Perspectives on Gender in North America

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Editor

STIMUL
2017

PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER IN NORTH AMERICA

Edited by
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Vydal | Published by: STIMUL, Bratislava 2017

ISBN: 978-80-8127-178-6
EAN: 9788081271786

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Feminist Voices in Alice Munro's Selected Short Stories

Sanja Ignjatović

Abstract • The paper examines the various layers of narratives in selected stories from Alice Munro's short-story collections *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* and *Dear Life* from the perspective of relevant feminist issues persisting to this day. By analyzing Munro's narrative technique in the autodiegetic narratives "Material," "The Eye," and "Dear Life," the paper aims to reveal the personal and the authentic female voices intricately woven into the trivial and mundane story worlds—voices otherwise denied public space. The design of these autodiegetic narratives produces the effect of autobiographical fiction, but it is the seemingly commonplace character-narrators whose authentic discourses ultimately blur the line between fiction and fact. Munro purposefully undermines the autobiographical narrative unity by allowing several female narratives to flow into the main narrative and provide a new space for the examination of gender, gender inequality, and limitations extending to the present day.

Keywords • Alice Munro, short story, narrative, discourse, feminism, gender, gender roles

The discourses relating to Munro's stories are not visibly radical in their protest against those discourses of power that shape the economic, political, social, or other aspects of everyday life. Quite the contrary, Munro's discourses can unarguably be seen as chunks of that very discourse-version settled into the routine of everyday business, and additionally juxtaposed to it in the form of autodiegetic fiction featuring the extensive use of focalizing subjects who, without the presumption of authority of any kind, present accounts of their own quests for identity.

Overt criticism of patriarchy and the exclusion of women from the domain of the public, and art, have been tackled by feminist theory and by feminist critics, belonging to various traditions, as the problem of the phallogocentric tradition that upholds the concept of feminine passivity against the male active principle, or, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain it in their essay "The Madwoman in the Attic," "Male sexuality, in other words, is not just analogically but actually the essence of literary power" (364). Of course, their argument can be extended and applied not only to the domain of art or creativity, but to a wider context, and the overall active participation and function of women in the public and private domains.

The goal of this paper, however, is not to focus on the binary opposites exposed by the feminist theory as artificially created and enforced by the patriarchal tradition in order to discourage one and privilege another, but rather to examine the fictional narratives of characters whose existence is limited by that very discourse of power and the nature of discourse in which and by which they operate. The paper aims to reveal the techniques Munro uses to expose the awareness of the imposed boundaries—the boundaries that, in the case of her stories, function as tradition, socio-economic circumstance, or simply forces operating on the level of interpersonal relations in a wider context. These techniques go against the very nature of the prevalent discourse and therefore subvert its power to reinforce cultural, social, and political boundaries aimed at women.

Adrienne Rich can be associated with the tradition of feminist criticism that remains unburdened by the legacy of Deconstruction, the relativization of meaning, and the seemingly positivistic and yet extremely polarizing influences of postmodernism that imply compromises within the discourse of power rather than attempt to change it. In her essay "When We Dead Awaken," incidentally published two years before Alice Munro published the collection of stories *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, Rich aims to investigate the roots of "the oppressive nature of male/female relations" and whether the model of oppression is located in the economic system or "the domination of males" (381). This is exactly why the relevance of Adrienne Rich's 'feminist manifesto,' if one could call it like that, cannot possibly be underestimated even in the light of recent feminist theoretical directions. Rich and Munro react to the very same historical, economic, social, and political period. Rich approaches the problematic perception of femininity and female gender roles

not as a critic, but as an artist, as well as Munro, for whom "re-vision" is the "act of survival," and in a similar vein as New Criticism approaches history and literary texts—with emphasis on re-interpretation. The quest for self-unity is then a quest for liberation from language that entraps women into the language of men: "how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live afresh" (Rich 382). Namely, Munro's narratives do not at first sight question or examine the feminine space within society. That is, until they are read in a sequence (if not their entirety), they do not uncover the systematic conceptions of identity or the limited scope of personal freedom imposed by societal heritage, tradition, and the patriarchal standard. The personal accounts Munro has produced concern the individual stories of the women Adrienne Rich gives her gratitude to: "the women who are not with us here because they are washing the dishes and looking after the children" (Rich 382), and they are by no means exotic or peculiar, other than in the sense that they are pervasively accepted as the norm. On the contrary, in accordance with the conventions of the literary genre Munro skillfully exploits, the narratives of these women become bleak and disturbing, oppressed by the weight of their own ordinariness. It is exactly this feature that destroys the myths of the patriarchal tradition for it unmasks the destructive core which influences all individuals, regardless of gender. Much like Rich, Munro also creates portraits of living, flesh and blood, women—fictional, and yet this-worldly in the sense that they are recognizable. Commenting on the binary opposition presumed between the sexes—female passivity and male activity—Rich notes that "a certain freedom of mind is needed" (385) in order for creative work to be possible. Women are not allowed the luxury of personal space in which their "attention will not be suddenly snatched away" (Rich 385)—by children, by their husbands, by chores, or by impending daily tasks resulting in a trivial existence in which there is no space for any imaginative transformation of reality. For Rich, "writing is re-naming" (385), and yet, there is no freedom for women to explore this space in an active manner.

