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Reading Alice Munro's Early Fiction: A Kristevian Analysis

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Abstract

There is an underlying and passive tension that brings a subtle darkness to many of Alice Munro's narratives and there is always something slightly uncanny about her characters and their situations. In fact, there are many things that go unsaid in Munro's narratives. The darkness that surrounds her stories is illuminated in an order of oppositions that make it difficult to distinguish accident from fate, the random from the carefully veiled design, the semiotic from the Symbolic. Munro's attempt to dismantle the linearity and unilateral direction of the patriarchal literary tradition can be analysed with the help of the ideas proposed by Julia Kristeva. Munro repeatedly explores the place of the Kristevian abject in her narratives. She frequently returns to her sudden revelations of the submerged but rock-hard realities of life, certain sets of situations that threaten her characters' sense of control over their lives and belief in subject/object categorization. Munro's subtle subversions reveal her concern for evolving a language that would be expressive of women's experiences.

[**Keywords:** abject, semiotic, Alice Munro, Julia Kristeva, psychoanalytic feminism.]

Introduction

Alice Munro writes very convincingly about the force that love can exert on people's lives and the unconscious patterns of attraction and loss that runs through an individual's history. Munro's writing is characterized by an ambivalence that reminds us of Margaret Atwood's phrase "inescapable doubleness of vision" (quoted in Howells, 1987: 3); it is an ambivalence arising out of her sense of embarrassment associated with justifying writing to her parents. Her writing is an acknowledgement of the power of writing but it also raises serious questions regarding the ability of language to convey the truth(s).

Munro looks at those aspects of women's lives that usually go under the 'undignified' category of "midlife crisis". Munro's characters appear to be caught up in the mire of the social world. There is an underlying tension that brings a subtle darkness to many of these narratives and there is always something slightly uncanny about Munro's characters and their situations. In fact there are many things that go unsaid in Munro's narratives. These qualities give Munro's writing its unique voice and many pleasures.

Alice Munro's stories are in many ways an enactment of the psychoanalytic study of life. Like in psychoanalysis, the tenor of Alice Munro's characters is shaped and determined by their past. These are stories about coming to terms with one's own past. Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject appears to be particularly useful in interpreting this psychoanalytic drama of Munro's fiction.

The Abject in Alice Munro's Narratives

Julia Kristeva associates the abject with the response to the eruption of the Lacanian Real into our lives. Death is too chaotic an experience; we have to shove it aside to lead "meaningful" lives. When the order of life is disrupted by the eruption of the Real, we respond in a way that is

in essence, pre-linguistic. Kristeva theorizes the traumatic experience of being confronted with death. She uses the corpse to exemplify the breakdown of the distinction between subject and object that is crucial for the establishment of identity and for our entrance into the Symbolic order. What we are confronted with when we experience the trauma of seeing a human corpse is our own eventual death made real. As Kristeva puts it, “the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject” (Kristeva, 1982: 4). Similarly, Kristeva traces the moment of pre-linguistic confrontation with the abject in phobia, a moment that precedes the recognition of any actual object of fear: “the phobic object shows up at the place of non-objectal states of drive and assumes all the mishaps of drive as disappointed desires or as desires diverted from their objects” (Kristeva, 1982: 35).

As against desire, Kristeva associates the abject with fear and *jouissance*. The object of fear is, in other words, a substitute formation for a primal fear. The fear of heights, for example, really stands in the place of a fear which is much more primal: the fear caused by the breakdown of any distinction between subject and object, of any distinction between ourselves and the world of dead material objects. Kristeva also associates the abject with *jouissance*:

One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it... violently and painfully. A passion (Kristeva, 1982: 9).

Kristeva thus means that we are, despite everything, continually and repetitively drawn to the abject. To experience the abject in literature carries with it a certain pleasure but one that is quite different from the dynamics of desire. Kristeva associates this aesthetic experience of the abject, rather, with poetic catharsis: “an impure process that protects from the abject only by dint of being immersed in it” (Kristeva, 1982: 29).

