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“Honey, Where Are the Kids?”: Motifs of the Past, Water, and Photography in Munro’s Stories Featuring Dead Children

ABSTRACT

As indicated by many critics, the death of children features prominently in Alice Munro’s short fiction. This paper approaches the theme in six of her short stories from the standpoint of her personal experience to establish shared elements that combine to build the narratives, reverberating in her writing. These elements are the past, water, and photography. The argument and literary exploration are grounded on previous literature on the author, short story theory, and photography theory, and ultimately pursue a double objective, i.e., to develop an interpretation of the figure of the lost child in Munro’s work, while providing supporting evidence for the autobiographical nature of her literature.

Keywords: Alice Munro, death of children, autobiography, the past, water, photography

»Kje so otroci?«: Motivi preteklosti, vode in fotografije v zgodbah Alice Munro, v katerih nastopajo liki mrtvih otrok

IZVLEČEK

Številni kritiki ugotavljajo, da smrt otrok zavzema pomembno mesto v kratki prozi Alice Munro. Pričujoči prispevek obravnava to temo v avtoričinih šestih kratkih zgodbah z vidika njene osebne izkušnje, z namenom določiti skupne elemente, ki se povezujejo v pripovedi, ki odmevajo v avtoričinih delih. Ti elementi so preteklost, voda in fotografija. Naši argumenti in raziskovanje se naslanjajo na predhodno literaturo o avtorici, teorijo kratke zgodbe in teorijo fotografije ter sledijo dvema ciljema, tj. razviti interpretacijo podobe izgubljenega otoka v delih A. Munro in dodatno potrditi avtobiografsko razsežnost njenih del.

Gljučne besede: Alice Munro, smrt otrok, avtobiografija, preteklost, voda, fotografija

1 Introduction

If death has always been an essential subject in literature (Dasenbrock 2021), the figure of ultimate absence, the lost child, is also recurrent in culture and throughout time as a universal haunting presence that we inevitably carry within us as trauma. The loss of innocence, of the past, and of the essence of our undisturbed identity metamorphoses into images and narratives in the form of the death of children (Froud 2017a). In literature, the memory and truth of childhood sink into the forgetfulness and nontruth of adulthood, the presence and life of the child entering the realms of absence of pure knowledge and death (Derrida 1998). In short fiction in particular, the epistemological traits and spatial constraints of the genre link this loss to the immaterial reality of the author's inner world, an enlightened place of insight into truth, a place transformed into "human experience distilled in black ink on paper" (Thomas 1999, viii), which signifies and emotionally isolates the event outside the temporal and social context of long fiction to provide a fragmented and possibly more real portrayal of the human condition and our encounter with the sacred (Brown 1997; Iftekharuddin, Rohrberger, and Lee 1997; May 1994; Trussler 1996). Storytelling intertwines cultural conceptions of death with the author's remembrance and psychology to combine seemingly incongruous elements into an "existential temporal horizon" (Trussler 1996, 563) where the safety of everyday life is disrupted, and the starkness of reality revealed (May 1994).

This connects short fiction narratives with the inner world and personal experience of writers, and, in this sense, no Munro reader can fail to notice how prominently the death of children features in her work. Although critics have analysed this theme in some of her stories (Bigot 2017; Heble 1994; Morgenstern 2018; Omhovére 2018; Sutherland 2018; Warwick 2018), and much research has been conducted to establish patterns of motifs in her work (Carscallen 1993; DeFalco 2018; Howells 1998, 2009; Martin 1987; Thacker 1998, 1999), my intentions are to approach the death of children in Munro's literature from the standpoint of her biography and discern recurrent elements that combine in the narrative to provide variations, and to ultimately support the much discussed autobiographical aspect of her writing (Howells 1998; Howells 2016; Palusci 2017; Redekop 1992; Ross 2020; Thacker 1988). In this regard, the Maitland River of Munro's childhood and youth is an endless source of life and inspiration that endows her narrative with mystery and adventure – as admitted by the author herself (quoted in Thacker 2018) – but remains a double-edged sword that feeds but drowns the surrounding fields and towns. It "conveys a prehistoric sense of flood and the possibility of either genesis or fearful sinking death" (Rasporich 1990, 133), and it is thus unsurprising that water and in particular drowning appear so often in her fiction (de Papp Carrington 1997). In a similar line, the author's idiosyncratic narrative has been compared with the photographic image because of its dichotomic and paradoxical nature (York 1988), which establishes "the pure relation of that which is to that which no longer is", freezing a moment of life while becoming "the effigy of death" (Barthes quoted in Rancière 2011, 39). On a different level, like visual art, in Munro's fiction, the objectively and accurately portrayed reality is broken by an outbreak of emotion (Howells 1998); it has the capacity to "immerse us in sensation" (Thomas 1999, iix), construing "delicate moment[s] of exposure" (York 1988, 21) which share the sensorial qualities of photography, and which try to provide order or explain a paradoxical and unruly reality difficult to comprehend. Munro's