Munro's narrative elements in the stories "Material," "The Eye," and "Dear Life" will be discussed through the prism of Adrienne Rich's essay "When We Dead Awaken," a personal proclamation transcending the categorization of either an artistic or a feminist manifesto, drawing upon such feminist traditions as that of Helene Cixous or Luce Irigaray, and yet claiming no roots in or

requiring any extensive theoretical background. In addition to that, Munro's narratives will be commented on with a view to the genre conventions, the rhetorical motivation of the author, and with the aim of emphasizing the role of minor characters in the stories as the direct comment of the author.

Genre-wise, the three stories examined in this paper can be categorized as autobiographies or pseudo-autobiographies, and not only because of the specific narrative techniques Munro uses, but rather because autobiographies also resonate with the apparent desire to consolidate personal historical continuity in the three narratives. In fact, the very narrative technique and the purposefulness of its use are, in a way, coextensive. Helga Schwalm in her essay "Autobiography" defines "autobiography as a literary genre [that] signifies a retrospective narrative that undertakes to tell the author's own life, or a substantial part of it, seeking (at least in its classic version) to reconstruct his/her personal development within a given historical, social and cultural framework." Given the feminist perspective, this paper focuses on the social dimension because, unarguably, personal narratives such as autobiographies, oral histories, memoirs, etc. all serve to better understand the relationship between individuals and their societies for such narratives are never only individual. In addition to that, being an autodiegetic narrative, autobiography inevitably involves a dualism of sorts—the narrator that focalizes the hero (the self) and produces two typical instances in the course of the narrative: the narrating self and the narrated self (Genette). The discourse produced is both at its end and in the present moment because of the two temporal points recognized in the process of narration, embodied in the subject and object of focalization, as Mieke Bal defines it in her revision of Gerard Genette's narrative model presented in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Focalization in an autodiegetic narrative may variably shift from the usually 'younger' instance of the narrator, the protagonist or main character, to the 'older' counterpart—the narrator. Dan P. McAdams in his article "Identity and the Life Story" proposes that the autobiographical form provides an explanation for the self of the present. In addition to that, the causal explanation of the 'present self' is also a condition for a 'unified' sense of self. "It is an individual's story which has the power to tie together past, present, and future in his life. It is a story which is able to provide unity and purpose in his or her life" (McAdams, *Power, Intimacy* 17).

Munro's fiction is to a large extent self-reflective. Focalization, therefore, occurs not only deliberately, but almost compulsively, which brings into play the numerous minor characters, among others the mother ("Dear Life") and Sadie ("The Eye"), who in the course of narrated events shed light not only on the narrator, or Munro as the author, but on the social context where women, enclosed in their designated space, suffer a tragic fate either by submitting to the external forces which entrap them in their private domains or, in Rich's words, render them paralyzed; or the opposite, by transgressing against the norm and bringing upon themselves a metaphorical or literal death, respectively.

> [T]he telling of autobiographical stories is a tool that can be used in order to establish, negotiate, and redefine identities. This means that identities are found rather in the way narratives are organized and performed in relation to the ongoing interaction than 'inside' the narrative. (Hydén 47)

"Material" is transmitted as a subjective, autodiegetic narrative, and it begins in what is the 'present' moment, but goes back some seventeen years into the past to explore the reasons of a failed marriage, but also, perhaps, the stumped personal and professional growth of the main character-narrator, now a middle-aged teacher, married to an engineer, Gabriel, and mother of the seventeen-year-old Clea.

