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Alice Munro: Secret Strategies of Loving

Abstract

The paper deals with Alice Munro's stories "A Wilderness Station" and "A Queer Streak". The common feature of the stories is that they are both novelistic and dramatic in nature. In the novelistic sense the plots of the stories use the method of central intelligence, while focusing on the themes of alienation, isolation, search for identity and integration. In the dramatic sense, they are based on epiphany as an ordering device and on metaphoric plots. Central metaphors in these stories are rooted in secrecy and silence. They ultimately concern women's secret strategies of loving.

Résumé

Le texte traite de deux histoires d'Alice Munro 'La ligne étrange' et 'La station dans le région sauvage'. Les nouvelles en cause sont caractérisées étant d'une nature en même temps romanesques et dramatique. Dans le sens romanesque, les intrigues des histoires font l'usage d'une méthode d'intelligence centrale, tout en posant l'accent sur les thèmes d'aliénation, d'isolement, de la recherche d'identité et d'intégration. Dans le sens dramatique, elles sont basées sur l'épiphanie, ainsi que sur les intrigues métaphoriques. Les métaphores centrales dans ces histoires sont enracinées dans le secret et le silence, ayant à faire avec les stratégies secrètes des femmes dans les affaires du cœur.

A number of Alice Munro's stories cover almost the entire life spans of their characters and are, in that sense, novelistic in nature. The scope of the narrative material is compressed in order to increase the desired artistic effect. Although the stories focus both on development and culmination, the main emphasis is on culmination. This last point highlights another feature of this group of Munro's stories: they are dramatic in structure. A considerable change occurs between the initial and the final situation, with one or more culminating points in between. This description is based on Norman Friedman's "What Makes a Short Story Short?" where he undertakes to define a short story in relation to the novel. He says that the materials and their organization in a short story differ from those in a novel only in degree but not in kind (101). The material of a short story may be of a smaller compass or it may be of broader scope but cut, "for the sake of maximizing the artistic effect" (102). In the latter case the focus is on culmination rather than development.

The definition offered by Suzanne C. Ferguson follows the same line of thought as Friedman's, and is equally relevant to the group of Munro's stories under discussion. Ferguson elaborates on the Jamesian "method of the central intelligence" that puts emphasis on subjectivity and thus, inevitably, affects the

choice of themes of modern fiction: alienation, isolation, the quest for identity and integration (290) – the themes characteristic of Munro’s “novelistic” stories. Ferguson further maintains that it is “in the realm of plot that modern short story is most different from earlier short fiction and in which it appears to be most different from the novel”(290). She distinguishes between “elliptical” plots, in which elements are simply omitted, and “metaphoric” plots in which “unexpected, dissonant existents and events are substituted for the omitted elements” (291). While Alice Munro has written stories in both manners, the ones dealt with in this paper belong to the latter group. Central metaphors in these stories are rooted in secrecy and silence. The secrecy and silence ultimately concern love, but the love is thwarted, the paths to its fulfillment difficult and devious.

Ferguson’s theory can be further applied to Munro’s stories when it comes to “epiphany” as an ordering device, “the notion of single ‘moments of experience as determiners of the quality of a whole life.’” (294) Unlike the novel, the short story usually contains only one such epiphany, but Munro’s stories sometimes contain more. These epiphanies are moments when the hidden is glimpsed, the metaphoric meaning fully or partly unveiled.

In a tentative typology of Alice Munro’s stories, this group, apart from having a novelistic scope and subject matter, has a distinctly dramatic structure. I have chosen the stories “A Queer Streak” and “A Wilderness Station”. “A Queer Streak” from *The Progress of Love* collection best reveals the basic pattern of this type. A number of key words throughout the story help the reader in the interpretation of its meaning. By focusing on these clues and bringing them into relation, the metaphoric structure of the story can be mapped.

The theme of the story could be briefly summed up as this: the heroine, Violet, experiences a sense of loss early in her life, and is confounded to lifelong secrecy and silence. The plot of the story can be divided into three parts (or acts). In the first part of the story, “Anonymous Letter”, the author, through the consciousness of the main character, first implies that Violet’s mother, who lost her three first-born children – sons, also lost motherly feeling by the time she had her three daughters. Thus the theme of loss and failure is introduced early in the story. Consequently, Violet, from the unconscious envy of the “lost” children, or from the unconscious feeling of guilt for being alive, sometimes desires to be lost, too, either in the waste ground behind the farm, or in the parlor stuffed with junk. However, she ultimately chooses to bring order into the confusion of the world of adults, and takes charge of the family.

