with the philosophical writings of Heidegger, Kant, and Teilhard de Chardin, thinkers Mr. Lougheed admires, they reflect the contradictions in Eugene's personality which discomfit Mr. Lougheed. To the retired druggist, life is a dialectic between reason and unreason, but to Eugene the two states are not necessarily exclusive. He embraces paradox, replying to Mr. Lougheed's suggestion that his plan to walk on water is some kind of joke: "It could be, a serious kind of joke" (p. 74).

Eugene seems to be advocating something like Keats' negative capability: "that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable

reaching after fact & reason".⁵ Keats' epithet "irritable" aptly describes Mr. Lougheed's exasperated attempts to penetrate the detachment of those around him as he pursues the traditional course of a man of good will, and assumes the responsibility for Eugene's well-being that goes with friendship. The state of mind envisioned by Keats and advocated by Eugene is beyond Mr. Lougheed, although he tries to understand because of his instinctive liking and respect for Eugene. Attempting to read Eugene's books on magic, he cannot make out what the young man sees in them: "Using a word out of his own youth, he told Eugene that all this had him stumped" (p. 74). The word "stumped" with its outworn rural connotations, mirrors the outdated views of an old man at odds with the urban young people among whom he now lives.

Again in "Tell Me Yes or No", the narrator describes books on magic in Barbara's Book Mart:

Other books deal with magic, there are really hundreds of books about witches, spells, clairvoyance, rituals, all kinds of tricks and wonders. (p. 119)

The list of subjects contained in these books warns the reader against comfortable assumptions that would limit reality to what is readily explainable.

The same strategy operates in "Forgiveness in Families", in which a dying woman miraculously recovers from a heart attack. Told from the biased point of view of her

daughter, the story relates how the woman's condition is so grave that doctors and nurses do not expect her to survive the night. As the narrator keeps vigil in the hospital, her ne'er-do-well brother, a member of an unnamed religious cult, arrives with his "brother priests" and insists upon conducting a prayer ritual which he claims will heal his mother. Next morning, the mother's condition has improved greatly, and the narrator is left with mixed feelings of relief and disappointment. Although she presents her brother as a selfish dilettante whose enthusiasms are shallow and short-lived, she cannot be sure that his incantations have not worked magic upon their sick mother. Since the narrator's exasperated tone keeps the reader at a distance, she fails to attract sympathy when she suffers the blow to her pride which results from her brother's magical success. Instead, the story has an air of artifice. Munro is less interested in convincing the reader that events took place as described, than in exploring the dynamics of this brother-sister relationship. Calling attention to the differences between the expected and actual outcome of her mother's illness, the narrator directs attention toward the conventions of fiction, and simultaneously, employs the narrative convention of reversing stereotypes. Reduced to its essence, the story transforms good sister and bad brother into bad sister and good brother, using pride, the narrator's besetting sin, to justify the switch.

Along similar lines, "Memorial" and "Winter Wind" also

examine proud individuals bent on controlling life rather than submitting to it. The narrator of "Memorial" admits to periodic feelings of helplessness:

Compared to June, she did live irresponsibly. Eileen had to see this, she had to admit it. Her lazy garbage all thrown together, her cupboards under their surface tidiness bursting with chaos. (pp. 209-10)

Although she castigates herself for her failures in managing everyday routine, Eileen is not convinced that her sister's way of life is superior to hers:

Here was a system of digestion which found everything to its purposes. It stuck at nothing. Japanese gardens, pornographic movies, accidental death. All of them accepted, chewed and altered, assimilated, destroyed. (p. 216)

June's consumer-like determination to savor all available experiences is appalling when it extends to her son's death. Eileen's contrasting helplessness appears a humane and necessary accomodation to the inescapable conditions of mortality and grief.

Life as fiction pervades these stories. June's way of life, for instance, is carefully constructed to deny the haphazard quality of existence. In this she resembles the grandmother in "Winter Wind", who married "while still in love with, though very angry at, another man" (p. 200). For the rest of her life, the grandmother bears the consequences of her early decision, and never relinquishes her first love, "that self-glorifying dangerous self-denying

passion, never satisfied, never risked, to last a lifetime" (p. 200). By marrying the wrong man, the grandmother achieves control over her rejected suitor, whose courtship of her is believed to have persisted despite his several marriages. With a new tentativeness and self-consciousness, the narrator of "Winter Wind", like the narrator of "Memorial", questions the validity of her interpretation: "And how is anybody to know, I think as I put this down, how am I to know what I claim to know?" (p. 201)

The narrator has pieced together her grandmother's story from scraps of evidence accumulated over years, but a story like "Tell Me Yes or No" goes beyond speculation to observe the mental process of transforming the experience of love into fiction. The necessary elements are memory, letters and imagination, with distance of both time and space acting as a catalyst. The supposition is that letters from an absent lover stop arriving. Instead of recounting her reaction to the cessation of letters and describing what subsequently happens, the narrator proposes various possible directions in which the plot might unfold. A study of obsessive passion, "Tell Me Yes or No" concerns a protagonist attempting to cure herself of a love which causes her more suffering than it is worth:

Love is not in the least unavoidable, there is a choice made. It is just that it is hard to know when the choice was made, or when, in spite of seeming frivolous, it became irreversible.
(p. 111)

As before, drawing the line between the provisional and the absolute is the difficulty. In *LIVES*, Del identified this difference between herself and Garnet French: she had committed herself to him only provisionally, whereas he had committed himself to her absolutely. Exactly how this surrender of self to the loved one is accomplished remains mysterious, but the process is suspected of being irrational and having dangerous consequences. The narrator of "Tell Me Yes or No" would avoid it if possible: "I had some time before this given up on intrigues, on anxious subplots" (p. 111). By equating falling in love with subplot, the narrator shows how, for her, self-consciousness is narrative-consciousness: She sees her life as a story unfolding. Accordingly, an exchange of stories precedes lovemaking even when it is a casual indulgence:

But after a while I do tell somebody, a man I work with, Gus Marks. He has recently separated from his wife. He takes me out to dinner and we drink and tell each other our stories, then mostly on my initiative go to bed (p. 110)

Sharing stories at least extends the length of time the man and woman are together, and the recitation of past histories creates an illusion of closeness which lends humanity to their liaison. In the case of the lover addressed as "you" by the narrator, a shared past is a powerful aphrodisiac. The narrator speculates that she especially loved this man for having known her years before:

I loved you for linking me with my past, with my young self pushing the stroller along the campus paths, innocent through no fault of my own. If I could kindle love then and take it now there was less waste than I had thought. (p. 113)

The idea of a love re-awakened from an earlier time attracts her by its power to unify past and present, and provide a storylike coherence which the random events of experience seem to preclude.

By the end of "Tell Me Yes or No", the narrator's fantasies are so interwoven with her account of what has happened that it is impossible to separate the two. The confusion is intentional, reflecting the narrator's confused feelings, the unknowable extent to which her love is a fiction in her own mind, rather than a fact verifiable in experience. The dreamlike journey to the dead lover's city and the confrontation with the lover's widow are proferred only to be withdrawn in the hypnotic conclusion:

Nevermind. I invented her. I invented you, as far as my purposes go. I invented loving you and I invented your death. I have my tricks and my trapdoors, too. I don't understand their workings at the present moment, but I have to be careful, I won't speak against them. (p. 124)

Not only is the narrator unable to explain her fictions, but also she would refuse to do so even if she could. The conclusion draws attention to the fictionalizing process as something unfathomable, and warns of the dangers of plumbing it too deeply. The narrator knows that her illusions are necessary if she is to retain her identity; nevertheless,

she invites the reader to participate in the process of making the story by admitting a range of possible interpretations, some of them contradicting others.

Throughout "SOMETHING", narrators often behave like magicians revealing their magic tricks to the audience. Instead of a single version of the truth, they offer alternative plots, as in "Tell Me Yes or No", or letters, as in "The Spanish Lady". Coincidence further strains the illusion of realism in the title story, as does the clever twist at the end of "How I Met My Husband". Puzzled, tentative narrators who voice their uncertainty by undermining their own narratives are characteristic of SOMETHING, whereas an authoritative narrator is felt to be in control of LIVES. Although Del Jordan occasionally alludes to the difficulty of capturing in fiction the totality of experience, she never allows her doubts to puncture the illusion she is creating.

Edward Said's indispensable analysis of authority in fiction isolates special conditions upon which narrative fiction depends: one is a sense of doubt felt by author, reader and especially the characters in the work that the authority of a single voice or group of voices is sufficient unto itself; another is a belief that truth can only be approached indirectly, "by means of a mediation that paradoxically, because of its falseness makes the truth truer".⁶ Although Said is referring to novels, his conclusion is equally true of this short story cycle. As he

points out, "the principle of authority provides a motion always attempting to steer clear of obstacles that emerge to inhibit, maim or destroy it utterly."⁷ The uneasy balance between authority and molestation, to use Said's terms, engages the reader in the process of discovery: "a truer truth is one arrived at by a process of elimination: alternatives similar to truth are shed one by one".⁸ The model of alternatives being shed as the story proceeds fits many stories in *SOMETHING*: the poison in "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You" that seems at first to be intended for Arthur, is later suspected in Char's death; Margaret, in "The Spanish Lady", who seems to be the outsider graciously befriended by the narrator, emerges as the other woman, threatening to destroy the narrator's marriage. Since alternatives have been proposed and refuted, the conclusion more strongly compels the reader's belief.

In addition to the deliberate undermining of the narrator's authority, another successful innovation in *SOMETHING* is the implied listener to whom the first-person narratives are addressed. Munro has previously used the memoir form with great skill, but in *SOMETHING* she introduces a confiding voice. In her analysis of voice in Munro's first-person fiction, M.G. Osachoff distinguishes three distinct tones: memoir, confession and meditation. According to Osachoff, the confiding voice of the confession reveals the moral qualms of a narrator over her past behaviour, while the confiding voice of the meditation

reveals similar qualms over making fiction out of actual people and incidents from her past.⁹ In this collection, Munro's readiness to explore more painful autobiographical materials marks her maturity as a writer, and helps account for the variety of voice and greater narrative self-consciousness of the stories in *SOMETHING*. Munro herself has expressed dissatisfaction with "Executioners", "Walking on Water" and "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You"; nevertheless, she considers them important steps in her artistic development:

Then I wrote a story in here that I don't think works at all. It's a very embarrassing story, I think, called "Executioners," where, again, I was trying to find out how to do a certain kind of thing, and it didn't quite do it.¹⁰

Admittedly, Munro failed to solve all the problems of the more complex form she decided to use; nevertheless, she succeeds in producing a medley of strong competing voices, the result of creative energy escaping from the rigid conventions of realism. No mere demonstrations of virtuosity, Munro's experiments with form are aimed at finding new ways to tell stories, based upon her insight into the differences between habitual ways of thinking in men and women. When the narrator in "Material" sees the similarity between her first and second husbands, she also intuitively understands that her view of the world is different from theirs because she is a woman:

At the same time, at dinner, looking at my husband Gabriel, I decided that he and Hugo are not really so unlike. Both of them have managed something. Both of them have decided what to do about everything they run across in this world, what attitude to take, how to ignore or use things. In their limited and precarious ways they both have authority. They are not at the mercy. Or think they are not. (pp. 43-4)

The male ability to filter out aspects of experience that do not accord with a pragmatic view of the world parallels the writer's authority, or ability to select details that develop a story, and reject those that subvert it. But Munro's female narrators continually affirm the reality of disorder and contradiction as part of life. Although women can learn the male approach, and, like June in "Memorial", attempt to master life, the alternative of acknowledging and submitting to strong chaotic passions like love, grief and jealousy is not necessarily a weakness. Under stress, the women in SOMETHING bend without breaking, and so do the new narrative forms in which Munro incorporates them.

An admission of uncertainty by the narrator in telling her story sometimes aids the communication process. At the end of "The Spanish Lady", when the narrator witnesses the final cry and death of an old man in the railway station, her own troubles seem insignificant: "What we say and feel no longer rings true, it is slightly beside the point" (p. 190). Having registered the gap between emotional pain and the pain of a life ending, the narrator concludes on a puzzled note: "This is a message; I really believe it is;

but I don't see how I can deliver it" (p. 191). Rather than attempting to analyse the effect of the stranger's death upon her, the narrator equates it with a message that she does not know how to send and communicates her state of mind by means of the analogy. Paradoxically, by relinquishing authority, she can better achieve her purpose of persuading the reader to imagine her feelings.