"Material" is at the same time the most direct criticism of conservatism and gender inequality transmitted through an uninterrupted female voice coming from a personal, albeit fictional, experience, but also a skillful narrative representation of a collective voice that exposes the climate in which professional and personal advancement and development are contingent upon the basis of gender. The unnamed main character reads her former husband's collection of stories, stumbles upon a story she herself provided the "material" for, and feels the urge to express her emotions in a letter to him. The plot revolves around her inability to put into words what she desires to say, so she instead, out of what eventually can be understood not as a practice but rather compulsion, resorts to examining the role of Hugo, her former husband, and the power that he, to an extent, still has over her. In this discourse, Hugo is the symbol of a man whose needs are put over everyone else's, and therefore he stands for a type. In this sense, some aspects of the story can also be understood as political, as they deal with the position of a woman in a society

that limits her to a traditional role. More precisely, the hypocrisy the narrative tackles is practiced by the academic community that endorses inequity. The incident which triggers the desire to reflect on her life and the personal failures otherwise ignored happens in the bookshop where Gabriel encourages her to buy Hugo's latest collection of stories for Clea. Her reading the story that is particularly personal is an introduction into a series of episodes from her life on which she reflects from two perspectives typical of the autobiographical convention. Finally, the confession where she admits her anger at not being allowed to have a career as a writer ensues, and it is there that emotions such as anger and envy reveal the painful personal disappointment.

The narration in "Material" is not entirely reliable. The discourse is uncensored and flows spontaneously from the perspective of an older self. Unarguably, it is one-sided, and yet, it does not aim to mask this feature. The emphasis is not on disguising the focalizing subject's intentions, but on revealing them, gradually, in a process of self-examination—a process where, basically, the narrated self and the narrating self are commenting on the past experiences and, in the process of writing, reliving them. Therefore, in this process of self-revelation, related in the syntax of frustration, pain, and envy, Munro's narrator examines the "vain, quarrelsome men . . . cosseted by the academic life, the literary life, by women" ("Material" 28) by examining her own role in the perpetuation of gender inequality, and the naiveté of the younger self that enabled it. The very juxtaposition of "swimming or drinking or going for a walk" (Munro, "Material" 28) with listening to a panel discussion at the University where her former husband Hugo is to discuss a relevant literary issue sets the tone of the entire confession-monologue. The unnamed narrator is the collective voice, rising against the hypocrisy of the normative that exploits the culturally perpetuated, politically upheld, and ideologically fortified inequalities.

The power that these men have is the power women are refused for reasons that can be inferred. If women are "hoping" to ask "intelligent questions" and "not be ridiculous," then what is insinuated is that women are not as intelligent as men on the "platform."

> People, I say, but I mean women, middle-aged women like me, alert and trembling, hoping to ask intelligent questions and not be ridiculous; soft-haired young girls awash in adoration, hoping to lock eyes with

> one of the men on the platform. Girls, women too, fall in love with such men, they imagine there is power in them. (Munro, "Material" 29)

The obvious spatial metaphor is quite adequate to illustrate the inequality in society that women of the "Material" world face in professional terms—women down, men up. In addition to that, by implying that those "bloated" men are "cosseted" (Munro, "Material" 28) by women, retrospectively, the narrator intimates that she was both one of the enablers and victims. It is important to note that these conclusions are made by the older self while the narrated self, the young woman, has no awareness, but rather only suffers, feels anger and powerlessness when faced with the uncontrollable ego of her husband at the time. Later on in the narrative, Dotty, their neighbor at the time, is invoked to illustrate the effect: "Dotty apologized every time, she was scared of Hugo and respectful of his work and his intelligence" (Munro, "Material" 41).

Dotty, a young promiscuous woman, possibly even a prostitute, is intimidated by the writer-husband of the narrator, even though she is quite clueless as to why. She, in fact, is intimidated by the very strength of Hugo's unrestrained overall appearance and behavior. His need for solitude, the special atmosphere to 'create,' dramatic and aggressive outbursts all conspire to induce in her some kind of unknowledgeable fear but also respect. Dotty is a witness to Hugo's own sense of self-importance and aggressiveness that is glimpsed later on in the narrative. "I [Hugo] arranged so that I could have this afternoon free. That did not just happen. I arranged it. I am at a crucial point, I am at the point where this play *lives or dies*. If I go down there I'm afraid I might strangle her" (Munro, "Material" 41).