Another key word in the story is “queer”. The whole family is a queer bunch. The father is unlucky in his bastardly origin, the mother is unlucky in her lack of brains and manners. “Insults” is the word most frequently repeated in the depiction of the family. Violet’s other two sisters are slovenly and semi-idiotic, but Violet is both smart and handsome, “a violet by the mossy stone.” Munro mocks the stereotypical and simplified perceptions that define “queerness”. These very perceptions ultimately cause Violet’s predicament. She is aware of her family’s strangeness and desperately attempts to deal with it. She becomes a “liar”, as the sisters call her, in an attempt to apply her imagination to the improvement of the household, intimidate the family into some kind of order, and

add colour to the ugliness of daily life on the farm. She educates herself not only through undertaking household jobs, but also by going to school in town. As a result, upon her return, because she has changed, the household seems to her also changed but for the worse: the family has acquired a funny accent; the house has a bad smell, as does the dog, but most of all her sisters. Moreover, the sisters have become rebellious and seem to be guarding some idiotic secret, which indeed turns out to be the case. When the father begins receiving frightening threat letters and fear creeps into the family, Violet joins in to help and discovers that the sender is one of the sisters, Dawn Rose, assisted by the other.

In another attempt to escape her family's "bad smell", Violet falls in love with a handsome minister, although neither she nor her family have been particularly religious. But Trevor is a minister of the United Church where ministry is endowed with special, almost political power. From this point in the story Munro carefully deconstructs the falseness of middle-class hypocrisy. Structurally the method resembles that of drama, where the climax is immediately followed by a reversal leading gradually to a denouement. When Violet receives a letter from a neighbour that there is trouble at home, it is with pride that she writes to Trevor how she took over and calmed her people, naturally expecting to deserve his praise. Her mother, however, is right for once when she wails that the whole thing will be interpreted differently and that it will be said they got a queer streak in the family. (A couple of years earlier, when Dawn Rose had begun to menstruate, she was so affronted that she went to the creek and sat in the cold water until the bleeding stopped. As a consequence she didn't menstruate again the whole year. A neighbour's diagnosis was that this could have affected her brain.)

Trevor, however, proclaims Dawn Rose a deranged person who needs medical assistance and Violet feels she has to protect Dawn against him. She wonders whether they could ask God to cure her. Violet's question to Trevor is the point of total deconstruction and rejection of Trevor's point of view on both the author's and Violet's part. From this moment on, the narration takes a different direction. The reader now feels the implicit irony which pervades the presentation of Trevor's philosophy: God works through laws and institutions (doctors being one of them). Unsurprisingly, his diagnosis is that Dawn Rose suffers from a kind of female insanity "that strikes at that age"; that she hates men and blames them.

This is the moment of existential shock for Violet, and one of the culminating points in the story: her life is at stake. Conscious and unconscious motivations clash. She feels both relief and doubt. She contemplates suicide, but life prevails. She feels as if she is watching a play, but at the same time is inside it. She "prays" to be delivered, and deliverance comes to her when she determines the purpose of her life herself. She decides to look after her family, to care. It seems at the moment "a golden opportunity" – to live for others and get free of the weight, the pain, and the humiliation of fighting for her own self.

After she gives up everything and returns to the farm to look after the family, both sisters in time become "reasonably" socialized and "proper" young women, married, with children. – no queer streak to be detected. It is when one day Violet arrives unexpectedly to visit her sister's family that she feels something wrong: it is not a good day for visiting, Dawn is varnishing the floors. On her way back, in

her car, Violet hears a voice saying that her life is tragic. It is, of course, the voice of the public opinion, but it is also Violet's own realization that she has made a wrong choice in deciding not to live her own life. As she used to do when she was a little girl, she now runs from the road into the woods, into the brush, wishing to be "lost", to hide, not to be seen. It is later in the story, towards the end, in a kind of dramatic revelation, that the reader learns how by 'losing' herself, the heroine actually found a new life, and her future husband.

In part two of the story, "Possession", which takes place years later, Violet and Dane, Dawn Rose's son are the only members of the family left. Seen through Dane's loving eyes, she is a "regal" businesswoman living in town in an apartment above the Royal Bank. There is only one thing Dane is unhappy about: rejection of her former country life and acceptance of status. Dane does not know that the background of Violet's change is a conscious wish to distance herself from her past. By conventional standards Dane is "queer" and it is for the third time the concept is (this time implicitly) applied to the family. The authorial suggestion is expressed through one of the narrator's voices: appearances are not to be trusted.

"Queerness" can be applied to Violet after her husband dies and, being unable to express her grief, she begins "seeing things". They are obviously things from the past she does not want to see, for she is frequently in the habit of tilting her head to the side and giving it a quick slap, as people do to get rid of a buzzing, unwelcome presence. There is nothing from the past Violet desires to see, but visitors from the future bring her joy. One of the two girls who visit her is the granddaughter of her other sister, Bonnie Hope; the other girl is her friend, very polite and good-hearted, "in spite of how they might look". They might look like lesbians, dressed identically in men's uniforms, but they are in fact feminists – another "queer streak". They have visited The Isle of Women in Mexico, they belong to a theater and they make up plays. To Dane the visit of the girls makes Violet sound as if she were on drugs; she is in fact happy. She tells the girls her secrets that she had to bear on her own up till then, and felt to be a heavy burden.