One of the narrators who has relinquished authority in SOMETHING is Dorothy, the elderly grandmother in "Marakesh". While she was a teacher, Dorothy refused to alter her teaching method, but insisted upon repeating what she had found successful in the past. Stubbornly, she continued to smoke cigarettes despite a petition urging her to stop. Once she had made up her mind on any subject, she never altered. Now that she is retired, however, she rarely looks back on her years in the classroom, sloughs off her former rigidity, and becomes fascinated with change. Whereas her young granddaughter, Jeanette, is grieved to find the elm trees cut down when she returns for a visit, Dorothy accepts the inevitability of change. Although she still appreciates beauty, she realizes that she no longer resents the loss of beauty in her surroundings as she once would have. If the familiar houses she sees from her window were torn down and replaced by a shopping centre parking lot, she would not be unduly upset:

Anything would do for her to look at; beautiful or ugly had ceased to matter, because there was in

everything something to be discovered. This was a feeling that had come on her as she got older, and it was not at all a peaceful, letting-go sort of feeling, such as old people were supposed to get; it was the very opposite, pinning her where she was in irritable, baffled concentration. (pp. 162-3)

It is Dorothy's attention to what is happening in the present moment that distinguishes her from her sister, Viola, who more effectively insulates herself against change, maintaining that, "pleasant thoughts keep you young" (p. 163). What Viola fails to realize is that the illusion of youth may not be worth preserving when its price is the denial of everything painful. Rather than keep life at a distance through forced cheerfulness, Dorothy is prepared to accept the pain that goes with allowing life to change her. Having relinquished power over younger people now that she is retired, she has become more curious about them, more interested in listening to them talk. During her granddaughter's visit, she impulsively invites a neighbour whose wife is dying of cancer to come over for a drink, thereby causing a chain of events that need never have occurred. Later the same night, Dorothy further indulges her curiosity by going to the end of her garden to look into Blair King's sunporch where he and her granddaughter Jeanette are making love. Although the sight disturbs Dorothy, causing her to tremble violently and fear that she is on the verge of a stroke, ultimately it confirms her respect for herself:

What if Viola had seen any of that? More than she could stand. Strength is necessary, as well as something like gratitude, if you are going to turn into a lady peeping Tom at the end of your life. (p. 174)

Dorothy can admit to herself that she is something of a voyeur. Unlike Viola, she is committed to the process of discovery. Her strength is in her acceptance of her entire self, including her lewd curiosity.

A similar tolerance for imperfection motivates Robina's speech to the narrator near the end of "Executioners": "If you let one bad thing like this bother you there's going to be a lot of trouble for you in this world" (p. 153). The bad thing may refer to the loss of life in the fire, or the blow Robina gave the child for mentioning Jimmy and Duval, Robina's brothers, as though implicating them in the fire. Instead of ending with the narrator wiser than she was at the beginning, "Executioners" ends with the narrator unable to distinguish between conflicting memories of what happened. The mystery of the fire cannot be solved; it can only pass out of living memory:

When everybody is dead who could have remembered it, then I suppose the fire will be finished with, it will be just as if nobody had ever run through that door. (p. 155)

Even though the narrator declares that the fire can be obliterated by the end of the lifetimes of its witnesses, the context of her statement within a written narrative

widens the circle to include all its readers.

As well as new implications of narrative, Munro discovers in *SOMETHING* new possibilities at the level of the individual word. Del Jordan would pause to relish a word's sound in *LIVES*; the narrators of *SOMETHING* are more apt to pause over the connotations of words. Struck by the evocative power of a particular word to recall a period in their lives, they interrupt their recollections to comment directly on connotation. The narrator of "Tell me Yes or No" recalls the years when she was a young mother by the adjective "mature":

A word we often used was "mature." We would meet somebody we had known a few years ago and we would report that this person had greatly matured.
(p. 107)

The effect of singling out the word is ironic. By stating that "mature" was used often, the narrator implies that her former notions about maturity were fashionable nonsense. Elsewhere, ironic effect is doubled by isolating two words for purposes of comparison, as in "Executioners", when the narrator compares the words "alcoholic" and "drunk":

Alcoholic was not a word spoken in our house; I don't believe it was spoken much anywhere, at that time. Drunk was the word used, but that was in the town. (p. 139)

From these comments on word choice, the reader is led to infer not only the father's weakness, but also the secrecy of his drinking. As a child, the narrator had only a hazy

understanding of the family situation. She recalls her efforts to reconcile her mother's version of her father as a wronged man, with the taunts she heard about him at school. In *SOMETHING* Munro rejects direct statements and chooses rather to allow the reader to make inferences. Recently she has commented unfavourably on her earlier penchant for summing up in the concluding paragraphs of her stories:

And now, I would go back, if I could rewrite most of those stories, and I would chop out a lot of those words and final sentences. And I would just let each story stand without bothering to do the summing up, because that's really what it amounts to.¹¹

Munro's increasing subtlety is a logical progression of her narrative technique which has always made use of metaphor as well as discursive reasoning to convey meaning. Munro understood early in her artistic career that metaphorical thinking is natural to the mind. Her fictional portrayals of dreams suggest that she has arrived intuitively at the same conclusions as Suzanne Langer advances in her study of reason, ritual, and art:

Metaphor is the law of growth of every semantic. It is not a development, but a principle. This is strikingly attested by the fact that the lowest, completely unintentional products of the human brain are madly metaphorical fantasies, that often make no literal sense whatever; I mean the riotous symbolism of dreams.¹²

Munro uses dreams to augment or modify the waking thoughts of her characters. Think of Mr. Loughheed in "Walking on

Water", piecing together fragments of dream and memory of the long-ago night when his father helped search for a demented youth after the discovery of the boy's murdered parents on a neighboring farm. Clearly the recurring dream is related to the old man's uneasiness over his young friend Eugene's mental state:

These were the facts. The dream, as far as he could tell, contained but did not reveal them. Awake he had all this information about the murder, double murder, in his memory, though he could not think when or how it was given to him. In the dream he never understood clearly what all the urgency and commotion were about, he knew only that he had to find his boots and hurry out with his father and brother (if he hurried, in the dream, he would not be left behind). (p. 82)

Suggesting danger, the need to hurry to prevent some unnamed disaster, the dream provides oblique commentary on the story of Eugene. It is an alternative to the kind of direct statement Et makes about her own thoughts after Char's death, when she recalls how she lied to Char about Blaikie Noble:

The question often crossed Et's mind in later years--what did she mean to do about this story when Blaikie got back? For she had no reason to believe he would not come back. The answer was that she had not made any plans at all. (p. 21)

Having Et review her thoughts is no less helpful than having Mr. Loughheed review his dream. Munro's readers would probably not willingly forego any of her techniques for communicating her characters' mental lives. Although she

uses them less frequently in her later work, Munro's "hesitant summaries", as Sam Solecki calls them, lead the reader directly to truths discovered in the course of the story.¹³ Through these summaries, Munro has trained her audience in the way to read her stories. No doubt she could now excise these helpful explanatory paragraphs today and still be understood, but they have additional value as pauses in the action which allow the narrator time to reflect. Such moments make each story not merely a sequence of events but a vehicle for expressing "the felt quality of an individual response to life".¹⁴ This bonding of reader and protagonist, which is characteristic of a Munro short story, takes place because the narrator, although relating memories from the past, does not start out understanding these memories any better than does the reader. The process of the story, then, is one of discovery, as the much quoted final paragraph of the final story makes clear:

The problem, the only problem, is my mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to get rid, of her; and it did not work, for she looms too close, just as she always did. She is heavy as always, she weighs everything down, and yet she is indistinct, her edges melt and flow. Which means she has stuck to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on, and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same. (p. 246)

By taking the reader into her confidence to a greater extent

than before, and confessing her sense of having failed to understand her past, the narrator has hit on a way of reminding the reader of his own feeling of inadequacy when confronting his memories. The insights of SOMETHING are more complex than those of the earlier works; they cannot be fully delineated in language. By admitting this, Munro's self-conscious narrators bear witness to the existence of the ineffable. As Ian Reid notes in his study of the short story, some stories linger in the mind because the reader is left uncertain about the precise nature and extent of the revelation or peak of awareness a character has apparently experienced. In addition, Reid speaks of the effectiveness of an incomplete denouement in which, at the end, the central character "is still struggling with the knot of her feelings, and so is the reader".¹⁵ Such inconclusive endings ring true in an age when the certainties of earlier short stories appear overly contrived:

Until 1950 or so, the story in Canada appeared to be machine-made, with two-dimensional characters solving artificial dilemmas Soon the story was not one told by a carefully engineered plot, but by the subtle implication of selected isolated incidents. Arrangement began to play a greater part, and significance lay in what appeared, at the outset, to be casual episodic moments.¹⁶

In Munro's work certainly, arrangement is crucial, not only for the reader's, but also for the narrator's understanding. The narrator reshuffles her memories in an attempt to sharpen her perception. In "The Ottawa Valley",

the declared goal is to rekindle the image of the dead mother, but her image continues to elude the narrator, who finally realizes that art, like memory, cannot recapture the past exactly as it was. The mother's likeness will change over time because it is continually being modified by the artist's experiences. Neither memory nor art, can arrive at a final perception. Since the narrator discovers that her story, like her memories, can be revised endlessly, the reader is drawn back to the beginning. Precisely this discovery of the cycling quality of memory is the likeliest answer to the riddle posed by the title of the collection, *SOMETHING I'VE BEEN MEANING TO TELL YOU*. Time, which appears linear in a novel, appears circular in Munro's short stories. In the course of *SOMETHING*, her narrators acquire a heightened consciousness of themselves as standing at a point on the circumference of a circle which they endlessly retrace in their memories, and their discovery becomes a presupposition shared by the narrators of *WHO* and *MOONS*. In Munro's later fiction, possession of this insight is what separates the women from the girls.

Notes

- 1 Alice Munro, *SOMETHING I'VE BEEN MEANING TO TELL YOU* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974). All subsequent references appear in the text.
- 2 J.R. (Tim) Struthers, "The Real Material: An Interview with Alice Munro," in *PROBABLE FICTIONS: ALICE MUNRO'S NARRATIVE ACTS*, ed. Louis K. MacKendrick (Downsview, Ont.: ECW Press, 1983), p. 28.
- 3 Alice Munro, quoted in an interview with Alan Twigg, "What Is: Alice Munro," in *FOR OPENERS: CONVERSATIONS WITH 24 CANADIAN WRITERS* (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour, 1981), p. 16.
- 4 Struthers, p. 15.
- 5 John Keats, letter to George and Tom Keats, December 21-27, 1817, Letter 45, *THE LETTERS OF JOHN KEATS 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1958), I, p. 193.
- 6 Edward Said, *BEGINNINGS: INTENTION AND METHOD* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), p. 90.
- 7 Said, p. 95.
- 8 Said, p. 90.
- 9 Margaret Gail Osachoff, "'Treacheries of the Heart': Memoir, Confession, and Meditation in the Stories of Alice Munro," in *PROBABLE FICTIONS*, ed. Louis K. MacKendrick (Downsview, Ont.: ECW Press, 1983), p. 64.
- 10 Struthers, p. 27.
- 11 Struthers, p. 15.
- 12 Suzanne K. Langer, *PHILOSOPHY IN A NEW KEY: A STUDY IN THE SYMBOLISM OF REASON, RITE AND ART* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), p. 147.
- 13 Sam Solecki, "Lives of Girls and Women," rev. of *THE MOONS OF JUPITER*, by Alice Munro, *CANADIAN FORUM*, 62, No.

722 (1982), 25.

14

Solecki, p. 25.

15

58. Ian Reid, *THE SHORT STORY* (London: Methuen, 1977), p.

16

Donald Stephens, "The Short Story in English," *CANADIAN LITERATURE*, No. 41 (1969), p. 126.

Chapter Four

The Temptation to Tell

Flo telling a story--and this was not the only one, or even the most lurid one she knew--would incline her head and let her face go soft and thoughtful, tantalizing, warning.
"I shouldn't even be telling you this stuff."1

The irresistible appeal of stories to both teller and listener is the premise of WHO. Whereas storytelling is an activity often reported in Munro's fiction, and an organizing principle of LIVES, the protagonist of WHO is obsessed with storytelling, using it not only to recapture the past but also to exorcise it. Moreover, the gothic and grotesque elements familiar in stories embedded in Munro's previous works become more pronounced. WHO is Munro's darkest vision of human nature; accordingly, the stories it contains are fables which illustrate the depravity of which people are capable, as well as the titillating effect of shocking stories which provide counterpoint to restricted lives.

In the form of gossip or reminiscence, storytelling is the main indulgence of a rural Ontario housewife in the days before television sets. As apotheosis of this group, Flo, the former hired girl and waitress, now married to Rose's widowed father and running a small grocery store, entertains herself and her audience with salacious stories about her

customers. Her usual listener, Rose, her young stepdaughter, is the protagonist of WHO, a girl who grows up to be a storyteller in her turn, and eventually becomes an actress, a type of professional storyteller. Within the community, Flo has little social or economic prestige, but, within the family, Flo enjoys considerable power over her husband, son, and stepdaughter.

At the height of Flo's influence while Rose is a child, Flo is the storyteller and Rose the listener; however, after Rose crosses the bridge from West Hanratty to attend high school in Hanratty--an obvious step up the social ladder--she gradually usurps Flo's place as storyteller: "Now Rose was the one bringing stories home, Flo was the one who knew the names of the characters and was waiting to hear" (p. 40). Confined by her duties in the store and the care of an invalid husband, Flo looks forward to tales of the notorious student group at the high school, centred around a boy named Horse Nicholson, and known to Flo as "those jokers."