The abject for Kristeva is, therefore, closely tied both to religion and to art, which she sees as two ways of purifying the abject: “the various means of purifying the abject – the various catharses- make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion” (Kristeva, 1982: 17).

According to Kristeva, modern literature explores the place of the abject, a place where boundaries begin to breakdown, where we are confronted with an archaic space before such linguistic barriers as self/other or subject/object. On the level of archaic memory, Kristeva refers to the primitive effort to separate ourselves from the animal:

By way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder (Kristeva, 1982: 12-13).

Alice Munro’s concern with the question “How to write as a woman?” is seen most passionately at work in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Indeed it is the only question that must be asked, the prerequisite of finding a voice at all in which to speak or else remain spoken in the phallic language. Moreover, because Del is a writer-figure ironically ambivalent both about sexuality and her relationship to her mother, Del is Munro’s “most significant character” (Carrington, 1989: 40). Munro’s narrative also explores the place of the abject where a threatened breakdown of meaning takes place and where we are confronted with the archaic space.

Del Jordan, the protagonist, confronts the archaic space of the abject when she is taken to Uncle Craig’s funeral. Del’s unwillingness to look at Uncle Craig’s corpse reminds us of Kristeva’s concept of the abject. The abject at once represents the threat that meaning is breaking down and constitutes our reaction to such a breakdown: an establishment of our ‘primal repression’. In fact, Del says that she feels like throwing up (Munro, 1971: 40):

I wanted death pinned down and isolated behind a wall of particular facts and circumstances, not floating around loose, ignored but powerful, waiting to get in anywhere (Munro, 1971: 39).

Looking at Uncle Craig's corpse makes her see what she must continually thrust aside in order to live – her own death made real.

Munro repeatedly explores the place of the abject in her narratives. She frequently returns to her sudden revelations of the submerged but rock-hard realities of life, certain sets of situations that threaten her characters' sense of control over their lives and belief in subject/object categorization. In many of Munro's stories,

The common element is the eruption of either deliberate or accidental violence that, like an underground stream that splits the earth, suddenly bursts through the seemingly surface of everyday behavior (Carrington, 1989: 39).

These frightening eruptions make the characters lose control of themselves or of the events in their lives, but then they struggle to somehow regain control. This is evident in Munro's 'Time of Death' (*Dance of the Happy Shades*). In this story we witness the nine-year old Patricia try to exercise control over her life until the story's climax when despite her apparent show of courage, her self-control breaks down. Patricia feels responsible for Benny's death because she was boiling the water that burnt him. In spite of this however, she displays remarkable self-control and succeeds in repressing her guilt until the visit of Brandon, the scissors man. Because Benny was fond of the old man, Patricia associates the two of them. When she hears Brandon coming down the road with his "unintelligible chant, mournful and shrill, and so strange that you would think... that there was a madman loose in the world" (Munro, 1968: 98) her terror of something completely uncontrolled in the world shatters her, she turns into "a wretched little animal insane with rage or fear" (Munro, 1968: 99).

The abject is explored in 'Images' (*Dance of the Happy Shades*) where attempts are made by the patriarchal order to maintain the difference between "me" and "(m)other". The child narrator is allowed entry into the Symbolic world only on the condition of maintaining this difference. According to Kristeva, in order to become a subject in the Symbolic realm it is necessary to reject/abject that which, gave us our existence – namely the mother.

In order to become a subject, the *infans* must separate from its primary unity with the mother. Abjection is a process of rejection by which a fragile, tenuous border that can become *mommy-and me* is demarcated (Keltner, 2011: 46).

Moreover, within patriarchal cultures women are reduced to the maternal function and therefore women, maternity and femininity are abjected along with the maternal function. This misplaced abjection is one way to account for women's oppression and degradation within patriarchal cultures. Julia Kristeva has argued that Christianity provided the 'most refined symbolic construct' for the representation of maternity, identifying the figure of Mary as 'privileged object' in European culture (Kristeva, 1986:161).