From the card one of the girls sends to Violet it is obvious what will the subject of the story they are going to write. Heather's diagnosis of Dawn Hope's condition is diametrically opposed to Trevor's, but equally extreme: it is a classic story of antipatriarchal rage, and what is called Female Crazyness is nothing but centuries of Frustration and Oppression. Violet promises them "documents" – the family letters, when she sorts them out, but she changes her mind and burns them. In this way she makes sure that the family story will never be told as a factual account, but will continue to be recreated as an artistic history by her cousin Heather.

Another late revelation makes Violet ashamed: the trunk where she keeps her keepsakes full of horse manure, "the trick of a stunted mind"? The discovery makes her fall over the fence into the rosebushes, "lose" herself, as several times before. The irony of the introduction of the "manure" incident is that it reestablishes the continuity of the heroine's intimate and family life: she has progressed in space and time from the childhood and youthful life on the farm to

the adult life of a businesswoman in town, but cannot escape the past. Soon after the incident with manure, Violet dies in hospital, peaceful and calm, with nothing broken in her. In a brief epilogue, or flashback, so Munro-like, the reader finds the secret key to Violet's life. She met her husband Wyck the day she ran off the road desperate, right into a ditch and the bushes where she got stuck. A car stopped and a man helped her pull the berry canes and branches off her. He didn't laugh at her, he laughed with her, and she was saved.

To go back to Friedman's definition of the short story: Munro's "A Queer Streak" is in one of its aspects novelistic in nature, as it presents a development of the heroine from childhood to old age. In Ferguson's description such stories have metaphoric plots and the subject-matter dealing with the quest for identity, alienation and isolation. In both Friedman's and Ferguson's sense they are also essentially dramatic in their structure, the emphasis being on culmination or epiphany. Central epiphany of the heroine in this story comes in the very end: you have to tell your story in order to preserve sanity. Munro thus emphasises the importance of story-telling or art, which is one of her major themes.

The story "A Wilderness Station" belongs to the same category of stories as the former – it is novelistic in scope, dramatic in structure, yet has some peculiarities of its own. While in "The Queer Streak" Munro focuses on one narrative voice, in "A Wilderness Station" she uses a multiple point of view expressed in epistolary form. Although there are seven epistolary narrators in the story, it is the last letter written by the heroine Annie Herron that is central to the meaning of the story. Annie gives a version of the mystery of her husband's murder that the reader tends to accept as the most probable one. In that letter she admits that she has lied not only to protect herself, but also to protect the surviving man, her husband's brother, and provide him with prospects for the future. This is implicitly confirmed by another female narrator - Miss Mullen's recounting of the epilogue, more than a hundred years later. Empowered Annie returns briefly to the dismal scene of her early life not only to encounter her brother-in-law George without fear, but to ask his younger family members: "Are you all fond of each other, then?" (*Open Secrets*, "A Wilderness Station", 222)

As is the case of "A Queer Streak", the structure of the story is dramatic, but the chronology of "A Wilderness Station" is disrupted by frequent switching back and forth in time, unlike the former story where the narration is more or less chronological. Despite the chronological shifts, it is also more static than the former story: a large portion of the narration concerns descriptions of setting and character. The Matron's, the brother-in-law's, the Reverend McBain's, the Clerk's and Hoy's accounts are matter-of-fact narratives, while Annie's and Miss Mullen's compete for the dominant female point of view. The women speak from different points of view, though both share an important experience: they live in celibacy. While Annie is all turned inward, communicating with her memories, and not trying very much to share them with others, Miss Mullen is preoccupied with outward appearances. She does not observe the silent drama of the older woman, but her narration offers the reader a more complete picture of Annie.

The first letter in the story, written by the orphanage Matron, introduces the reader into the drama that culminates not long after, in one of the 'wilderness stations' where Annie's husband is killed, and has a long drawn out resolution in Annie's last letter and Miss Mullen's concluding narrative. From the Matron's introduction we learn that the heroine Annie was raised in the Home; and that she slightly squints or 'has a waywardness about one eye' (191). This interesting element of characterization reminds one of Tolstoy's Maslova, from *The Resurrection*: it is an indication that the heroine sees the world from a different angle than the rest. Both girls are homeless in a cruel world where they struggle to survive and get hold of whatever love they can. Indeed, Annie Herron is unusual, almost "queer", in the sense of the previously discussed story by Alice Munro. This is mostly because of a certain secretiveness about her personality engendered by the lack of communication. Like the heroine of "A Queer Streak" she willingly withdraws from the world in order to avoid being forced into a more unacceptable alternative.