As well as being an index of their relative power, storytelling is a bond between Flo and Rose, a shared activity in which they set aside their mutual antagonism. As Rose's adult life diverges from Flo's, and her education, marriage, and career separate her physically, intellectually, and socially from her stepmother, stories about mutual acquaintances become their last common ground: "When Rose was home on a visit conversation was difficult,

so she would ask Flo about the people she saw at the Legion"(p.201). Flo's increasing bitterness and belligerence, which mar Rose's infrequent visits, can be circumvented by encouraging Flo to tell stories, just as she did before Rose went to school. In those days, they enjoyed a long truce, and Rose has happy memories of the time when her brother was still a baby in his carriage, Flo was telling stories from her high stool behind the counter, and Rose herself was on the floor with her brown paper and crayons.

Although storytelling occurs frequently throughout Munro's fiction, WHO is unusually preoccupied with its dangerous results. By dwelling in her stories on subjects such as murder and incest, Flo instills in Rose a distorted view of human nature that accentuates its potential for violence and depravity. Primed to expect life to be filled with unpleasant surprises, Rose experiences it in accordance with Flo's accounts, as a battleground where exploiters and victims engage in perpetual conflict. Flo, as guilty storyteller who, against her better judgement, tells unsuitable tales to a child, becomes the paradigm for Rose, who feels guilty for having betrayed her past by turning it into stories to shock her middle-class intellectual friends. On one occasion, Rose begins reading aloud a letter in which Flo denounces her for appearing bare-breasted in a television production of THE TROJAN WOMEN:

Halfway through, she had to stop reading. It wasn't that she thought how shabby it was to be exposing and making fun of Flo this way. She had done it often enough before; it was no news to her that it was shabby. What stopped her was, in fact, that gulf; she had a fresh and overwhelming realization of it, and it was nothing to laugh about. (p. 186)

Since Flo represents the past which Rose has repudiated, Rose cannot manage to see her as a comic figure. Rose's escape from Flo's influence has been too painful to allow her to take Flo lightly. Whether or not she has escaped Flo is a moot point. At best, Rose's ties to the group in which she now moves are tenuous, as shown by her eagerness to ingratiate herself. An outsider for as long as she can remember, she has never had a secure position in society: "Rose thought of her own family as straddling the river, belonging nowhere, but that was not true" (p. 4). As a child, she had felt superior to her environment; after leaving it, she feels inferior. By telling sordid stories about her past, she seems to humble herself, but, paradoxically, she exalts herself in the eyes of these middle-class liberals who envy her the experience of poverty:

Rose knew a lot of people who wished they had been poor and hadn't been. So she could queen it over them, offering various scandals and bits of squalor from her childhood. (p. 23)

Unable to resist the temptation to shock her friends, Rose rationalizes her storytelling on the grounds that she is

telling true stories which explode romantic myths of poverty perpetuated in literature and film. In a disparaging reference to "The Garden Party", Rose complains, "Katherine Mansfield was never obliged to look at stained underwear; her relatives might be cruel and frivolous but their accents would be agreeable" (p. 48).

Unlike Katherine Mansfield, Rose has direct experience of poverty; she understands that its salient feature is ugliness, as exemplified by stained underwear and harsh voices. These details are often omitted in literature, which transforms a girl like Franny McGill until she is unrecognizable:

Later on Rose would think of Franny when she came upon the figure of an idiotic, saintly whore in a book or a movie. Men who made books and movies seemed to have a fondness for this figure, though Rose noticed they would clean her up. They cheated, she thought, when they left out the breathing and the spit and the teeth: they were refusing to take into account the aphrodisiac prickles of disgust, in their hurry to reward themselves with the notion of a soothing blankness, undifferentiated welcome. (p. 26)

Although Lawrence Mathews reads the passage as an attack on Robertson Davies' *FIFTH BUSINESS*, its implications go beyond any one novel to indict writers for sentimentalizing their characters.² Concern for truth-telling is nothing new in Alice Munro's fiction; however, the insistence on the right of the dark side to equal or greater time than the bright side is more pronounced in *WHO* than elsewhere in the canon. *WHO* is ruthlessly anti-romantic, especially in depicting

poverty. Rose has scant patience with Jocelyn's notion that her husband, Clifford, has been damaged by poverty and deserves special consideration as a result:

What Jocelyn called [Clifford's] bitterness seemed to Rose something more complex and more ordinary; just the weariness, suppleness, deviousness, meanness, common to a class. Common to Clifford's class, and Rose's. Jocelyn had been insulated in some ways, left stern and innocent. (p. 111)

Poverty has a coarsening effect on those who experience it, rendering them less vulnerable to psychic pain than are protected middle-class children. Jocelyn idealizes Clifford, projecting her own fiction upon the actual man much as Patrick idealizes Rose, projecting upon her his fiction of the Pre-Raphaelite Beggar Maid. The romantic roles of knight-rescuer and lady-victim are seductive enough to overcome Rose's instinctive resistance to Patrick's view of her. Once Rose marries Patrick, she discovers the hateful restrictions that Patrick's seemingly benign fiction impose upon her. Rose is unable to sustain her role as Patrick's damsel-in-distress. Even as a child, she possessed a personality which contradicts the sweetly submissive stereotype. Instead, her nature "was growing like a prickly pineapple, but slowly, and secretly, hard pride and skepticism overlapping . . . " (p. 5). She is not sweet and yielding, but, like the pineapple, has a tough self-protective rind. The fierce resistance she musters against her stepmother reasserts itself against her husband

as he attempts to dominate her.

In contrast to the bare feet which reveal the Beggar Maid's status in the Burne-Jones painting to which Patrick indirectly refers, Rose's emblem for her own origins is the outhouse behind her first school.³ Rather than visit the dark and frightening Girls' Toilet where "Many people, it seemed, declined to use the hole" (p. 23), Rose waits until she can get home, risking wet pants and Flo's scorn. She dares not confide in Flo for fear that her stepmother will call unwanted attention to her by arriving at the school, "with a pail and shovel, cleaning up, and lambasting everyone into the bargain" (p. 24). Rose's determination to conceal the situation in the Girls' Toilet from Flo is important because it draws attention to the way in which secrets which cannot be revealed gain power by being suppressed. The extent to which previously concealed aspects of Rose's childhood dominate this narrative suggests their great influence upon her as she grows up. Keeping secret her fear of the school outhouse, "She was building up the first store of things she could never tell" (p. 24). The link between toilets and telling forged here holds throughout the work. Tim Struthers has noted the prevalence of toilets and excrement in *WHO*. In addition to linking Rose to Flo and to Franny McGill, who has been raped in the school outhouse by her brother, the toilet image relates to Mr. Burns who is glimpsed in his outhouse, and to Cora, on whom Rose develops a schoolgirl crush, in that her

grandfather is known as the honey-dumper. Struthers interprets the toilet as an image in which Munro expresses the changes in Hanratty, when, in the last three paragraphs of "Privilege", progress is discussed in terms of the disappearance of outhouses and introduction of indoor plumbing.⁴ But this explanation alone scarcely accounts for the numerous scatological references in WHO. They point also to a change in Alice Munro's notion of what belongs in narrative, contradicting the opinion expressed by Ada Jordan in LIVES:

Next day they will be telling about how they go to the toilet, why do they leave that out? There isn't any of that in Silas Marner. There isn't any in the classic writers. They were good writers, they didn't need it."⁵

Ada believes that neither sex scenes nor bathroom scenes belong in literature, but WHO insists the opposite, that private physical acts are vital to literature if it is to reflect life accurately. When Flo has the indoor toilet installed, the narrator reflects on it less as a symbol of change than a symbol of lost privacy:

They were all familiar with each other's nether voices, not only in their more explosive moments but in their intimate sighs and growls and pleas and statements. And they were all most prudish people. So no one ever seemed to hear, or be listening and no reference was made. The person creating the noises in the bathroom was not connected with the person who walked out.
(p. 4)

The phrase, nether voices, directly associates the image

with narrative. In a parallel passage, Rose overhears her father talking to himself in his workshop:

From the shed came not only coughing, but speech, a continual muttering, reproachful or encouraging, usually just below the level at which separate words could be made out Now and then some words would break through and hang clear and nonsensical on the air. When he realized they were out, there would be a quick bit of cover-up coughing, a swallowing, an alert unusual silence. . . . The person who spoke these words and the person who spoke to her as her father were not the same, though they seemed to occupy the same space. It would be the worst possible taste to acknowledge the person who was supposed to be there . . . (pp. 3-4)

Words are important here not as communication but as utterance, perhaps unintelligible to a listener, but meaningful to the speaker himself, and arising from the depths of his being. Through these involuntary words, an individual expresses what he is, and his need to do so is a powerful compulsion.

The narrator of *WHO* feels a compulsion too, a drive to confess which is as strong as that of Coleridge's ancient mariner. Once these hidden memories are unstoppered, they pour out one after another, as hard to stop as Franny McGill's unwelcome overtures to Rose in the schoolyard: "Go away, Franny. Go away or I'll punch you. I will. I really will" (p. 26). Difficult as Franny is to suppress, Flo is worse. Her name suggests its homophone, flow; her talk is a flow which cannot be staunched. She has no decent reticence: "she was the sort of woman who will make public

what she finds in the laundry bag" (p. 24). Throughout her childhood, Rose hates Flo for telling everything, especially for the sadistic pleasure Flo takes in destroying Rose's illusions. Yet she is fascinated too by the stories Flo tells her. The implied complicity between teller and listener parallels the complicity between Rose's father and Rose during the beatings, or between Rose and Patrick during their violent marital quarrels. In WHO, speech as the bond between people is thoroughly explored: the fascination with words observed in Munro's fiction takes a different form in the strange case of the old woman Rose encounters in the County Home who no longer speaks but will obediently spell words if she is given them:

"Isn't she a wonder," the nurse said. "She can't see and that's the only way we can tell she can hear. Like if you say, 'Here's your dinner,' she won't pay any attention to it, but she might start spelling dinner." (p. 183)

When the nurse suggests that Rose supply a word to be spelled, the old woman obliges with the correct spelling of "celebrate", a word which recalls Hagar's insight near the end of Margaret Laurence's THE STONE ANGEL: "I must always, always have wanted that--simply to rejoice."⁶ Endorsing this sentiment, WHO recognizes words as the means of rejoicing in the human condition in all its aspects. WHO simulataneously acknowledges the squalor of Rose's background and rejoices in its richness as experience:

She knew she would never flourish, never get to any very secure position--if indeed there was such a thing--in the world of school. But she was not miserable, except in the matter of not being able to go to the toilet. Learning to survive, no matter with what cravenness and caution, what shocks and forebodings, is not the same as being miserable. It is too interesting. (p. 27)

Learning to survive in the harsh world of her youth, Rose develops early the technique of adapting, which is closely related to acting, her destined career. In new places, she has a habit of walking the streets in the evening, looking in the lighted windows of houses and imagining herself inside as the hostess or a guest. She can picture herself equally well in lavish or modest houses: "Rose is an actress; she can fit in anywhere" (p. 152). Unfortunately for Rose, her usual attitude to her acting is more ambivalent than this suggests. Obsessed by the failure of imitation to illumine the truths of experience, she is often overcome by a sense of shame:

The thing she was ashamed of, in acting, was that she might have been paying attention to the wrong things, reporting antics, when there was always something further, a tone, a depth, a light, that she couldn't get and wouldn't get. And it wasn't just about acting that she suspected this. Everything she had done could sometimes be seen as a mistake. (p. 205)

These thoughts occur to Rose in the context of her final meeting with Ralph Gillespie in the Hanratty Legion Hall. Ralph is almost Rose's alter ego in WHO. Like her he is an actor by instinct. Famous for his imitation of a local

character whose name, Milton Homer, is a reminder of the low esteem in which Hanratty holds poets, Ralph is someone she has been acquainted with since their school days, when he occupied a desk ahead of hers. Even then, Rose felt an affinity for him:

Both of them lost or mislaid or never adequately provided themselves with all the pencils, rulers, erasers, pen nibs, ruled paper, graph paper, the compass, dividers, protactor, necessary for a successful school life; both of them were sloppy with ink, subject to spilling and blotting mishaps; both of them were negligent about doing homework but panicky about not having done it. (p. 199)

As shy as they were impractical, they could not manage a conversation, but communicated on another level:

That wasn't quite all. Their shoes and boots became well acquainted, scuffling and pushing in friendly and private encounter, sometimes resting together a moment in tentative encouragement; their mutual kindness particularly helped them through those moments when people were being selected to do mathematics problems on the blackboard. (p. 199)

Ralph's nearness comforted Rose then, and continues to comfort her when he comes to sit beside her at the Legion. Like her, he hides behind a joking manner. In their schooldays when Ralph shook snow out of his hair onto her desk, she was charmed; she appreciates his oblique approach because it so closely resembles her own. As she realizes in the concluding sentence of WHO, Ralph's life could nearly have been hers: "What could she say about herself and Ralph

Gillespie, except that she felt his life, close, closer than the lives of the men she'd loved, one slot over from her own?" (p 206). She escaped from Hanratty whereas Ralph returned home after the war. Had she stayed, her life would have been a version of his. Renouncing that life for herself, she is nevertheless drawn to men like Ralph. Simon, with whom she later falls in love, has many of Ralph's appealing qualities, including the ability to amuse her by his acting. Just as Ralph would "do" Milton Homer, Simon entertains Rose by playing various parts:

She already knew a few of his characters. This was The Humble Workman. Some others were The Old Philosopher . . . and, where appropriate, The Mad Satyr, nuzzling and leaping, making triumphant sucking noises against her navel. (p. 161)

Rose dreads the loss of independence which accompanies falling in love. A playful lover who mimics love seems to allow her to play a lover's role too, free of the demand a humourless man like Patrick makes that she match her feelings to his. This strong dramatic element in erotic love is suggested by Flo's euphemism for the sex act:

That was Flo's word for it: perform. Back in the country, back on the hill farms she came from, Flo said that people had gone dotty, been known to eat boiled hay, and performed with their too close relations. (p. 25)

As usual, Flo's stories are warnings for Rose. They imply that there is something ridiculous in sexuality. The idea

of performance implies the possibility of withholding oneself from a ritual which is acted out. At the same time, Flo's harping on perverse sexuality is suggestive in light of the destructive relationship Rose and Patrick develop. To Patrick's attempts to dominate and possess her, she responds with overwhelming rage, beating her head against the bedpost, throwing a gravy-boat through the dining room window, even slashing her wrists or rushing out into the garden and tearing at the grass. Their marriage repeats the unhealthy cycle of quarreling and reconciliation, "until enough damage had been done, until nearly mortal damage had been done" (p.95).