What the unnamed narrator extracts from her memories, the numerous episodes of her married life to Hugo, is what Adrienne Rich calls the "devouring ego." In her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Rich describes the traditional paradigm in which the prerogative of creation is granted to men and expected to be upheld by women without questioning it:

> Now, to be maternally with small children all day in the old way, to be with a man in the old way of marriage, requires a holding-back, a putting aside of that imaginative activity, and demands instead a kind of conservatism. I want to make clear that I am not saying that in order to write well, or think well, it is necessary to become unavailable to

> others, or to become a devouring ego. This has been the myth of the masculine artist and thinker. (385)

What Rich calls "the old way of marriage," the protagonist in "Material" compares to "permissively reared children." The behavior of such "imaginative activity" (Rich 385) that is the prerogative of men remains unquestioned and their excesses accepted as collateral damage— the burden of the females they exploit in the process. Munro's collective voice terms these men "outrageous writers" for they suffer from "excess of approval" ("Material" 34), but the argument extends beyond the realm of art. "He used to smile crookedly for photographs to hide the right top incisor, dead since somebody at high school pushed him into a drinking fountain. Now he doesn't care, he laughs, he bares those rotting stumps" (Munro, "Material" 33). Hugo is basically presented as a caricature of a man—baring "those stumps," and, of course, this description comes at a moment when he is already exposed for his numerous love affairs, divorces, and the neglect of his daughter Clea, for example. The narrative unarguably guides us to see the story from a particular position. Even when the narrator admits her emotion-inspired portraiture of Hugo, she ironically comments that she does not have "the imagination or good will to proceed differently" implying that she is describing "life", while "fiction" is "Hugo's business" (Munro, "Material" 34). Munro's narrator is openly amused at how effortless such a description of Hugo may be achieved, and this is yet another instance where the technique itself stands as the mirror of truth to the discourse of power—truth stripped off any ideological boundaries, but personal.

Her "life" is unimaginative—it is the private domain limited by housework and the needs of others, whereas her own aspirations fall short of fruition. This is also ironically illustrated in the very act of her writing Hugo a letter that is delayed until all the family business has subsided, at which point inspiration too subsides and turns into bitter and inartistic frustration. It is also here that Munro's character-narrator and Rich align. Rich says, "I felt that I had either to consider myself a failed woman and a failed poet, or to try to find some synthesis by which to understand what was happening to me" (385). The social and even peer pressure allows for gender-inspired stereotypes to be the armature of female identity causing what Rich calls "discontinuity of female life" (385).

The practice of re-naming reality is in Munro's "Material" depicted in the episode where both the narrator and her husband engage in a game of creating original "phrases in common" ("Material"37) to describe their world. Hugo, however, elevates this practice to art, in which those same phrases become the building blocks of his stories. The younger self of the narrator never clearly voices her failed ambitions—they somehow must remain untold, as if naming them would destroy the foundations of the acquired reality. The character of the mother in "Dear Life" similarly keeps golf clubs in plain sight even though they are never used, nor was there ever any opportunity for the kind of life that included them to draw the family out of the farm life she clearly despises and rejects.

The personal narrative is craftily shaped from fragments of memory that need not be artistically reworked for the purpose of a letter, but it is exactly the style and the effort that lead to the conclusion that Munro's collective voice here echoes Rich's seeking and demanding "a certain freedom of mind" (385), or even before that, Virginia Woolf's demand for "a room of one's own" (561). Women, disciplined to assume their passive roles and forced into holding back their individuality and potential subversive creativity that could reshape primarily their own perception and then re-shape and re-name reality as such, are given the choice either to conform, or to renounce their femininity in the discourse that is supposedly universal only in its masculine form, or rather maternity and motherhood for it is not equally shared. "Don't be offended. Ironical objections are a habit with me. I am half-ashamed of them" (Munro, "Material"51).

What for Hugo turns out to be "a paying investment"—their broken marriage, the struggles over the years—for the narrator "now" is "useless baggage" for she is neither a writer, nor has she gained any recognition for the experience and labor of the married years. The impossibility of writing a coherent letter to Hugo is emphasized by her frantic irony and at the same time by an artistic, metaphorical, paralysis. The inability to write to her own satisfaction lies also in the inadequacy of words that she could use—she describes rather than writes. However, Luce Irigaray in her essay "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine " claims that "to play with mimesis" is a way by which women reassume their position within the discourse in the sense that they do not become absorbed by it, but rather unmask those features of it that remain invisible to the masculine eye. She goes on to

say, "It also means 'to unveil' the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply absorbed by this function. *They also remain elsewhere…*" (378).

Ironically, the "devouring ego" of Hugo is perceived as similar to that of Gabriel—a gentler and more understanding husband who is nowhere near as exotic in terms of social recognition or his profession. "In their limited and precarious ways they both have authority. They are not *at the mercy*. Or think they are not. I can't blame them…" (Munro, "Material"51–52). What the narrator suggests is that women do not have the authority to create the atmosphere that writing requires—the personal space. The two entirely different men, a university professor and an engineer, both have the power to enforce their ego simply on the basis of gender and without it being questioned. What the narrator specifically finds blasphemous in her second husband is his unforced and spontaneous ability to be "happy," therefore revealing the tragic irony of her two extreme choices resulting in the same loss—that of freedom. The sudden awareness of her apparent powerlessness results in an affective outburst: "I do blame them. I envy and despise" (Munro, "Material"52).