finesse lies in the fact that, in stories about childhood, she achieves this photographic-like portrayal of the ambiguities of existence with the retrospection and hindsight of adulthood – jumping backwards and forwards in time to create her subjective understanding of the picture – while still managing to leave intact the baffling components perceived by the child.

The following sections explore six of Munro’s stories, which, I argue, stem from personal experience, to find patterns of coherence, outlining stylistic and thematic components – autobiography, the death of children, water, and photography – integrated in the writing to construct a sense of *déjà vu* for the reader (Bigot 2017). In this respect, Sheila Munro’s memoirs *Lives of Mothers & Daughters: Growing Up with Alice Munro* (2001) and Robert Thacker’s biography, *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives* (2005), anchor the biographical component of my argument.¹ Nevertheless, despite foundations in previous literature on Munro, short fiction and photography theory, this exploration remains personal and subjective and aims to advance my own interpretation of child death in the author’s work.

2 Elements in Munro’s Stories Featuring a Child’s Death

To start at the beginning is to confront the last of Munro’s work, “Finale”, the quartet of stories in *Dear Life* that concludes the author’s literary career and which she introduced in semiautobiographical terms as “the first and last – and the closest – things” (2013, 255) to be said about her life. Yet the events and themes of these four childhood pieces echo her previous work (Bigot 2017; Lucio-Villegas 2021; Ross 2020) which, in many instances, reads as their initial revisitation in fiction. As insightfully pointed out by Corinne Bigot in her 2017 essay “Ghost Texts in Alice Munro’s Stories”, in “Night”, the second story in “Finale”, the adult narrator remembers her childhood self being persecuted at night by the thought that she would strangle her sister, and this acknowledged reminiscence, the scenario of a child killing a child, haunts Munro’s fiction from the beginning to become a theme she approaches from various perspectives, employing different narrative devices in stories which could be loosely described as potential fratricides and sororicides: “The Time of Death” in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), “Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux” in *The Progress of Love* (1986), “Child’s Play” in *Too Much Happiness* (2009), and “Gravel” in *Dear Life* (2012).² In parallel, water as a medium of death also appears from the start of Munro’s work. In “The Time of Death”, from *Dance of the Happy Shades*, Patricia, the precocious nine-year-old protagonist, accidentally kills her mentally disabled brother Benny with boiling water while cleaning unsupervised, although readers are given no details of the accident itself. She is unable to understand the seriousness of her action and remains unaware of the guilt that may assail her, blocking her grief – “with her it was as if nothing had happened” (2011, 97) – until Benny’s mythical innocence comes to haunt her in the figure of Brandon, the wandering scissors-grinder who fascinated the little boy, unlocking her emotions into a screaming fit (Carscallen 1993; Ventura 2015). Furthermore, Patricia’s suspended emotional tension proceeds alongside an unseasonal lack of snow, as readers are reminded throughout the narrative, and Brandon’s release of Patricia’s grief in turn finally precipitates the snowfall in the final paragraph (Smythe 1992): “The snow

¹ Sheila Munro was born in 1953 and is the eldest daughter of Jim and Alice Munro (S. Munro 2001).

² Later editions have been used to write this paper.

came, falling slowly, evenly, between the highway and the houses and the pine trees, falling in big flakes at first and then in smaller and smaller flakes that did not melt on the hard furrows, the rock of the earth” (A. Munro 2011, 99), in a description evoking the stillness of a photograph and condensing Munro’s entire story behind it (York 1988).