The scenes of violence taint the atmosphere of *WHO*, and make it the most disturbing of Munro's works. Although violence has always been present in her fiction, in *WHO* it moves from the periphery to the centre. Whereas Del Jordan has a neighbour who is suspected of beating her child, Rose herself is the beaten child. Her recollection of the experience implicates her in the beatings, not only as victim, but as instigator, who courts violence out of a perverse need to ritualize her anger against her stepmother.

Blood is an insistent motif in Rose's fantasies. As she pictures the scene suggested by the phrase, "Royal Beating", blood is the final necessary detail: "Someone knelt and the blood came leaping out like banners" (p.1). Blood as emblem of human pain is repeated in Flo's story of her severe nosebleed which erupts in the hospital when she visits the

woman for whom she used to work as hired girl. In another of Flo's stories, Becky Tyde's father is beaten until "the snow he was lying in turned red" (p. 8), and after his assailants finally leave, Becky is still watching from the window: "She watched the men leave at last and her father make his delayed bloody progress through the snow and up the steps of the verandah" (p. 8).

The blood which flows from the beatings in these stories is not released when Rose's father actually beats her:

He has never managed to really injure her, though there are times, of course, when she prays that he will. He hits her with an open hand, there is some restraint in his kicks. (p. 17)

Paradoxically, her father's failure to lose all control and deliver the ultimate beating perpetuates the cycle of rebellion and punishment. The degree of Rose's own responsibility for the violence she provokes against herself is central to WHO. The title, WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? comes from a question asked Rose by a teacher critical of her for daring to consider herself superior to others. Although the question also suggests Rose's quest for identity, her pride is the main issue. Habitually self-critical, Rose wonders whether her own stubborn pride led to the beatings. She believes her father was trapped into violence when she and Flo pushed him too far: "there comes a time when you can't draw back" (p. 16). Later,

reflecting upon her violent fights with Patrick, she sees them as symptoms of illness, and recalls how they would ask each other, "What do you think triggers the reaction?" (p. 95)

Blood and violence are not mere background detail in WHO, but are part of an image pattern suggested by Patrick when he first falls in love with Rose: "You don't know how I love you. There's a book I have called THE WHITE GODDESS. Every time I look at the title it reminds me of you" (p. 78). Whereas Patrick refers to the connotations of purity and spirituality suggested by the title of this work by Robert Graves, Graves' analysis of the White Goddess reveals her as more perverse and contradictory--hence more like Rose--than Patrick guesses. According to Graves, she is the muse of poetry, and by invoking her the true poet may achieve, "the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites".⁷ White is the first of her colours, symbolized by the new moon; however, her second colour is of special significance for the protagonist of WHO:

When Suidas the Byzantine records that Io was a cow that changed her colour from white to rose and then to black, he means that the New Moon is the white goddess of birth and growth; the Full Moon, the red goddess of love and battle; the Old Moon, the black goddess of death and divination" (p. 69).

In WHO, the protagonist's name comes from the colour, rose, suggesting the red of the second goddess of Graves's triumvirate and the colour of blood; moreover, the Rose

Goddess is the deity of love and sexual warfare. To summon her is to invoke what Graves calls, "the ancient power of fright and lust--the female spider, or the queen-bee whose embrace is death" (p. 24).

Graves blames his century's emphasis on marriage, a state inimical to the goddess, for the decline of poetry:

The White Goddess is anti-domestic; she is the perpetual "other woman" and her part is difficult indeed for a woman of sensibility to play for more than a few years . . . (p. 447)

This description fits Rose so exactly it requires no comment except to note that Graves' argument, despite its implicit admiration for the female principle, the goddess as muse, never admits the possibility of a female poet. In *WHO*, however, Rose assumes the roles of artist and goddess; therefore the sexual liason between male poet and female muse presupposed in *THE WHITE GODDESS* becomes further complicated. In this context, the scene when Rose allows Clifford to make love to her along with Jocelyn suggests Rose's desperation, the lengths to which she will go in a doomed attempt to satisfy her dual nature: "Rose felt curious, disbelieving, hardly willing, slightly aroused and, at some level she was too sluggish to reach for, appalled and sad" (p. 132). The aftertaste of guilt and disgust drives Rose from Clifford and Jocelyn's house early the next morning. Since their lovemaking is a ritual acknowledgement of Rose's love for them both, Rose might have taken comfort

from it, but instead she believes that they have trivialized the past, and vindicated Clifford's rejection of her years before when he decided against consummating their love affair: "What we're doing. It's not some big necessary thing. It's ordinary mischief"(p. 122).

Once again, events seem to be forcing Rose to acknowledge that she is a solitary whose connections with other people never last. In an interview with Alan Twigg, Alice Munro corroborates this view:

Twigg: My wife's comment on WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? was that your character, Rose, is never allowed to get anything. She's always unfulfilled. May be she's just wary of emotion.

Munro: She gets something. She gets herself. She doesn't get the obvious things, the things she thinks she wants. Like in "Mischief," Rose doesn't really want that love affair. What she does get is a way out of her marriage. She gets a knowledge of herself.⁸

Despite the author's contention that Rose does not emerge empty-handed, this vision of a woman in her prime as lover and destroyer is somewhat bleak. Discussing Canadian literary themes in relation to Graves' thesis in THE WHITE GODDESS, Margaret Atwood remarks on "the notable absence of Venuses" (Rose Goddesses) in the literature. Publication of WHO followed Atwood's SURVIVAL, and filled the gap Atwood distinguished between Diana-Maidens and Hecate-Crones.⁹

Rose suffers in a way that the earlier and younger protagonist, Del Jordan, does not. Perhaps Del's sense of her artistic destiny enables her to detach herself from her

experiences, regarding them as material for future fiction. Although Rose also has artistic ambitions, they are ill-defined and embarrass her by revealing a shameful need to attract attention: "She wanted to perform in public" (p. 69). Incapable of deciding her future, Rose drifts in a state of inertia, dreaming of playing the harp or becoming a foreign correspondent. When Dr. Henshawe repeatedly tells her she is a scholar, Rose feels uneasy because she has no clear sense of who she is. Although Rose's intellectual gifts have won her a scholarship, she is more at the mercy of her feelings than Del. Her relationship with Patrick makes her hysterical at times, and culminates before their divorce in impulses to murder and suicide. The anger Patrick rouses in Rose is a fuller development of the fury sensed in characters like Lois in *DANCE*, who lashes out against the limitations of her class.

Hysteria contains a dramatic element which accords with Rose's choice of acting as her profession, and makes it believable that she would discover it almost accidentally. Acting suits Rose's dramatic temperament just as Del's writing suits her authority, her air of being in control of herself and her life, detached from the guilt and remorse which Rose suffers. Both artist-heroines are engaged in similar searches for artistic truth, but Del has not yet been forced to acknowledge her own mediocrity as Rose has:

It was part of her job to go on local television
chatting about these productions, trying

to drum up interest, telling amusing stories about things that had happened during the tour. There was nothing shameful about any of this, but sometimes Rose was deeply, unaccountably ashamed. (p. 177)

Rose's shame derives from unreconciled inner conflict between Flo's standards and those of the artistic group in which she now moves. The reader's sense that Rose is enmeshed in the story--whereas Del is detached from it--is partly attributable to the difference between point of view in the two works.

As A.A. Mendilow points out in his study of time in the novel, the first-person narrative's effect on the reader is contrary to expectations. Instead of allowing the reader to identify with the protagonist, "Another person is felt to be interposed between the I of the novel and the reader's I."¹⁰ Mendilow also notes how first-person narration implies that events have already taken place. *LIVES*, for example, is told in the first person by Del Jordan, apparently reviewing her past history. Moreover, the kunstlerroman form, in which the narrator is a young writer, implies that the suffering of the past has been purged in the transformation of experience into art.

By contrast, the third-person narration of *WHO* brings the focus closer to the events described, and sacrifices the narrator's control over the tale. In a 1983 interview, Tim Struthers comments on his impression that there are several narrators: Rose herself at ten or thirty-two, and a narrator

who "adopts a superior ironic tone towards Rose". Struthers sees this as an inconsistency of narrative point of view resulting from the revisions Munro made to WHO, but the author emphatically denies this:

No, I don't think so. No, I don't think so. I don't think that has anything to do with it. There may well be an uncertainty, a problem that I had, but I don't think that hasty rewrite is the reason. I think there were just times when I felt that the story had to work that way, and I really can't tell you why.¹¹

Munro's reply to Struthers reflects her commitment to her artistic process, in which she discovers the form of the work as it progresses and will allow her discoveries to change her mind about what belongs in it. WHO was originally intended as a two-part structure with one part in the first person devoted to Janet, and the other in the third person devoted to Rose, who was Janet's fictional creation. It was not until the work had been printed in galleys that Munro belatedly realized that the form, a complication of the form she had used in LIVES and with a similar epilogue, was not the most suitable one. At her own expense, she made the changes she considered necessary.

L.M. Leitch has compared a reviewer's copy (the first version) with the final version. According to Leitch, in the first version WHO had a two-part structure, and contained three stories that Munro excised and later included in MOONS. The stories which she removed are "The Moons of Jupiter", "Connection", and "The Stone in the

Field".¹² Leitch also traces alterations Munro made in individual stories after their first publication in magazines to prepare them for inclusion in WHO. She notes that the original version of "Half a Grapefruit" has no references to Rose as chronicler, and "Wild Swans" in its first published version does not contain Flo's story of the undertaker who regularly buys candy.¹³ Leitch's work supports the interpretation of WHO as deliberately self-reflexive by showing how the author's revisions made storytelling more prominent. These revisions further suggest that the reference to the WHITE GODDESS, the name, Rose, and the motif of blood are linked not only to the themes of love and violence and the contradictions within Rose's character, but also to the structure of WHO, which is not imposed by the author (the masculine paradigm) but discovered by her (the feminine paradigm). Similarly, the blurring of narrative viewpoint, which Munro was unable to explain to Struthers, but considers necessary in this work, is an accommodation she felt compelled to make, not one which she deliberately chose. Whatever its source, it aptly reflects Rose's concern over the extent to which life for her is a series of roles which she plays. Rose is at once the "I" and the "she", the self and the character.

As befits an actress, she is always on stage to the extent that she is aware of creating an impression, of telling stories to engage the attention of an audience, be it private or public. In the final paragraph of the

concluding segment, Rose masters the temptation to tell the story of Ralph Gillespie: "Rose didn't tell this to anybody, glad that there was one thing at least she wouldn't spoil by telling, though she knew it was lack of material as much as honorable restraint that kept her quiet" (p. 206). Her renunciation of artifice recalls Prospero's epilogue in *THE TEMPEST*:

Now my charms are all o'erthrown
And what strength I have's mine own,--
Which is most faint: (V. Ep. 1-3)

THE TEMPEST, it will be recalled, is the play from which in the opening segment, "Royal Beatings", Rose overhears her father reciting as he works in his shed: "The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces" (p. 4). The circle is complete, encompassing suppressed memories demanding to be told and a Rose Goddess who is also a female artist searching for the muse within herself. Through embedded stories told or hinted at in the text, Munro extends her reach further below the surface identity that individuals construct for themselves, showing how, against their will, they act out or retell the patterns of myth.