The character of the mother appears in the last four stories of the *Dear Life* collection termed by Munro herself "autobiographical in feeling" (255), but the character type is not restricted to this collection. Rather, the narrator of "Material" and the character of the mother share the same paralysis, but suffer different consequences in their inability to change their individual fates." The Eye" and "Dear Life" do not, at first glance, revolve around the narrator-author's mother. On the contrary, the very convention of the genre gives primacy to the narrator-author, who recalls episodes from her past and comments on them from different perspectives. On the other hand, the inevitable inflow of the unexpected biography of the mother creates a bridge between different worlds—the different stages of the narrator-levels—and reveals a significant, yet not as striking, shift in lifestyle, values, and understanding of what may appear a distant cultural artifact, but in reality stands for an enduring tradition and a contemporary issue.

The story begins with the narrator's mother being presented as an "ominous presence"—the unquestionable authority on all matters, but not authority "feared." The mother-figure is soon contrasted to Sadie, an episodic character, who introduces a change not only in the household, but, in a broader context, also in the perception of what is acceptable behavior for women. Sadie is a

rebellious teenager whose language greatly differs from the norm the narrator's mother approves of. Moreover, she is a young farm girl who behaves in a way that necessarily invites the attention of local women. Ironically, of course, the stereotypes that apply to Sadie's being discriminated against by the narrator's mother are aligned and based on the same premise the mother herself is discriminated against—individuality. Playing the guitar, singing on the popular local radio station, and frequenting dance clubs are Sadie's 'sins.' Being a woman implies uniformity pertaining to behavior, appearance, values, and tenacity in upholding tradition. The extent and power of Munro's irony cannot be fully grasped or enjoyed on individual occasions or in the individual comments. It is rather the bigger picture that, on the one hand, provides criticism against the hypocrisy appropriated by women and exerted on each other; and on the other, the tragedy of the lack of awareness of the seemingly innocent or moral daily practices. This attitude of compliance and aggressiveness, an everyday concoction of small-town morality, insincerity, and double standards enacted by and upon fellow-women, is illustrated in the opening lines of "The Eye":

> And in my interpretation of the picture that hung at the foot of my bed, showing Jesus suffering the little children to come unto him. Suffering meant something different in those days, but that was not what we concentrated on. My mother pointed out the little girl hiding round a corner because she wanted to come to Jesus but was too shy. That was me, my mother said, and I supposed it was though I wouldn't have figured it out without her telling me and I rather wished it wasn't so. (258)

The child-narrator in "The Eye" recognizes the problematic notion of "suffering," and Munro skillfully adds to its irony by relating it to yet more illustrations of how actual suffering is neither properly named nor properly attended. Interestingly, the ironic, playful, and occasionally sarcastic narrator, Munro, focalizes the first-person narrative through different characters rendering the temporal distance almost irrelevant. The child's first steps into religion are at the same time, in a broader context, the first steps into the realization that personal identity may be understood differently by her mother. This means that the authority, or "the ominous presence," demands something different to be understood as natural, or later on, moral—the norm—the mold against which identity is shaped. Sadie is particularly important in the relationship

between the mother and the narrator as a child because she presents a possible outcome of what her mother would consider bad parenting. Sadie's 'celebrity' status, initially ignored by the mother, becomes an excuse for the demonization of what the young woman epitomizes and what seems to be too liberal at that moment. The mother uses her behavior as a negative example and her death as a deterrent. However, Sadie's influence on the child is also cleverly used by the mother as a pretext for yet another attempt to convince her husband that moving to the local town would have a beneficial effect on their daughter's education and overall behavior for, ironically, it would be too liberal of her to admit to having ambitions and preferences of her own. The idea or ambition, however, remains unrealized.

Sadie's account of her dance club adventures is related through the child's eyes and remains only partially understood. The young girl at the time cannot understand what it means to "jab" the young men when they transgress the limits, nor does she understand the notion of having to "bolt home" or not being "caught." "She wasn't like some, she said. She didn't mean to get caught" (Munro, "The Eye"262). When Sadie is run over one night coming home from the dance club, the women in the community are not outraged or disconsolate by the tragedy, but by the shame of her not being in the company of a man her age as her protector: "'A girl without a boyfriend going to dances on foot,' said the woman who was still being friends with my mother. She spoke quite softly and my mother murmured something regretful" (Munro, "The Eye"266–267). The child is taken to the funeral by her mother against her will in order to see the consequences of such behavior. The death of Sadie, similarly to the exile of the local prostitute mentioned in one of the other stories, is considered a punishment for the sin of immorality—the disregard of the norm. Ironically, the very event—the funeral—triggers another memory in the narrator and that is the discussion between her parents about the mother taking the car and taking the child to the funeral. For the father such an act is completely unnecessary—a woman driving a car, alone and with a child—is in itself an act of rebellion, or simply an unnecessary whim on the part of the woman: "My mother wanted something very badly. Was it nice friends? Women who played bridge and had husbands who went to work in suits with vests? Not quite, and no hope of that anyway" (Munro, "Dear Life"263). At this point, the narrator is commenting from the perspective of the older self, having the distance and the knowledge to understand both what was attempted by the