This inferred process, a photograph as an “inexhaustible invitation³ to deduction, speculation, and fantasy” (Sontag 2019, 24) prompts the storyline of “Epilogue: The Photographer”, in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), a story which, according to Munro’s biographer Robert Thacker, “encapsulated not only her own life’s detail – seen and imagined – but also the very sensibility that had made her the writer she had become” (2005, 213). In the story, a photograph of Marion Sheriff, a young girl who drowned herself by walking into the Wawanash River in Jubilee, fascinates Del, the teenage narrator, into trying to piece together in her mind a novel about the girl’s family. What is known of the unhappy events surrounding Marion’s family – “Well, there is a family that has had its share of Tragedy!” (A. Munro 2015, 307) – is insufficiently dramatic for Del, who fashions its members and the reasons for the girl’s suicide into a more Gothic and satisfying version of reality (Carscallen 1993). Thus, she creates a character, *The Photographer*, who, like Del, manipulates through his art the world around him, distorting his subjects into their “unusual, even frightening” potential future selves, so that “[p]eople saw that in his pictures they had aged twenty or thirty years”. In consonance with the romantic notions of a teenage girl, Caroline – Marion in Del’s novel – falls in love with the photographer and carries his child until “[o]ne day (when she could already feel her womb swollen *like a hard yellow gourd in her belly*), she found the car overturned beside a bridge, overturned in a ditch beside a dry creek. It was empty. He was gone. That night she walked into the Wawanash River” (A. Munro 2015, 311). The photographer is an agent of death (Barthes 1993; Smythe 1992), both through his escape – note the dry creek – which triggers the girl’s demise, and by the very nature of his art, “transmuting, in an instant, present into past, life into death”, “enlarging the familiar iconography of mystery, mortality, transience” (Sontag 2019, 76, 72). In this regard, it seems apt that Marion’s photograph enchants Del because it conceals the mystery of her death (York 1988); it provides a clean slate on which to create her own fictionalised version of the past, something Munro also does in her work, although with the hindsight and distorted memory of adulthood (Palusci 2017; Redekop 1992; Regan 1991; Thacker 1988).

As indicated by many critics (Carscallen 1993; Froud 2017b; Heble 1994; Martin 1987), this distorted memory is acknowledged in the linked reminiscences of “Miles City, Montana”, in *The Progress of Love*, which is based on the near drowning of Munro’s four-year-old daughter Jenny in 1961 (S. Munro 2001; Thacker 2005). In the story, the adult narrator remembers in the first line how “[m]y father came across the field carrying the body of the boy who had drowned”, although “I don’t think I really saw all this” (A. Munro 2007, 84). At the boy’s funeral, the narrator recalls how, as a child, she “felt a furious and sickening disgust” at the sight of her parents that “could not be understood or expressed” (A. Munro 2007, 86). It is a photograph that elicits this memory and the main recollection of the story, the near drowning of her daughter in a swimming pool twenty years later: “Andrew took a picture of me standing

³ “Invitations” in the original in plural.

beside the car. I was wearing white pants, a black turtleneck, and sunglasses. I lounged against the car door, canting my hips to make myself look slim” (A. Munro 2007, 87). The main story describes the family’s car trip to visit the children’s grandparents. They stop in Miles City, where the children take a dip in the local pool, although it is closed for lunch and the parents are not allowed in. The mother wanders off looking for something to drink when she has a premonition, “*Where are the children?*” (A. Munro 2007, 103), and through a hole in the fence sees her eldest daughter, Cynthia, “standing about waist-deep in the water, fluttering her hands on the surface and discreetly watching something at the end of the pool, which I could not see. I thought by her pose, her discretion, the look on her face, that she must be watching some byplay between the lifeguard and her boyfriend. I couldn’t see Meg” (A. Munro 2007, 100), the younger daughter. The mother calls out and Meg is saved by her father from the “treacherous clear blue water” (A. Munro 2007, 102), even though as admitted by the narrator again, there is a certain degree of invention in her recollection of the event. “Miles City, Montana” narrates the experiences of “the loss and near loss of a child” (Froud 2017b, 130) by drowning, both acts of remembrance triggered in the story by a family photograph. In turn, this sparks the protagonist’s “mental pictures of the present and the past” (Sontag 2019, 25), a fictionalised version of a true event in Munro’s family history, adapted to explain the dual and contradictory nature of water, sex and life, a child’s realisation and comprehension that living and procreation entail guilt and death (Carscallen 1993; Froud 2017b; Heble 1994, 2009; Ross 1992). It dawns on this narrator that her disgust at her parents is justified because they implicitly “gave consent to the death of children and to my death not by anything they said or thought but by the very fact that they had made children – they had made me. They had made me, and for that reason my death” (A. Munro 2007, 103).