When Christina Mullen takes Annie to visit the Herron family, they encounter the amazed Herrons, among them the future young politician Treece, and old George now senile and speechless. It is when she sees the extensive family with lots of children of various age, that Annie asks: "Are you all fond of each other, then?" ("which brought on funny looks", 222) The question is perhaps rhetorical, for they seem to be happy enough, and Annie knows it is to her they partly owe their happiness. But it is with George she wishes to stay alone on the porch, while Christina gives the family driving tours. When they return both elderly people are asleep. At Christina's expression of regret that old Mr. Herron wasn't able to talk to her, Annie replies "Well, I could talk to him" (225). She finally gets her chance to talk, and not be talked to. She feels superior and gloats. Like Violet in the former story, she ultimately finds peace only when her story has been fully told.

We end up not knowing for certain what really happened – how Simon Herron was killed. The effect of such narration, as Coral Ann Howells points out, (127) is to shift attention to Annie Herron and her story. Two things can be known with certainty, though: firstly that Annie was unhappy in her marriage and later found prison a safe haven. Secondly that she deeply valued family happiness as revealed by her question to George's family many years later, "Are you all fond of each other, then?" (222) It is also indicated by her prolonged silence, which was a peculiar kind of sacrifice. Howells compares Annie Herron to Atwood's Grace Marks, for both of them, as with many other women from Scheherazade on, "storytelling is not about revealing secrets but rather about keeping them while managing to stay alive" (128).

In both stories heroines are regarded by the outside world as somewhat queer, even mad, and can be considered in the light of the psychoanalytic discourse of hysteria. As Shoshana Felman put it, their problem is "how to avoid speaking both as mad and as not mad" (132). Their "madness" is their "scarlet letter", placing them outside human community, while at the same time they naturally also remain part of it. This essentially hysterical position often imposes silence upon women: both Violet and Annie embrace silence for the greater period of their life, but the author focuses on the epiphanic moments when they "speak their silence".

Some additional insight into Munro's stories can be gained from Juliet Mitchell's inspired psychoanalytic reading, especially her two essays: "What Maisie Knew: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl" and "Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis", in *Women, The Longest Revolution*.

There are many correspondences between James's *What Maisie Knew*, or better Mitchell's reading of it, and the two stories by Munro. Curiously, Mitchell begins her analysis with the consideration of one of the character's eyesight: Mrs. Wix wears glasses and is characterized (in her own words) by "a divergent obliquity of vision" (172). Unlike Munro's Annie Herron (whose one eye slid slightly off to the side to take in more information), looking through her corrective glasses, or "straighteners", Mrs. Wix sees less than the child Maisie, and keeps wondering at the secret of what "Maisie knew" (172). For James seeing is knowing, vision is knowledge, says Mitchell. Pictorial and dramatic technique merge in James' novel, just as they do in Munro's stories. The central image in "A Queer Streak" is that of a bush into which the heroine frequently jumps to hide, away from the expected "security" of home or human relations, and the image forms part of the metaphor of loss, secrecy and silence. The central ironic image of "A Wilderness Station" is the contrast between the wilderness and the prison. Paradoxically, although the heroine is not afraid of the wilderness, she feels safer in prison.

Mitchell's preoccupation is with how the heroine, Maisie, manages to remain sane. She analyses the metaphorical structure of the novel, focused on Maisie's being divided in two, and her struggle and success in transcending the division. "At moments of intensity, Maisie instinctively glimpses that the divided world is unified" (180). Her final knowledge is her rejection of the game played between her father and her mother in which she was used as a billiard ball. At thirteen she is reborn: she adopts silence as the language of understanding. She waits and listens; she knows what she wants. When she cannot get the handsome Sir Claude who has no guts, she irrevocably drops out of the game. Similarly, both Munro's heroines become "divided against themselves" when they reject their emotional self. Violet becomes unified again just before her death, after she has safely entrusted the communicable part of her secret to her young cousin; Annie after she has made peace with George.

In the latter essay, Mitchell discusses how hearing and retelling history can be a healing process. Psychoanalysis requires that patients disrupt history to recreate it (288). "The woman novelist must be an hysteric" (289), too, says Mitchell. She has at the same time to be feminine, and to refuse femininity. Mitchell poses the question: in deconstructing history, what do we construct? "What are we in the process of becoming?" (294) This is the crucial question for the process of re-visioning history, both private and public.

Munro's two stories do not put much emphasis on the process of becoming. The female characters do not change too much; they do not become very different. They try to survive and as a consequence they repress something – the something usually being their sexuality. These two stories by Alice Munro are about this silent repression, and suggest the art of story telling as a cure.

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