mother, but also what was not clearly named. What is recurring is the image of the mother whose hands are full—at the time with another baby, the laundry washed manually, or the dishes, or work around the farm—all preventing her from having the autonomy to deal with her own aspirations. Even in the context of this story alone, albeit the mastery of narrative and focalizing 'tricks,' Munro employs to create the effect the genre requires, it is impossible to simplify the mother's attitude towards Sadie as merely being reflective of high moral standards. On the other hand, the complete portrait of this former school-teacher and mother of three, who could never fit in or be to the liking of her own or her husband's family, becomes revealed in "Dear Life."

Structure-wise, "Dear Life" features a series of analepses presented by the narrator from the period of time ranging from the character's mid-teens to, probably, early twenties when she marries and leaves for Vancouver. Moreover, a significant, effect-creating 'event' is embedded. It is important to note that it is only at this point in "Dear Life," as the last in the series, that it is revealed that the narrator is focalizing from the vantage point of an older woman whose mother is long gone. The typical single-effect event, or epiphany, is not provided as the main story, but as a commentary by the narrating self. The embedded narrative isa seemingly unrelated story of which the narrator's mother and a certain neighbor are participants. The incident described there is in fact the very beginning of a series, and it involves a mentally deranged elderly woman, the neighbor, who intrudes on the narrator's mother inside the family house—an incident misconstrued, for the unfortunate woman is the former inhabitant of the house, looking for her own child in frenzy. The very idea that the story of that family house begins and ends with madness is disturbing. Both women implicated by pure circumstance in the incident would remain stuck and paralyzed in the space of the house—their limited space. Metaphorically, the narrator herself was paralyzed, too: being overwhelmed by the daily routine and dissatisfied with her own creative flow—"so busy with my own young family and my own invariably unsatisfactory writing" (Munro, "Dear Life"318).

Moreover, "Dear Life," although it goes back in time to re-examine events belonging to the past, yet again resonates with the same collective voice related in "Material" because the standpoint of the narrator is not that of the past, but rather of the older self, who, in the process of narrative creation, the storytelling process, sifts through memories and reconsiders her position.

In fact, the three exemplary stories examined in this paper, among a series of other stories from different collections, uncover the tenacity with which tradition and traditional roles persist over a period of at least six decades of the twentieth century, but extend to the twenty-first as well. The contrast between the setting in "Material" and the stories from *Dear Life*, granted, is only found in the setting. Whereas the setting of the latter is a small-town farm, the setting of the former is an urban area with a much developed academic community. It is not difficult to notice the connectedness of the character of the mother and the narrator of the "Material." They are both teachers, both stunted in their professional growth and both paralyzed by marriage and the sense of inadequacy that continuously triggers the impulse to digress and return to the crossroads point where things could have gone a different way. Both women are controlled by the men in their lives. The compliance that permits their ambitions to be influenced and ultimately renounced, or denied, is addressed tentatively in "Material," while the mother's narrative excludes even the possibility or notion of rebellion. She approaches her husband as the ultimate authority on all questions pertaining to her own life and the life of the family, although no resentment is ever openly mentioned. The resentment which, on the other hand, oozes from the space between the lines of "Material" is indicative of the transformation in the awareness of one's own self-worth. Both in "Material" and "Dear Life," men are contented with their lifestyle and the distribution of power, regardless of the economic status or any other aspect of life.