Notes

- 1
Alice Munro, *WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1978), p. 7. Subsequent references appear in the text.
- 2
Lawrence Mathews, "Who Do You Think You Are?: Alice Munro's Art of Disarrangement," in *PROBABLE FICTIONS*, ed. Louis K. MacKendrick (Downsview, Ont: ECW Press, 1983), p. 181.
- 3
A Lys Baldry, *BURNE-JONES: MASTERPIECES IN COLOUR* (London: T.C. & E.C.Jack, n.d.), p. 50.
- 4
J.R. (Tim) Struthers, "Intersecting Orbits: A Study of Selected Story Cycles by Hugh Hood, Clark Blaise and Alice Munro, in their Literary Contexts," Diss. Western Ontario 1981, p. 222.
- 5
Alice Munro, *LIVES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1971), pp. 171-2.
- 6
Margaret Laurence, *THE STONE ANGEL* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), p. 292.
- 7
Robert Graves, *THE WHITE GODDESS* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), p. 14. Subsequent references appear in the text.
- 8
Alan Twigg, "What Is: Alice Munro," in *CONVERSATIONS WITH 24 CANADIAN WRITERS* (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 1981), p. 19.
- 9
Margaret Atwood, *SURVIVAL: A THEMATIC GUIDE TO CANADIAN LITERATURE* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 199.
- 10
A.A. Mendilow, *TIME AND THE NOVEL* (New York: Humanities Press, 1972), p. 107.
- 11
J.R. (Tim) Struthers, "The Real Material: An Interview with Alice Munro," in *PROBABLE FICTIONS*, ed. Louis K. MacKendrick (Downsview, Ont.: ECW Press, 1983), p. 32.
- 12
Linda Margaret Leitch, "Alice Munro's Fiction: Explorations in Open Forms," M.A. Thesis Guelph 1980, p. 150.
- 13
Leitch, pp. 113, 130.

Chapter Five

Life as a Recurring Story

MOONS is Alice Munro's most bookish work.¹ Many of its characters are engaged in aspects of the book trade, working as writers, editors, archivists, librarians or booksellers. Despite their professional association with books, they feel the same self-consciousness about being readers and dreamers in a workaday world as Del Jordan felt in LIVES. The female narrators in MOONS often instinctively prefer men who are their intellectual inferiors, but should they fall in love with men who share their love of books, frequently find these men selfish, faithless or priggish. On the whole, however, the educational level has risen since the previous generation, when a year at Teacher's College made Ada Jordan an intellectual, and therefore a misfit, in Jubilee.

In MOONS, Ada's generation has grown old, represented now by a woman like Mrs. Kidd, confined to a nursing home where meals are the high points of the day, and pastimes like Scrabble have replaced her former interest in natural history. Although Mrs. Kidd has forgotten much that she once knew, she still retains the poetry she recited as a schoolgirl, and clings to it as a talisman:

She wanted to float herself clear. Sometimes she could do it by lying on her bed and saying in her head all the poems she knew, or the facts, which got harder and harder to hold in place.
(p. 175)

The remembrance of poems and facts reassures Mrs. Kidd that despite the gradual loss of her powers as she grows older, something of her essential self still remains. This need for reassurance helps explain Munro's habit of having characters quote the poems they recall from their schooldays, a technique she has used in each collection. Not only does the embedded quotation relate to theme and characterization, but it is part of the quoting character's definition of himself. The poems he knows by heart he possesses like eyes of a certain shade or the ability to carry a tune.

Even more self-definitive are the ubiquitous family stories, anecdotes from the past which Munro's characters tell one another. Cousin Iris in "Connection" is an extreme example of the urge to tell one's story to an available, though unwilling, audience:

We drank; we ate; the children came in and were praised. Richard came and went. Nothing fazed her; she was right. Nothing deflected her from her stories of herself; the amount of time she could spend not talking was limited. She told about the carpet bag and the millionaire's son all over again. She told about the dissolute actor. How many conversations she must have ridden through like this--laughing, insisting, rambling, recollecting. (p. 16)

Cousin Iris's stories betray her longing for approval, her determination to establish a connection with other people. In MOONS there are many garrulous characters like her, but

they are balanced by their opposites, characters who mutely accept restricted lives unredeemed by a flow of talk to give them meaning. Descended from talkers on her mother's side and non-talkers on her father's, the narrator of "Chaddleys and Flemings" is the prototype of the narrators in MOONS: her heritages have not blended to make her a moderate talker, but they have remained separate, causing her to alternately reveal and conceal, and making her uneasy no matter which option she chooses.

The silent Flemings are even more influential than the loquacious Chaddleys because speechlessness implies a criticism of talk as a frivolous escape from work, and so casts doubt on the whole narrative enterprise. Her father's aunts fascinate the narrator of "The Stone in the Field" because their way of life is entirely different from the one she knows:

Work would be what filled their lives, not conversation; work would be what gave their days shape. . . .

What was felt in that room was the pain of human contact. (pp. 26-7)

There is something splendid about the aunts' isolation. Although the narrator's mother pities them, the narrator suspects that they possess strengths unknown to talkative people:

My mother looked at their lives and thought of how they could be brightened, opened up. . . . Why not? my mother would ask, seeing life all in terms of change and possibility. She

imagined they would yearn for things, not only material things but conditions, abilities, which they did not even bother to deplore, did not think to reject, being so perfectly encased in what they had and were, so far beyond imagining themselves otherwise. (p. 29)

The aunts seem to have achieved a rare contentment in their routine of never-ending work. Despite its limitations, their way of life has enabled them to reach a level of acceptance and endurance impossible for more ambitious people like the narrator to reach.

In addition to the role of language in developing self-consciousness, the part it plays in establishing human relationships is shown to be crucial. In *MOONS*, Munro not only uses her characteristic pauses to consider the sound or connotations of words, but also she tests the minimum language requirements for communication to take place and relationships to be established. In "The Stone in the Field", talking to the aunts is difficult because they do not exchange stories as family members usually do. Owing to their paralysing shyness, they can scarcely bring themselves to answer questions. Instead their brother manages to communicate with them in a simplified way which somewhat resembles Mrs. Cross's attempts to communicate with Jack, a stroke victim who has lost the power to speak. Like Jack, they often reply by means of a giggle rather than a word. In another story, "The Turkey Season", the role of special languages at work is explored. The highschool-girl narrator, a stranger to the working world, must learn its

vocabulary and idioms in order to perform her job as a turkey gutter and fit into this new society where her co-workers telegraph messages concerning sex through phrases whose special meanings arise from their context:

Lily said she never let her husband come near her if he had been drinking. Marjorie said since the time she nearly died with a hemorrhage she never let her husband come near her, period. . . . I could see that it was a matter of pride not to let your husband come near you, but I couldn't quite believe that "come near" meant "have sex." (p. 68, emphasis added)

As an outsider at the Turkey Barn, the narrator is a Jamesian innocent abroad, registering fresh impressions in a foreign milieu and straining to understand a foreign language. In this volume, Munro's approach to language is more consciously analytical than before. Language itself has become her subject as well as her vehicle of expression. Moreover, Munro's characterization, which has always relied on close observation of the particular to reveal the differences between people, has become more generalized, concerned with similarities rather than differences, especially among women characters.

In her earlier work, she tended to use symbols warily, reluctant to stretch her metaphors beyond the single story, and so compromise the individuality of her characters and their situations. Munro has denied being a writer of ideas often enough that her critics have tended to take her at her word; however, *MOONS* is the first of her works to be

structured by a coherent psychological argument that unifies it around the metaphor of Jupiter's moons. Repeatedly, these stories relate women's behaviour to the irresistible force of their attraction toward the men they love. Like the moons, they travel in fixed orbits beyond their own control. This ironic message is repeated with subtlety, and often a wry humour, in narratives layered with references to unwritten and written stories which further elaborate it.

The growing self-reflexiveness of Munro's fiction already discussed in the two previous chapters culminates in *MOONS*, where the link between writing and life is insistently called to the reader's attention, perhaps most memorably by means of the cardiogram referred to twice in the title story. The narrator's attention is drawn to the screen above her father's hospital bed, on which, "a bright jagged line was continually being written" (p. 217). Naturally the daughter's worried gaze focuses on the line because she knows that its continuity represents her father's beating heart. So long as the line writes, he lives.

Whereas *WHO* was preoccupied with separation, *MOONS* is obsessed with connection. The family historian who narrates the first and last stories in *MOONS* replaces Rose, the iconoclast of *WHO*, hellbent on escape, first from her family and social class, and later from her husband's Pygmalion-like attempts to mold her into a female replica of himself. In order to discover her own individuality, Rose

must break free of these constraints; but, by the conclusion, she has become closer to her stepmother, the villainess of her childhood, now stripped of her former power through senility. In *MOONS*, the progression from destruction to rebuilding continues: shattered family ties are re-joined, and connections with the past have become desirable. Several narrators undertake sentimental journeys to ancestral farms, only to discover that nothing remains on the land to mark where their people once were; yet memories survive, preserving the past into the present. The stone which marked the grave of a reclusive hired man has disappeared in "The Stone in the Field", while in "Visitors", the family farm has been turned into a Conservation Area:

Albert walked up and down in the grass. He made a turn, he stopped and looked around and started again. He was trying to get the outline of the house. Wilfred frowned at the grass and said, "They don't leave you much." (pp. 211-12)

Inexorably, time changes the landscape of childhood. To a great extent, *MOONS* is preoccupied with time:

For instance last spring, last autumn in Australia, when I was happy, the line that would go through my head, at a merry clip, was this: "Even such is time, that takes in trust--" I could not go on, though I knew trust rhymed with dust and that there was something further along about "and in the dark and silent grave, shuts up the story of our days." I knew the poem was written by Sir Walter Raleigh on the eve of his execution. My mood did not accord with such a poem and I said it, in my head, as if it was something pretty and lighthearted.

I did not stop to wonder what it was doing
in my head in the first place. (p. 122)

The metaphorical link between the poem and the narrator's experience was present in her mind long before she understood it.² Even in her happiness, she was aware of time and change, and knew that her joy would end.

In the mind, present experience is continually being modified with reference to recollections as diverse as an Elizabethan poem or a spinster relation:

I think of being an old maid in another
generation. There were plenty of old maids
in my family. I come of straightened people,
madly secretive, tenacious, economical. Like
them, I could make a little go a long way.
(p. 110)

The narrator recognizes that it is not outward, but inner, experience that matters; not what happens but how women feel about it. The free-wheeling narrators of *MOONS*, with their temporary lovers, seem at first glance far removed from the lonely old maids of the past; but, like their forerunners, they end up fingering their keepsakes while the beloved man moves on: "A piece of Chinese silk folded in a drawer. . . . the one letter, hidden under maidenly garments, never needing to be opened or read because every word is known by heart, and a touch communicates the whole" (p. 110). These women who treasure the relics of their lost loves resemble the discarded mistress in "Prue", who steals her former lover's amber cufflink. Although Prue's friends believe she

is "somebody who doesn't take herself too seriously, who is so unintense, and civilized, and never makes any real demands or complaints" (p. 129), their assumptions are questionable. In common with the old maids of past generations, Prue behaves with stoical fortitude, but her disturbed inner life is radically different from her outwardly calm appearance. She is sustaining herself by means of fantasies, just as women in her position always have. Similarly, the narrator of "Bardon Bus" exemplifies the power of fantasy to irradiate life and temper the loss of a beloved man. Appropriately, the lover with whom the narrator of "Bardon Bus" lived in Australia is an anthropologist, someone who studies human beings; therefore, his habit of moving from one woman to the next is consistent with his professional curiosity. His friend, Dennis, compares X's succession of mistresses with the excavated figures at Sian in China: "He said it reminded him of X's women. Row on row and always a new one appearing at the end of the line" (p. 119). Although the narrator rejects this malicious comparison, her protest has a hollow ring:

I think the comparison's a bit off. Nobody has to dig the women out and stand them on their feet. Nobody puts them there. They came along and joined up of their own free will. They're not a standing army. Most of them are probably on their way to someplace else anyway. (p. 120)

X replies, "Bravo", as well he might, since her attitude allows him to pursue his predatory course undeterred by

tearful recriminations. Yet the tears will be shed eventually when the narrator grieves in private, compulsively recalling the details of their passion even though she recognizes the folly of this kind of self-torture: "The images, the language, of pornography and romance are alike: monotonous and mechanically seductive, quickly leading to despair" (p. 123). By escaping into lurid fantasies, the narrator makes herself more unhappy; but by transforming her memories into a decadent fiction, she can achieve some control over them. Artificiality is enhanced by calling the lover "X", the choice of letter recalling the sensational confessional novel *THE HAPPY HOOKER*, written by a prostitute with a conspicuous "X" in her name, Xaviera Hollander.³ This book is referred to directly in "Labor Day Dinner", in which it appears on a teen-age girl's summer reading list. In "Bardon Bus", the oblique reference to prostitution suggests how, like the prostitute, the narrator of "Bardon Bus" allows herself to be a convenience a man may use and then discard, without being obliged to listen to her protests or face her grief.