In the biblical stories, God impregnates the Virgin. Thus "the primal scene" (of conception) and "the mother's *jouissance* in the act of coitus" are done away with (Kristeva, 2000: 250). This fantasy of Immaculate Conception protects the child from facing a reality that is abject: that of being excluded from the "primal scene" that brought about its existence. Thus the child excludes the mother's *jouissance*.

There is a list of stories by Alice Munro that deals with the theme of young girls either coming to terms with the maternal or the stage of being abjected from it. The child-narrator in 'Images' is encouraged to be a part of the father's world: "My father said, 'Do you want to come

with me and look at the traps?” (Munro, 1968: 35). But she is also aware of the shadowy world lurking underneath, the world of the abject: “I watched the shadows instead of the people” (Munro, 1968: 35). The bewildered child watches the “gigantic shadows” of the coarsely joking adults around her (Munro, 1968: 35). Munro has tried to explain the child’s sense of what is going on, “nothing very awful ... but [she] keeps feeling a threat and a horror because her grandfather had died” and because of her “mother’s pregnancy” (quoted in Carrington, 1989: 75). The child obviously understands neither death nor sex and its consequences. She offers a childlike perspective of sexuality and death.

If a woman identifies with the father – tries to model herself in his image, then she ends up becoming “him” and supporting the same patriarchal order which excludes and marginalizes her as a woman. What Munro seems to be asserting instead is that women must work within the Law and accept sexual difference within the framework but refuse to become one of “them”. The narrator of ‘Boys and Girls’ (*Dance of the Happy Shades*) cannot seem to “break the code” which Kristeva insists need to be accomplished. The narrator here at the end of the story has three choices: either to accept her place in the gendered society, or find her own provisional space or go completely insane. The first is the outcome of the narrator as she accepts her place in the patriarchal order without disrupting the traditional order.

The Semiotic in Alice Munro’s Narratives

Talking about the connection between the semiotic process and literary form, Kristeva says that even if the semiotic process occurs in a previous time chronologically to the Symbolic, it is also simultaneously present as the sub-text of symbolic discourse:

The semiotic occurs, in literature, as a pressure on symbolic language: as absences, contradictions and moments in a literary text (Humm, 1986: 64).

In ‘Psychoanalysis and the Polis’ Kristeva analyses the novels of Louis Ferdinand Celine. Her literary criticism has two foci: the segmentation of sentences and recuperable syntactical ellipses (Kristeva, 1982: 88). This is where the locus of emotion, or the semiotic, will appear. Not only does Kristeva provide us with specific critical techniques, she also takes care to provide a specific aesthetic criteria. Great writers, she says, are those who, thematically, can immerse their readers in the unnamable semiotic of disruption. The task of critics is to help writers and readers (whether male or female) affirm this crisis in the symbolic function of literature itself. In the case of a signifying practice such as ‘poetic language’, the semiotic disposition will be the “various deviations from the grammatical rules of the language” including the articulatory effects which shift the phonemative system back towards its articulatory phonetic base and consequently towards the drive-governed bases of sound-production. (Kristeva, 1988: 182). It also includes

the over-determination of a lexicon by multiple meanings which it does not carry in ordinary usage but which accrue to it as a result of its occurrence in other texts; syntactic irregularities such as ellipses, non-recoverable deletions; indefinite embeddings etc (Kristeva, 1988: 182-3)

One of Alice Munro’s central preoccupations from her earliest stories is the role of the narrator, the figure who organizes the material and establishes the relationships. This is especially manifest in Munro’s fondness for particular words that in their repetition orchestrate the plot, encouraging a theme to resonate through the narrative so as to overcome any tendency that might pull the story apart:

As Munro's craft and thinking has developed, however, it has become increasingly evident that the demands of story could no be accommodated by the clarity and tidiness of its discourse (Blodgett, 1988: 108).

Munro's attempt to immerse her readers in the unnamable semiotic of disruption is seen in *The Moons of Jupiter*. Munro practices a syntax of absence in these stories, breaking up the continuity that is so desirable for any reader. Prue, the narrator of 'Prue', is endowed a curious syntax:

She presents her life in anecdotes, and...it is the point of most of her anecdotes that hopes are dashed, dreams ridiculed, things never turn out as expected, everything is altered in a bizarre way and there is no explanation ever (Munro, 1982: 129).