This bifocal perspective of adult and child narrators (Burszta 2016; Guignery 2015; Hoy 1980) becomes more complex in “My Mother’s Dream”, in *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998), which is based on a recurrent and haunting dream Munro had after the death of her second daughter Catherine, fourteen hours after her birth (S. Munro 2001; Thacker 2005). Munro’s daughter Sheila explains how “[t]here are no photographs of my mother when she was pregnant with Catherine, and the death was something she rarely mentioned” (2001, 43), although Alice Munro pours this memory into a narrative that unites the voices of mother and daughter (Sutherland 2018) and fictionalises its conclusion to a happy ending. Told from the adult viewpoint of the surviving baby, who implicitly and complicitly shares her mother’s recollection of the unfolding events, the story starts with the mother’s dream: “During the night – or during the time she had been asleep – there had been a heavy fall of snow”, but things soon start to go amiss since “[s]now had settled overnight on the luxury of summer. [...] Also, everybody had gone away – though she couldn’t think who ‘everybody’ was” (A. Munro 1999, 293). The dream drifts into a nightmare when the mother recalls who this “everybody” is and “remembered that she had left a baby out there somewhere, before the snow had fallen. Quite a while before the snow had fallen. This memory, this certainty, came over her with horror. It was as if she was awakening from a dream”. The guilt and grief that ensue follow a recognition that the infant “would be dead, shrivelled and brown, its head like a nut, and on its tiny shut-up face there would be an expression not of distress but of bereavement”, an extension of the mother’s feelings rather than “any accusation of her” (A. Munro 1999, 294), and that “[t]here would

never be any room in her for anything else. No room for anything but the realization of what she had done". The dream's ending, like the ending of the story that unfolds once the mother wakes up, is full of relief: "What a reprieve, then, to find her baby lying in its crib. [...] Red hair like her own, on her perfectly safe and unmistakable baby. The joy to find herself forgiven" (A. Munro 1999, 295). One cannot but wonder at the implications of "My Mother's Dream" in terms of Munro's biography and interpret the story as an exercise of reconciliation with the death of her child where the conceptual nature of water, in this case snow, is exploited as a "symbol of the feminine and the unconscious" (Rasporich 1990, 134), an element intrinsic to female fertility, which carries life and death. In fact, in the narrative perspective, the voice of the child merges with the mother's memories to omnisciently develop the story, unifying the two, as they were during pregnancy, in one consciousness and body to find reconciliation (Sutherland 2018).

Disturbingly, in "Child's Play", from *Too Much Happiness*, preteens Marlene and Charlene drown Verna, a Down syndrome girl, at a summer camp; the shadow of Verna's murder haunts the two adult females in different ways and unites them in their individual search for reconciliation with their deed. Much has been written about the story highlighting Verna's disability and/or analysing Marlene's – the protagonist and narrator's – unfelt guilt (Darroch 2018; Duncan 2011; Sutherland 2018; Warwick 2018), yet the plot line leading to the latter's confession, the raw and graphic description of Verna's killing, is condensed in images that plague her to disclosure, "uncovering a hidden truth, conserving a vanishing past" (Sontag 2019, 59) that she is unable to fend off, as she points out at the beginning of the story (A. Munro 2010, 188–89):

For a long while the past drops away from you easily and it would seem automatically, properly. Its scenes don't vanish so much as become irrelevant. And then there's a switchback, what's been all over and done with sprouting up fresh, wanting attention, even wanting you to do something about it, though it's plain there is not on this earth a thing to be done.

In this sense, Munro's "paradoxical combination of power and powerlessness, secrecy and exposure experienced by female narrators" (Howells 1998, 142) remains a contradictory pursuit to control the uncontrollable past, which, like photography, employs retrospection and voyeurism in its exposition (de Papp Carrington 1989). Indeed, the feelings that ultimately trigger the murder are underpinned by the power Marlene confers on Verna, partly due to a lack of understanding of her syndrome and behaviour, since

only adults would be so stupid as to believe she had no power. A power, moreover, that was specifically directed at me. I was the one she had her eye on. Or so I believed. As if we had an understanding between us that could not be described and was not to be disposed of. Something that clings, in the way of love, though on my side it felt absolutely like hate (A. Munro 2010, 200).

Hence, Marlene goes on to dedicate part of her academic career to the justification of this hate and publishes a book, *Idiots and Idols*, which describes how different cultures assign to "mentally or physically unique" people "a good deal that is remarkable, even awesome [...].