Another story of love and loss is told from the woman's point of view by Lydia in "Dulse". She recalls her first sight of her lover, Duncan, when he came to the bookstore where she worked to ask for a copy of *THE PERSIAN LETTERS*. The Montesquieu work serves as a pretext for Duncan to air his bibliographic knowledge for the store clerk. Overhearing their conversation, Lydia forms a first

impression of Duncan as a show-off, a judgement that colours the reader's assessment of him from then on. In addition to this overt use of a literary reference to reveal character, the unstated parallels between Duncan and his book choice go much deeper.

In *THE PERSIAN LETTERS*, three Persian gentlemen, Rica, Usbek, and Rhedi, travel to Europe, where they study manners and institutions. Particularly relevant to Duncan is the letter written to Usbek by Fatme, one of his wives left behind in the seraglio, who describes feelings similar to Lydia's when she is rejected by Duncan:

How hapless is the lot of a woman who has such violent desires and yet is deprived of the society of the only person who can satisfy them. Left to herself, with nothing to preoccupy her mind, her whole life is spent in sighs and in the delirium of exasperated passion.⁴

Fatme's delirium is recalled in Lydia's trance-like existence in Toronto after her final attempt to telephone Duncan. Living alone again, she has difficulty getting through such elementary routines as taking the subway or buying a loaf of bread:

She thought afterwards that she had been seized up, as machines are said to be. Even at the time she had an image of herself. She saw herself as something like an egg carton, hollowed out in back. (p. 41)

For Fatme and Lydia, losing the beloved is like losing a

part of themselves. In contrast, men more easily resume their everyday lives when a love affair ends because they retain private areas of self where women are never allowed. Even while Lydia was living with Duncan, his apartment retained its bachelor character, reminding her that she was only a temporary resident:

She thought about Duncan's apartment. . . . All disorder was actually order, carefully thought out and not to be interfered with. There was a beautiful little rug at the end of the hall, where he sat and listened to music. There was one great, ugly armchair, a masterpiece of engineering, with all its attachments for the head and limbs. (pp. 53-4)

Into this selfish sybarite's privacy tiptoes Lydia, bringing flowers and gifts, adapting herself to her lover's household arrangements, fitting her needs to his, even enduring his reminiscences about other women:

Duncan spoke about his former girlfriends. Efficient Ruth, pert Judy, vivacious Diane, elegant Delores, wifely Maxine, Lorraine the golden-haired, full-breasted beauty; Marian the multilingual; Caroline the neurotic; Rosalie who was wild and gypsy-like; gifted, melancholy Louise; serene socialite Jane. (p. 52)

This harem recall's Usbek's, and presupposes a similar view of women as amusing playthings. A significant omission in *THE PERSIAN LETTERS* is an answering letter from Usbek to Fatme, whereas the collection contains several communications from Usbek to his chief eunuch, the administrator of the seraglio.

Like Usbek, Duncan considers women incidental in his life; his attitude is best expressed in Byron's *Don Juan*: "Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,/'Tis woman's whole existence" (I cxciv). Certainly Kay, the narrator's friend in "Bardon Bus", exemplifies the kind of woman who is completely taken over by love: "She takes up a man and his story wholeheartedly. She learns his language, figuratively or literally" (p. 116). By falling in love with a series of men, and remaking herself to suit each one, Kay seems an extreme case of female folly, but the narrator insists that she is typical: "In none of this is she so exceptional. She does what women do. Perhaps she does it more often, more openly, just a bit more ill-advisedly and more fervently" (p. 116). The point is that women tend to desperation in their need for men's love. By way of reinforcement, a brief but tantalizing reference to Willa Cather's novel, *A LOST LADY*, affords a close literary parallel with Lydia in "Dulse".

An elderly man staying at the same guesthouse as Lydia engages her in conversation about Willa Cather, once a summer resident of the island, and a research interest of the old man, who names *A LOST LADY* as his favourite of her works.

The lost lady of Cather's romance is Marian Forrester, a beautiful adventuress who, as the young wife to a rich and powerful older man, commands the admiration of a wide circle of male acquaintances. As her husband's fortune and health

decline, Mrs. Forrester's status slips and her need for love intensifies, finding its outlet in younger, less suitable men, to the dismay of the adoring young Niel, who has imagined her as a lady chaste and fair:

Mrs. Forrester's hand tightened on his arm. She began speaking abruptly. 'You see, two years, three years, more of this, and I could still go back to California--and live again. But after that . . . Perhaps people think I've settled down to grow old gracefully, but I've not. I feel such a power to live in me, Niel.' Her slender fingers gripped his wrist.⁵

Niel is horrified when his former idol confesses such human longings, and disgusted when she forms a liaison with a morally and socially inferior young man who treats her with savage disrespect. Although there are hints in the narrative that Mrs. Forrester responds to Ivy Peters' rough sexual treatment, Ivy's motives are more vengeful than sexual: he itches to punish the local aristocracy which once looked down on him.

Mrs. Forrester's example illuminates Lydia's situation. She too is a woman who loses the protection of a man, and whose status in the eyes of other men declines accordingly. In the new milieu of the island, her former position as Duncan's mistress is irrelevant. Like her fictional predecessor, Lydia seeks male companionship and admiration. To the telephone work crew with whom she plays cards in the guesthouse kitchen, she is just a woman, the object of their sexual speculations as they are objects of hers. From her

detached vantage point beyond physical desire, Lydia decides that Vincent would have been her choice, but she is not impelled to act upon it; instead, she merely wonders what it might have been like had she settled down with someone like him:

That is, should she have stayed in the place where love is managed for you, not gone where you have to invent it, and re-invent it, and never know if these efforts will be enough?
(p. 52)

The emotional strain of attempting to invent new forms of loving outside the traditional form of marriage has been hard on Lydia. She has been discussing her feelings with a psychiatrist, and a remembered fragment of their conversation reveals how vulnerable the affair has made her, how little self respect she has retained:

"What about you?" said the doctor. "What do you want?"
"For him to love me?"
"Not for you to love him?" (p. 53)

Like most of the women in MOONS, Lydia persists in valuing herself in accordance with the feelings she arouses in the man she loves. Such women are naturally afraid to annoy their men, and take pains to placate them. Think of the mother in the title story as she observes her daughter's mollifying touch on the arm of a young man:

Judith moved ahead and touched Don's arm. I knew that touch--an apology, an anxious reassurance. You touch a man that way to remind him that you

are grateful, that you realize he is doing for your sake something that bores him or slightly endangers his dignity. It made me feel older than grandchildren would to see my daughter touch a man--a boy--this way. (p. 223)

What moves the mother is the sight of her independent daughter's dependence on a man's approval. Although Judith lives with her boyfriend instead of marrying him, her relationship with Don is no different from that of a traditional wife's to her husband. In fact, Judith's apologetic attitude parallels her mother's in the linked story, "Chaddleys and Flemings", which opens this volume. There, the mother-narrator was unable to bring herself to ask her husband to drive her aunt from her hotel to their house:

I had not wanted to ask Richard to go to the hotel for her. I would not say I was afraid to ask him; I simply wanted to keep things from starting off on the wrong foot, by making him do what he hadn't offered to do. (p. 13)

Despite these rationalizations, the narrator betrays her fear of making demands of her husband. She seems to believe that she has relinquished her rights along with her maiden name, and the duty to adapt to marriage is entirely hers.

Rather than being an advancing straight line, the movement in MOONS is circular, revolving like the heavenly cycles of the moons around Jupiter. The girl child alluded to by the narrator in "Chaddleys and Flemings" has grown up to become dominated by a man just as her mother was. Life

is seen, then, as a recurring story, most ironically in the case of Mrs. Kidd and Mrs. Cross, two old women who re-establish in the nursing home the mother-child relationships they had years before: Mrs. Cross adopts Jack, a stroke victim, and Mrs. Kidd reciprocates by befriending Charlotte, who has multiple sclerosis. The rivalry which Mrs. Kidd and Mrs. Cross established as little girls is reawakened over these surrogate children, and the familiar pattern of children growing up and leaving their mothers is repeated when Jack and Charlotte pair off, leaving the two old women alone together once again.

Inured to loss, they retain the ability to discuss what has happened, thereby partly restoring their perspective. As old acquaintances who understand each other's spoken and unspoken thoughts, they exemplify the importance of speech and storytelling as a basis for friendship. By contrast, Jack, his speech blocked by the effects of a stroke, struggles vainly to communicate:

He opened his mouth and said, "Anh-anh-anh,"
 "Yes," said Mrs. Cross encouragingly.
 "Yes?"
 "Anh-anh-anh," said Jack. He flapped his
 right hand. Tears came into his eyes. (p. 167)

Jack is desperate to tell Mrs. Cross about his past. Without being able to offer her essential information about his background in exchange for the information she gives him about hers, he cannot be her friend. Despite her limited education, Mrs. Cross has the good sense to treat Jack as

she treated her children when they were young; she makes up questions requiring yes or no answers from him:

Jack was pointing at one of the pictures. . . .
 "What about it? This is like one of those things on television. Trees? Green? Pine trees? Is it the deer? Three deer? No? Yes? Three red deer?" He flapped his arm up and down and she said, "I don't know, really. Three-red-deer. Wait a minute. That's a place. . . .
Red Deer." (p. 170)

Mrs. Cross is intelligent enough to invent the game and patient enough to play it because of her liking for Jack. Seeing Mrs. Kidd and Charlotte playing Scrabble, she immediately thinks of using the letter tiles to help Jack to communicate. Instead of pleasing Jack, however, the Scrabble letters provoke the climactic scene in which Jack and Charlotte join forces against Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd, throw off their power and leave them feeling weak and ridiculous:

He made a sound of disgust and pushed the Scrabble board and all the letters to the floor, all the time looking at Mrs. Cross so that there could be no doubt that this disgust and fury had been aroused by her. She knew that it was important at this moment to speak coldly and firmly. . . . But she was not able to say a word, such a feeling of grief, and shock, and helplessness rose in her heart. (p. 177)

Weakened by old age and a bad heart, Mrs. Cross is drained by the emotional expenditure of the confrontation with Jack. As comfort, her friend Mrs. Kidd offers her a story which describes Mrs. Kidd's own weakness following a black-out she

suffered, but ends reassuringly with her being restored to strength:

As a matter of fact, Mrs. Cross had heard Mrs. Kidd tell this story before, but it was a long time ago and she laughed now not just to be obliging; she laughed with relief. Mrs. Kidd's firm voice had spread a numbing ointment over her misery. (p. 179)

The story has achieved the desired effect of encouraging Mrs. Cross not to lose hope despite the collapse of the relationship she had built with Jack. By her matter-of-fact manner, Mrs. Kidd reminds her friend that there are worse losses than the regard of a young man whom she was trying to help. Mrs. Cross may have lost Jack, but her old friend is still at her side. Moreover, although she tried to ignore it, Mrs. Cross knew instinctively that the tie between Jack and herself was fragile. She always took exaggerated care not to anger him, and was amazed that he permitted Charlotte to tease him:

"Anh-an-anh?" said Charlotte, teasing him. What kind of a word is that, anh-anh-anh?" Mrs. Cross waited for the skies to fall, but the only thing Jack did was giggle, and Charlotte giggled, so that there was a sort of giggling-match set up between the two of them. (p. 177)

Charlotte's appreciative giggle draws her closer to Jack than Mrs. Cross has managed to get despite all her patient kindness. By going off with Charlotte, Jack reveals the superior force of sexual communication over verbal communication. It is another illustration of the

gravitational force between Jupiter and the moons. Although Mrs. Cross has proven herself a better friend to Jack than Charlotte is, he abandons the older for the younger woman who attracts him sexually.