The emphasis in this description falls upon the matter not told. It is through such gaps and absences that the semiotic emerges.

Similarly in 'Labor Day Dinner' we have a polyphony of voices of a group of people with disparate interests. The dinner in the story concludes in a kind of impasse. Ruth's word "relics" beautifully conveys the whole situation and the characters' relation to it (Munro, 1982: 157). The story is characterized by an apparent lack of formal design. Within this framework, the characters appear from time to time only to lapse into silence and darkness. After a brief gap of silence and darkness in the text, one comes across the words "A gibbous moon" (Munro, 1982: 158). George uses these words to initiate a conversation and to break the silence; it is "an offering" (Munro, 1982: 158). Like the poems of e.e. cummings, the formal space of the words convey a meaning; "A gibbous moon" hanging separately, seems to imitate the moon in a state of suspension in the sky. The image of the moon nearing the time of fullness conveys the idea of the idea of both being and becoming. Like the moon, the story too is reaching completion. George offers a ceasefire to Roberta who is still "on the edge" but now "on the edge of caring and not caring" (Munro, 1982: 158). At this moment a car at a crossroad suddenly appears in front of them, bearing the dark down upon them, "a huge, dark flash, without lights" (Munro, 1982: 159). The use of the oxymoron "dark flash" is a symbolic inversion of the moment that George and Roberta share. They survive to sense the meaning of the event, to "feel as strange, as flattened out and born aloft, as unconnected with previous and future events as the ghost car was, the black fish" (Munro, 1982: 158). The near accident near the crossroad is a sign of the discontinuities that cross the text, forcing meaning to occur where the gaps are. The dark of the story has been illuminated in an order of oppositions that make it difficult to distinguish accident from fate, the random from the carefully veiled design, the semiotic from the Symbolic.

Munro's attempt to dismantle the linearity and unilateral direction of the patriarchal literary tradition is also seen in her mixing of genre codes in her narratives. The shifting of generic markers is seen in the very difficulty that one encounters in categorizing Munro's narratives. One can take the example of *Dance of the Happy Shades*. W. J. Keith calls *Dance of the Happy Shades* "sequence stories" or "linked stories" "with the effect of a novel" (quoted in Bharathi, 1995: 248). In an interview with Geoff Hancock, John Metcalf draws attention to the popularity of "sequences of stories, interlocked stories" in Canada and talks about the disruption that they effect—

Different rhetorics, amazingly different and various worlds, different voices – that's the joy of a story collection (Bharathi, 1995: 249).

The sequence stories seem to combine the precision of the short story form with the space and complexity of the novel form.

Another generic boundary, which Munro's collections touch upon, is autobiography. There are clear autobiographical echoes in many of Munro's narratives. In "So Shocking a Verdict in Real

Life”: Autobiography in Alice Munro’s Stories’ Robert Thacker refers to the autobiographical elements that are found throughout the Munroian oeuvre:

“Since the publication of her first collection of stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), reviewers and critics have noted parallels between her protagonist’s lives and Munro’s own life” (Thacker, 1988: 154).

Indeed *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* are collections that take up Munro’s Huron-county adolescence most thoroughly. Thacker notes Munro’s use of the autobiographical forms of memoir, confession, and mediation. While many readers may be ignorant of Munro’s own history in its specifics, they know many of its details simply by having read her work: her growing up on the edge of Wingham (Jubilee, Hanratty, Dalglish), father a sometime fox-farmer from Huron County stock, mother from the Ottawa Valley; her mother’s death from Parkinson’s disease after a long decline, her father’s more recent death of heart problems. “The Peace of Utrecht”, where the mother is shown as suffering from Parkinson’s disease, can be cited as an example.