And what was interesting was to discover a certain amount of veneration as well as persecution, and the ascribing [...] of quite a range of abilities, seen as sacred, magical, dangerous, or valuable” (A. Munro 2010, 210). For she ultimately needs to explain to herself the emotions that drove Verna’s drowning and murder, the jubilation felt at winning a child’s in-existent battle: “Charlene and I kept our eyes on each other, rather than looking down at what our hands were doing. I don’t think we felt wicked, triumphing in our wickedness. More as if we were doing just what was – amazingly – demanded of us, as if this was the absolute high point, the culmination, in our lives, of our being ourselves” (A. Munro 2010, 222).

As pointed out by Susan Warwick (2018), this story expands on “The Time of Death” and shifts the viewpoint from the third person to the first, focusing on the psychology and guilt of the killer rather than on the questionable responsibility of the child. In between these two stances, “Gravel” – included in *Dear Life*, Munro’s last collection of short stories – operates again in the ambiguous territory of memory and culpability, although, in this case, the narrator cannot be held ethically accountable for the murder of his/her sister. In the story, the protagonist inhabits a kind of “no man’s land”, obsessed with the ascertainment of his/her involvement in the self-inflicted death of the older sibling, Caro. In accordance with this state of mind, the narrator remains throughout the narrative unnamed, ungendered, of unspecified age, as he/she unfolds a confusing and vacillating account of the events surrounding Caro’s death, a life he/she “can barely remember” (A. Munro 2013, 91), for the reality of the moment itself escapes him/her. The events approaching the scene are clear enough: two children playing outside their trailer by a gravel pit, their dog Blitzee for company, while their mother and newly acquired stepfather have sex inside; then, Caro giving instructions, “I was to go back to the trailer and tell Neal and our mother something. That the dog had fallen into the water. The dog had fallen into the water and Caro was afraid she’d be drowned” (A. Munro 2013, 102), although the rest is unclear:

In my mind I can see her picking up Blitzee and tossing her, though Blitzee was trying to hang on to her coat. Then backing up, Caro backing up to take a run at the water. Running, jumping, all of a sudden hurling herself at the water. But I can’t recall the sound of the splashes as they, one after the other, hit the water. Not a little splash or a big one. Perhaps I had turned towards the trailer by then – I must have done (A. Munro 2013, 102).

The following events are also sketchy and full of uncertainty in the memory of a child who is too young to go to school, and who grows up afflicted by his/her guilt and responsibility in Caro’s haunting death, although his/her subconscious provides a different version, one in which blame and attribution do not exist:

When I dream of this, I am always running. And in my dreams I am running not towards the trailer but back towards the gravel pit. I can see Blitzee floundering around and Caro swimming towards her, swimming strongly, on the way to rescue her. I see her light-brown checked coat and her plaid scarf and her proud successful face and reddish hair darkened at the end of its curls by the water. All I have to do is watch and be happy – nothing required of me, after all (A. Munro 2013, 102–3).

The scene itself is elusive, a secret photograph hidden by the *lethe* of childhood, which contains a “delicate balance of concealment and revelation”, where the drowning yet again “suggests immolation in the ugly feelings of the past” (York 2018, 211) and continues to torment. For acceptance of oblivion is unacceptable, and the one image that would appease is unreachable: “But, in my mind, Caro keeps running at the water and throwing herself in, as if in triumph, and I’m still caught, waiting for her to explain to me, waiting for the splash” (A. Munro 2013, 109).