This pattern is repeated in "Hard Luck Stories", when the narrator describes her dismay at the discovery that the man she was in love with was passionately drawn not to her, but to the woman at whose house they were staying: "He'd brought me there to counter her with. I was his sensible choice. I was the woman he liked. I couldn't stand that. I couldn't stand it" (p. 195). Here the narrator repeats the same sentiment she has declared earlier: that despite paying lip-service to the notion that the best love is rational, she instinctively understands that what matters is irrational sexual attraction:

There's the intelligent sort of love that makes an intelligent choice. That's the kind you're supposed to get married on. Then there's the kind that's anything but intelligent, that's like a possession. And that's the one, that's the one, everybody values. That's the one nobody wants to have missed out on. (p. 195)

Since love is not commanded by reason, it becomes a matter of luck, with the odds against both members of the couple being obsessed by each other. Therefore, the stories of past love are properly designated as hard luck stories. The two women tell about their previous affairs, unconsummated in Julie's case. She speaks deprecatingly of her

revelations as, "laying-bare my ridiculous almost-affairs" (p. 191), prompting Douglas to misquote the song from GAMMER GURTON'S NEEDLE:

Back and side go bare, go bare,
Both foot and hand go cold:
But belly God send thee good ale enough,
Whether it be new or old.⁶

Douglas alters the first line to "Back and side lay bare, lay bare", and this unusual instance of Munro's changing a word in an embedded quotation assumes added importance because of its rarity. The effect of the change is to strengthen the connection between being and telling. For a reader who recognizes the lines, the two versions play off one another so that the image of the half-naked body of the ragged ale drinker complements the image of the women attempting to tell the truth about their unhappy past experiences with men. Significantly, it is the two women who tell stories about their past loves. Douglas Reider, whose male presence is probably instrumental in provoking their stories, confines his anecdotes to tales of the private dealers in old diaries and letters who are his business rivals. The narrator describes him as youthful-looking in a special sense of the term:

I am thinking of the hard youthfulness, the jaunty grim looks you often see in photographs of servicemen in the Second World War. Douglas was one of those, and is preserved, not ripened. Oh, the modesty and satisfaction of those faces, clamped down on their secrets! With such men the descent into love is swift and

private and amazing--so is their recovery.
(p. 184)

Unlike Julie and the narrator, Douglas does not "lay bare" his past loves, so the reader is free to assume that he is less scarred by love than are the two women. Describing his work to her friend, the narrator says, "He's a sort of pirate, really" (p. 184), and certainly the metaphor of men as pirates of women's love pervades the stories in MOONS. It can be appropriately applied to Duncan in "Dulse", to Alex in "Bardon Bus", Gordon in "Prue" and George in "Labor Day Dinner".

A significant exception, however, is Wilfred in "Visitors", a man who epitomizes the sensible marital choice rejected by the narrator of "Hard Luck Stories". Wilfred, who rescues Mildred with his marriage proposal after the death of her former protector, Mr. Toll, is a friendly alter-ego for Mildred, a conclusion reinforced by the similarity in their names. In addition to their shared tastes in leisure activities (evenings at the Legion to play darts and drink beer), they share a common conception of a story as a construct which has meaning beyond its factual value as history:

If Wilfred had been telling that story, Mildred thought, there would have been some kind of ending to it. . . . In Wilfred's stories you could always be sure that the gloomy parts would give way to something better, and if somebody behaved in a peculiar way there was an explanation for it. If Wilfred figured in his own stories, as he usually did, there

was always a stroke of luck for him somewhere, a good meal or a bottle of whisky or some money. Neither luck nor money played a part in this story. She wondered why Albert had told it, what it had meant to him. (p. 215)

As soon as Mildred inquires about the meaning of the story, she realizes that she has made a mistake. Her brother-in-law is offended by her curiosity: "Albert picked up a cold piece of hamburger and put it down and said, 'It's not a story. It's something that happened'" (p. 215). In "Visitors", a character's storytelling ability parallels his appetite for food and drink. The thin, teetotal Albert has meagre physical appetites. Unlike his enthusiastic brother, Wilfred, he is a colourless individual who reveals almost nothing about himself. Mildred becomes exhausted trying to entertain him because he and his wife and her sister cannot suggest any place they are interested in seeing except the Pentecostal church. They conform to a pattern in Munro's fiction in which religious faith is frequently a sign of blindness and rigidity. Because the faithful think they know in advance how the story comes out, they are not struggling like the central characters to understand the meaning of their lives. Albert is like David's beatific girlfriend Kimberly in "Labor Day Dinner":

Kimberley is endangered on two sides, Roberta thinks. But she will manage. She is strong enough to hold onto David through any number of Angelas, and strong enough to hold her smile in the face of George's attack on her faith. Does her smile foresee how he will burn? Not likely. She foresees, instead, how all of them

will stumble and wander around and tie themselves in knots; what does it matter who wins the argument; For Kimberly all the arguments have already been won. (p. 156)

There is a streak of malice in David's mother's appraisal of Kimberley, and similar malice in the portrait of the orthodox Finnish Lutheran sister-in-law in "Accident", so convinced of her righteousness that she takes over the funeral arrangements for her sister's dead child, confidently discharges her duty to reveal her sister's husband's infidelity, and even demands that the highschool principal put a stop to the affair. As a result, the unfaithful husband justifies himself by divorcing his wife and marrying his mistress, completely overturning his sister-in-law's intentions.

In the final segment of this story, the tense changes from past to present as the second wife, now middle-aged, contemplates her past, and sees how her life has been interwoven with the lives of others. As she looks back, her memories remind her of a story with alternate endings. She believes that the pattern of her life had been for her to remain single, but it was altered by a combination of chance events. If Fred Beecher had not decided to use his car to deliver a baby carriage across town, Ted's son would not have died, and Ted would not have married her:

She's had her love, her scandal, her man, her children. But inside she's ticking away, all by herself, the same Frances who was there before any of it. (p. 109)

Despite her altered circumstances, Frances thinks she has an inner core of self which is unaffected by what happens to her. She knows she is more than the sum of her experiences. Shared by several protagonists in *MOONS*, this new insight affects their attitude to storytelling, suddenly bringing them up short in the middle of a narrative, when they realize how storytelling tends to trivialize people's lives:

If I had been younger, I would have figured out a story. I would have insisted on Mr. Black's being in love with one of my aunts, and on one of them--not necessarily the one he was in love with --being in love with him. I would have wished him to confide in them, in one of them, his secret, his reason for living in a shack in Huron County, far from home. Later, I might have believed that he wanted to, but hadn't confided this, or his love either. I would have made a horrible, plausible connection between that silence of his, and the manner of his death. Now I no longer believe that people's secrets are definable and communicable, or their feelings full-blown and easy to recognize. (p. 35)

There is a new awareness here of people as more complex and mysterious than stories about them ever show. Words inevitably fall short of conveying the truth of people's lives, as the narrator of "Hard-Luck Stories" realizes when she hears herself deprecating a word in a verse on a tombstone:

"Waft," I said. "That sounds nice." Then I felt something go over me--a shadow, a chastening. I heard the silly sound of my own voice against the truth of the lives laid down here. (p. 196)

The self-conscious tone occasionally present in all Munro's books becomes self-critical in *MOONS*, as narrators confront the failure of narratives to encompass the multiplicity and contradiction of life. The knowledge painfully acquired by these narrators is knowledge of their limitations, of barriers which the storyteller cannot cross. In "The Turkey Season", the narrator speculates that Herb was probably homosexual, and attempts to imagine his feelings when Brian was fired, ordered out of town and denounced as a pervert; but ultimately she acknowledges the futility of her attempt to explain what happened:

Later still, I backed off from this explanation. I got to a stage of backing off from things I couldn't really know. It's enough for me now just to think of Herb's face with that peculiar, stricken look; to think of Brian monkeying in the shade of Herb's dignity; to think of my own mystified concentration on Herb, my need to catch him out, if I could ever get the chance, and then move in and stay close to him. (p. 74)

An explanation offered and later rejected does not disappear since, unlike the other arts, literature is able to say what it has chosen not to say, as Suzanne Langer explains in

FEELING AND FORM:

Where there is no exclusion of opposites, there is also, strictly speaking, no negative. In non-verbal arts this is obvious; omissions may be significant, but never as negatives. In literature, the words, "no," "not," "never," etc., occur freely, but what they deny is thereby created.⁷

Therefore, when the narrator claims to no longer believe

something, the original belief still stands; denying it has neither erased it from the narrative nor caused the reader to forget it. By means of negation, Munro widens her possibilities for suggesting complexity and ambiguity without breaking the illusion that the narrator is remembering actual experiences. By reporting her changes of mind, the narrator suggests how memories are continually being extended and modified in the process of reflection. As Munro's narrators age, a discernible, but not invariable, trend in succeeding books, their memories extend far enough back for them to realize that they have altered their opinions in the course of time. Accordingly, they have grown less confident that their point of view represents the truth.

Growing older, Munro's narrators have also grown more detached. The sadness they feel as their power to attract men diminishes is balanced by a calm pleasure in having reached a vantage point above the hurly-burly of the sexual arena:

She had noticed something about herself, on this trip to the Maritimes. It was that people were no longer interested in getting to know her. It wasn't that she had created such a stir before, but something had been there that she could rely on. . . . She was not surprised because she was in a new, strange condition at the time. She made efforts one after the other. She set little blocks on top of one another and she had a day. Sometimes she almost could not do this. At other times the very deliberateness, the seeming arbitrariness, of what she was doing, the way she was living, exhilarated her. (pp. 36-7)

Since erotic love in MOONS is almost like demonic possession, life beyond menopause, although somewhat arid, has its compensations for Lydia, as it has for Roberta in "Labor Day Dinner":

But Roberta has the idea that, much as she likes them both and wishes them well, love is really something Valerie could do without being reminded of. In Valerie's company you do wonder sometimes what all the fuss is about. Valerie wonders. Her life and her presence, more than any opinion she expresses, remind you that love is not kind or honest and does not contribute to happiness in any reliable way. (p. 140)

According to this view, a woman's passion has little to do with her affection, and is a barrier to other achievements. In love, Roberta becomes enervated; whereas without a lover, her widowed friend Valerie discovers new energy, enabling her to singlehandedly turn her summer home into the setting people have in mind when they speak longingly of "a house in the country" (p. 141). Valerie is fortunate in having the resources to create a life for herself when her life with a man is ended by his death; other women, older and frailer than Valerie, are left with damaged pride and the pretense that there is still some point to their lives:

Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd used to play cards in the Recreation Room every afternoon. They put on earrings, stockings, afternoon dresses. They took turns treating for tea. On the whole these afternoons were pleasant. (p. 165)

The two old women cling to their custom of dressing up in the afternoons because it is one of the few comforting

rituals still possible in the nursing home. Like several other women characters in *MOONS*, they use clothes to bolster their pride or distract themselves from anxiety and grief. In "Connection" too, the narrator remembers her mother wearing a secondhand silk jersey afternoon dress acquired from a relative, and recalls how the ample corsetted figures of women of that generation proclaimed their rights and powers. In "Bardon Bus", however, buying clothes becomes an obsession:

I've become feverishly preoccupied with clothes. . . . I'm half convinced that a more artful getup would have made a more powerful impression, more dramatic clothes might have made me less discardable. I have fancies of meeting X unexpectedly at a party or on a Toronto street, devastating him with my altered looks and late-blooming splendor. (pp. 124-5)

Clothes shopping is an irrational response to the loss of her lover, a useless attempt to present herself in a new and irresistible form, even though the man for whom this is done is not there to see the transformation. Simultaneously, shopping affords temporary relief from suffering, just as it does in the title story, in which the narrator recalls trying on clothes once while she awaited the results of leukemia tests on her little girl, and again while she waits for it to be time to visit her father in hospital awaiting surgery. The futility of such attempts to escape into a new self by donning a new costume is suggested by the boy dressing up in women's clothes in "Bardon Bus":

Finally everybody is satisfied and a beautiful young lady, who is not a young lady at all, but a pretty boy dressed up as a lady, emerges from the shadow of the mirror. His smiling face is tense and tremulous. I remember how when I was ten or eleven years old I used to dress up as a bride in old curtains, or as a lady in rouge and a feathered hat. After all the effort and contriving and my own enchantment with the finished product there was a considerable letdown. What are you supposed to do now? (p. 126)

The illusion of change fleetingly produced by dressing up cannot be sustained. Typically, the costume chosen reveals hidden aspects of the wearer, enabling Munro to show, for instance, the developing sexuality of the adolescent Angela in "Labor Day Dinner":

As for Angela and Eve, they are dramatically arrayed in outfits contrived from a box of old curtains found in the upstairs of George's house. Angela wears emerald-green damask with long, sun-faded stripes, draped so as to leave one golden shoulder bare. . . . Angela is tall and fair-haired, and embarrassed by her recently acquired beauty. She will go to great trouble to flaunt it, as she does now, and then will redden and frown and look stubbornly affronted when somebody tells her she looks like a goddess. (p. 135)

Clearly, Angela is trying on the goddess role when she appears at dinner in this costume, just as she tries out her charms on David: "Angela is trying out her powers; she will try them out even on a cousin she has known since she was a child" (p. 156). She is too young to be ready to enter a sexual relationship, but prepares for this coming phase by practising on David, who is safely beyond her reach.

In her journal too, Angela tries on a role for which she is still too young, that of critic of her mother's behaviour since living with George:

"I have seen her change," Angela has written in her journal, "from a person I deeply respected into a person on the verge of being a nervous wreck. If this is love I want no part of it. He wants to enslave her and us all and she walks a tightrope trying to keep him from getting mad." (p. 147)

Subtly, Angela's journal reinforces the narrator's account of Roberta's declining self-confidence and growing desperation.