The epiphanic moment closes "Dear Life" and the narrative of the mother, but extends to the narrator whose quest for unity and identity results in a kind of acceptance of failure and the circumstances: "We say of some things that they can't be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves. But we do—we do it all the time" (Munro, "Dear Life" 319). Essentially, Munro's narrators discover the problematic necessity to resist culture and tradition, but also the coextensive renunciation and isolation followed by this necessity. The complex matter of personal choice in a society that breeds and fully accepts only conformity figures as the underlying challenge of the daily life of Munro's narrator-characters (and characters). In this sense, these women's struggles unveil the systematically imposed negative conceptions of identity, as well as their never-ending compulsion to re-evaluate them by re-evaluating their own life narratives. This re-evaluation takes the form of storytelling

that serves the purpose of not justifying the personal sense of failure per se, but rather uncovering the roots of the madness that the accrued failures seem to present to them. Namely, Lars-Christer Hydén, one of the authors in *Beyond Narrative Coherence*, claims that dementias "generally imply either a disruption or a gradual change of identities" (40) and that the effort put into telling and re-telling of memories, turning them into narratives, is a process by which the disruption is overcome at least momentarily.

> Sometimes narratives become part of the illness process. This is especially true when a person's ability to tell and use stories is affected by the disease, and the telling of stories at the same time becomes a central part of the life with the disease. (Hydén 40)

The practice of telling and re-telling stories does not only imply the person with the illness expressing themselves using language or even body language, but also hearing their stories through other people's voices—giving them a sense of credibility and reliability.

In "Dear Life" it is the narrator, decades later, that goes back to "interpreting" her mother's narrative as a way of re-interpreting her own. Storytelling is used as a tool that directs the impulse to reassess the discourse by properly understanding the present and by ensuring the existence not only of continuity but, more importantly, of the historical sense, much in the vein of Adrienne Rich. It also grants a creative release to the urge to reassess the nature of relation to the dominant discourse in the vein of Irigaray, encircling the three stories of women, of different generations and perspectives, from the viewpoint of a child without a developed sense of what womanhood entails in a society hierarchically positioning one gender over the other in "The Eye"; through the eyes of a woman desperately seeking a way to advance in a society where her role is limited to sustaining the equilibrium between survival and traditional role in "Dear Life"; and a woman who, although well aware of the double standard and the hypocrisy of equality, ultimately only discovers herself to be incapable of a creative endeavor and rants in frustration (see Munro, "Material").

The compliance, or rather the absorption into the traditional role, is best exemplified by the manner in which the narrator in "Dear Life" recognizes the roots of her own, perhaps under the circumstance, justified 'passivity.' The very cultural conditioning places women in the position to choose, inexcusably, between the extremes of being considered perfect mothers, wives,

daughters, all assuming certain patterns of behavior artificially placed to restrict movement—social, political, and other.

The character of the mother is the most poignant because the reader is presented with the unfortunate resolution of her personal drama. In her forties, the age the narrator in "Dear Life" has long outlived, and the age that the narrator of "Material" is currently most likely in, she is diagnosed with Parkinson's—a disease that, on the physical, literal, level, renders her paralyzed and, on the metaphorical level, parallels the collective condition of arrested identities, women submerged in the dishwater, indiscernible from the objects surrounding them in their limited private spaces. Battling the illness, the mother speaks of "her struggle to get to high school," and, among other things, "the friends she had at a normal school" (Munro, "Dear Life"315)—relating in chunks of memories the personal struggles essential to her personal development, however failed.

Hydén suggests in his essay "Identity, Self, Narrative" that one of the possible ways in which a narrative can be interpreted is not as a "finished" but an "ongoing" product of the social circumstances that produce it:

> In this way telling an autobiographical story is a move in an ongoing interaction with other participants, a move that aims at redefining the relationships between the participants. (Hydén 47)

The mother's storytelling practice is directed primarily at her daughter in an attempt to find the common grounds for better understanding, but also a warning against the imminent threat of being frozen in time, digressing and re-living one and the same fulfilling experience as contrasted to decades of struggle and failure. In the abovementioned essay, Hydén indicates that it is not only important what the story tells, but also "the way stories are told, received and *negotiated*" (47)—to regard stories as accounts of social "performance and action," and "to challenge the traditional literary idea about narratives, and regard narratives as storytelling" (47.). In this sense, it is not unexpected that the character's mother holds on to one story she feels is defining—personally and socially.

In one of the episodes in "Dear Life," Munro contemplates on the "very new looking golf bag, with the golf clubs and balls inside" (303), in a corner of the dining room, never once used but simply collecting dust there as a reminder of what her mother might have dreamed of for her husband and herself. The younger-self's comment that people who played golf "were not

people who wore overalls" (Munro, "Dear Life" 303) suggests a discrepancy in the reality the mother desired and lived. Even for the child, the idea of her mother playing golf is unimaginable, and this testifies to an awareness both of conditioning and social boundaries. The aspirations elicited by the deceitful concept of vertical mobility are not only frustrated and overturned into a form of drudgery and ultimately madness for this particular woman, or the collective voice of the period, but they are also indicative of the methodical indoctrination that disallows individuals of any gender to break free from uniformity unharmed. The perpetuation of the system belongs to the family from this viewpoint. It is in the very family that this conditioning takes place and it is also where the discourse of power exerts its strongest influence, and Munro illustrates the impotence of women by presenting the debris of her mother's shattered dreams in the form of objects collecting dust in the dark corners of the living room, and subtly creating a parallel to the immovable and useless body of the mother herself —ultimately an object without a practical purpose:

> She must have thought differently at one time. She must have thought that she and my father were going to transform themselves into a different sort of people, people who enjoyed a degree of leisure. Golf. Dinner parties. Perhaps she had convinced herself that certain boundaries were not there. (Munro, "Dear Life" 304)

In an almost anecdotal tone, the narrator in "Dear Life" gives an account of the "misgivings" she remembers or believes could have been the reason for a certain animosity not only in the wider family circle, for her relatives could not approve or understand the way she spoke (304), but by extension the neighborhood as well. Her mother's cooking is scrutinized with the view of the standard set for her by her female predecessors, her appearance is contrasted to that of the local women. The fact that she diverges from the standard of her own social status, but also from the norms pertaining to it, albeit the compromises and sacrifices accepted in their name, suggests the extent to which renunciation of personal freedom and individual expression are not only desired, but considered obligatory.

In the final lines of the mother's portrait, Munro intrudes into the narrative by providing a striking, and ambiguous, comment that could be interpreted both literally and figuratively. Namely, the reduction of this woman to a housewife, and the limitation of her space to the interior of the house—the

isolation—correlates, ironically, with the nature of her illness and the gradual, yet long, decline of her capacities and physical power. Her mother's "afternoon dress, even if she was only washing things at the sink" is commented on by the relatives, along with the "misgivings about [her] cooking," as a "fault" for not looking like "what she was" (Munro, "Dear Life" 312). The mother's being brought up on a farm implied a comportment that would not resist remaining on one—not changing into an afternoon dress, nor talking in a way that would imply a certain degree of sophistication, and these restrictions, among others, are imposed by the wider family circle and society.

Munro's comment on the endurance of her mother's body to sustain the illness, that "she held on to some strength in herself for a surprisingly long time" ("Dear Life" 308), correlates, perhaps, to her endurance in the struggle for personal liberation and emancipation. Ulrica Skagert in *Possibility-Space and Its Imaginative Variations in Alice Munro's Short Stories* indicates that the power of Munro's fiction is in her ability to "transform" reality into art by revealing the "shocking business of real life" located under the surface. By relating her mother's illness, and the inner struggle to prolong life and her mental capacities, strategically to her great efforts to advance socially and exert her authentic individuality, Munro emphasizes the importance of a unified existence—much in the manner of Rich.Any division or compromise reducing an individual to a mere gender role, metaphorically, leads to madness. In "Material" it is envy and resentment that paralyze and prevent authentic, creative, life-affirming action, whereas in "Dear Life" compliance leads to paralysis—not only mental, but literal, physical, passivity.

Skagert's description of Munro's work as revealing the "shocking business of real life" can also be extended to include and complement, for the purposes of conclusion, Virginia Woolf's comment on gender in her essay "A Room of One's Own," where she says,

> At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial – and any question about sex is that – one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker. Fiction here is to contain more truth than fact. (561)

What is essentially subversive in Alice Munro's narratives is, on the one hand, the technique she employs to induce interpellation in the reader—the

technique which is direct, devoid of excessive embellishment or ornament; but personal and "mimicking," in Irigaray's sense, the discourse of power that penetrates individuals through culture and tradition. However, this technique of "mimicking," enhanced by the authenticity of subject and character, does not relate truth directly itself, but rather, as Woolf suggested six and more decades earlier, serves to encourage an interpretation of one's own on the basis not of factual veracity, but of the credibility and veracity of the presented. The feminist in Munro is evident not in her choice of characters, although they are surely women whose unfortunate or disturbing life narratives are related so as to center attention to a more collective theme and issue. The feminist aspect of Munro's work is made manifest by the subtle method of uncovering the way in which the patriarchal society conceals and disguises its own brutality on the basis of economic, class, gender, and other differences in its hierarchical configuration; and uncovering by showing how what Rich calls "fragments and scraps" of "common consciousness and a common theme" (386) becomes thwarted from fully developing into an awareness of self by forces, both external and internal, which conceptually, functionally, and morally define women's identity.

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PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER IN NORTH AMERICA

Edited by Lucia Otrísalová

STIMUL, Bratislava 2017

ISBN: 978-80-8127-178-6
EAN: 9788081271786