3 Discussion and Conclusions

As argued, the stories analysed in this paper surface from Munro’s personal experience. “The Time of Death”, “Child’s Play” and “Gravel” can be linked to Munro’s semiautobiographical story “Night” in so far as they articulate and explore the potential scenario that oppresses its child protagonist, i.e., the capacity to kill another child, from different angles and judgements. However, while the narrator’s mind in “Night” is consoled by her father, who explains that “[p]eople have those kinds of thoughts sometimes” (A. Munro 2013, 283) without necessarily acting upon them, in the previous stories there is a lack of adult presence which borders on negligence. In “The Time of Death”, nine-year-old Patricia is expected to look after three younger siblings alone for “[t]hree-quarters of an hour at least” (2011, 89); she tries to impose cleanliness and “exercise a sense of responsibility in a household where this is conspicuously lacking” (Martin 1987, 32), with tragic consequences. In the first few lines of “Child’s Play”, Marlene assumes her parents talked about Verna’s drowning, which was deemed an accident: “I suppose there was talk in our house, afterwards. How sad, how awful. (My mother.) There should have been supervision. Where were the counsellors? (My father.)” (2010, 188); however, we later learn that there was some supervision, but that the murder happened quickly, in the confusion and excitement of a camp’s last day, and therefore passed unobserved. In “Gravel”, the children are told to play outside while their mother and her lover have sex, although both adults are fully aware of the dangers of the gravel pit “filled to the brim with snow and rain” and “twenty feet deep” (2013, 100). There is an implicit accusation of neglect in the circumstances of the deaths – which might otherwise have been avoided – yet the negligence provides the stories with a further component in the *tableau* of death, reworking “the frame of our perception and the dynamism of our affects” (Ranci re 2009, 82), so that readers may also become obsessed with its understanding and conception, rereading its description and surrounding details to fully comprehend the props involved. It is ironic that the death scene in “The Time of Death” is omitted from the narration – Benny’s fatal scalding with boiling water is an ellipsis too horrendous to visualise – while in “Child’s Play” it is starkly and graphically described as a conscious act which, like Verna’s drowning head, rises up, gasping for air, a truth refusing to be left behind (Ventura 2015; Sutherland 2018). In “Gravel”, “the emblematic ghost story that is both haunted by a dead/undead child and haunted by several ghost texts” (Bigot 2017, 145), the death scene remains elusive, the one piece of the puzzle that is missing and would put the narrator’s mind at rest. In all cases, the image of death lies at the core of the story, the frozen moment in time stating our innocence, vulnerability, and destruction, filling in “blanks in our mental picture of the present and the past” (Sontag 2019, 25), glued together by the symbolism of water and approached from shifting perspectives.

It is perhaps not surprising that while “Finale”, the author’s final four stories including “Night”, was introduced as a “separate unit, one that is autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact” (A. Munro 2013, 255), *Lives of Girls and Women*, published forty-one years previously, initially contained an authorial disclaimer – not incorporated in recent editions – which described the narrative as “autobiographical in form but not in fact” (Thacker 2005, 211). The final piece in the collection, “Epilogue: The Photographer”, conceived originally as a novel titled *Real Life*, transforms the collection into “a portrait of an artist as a young woman” (Thacker 2005, 216) and draws from Munro’s childhood and youth, and her own adolescent attempt to novelise a Gothic version of her Ontario hometown, Wingham. The writer’s fictional references to photography go hand in hand with a writing mode that builds on the recollection of a decisive image, a scene where something happened to determine the narrator’s life forever. In these stories the crucial event is closely connected with the figure of the lost child, which haunts Munro’s biography and fiction: “Something happened here. In your life there are a few places, or maybe only the one place, where something happened, and then there are all the other places” (A. Munro 2013, 162).

Curiously, a draft version of “Miles City, Montana” included a stillborn baby, Elizabeth, buried in a shoebox, and another baby Elizabeth, who lived less than twenty-four hours and was buried in the same way, forms one of the main axes of an unpublished story, “Shoebox Babies”, on which the author worked in the 1970s (Thacker 2005, 126). Both Sheila Munro and Robert Thacker mention the death of Munro’s daughter Catherine and its impact on the author. Catherine was buried in a small box in an unmarked grave. Her death haunted Munro so that “[f]or years afterwards she had dreams about a lost baby, dreams about leaving a baby girl out in the rain and forgetting about her” (S. Munro 2001, 43), which would finally materialise in “My Mother’s Dream”. The author also placed a belated marker on the baby’s grave in 1990 to recognise her existence (Thacker 2005, 126). Catherine’s kidney-related medical condition was the cause of her death, although her physical appearance made the Munros think she had Down syndrome, and they discussed the possibility of finding an institution for her so Alice Munro could continue her writing career (S. Munro 2001, 43).

Although we cannot fully ascertain to what degree all this weighed on Munro’s mind, there is a veiled tone of parental guilt and justification in the writing of these stories, a combination of uncontrollable elements and circumstances amalgamated to provide meaning (Lin 2020), with Munro’s psychology, as a mother and woman, underpinning and furnishing her writing so that the figure of the lost child becomes a central theme in her fiction. The “afterwardness”, “beforeness”, and intertextuality which group these stories together sometimes function on a fictional level, and in other instances work on the metafictional plane. The recollective and changing perspective of the adult narrators – not included in “The Time of Death” – reverberates from Munro’s biography (Sutherland 2018), blending the imagination and memory of the author into the narrative, embedding a set of recurring components – her past, the iconography of water, and photography – to shape her depiction of children’s deaths.

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