"Labor Day Dinner" uses brief literary references to reflect character and to elaborate the theme of feminine weakness and dependence upon men. When the hostess's daughter greets Eva, who is dressed up in a costume made of lace curtains, she says, "I know who Eva is. She's the Bride of Lammermoor" (p. 138). Thus, she places Eva in the romantic context of Sir Walter Scott. The unfortunate heroine of *THE BRIDE OF LAMMERMOOR* is the pawn in a family struggle for power.⁸ The Scott reference acts as a gloss on the similar circumstances of the mother and her two daughters in "Labor Day Dinner" because they depend upon the good will of the man chosen by the mother. Furthermore, book titles listed in Angela's summer reading list reflect her confused state of mind, poised as she is between childhood and adolescence. Her reading mixes romance and realism, children's and adult literature. Its contrasts

reveal the wide extent of her search for feminine models to emulate:

During the summer Angela has spent a lot of time reading. She has read ANNA KARENINA, THE SECOND SEX, EMILY OF NEW MOON, THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY, THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF W.B. YEATS, THE HAPPY HOOKER, THE ACT OF CREATION, SEVEN GOTHIC TALES. Some of these, to be accurate, she has not read all the way through. (p. 148)

This book list could belong to many of the women in MOONS at Angela's age. Against their better judgement, they are attracted to romantic views of women suggested by the poetic tradition of THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY⁹ and Yeats's devotion to his beloved Maud Gonne. ANNA KARENINA and SEVEN GOTHIC TALES reflect a European past that is remote from the experience of a young Canadian girl, but exerts a powerful attraction, nevertheless.

The inclusion of L.M. Montgomery's EMILY OF NEW MOON is a rare instance of Munro's referring to a Canadian, rather than an English, American or European work. First published in 1923, EMILY OF NEW MOON is an enduring children's novel about an orphan raised by maiden aunts on a Prince Edward Island farm.⁹ Its heroine is an aspiring poet, in some ways a forerunner of Del Jordan in ambition and inclination; therefore Munro's comments on EMILY OF NEW MOON in her recent interview with Tim Struthers shed new light on her own conception of the role of the artist in Canadian society. Munro acknowledges Montgomery's novel as an early

favorite which still interests her, and about which she would someday like to write:

I feel in that book she was getting very close to the book she should have written and never did write. There's a real sense of brooding and menace and even horror in that book which she just does not permit herself in a book like ANNE OF GREEN GABLES. They're a bit like TOM SAWYER and HUCKLEBERRY FINN. You know how in TOM SAWYER everything is sort of popular-entertainment level, and in HUCKLEBERRY FINN we get down to some real stuff. Well, EMILY OF NEW MOON is a bit like that.¹⁰

Munro reveals her fascination with the dark side of existence which she considers indispensable in a work of art. She believes that willingness to face this darkness distinguishes the serious from the popular artist. Although she sympathizes with Montgomery's reluctance to break the polite conventions of her time, she is convinced that her timidity kept her from becoming a first-rate novelist. Nevertheless, by referring to EMILY OF NEW MOON, Munro pays tribute to L.M. Montgomery's influence on her, and simultaneously insinuates another moon into her own imagery of Jupiter's moons by means of the title, EMILY OF NEW MOON.

By the end of "Labor Day Dinner" the moon has become a dominating presence influencing all their lives. The speeding car which narrowly escapes crashing into the car in which Roberta, her daughters and her lover are travelling, is being driven without lights. The driver, returning from a drinking party, "sees the road by the light of the moon" (p. 158). Before their narrow escape, Roberta points out

the gibbous moon and recalls how she taught George the meaning of the word, gibbous, a term for the moon when it is more than half full. The gibbous moon not only is an appropriate figure for the middle-aged Roberta, but also, as a later phase of the new moon, is a continuation and extension of the reference to L. M. Montgomery. Thus, even a single item in a book list does double duty, yet the symbolism is never strained. Correspondences are suggested rather than forced upon the reader. The author does not attempt to persuade her audience that old stories cast light on new, but she structures her work according to this principle. The scaffolding is firmly in place, but functions without calling attention to itself. For example, without bothering to trace the source of the fragment of verse quoted by the father in "The Moons of Jupiter" the reader can still grasp its general significance from the lines alone: "'Behind him lay the gray Azores,/Behind the Gates of Hercules;/Before him not the ghost of shores,/Before him only shoreless seas'" (p. 225). A man facing a dangerous operation would be likely to have his mind fixed on lines which repeat the words "behind" and "before", and contrast past accomplishment with future uncertainty. The poem affords several other parallels too. Its title, unstated in the story, is "Columbus", which connects it with the idea of the New World and of a voyage of discovery, both familiar metaphors of death. Moreover, the poem's refrain, "On, sail on!" mirrors the father's

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fortitude. With her usual restraint, Munro provides the fragment of verse to reflect the father's situation and leaves explanations to the critic.

With the same subtlety, the work's controlling metaphor of Jupiter and the moons is introduced through a seemingly desultory conversation between the narrator and her father during their last visit in the hospital. After she describes the show she has just watched at the planetarium, they try to remember the names of the moons of Jupiter, and between them recall that they are Io, Callisto, Europa and Ganymede. The correspondence between the power of gravitational attraction that holds four moons (three females and one male) in orbit around a central male planet, and the power of sexual attraction is implied rather than stated: "Io and Europa, they were girlfriends of Jupiter's, weren't they?" (p. 233). Munro provides the link by means of the father's colloquial term "girlfriend", thereby condensing two stories of the god's amorous pursuits into one modern epithet.

In recent usage, girlfriend has overtones of a sexual relationship, as shown previously in "Dulse", through the list of Duncan's discarded lovers: "Duncan spoke about his former girlfriends. Efficient Ruth, pert Judy, vivacious Diane, elegant Delores, wifely Maxine . . ." (p. 52). Men like Duncan or Alex in "Bardon Bus" resemble Jupiter in their commitment to the chase, their loss of interest in a woman once they have captured her. For their part, women like Lydia in "Dulse", Prue, or the narrator of "Bardon Bus"

cling to their lovers as Juno clung to Jupiter, hoping to rekindle the dead embers of passion in men who have abandoned them, and jealous of the women who have displaced them. Yet none of these parallels between the Greek myths and Munro's men and women are spelled out. In this respect, Munro's method is more like a lyric poet's than a prose fiction writer's: she creates her image and allows it to speak for itself.

Underlying *MOONS* is a conception of memory which takes into account its peculiar power to make recollected stories resemble recollected experience. The organizing, transforming process of remembering brings the two close together. Having discovered that memories of stories can be as intense as memories of experiences, and that the associative process of recollection combines events and literature in its search for meaning in past experience, Munro is able to reproduce the semblance of a literate, middle-aged narrator's remembering voice. The emphasis on literary recollections of this volume, in contrast to the family anecdotes of earlier collections, suits this group of characters, most of whom are readers, and some of whom are writers as well.

As Munro's protagonists change from a pre-war rural generation with a high-school education to a post-war urban generation with a university education, they see their lives against a background derived not only from family tradition, but also from literary tradition. The literary influence is

strongest on those who are attempting to cast off inherited values and forge new, less restricted lives than their parents. Not surprisingly then, given her faith in progress and her longing for self-improvement, Ada Jordan in *LIVES* is the outstanding instance of a character in Munro's early work for whom literary references are provided. Ada's Tennysonian pen name, Princess Ida, adds an important element to her characterization. Having rejected her mother's dogmatic religious faith, Ada has turned to secular writing in search of ideals. The difference between Ada and the women Munro describes in *MOONS* is that their faith in progress has declined and they question the truth of secular writing as determinedly as Ada once questioned the truth of religious gospel. Literary references add another layer to Munro's recent writing, but it is a layer which does not tend to fix character by showing a mind set in certain lines. On the contrary, literary references add a layer of ambiguity, raising doubts about the extent to which characters understand their own behaviour, as well as doubts about the extent to which the written word can embody the truth.

Notes

¹
Alice Munro, *THE MOONS OF JUPITER: STORIES BY ALICE MUNRO* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982). All subsequent references appear in the text.

²
Sir Walter Raleigh, "Written the night before his death. Found in his Bible in the Gate-house at Westminster," (1618; rpt. London: Blackie, n.d.) p. 370.

³
Xaviera Hollander, *THE HAPPY HOOKER* (New York: Del, 1972).

⁴
Charles Louis II Montesquieu, *THE PERSIAN LETTERS: WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES, NOW COMPLETELY DONE INTO ENGLISH FROM THE ORIGINAL BY MONTESQUIEU* (London: Athenaeum, 1897), p. 15.

⁵
Willa Cather, *A LOST LADY* (1923; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938), p. 120.

⁶
William Stevenson, *GAMMER GURTON'S NEEDLE*, Act II, Song. (c. 1562; rpt. London: Gibbings, 1906), p. 14.

⁷
Suzanne Langer, *FEELING AND FORM* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 242.

⁸
Sir Walter Scott, *THE BRIDE OF LAMERMOOR*, (1819; rpt. London: Dent, 1906).

⁹
L.M. Montgomery, *EMILY OF NEW MOON*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1923).

¹⁰
J. R. (Tim) Struthers, "The Real Material: An Interview with Alice Munro," in *PROBABLE FICTIONS*, ed. Louis K. MacKendrick (Toronto: ECW Press, 1983), p. 18.

¹¹
Joachin Miller, "Columbus," in *BEST LOVED STORY POEMS* (Garden City, N.Y.: Halcyon House, 1949), p. 310.

Conclusion

In Alice Munro's fiction, stories that are mentioned or told provide ironic commentary on her characters' experiences. By adding rival viewpoints to that of her narrators, they reflect the complexity and ambiguity found in daily life and allow Munro to avoid finally having to settle for only one version of the truth. Thus, they counter the strong sense of closure that the short story form tends to impose, the neat rounding-off that is so unlike life. Munro makes oral stories and stories in books as commonplace in her characters' lives as work and meals. She shows the influence stories exert throughout life, but especially in childhood. Since the children and teenagers in *DANCE* and *LIVES* are preoccupied with understanding themselves and the people around them, stories are of paramount importance in molding their personalities. Typically, children attribute allegorical significance to every anecdote, fairy tale and legend they are told. They identify with the heroes and heroines of stories, and often cannot distinguish between stories and reality. Frequently, Munro's protagonists are girls who are determined to escape the limitations of a provincial upbringing and enter a wider world. They reject not only their geographical isolation in a small community, but also their intellectual isolation. Their first step toward departure is to construct an identity which is as different as possible from that of

their mothers. Searching for models of adult women to emulate, they rely on oral stories or stories from their reading to supplement their limited experience. Romantic stories abound in the literature to which they have access, and distort their thinking by raising false expectations or encouraging them to wait passively to be rescued by a male hero.

In two of Munro's works (LIVES and WHO) an artist-protagonist widens the scope of story references. Not only does the young artist--Del or Rose--tell stories, but also she reflects upon them, wondering to what extent they distort the truth by leaving out significant details. One work, WHO, is preoccupied with stories about aspects of existence usually left out of literature, stories which dwell on poverty as a condition in which the squalor of human life dominates. Munro implies that this world, one of soiled laundry, toilets and physical violence, is especially familiar to women because they are often forced to perform clean-up tasks and endure beatings. Also significant to women are stories which reflect the natural cycles of female life. MOONS looks at aspects of women's lives which change little from one generation to the next, examining the extent of their dependence upon men, and showing how they continue to need men despite greater possibilities for female independence than existed in their mothers' day.

The many stories that Munro's characters tell are the smallest units of a Chinese Box structure. They are

enclosed by Munro's short stories, which are themselves inside a larger box, the story cycle. Beyond it, the reader can discern the outlines of yet another enclosure, a myth which is implied but not retold in detail or even closely followed. It serves rather as a context for Munro's own story, or a gloss on it. In *DANCE*, the mythical figure of Orpheus is invoked by the title story. In *WHO*, it is the Triple Goddess, and in *MOONS*, the god, Jupiter. *LIVES* uses Tennyson's poems as a frame of reference for Del and Ada Jordan, thus altering the classical reference pattern more common in Munro's fiction. The most radical departure, however, is in *SOMETHING*. In this work, Munro performs her highwire act without the safety net of an informing myth. The omission is appropriate since the subject of *SOMETHING* is storytelling itself. This work tests the boundaries of narrative by experimenting with point-of-view and questioning its own narrative strategies. Yet, it is more strictly contained within those boundaries than any of Munro's other cycles. It does not reach outside itself to catch the strings of myth.

The structural significance of stories in Munro's fiction is far-reaching. The narrators claim storytelling as a mode of thought natural to women and strive to develop a feminine way of writing fiction which rejects authorial contrivance in favor of submission to a process of discovery. Finally, by her constant references to stories, Munro declares her belief that man is a storytelling animal.

Of all the tools that he has yet devised, words are the most important. They are the links joining characters to one another and the past. By telling their stories, putting them into words, her characters attempt to gain control over their lives. Outwardly, their lives are often unhappy, their hopes frustrated. But their inner lives, the memories and life stories that they have constructed, redeem their failures, making actual events seem mere appearance and their inner lives the true reality. Munro's characters survive by making up their own fictions that excuse, explain, and forgive their limitations and failures.

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