The regionalist focus, defined by Linda Hutcheon as “concern for the different, the local, the particular – in opposition to the uniform, the universal, the centralized” (quoted in Bharathi, 1995: 252) is found in Munro’s narratives:

Quoting Del Jordan’s statement in *Lives of Girls and Women* (“People’s lives in Jubilee, as elsewhere,...were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable”) W.J. Keith remarks that “ ‘As elsewhere’ is an essential part of the insight, in Munro the universal is always incarnate in the local and particular” (Bharathi, 1995: 253).

In an interview for a 1985 issue of the Belgian feminist journal *Les Cahiers du GRIF* Kristeva said,

I have the impression that when women tell a story, they often resort to mimetic acts and to repetitions of already developed narrative structures, even if fragments of an original and authentic discourse sometimes make their way into the gesture of such imitations (Guberman, 1996: 66).

Even though Munro’s narratives are about protagonists who grow into maturity, she undercuts the *bildungsroman* pattern either by questioning the implied social codes or by disrupting the linear mode of narrative commonly used in the *bildungsroman* narratives. For instance, in ‘Red Dress – 1946’ the narrator questions the validity of the magazine article which urges girls to “Be gay. Let the boys see your eyes sparkle, let them hear laughter in your voice!” by saying “I felt absurd, smiling at no one” (Munro, 1968: 154).

Self-reflexivity characterizes the stories within a story that Munro’s protagonists tell. In describing the “strong, respectable, never overtly sexual” relationship between Maddy and Fred Powell, the narrator of ‘The Peace of Utrecht’ is reminded of “whatever the pocket novels are saying about small towns” (Munro, 1968: 194).

Another prevalent attitude, which Munro questions, is the one toward the natives. Old Joe Phippen in ‘Images’ “lives up in no man’s land beyond the bush” (Munro, 1968: 43) and is curtly dismissed by Mary. This kind of simultaneous presentation and questioning of norms is characteristic of Munro, where an initial identification of facts precedes the implicit subversion. The same trend is found in Munro’s presentation of history. Attempts to fictionalize and re-write history take the form of presenting the general through the particular. For instance, Del Jordan in ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’ becomes aware of the Depression when prices fall and her father is unable to continue his fox farming and is forced to become a peddler.

Conclusion

Dennis Lee, in his 'Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space' talks about his sense of inauthenticity, of powerlessness, his physical constriction, his apparent loss of the past following his realization that the language he was using was actually alien to him. Lee says,

The prime fact about my country as a public space is that in the last twenty-five years it has become an American colony (1972, 521).

It is of course possible to argue that the process of colonization started much earlier. Lee goes on to say, "If you are a Canadian, home is a place that is not home to you" (521). This has been the price to pay for being the neighbour of the powerful United States of America. It has been a long and arduous struggle for the Canadians to carve a separate and independent identity for themselves – an identity distinct from her neighbour. Northrop Frye says that in Canada the answer to the question "Who am I?" is at least partially the same as another question: "Where is here?" (quoted in Atwood, 1991: 17). "Who am I?" can be seen as an appropriate question in a country where the location is already well defined. "Where is here?" presents a more difficult problem because it questions Canada's "here" in relation to other places. Frye, therefore, evinces that the Canadian is faced with the task of clearly defining the "here" before he is able to assert his identity.

Lee's silence and his subsequent recovery is remarkably similar to that described by many women writers:

Although Canadian writers in general often illustrate adventure and escape differently from American writers, women writers more consistently than male writers situate and celebrate a maternal domain that presents an alternative structuring to that of patriarchal systems (Irvine: 11).

As a result, within already established patterns of colonization, or at least of economic and political domination, women writers like Alice Munro find that the "maternal domain" powerfully connects their cultural and psychological situations, their positions as Canadians and as women.

For Kristeva the phallus is not necessarily male, but is available to women too. Similarly the particular feminine attributes of the Semiotic are available to all with bodies to feel. The Semiotic finds its clearest expression in certain forms of art – hence the revolutionary importance of art for Kristeva and the optimism with which she can face patriarchy. Such subversion marks the narratives of Alice Munro that reveal her concern for evolving a language that would be expressive of women's experiences.

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