

Lester E. Barber

Bowling Green State University, Ohio

Alice Munro: The Stories of *Runaway*

Summary

This essay will analyze and explicate the stories in Munro's latest collection, *Runaway*, in order to present the reader with a description of her artistic interests, motifs and techniques in this work. The author finds remarkable similarities among the stories, even as they explore very different female characters and situations. The author notes the delicacy and precision with which Munro tracks the progress of her characters' thoughts and feelings, often in a kind of interior dialogue with themselves. Love, or its absence, is the usual subject matter in the stories – most often between a woman and a man, but sometimes between parent and child – and the author shows how Munro's characters deal with the “old confusions or obligations” engendered by this emotion. Finally, the author cites several examples in describing Munro's style of presenting her characters, one typified by colloquial and self-deprecating dialogue, but punctuated at times by language of great poetic and emotional power.

Key words: Women as main characters in Munro's fiction, Colloquial, self-deprecating dialogue and language of poetic, emotional power, Retrospection and understanding, Unity of “Chance”, “Soon”, and “Silence”

Alice Munro: Zbirka kratkih zgodb *Ubežnik (Runaway)*

Povzetek

Pričujoči esej osvetli in razčleni zadnjo zbirko kratkih zgodb uveljavljene kanadske pisateljice Alice Munro z naslovom *Ubežnik* ter se pri tem posebej osredotoči na avtoričine umetniške težnje, motive in postopke. V ospredje stopijo osupljive podobnosti med zgodbami, in to kljub precejšnjim razlikam med ženskimi liki, ki praviloma nastopajo kot protagonistke v teh zgodbah. Poleg tega avtor nameni posebno pozornost razčlembi notranjega monologa, s katerim liki praviloma udejanjajo svojo pripovedno držo. Poglavitna tematika zgodb je ljubezen (oziroma njeno umanjkanje), in sicer v razmerjih ona–on, starši–otroci, kot posledica preteklih nesporazumov in odgovornosti. Sklepni del poda slogovno analizo pripovednih postopkov karakterizacije likov ter oriše pisateljčin poetični in emocionalni domet.

Ključne besede: Ženske kot osrednji liki v zgodbah Alice Munro, pogovorno-samoobtožujoči dialog in jezik poetično-emocionalne moči, retrospekcija in umevanje, enotnost “naključnega”, “skorajšnjega” ter “molka”

Alice Munro: The Stories of *Runaway*

1. Introduction

Alice Munro is widely regarded as one of the world's very best living writers of short fiction in English. A Canadian author who suffuses her stories with the geography and common life of her native western Ontario and of her second home near the Pacific coast in British Columbia, Munro nevertheless expresses a style and sensibility which speak to a great many North Americans, Canadians and U.S. citizens alike. In addition, the issues she explores and the sensibility with which she presents them make her an important writer for the world at large.¹

I met Alice Munro briefly in the spring of 2006, on a ferry returning to the Ontario, Canada mainland from Pelee Island where she had read from a book in progress to an assorted audience of birders and literary enthusiasts. She was charming, openly friendly, with a ready smile. But, her eyes and expressions hinted at depths of understanding, a sense of humor and an ironic habit of mind. There was, I thought, a contrast between her quiet, mid-western friendliness and an implied set of richer, more private reserves within.² Not surprisingly, these are all qualities which are reflected in the stories which comprise Munro's latest collection of short stories, *Runaway*.

Known primarily for her short fiction, Munro has published over a dozen collections and other full-length works, almost all of them to enthusiastic, sometimes rapturous acclaim.³ She deserves every bit of the respect and praise which has been lavished upon her, I believe, and will endure as a major writer because of the quiet revelations, the biting ironies, the acute presentations of common life and the sure use of language and dialogue in her stories.

Because her latest collection has not yet been the subject of much direct critical attention – except for the many fine reviews, of course – *Runaway* is an especially apt subject for a general appreciation and analysis of Munro's fiction. I will treat the stories separately and as a whole in an attempt to isolate and explain their essential qualities. It seems clear that these stories extend habits of thought and composition which Munro has used before, but it is not my goal to explore the relationships of this latest publication to her work at large. Rather, I will try to let *Runaway* speak wholly for itself.

2. Generalizations and the First Story

To begin with the obvious, it should be said that all the stories in *Runaway* center on women's thoughts and feelings about themselves and their situations. They track the unsteady progress of those thoughts and feelings with great delicacy and precision. In the broadest sense, each of the stories is about a woman acquiring knowledge, about the consequences thereof and

1 Readers interested in biographical information about Munro, as well as the relationship between her life and her fiction, should see especially Robert Thacker, *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*. This is the most recent biography, and one with which Munro cooperated.

2 For a personal take on Munro and her art, see the memoir by Munro's eldest child, Shelia Munro.

3 For an excellent, up-to-date select bibliography of works by and about Munro, including reviews of *Runaway*, see Thacker 2005.

about knowing herself. Some of Munro's women are young adults, some are mature individuals looking back on their earlier lives and one – in "Trespases" – is a pre-teen girl. Indeed, with a single partial exception, the stories are presented entirely from the perspectives of these women. Love, or its absence, is the usual subject matter in the stories, most often between a woman and a man, but sometimes between parent and child. Yet, this topic only partly defines the issues and concerns which the author engages. Munro explores her characters' inner and outer lives with subtlety and nuance, always sympathetically, but with a strong sense of irony and dryness which shades sometimes into a dispassion which is almost ruthless. She does not shy away from exposing her characters to the most painful thoughts and revelations.

Rarely are men much in focus in this collection. Only a few are interesting in their own right, but even these are not richly drawn, remaining somewhat shadowy foils for the women whose lives they affect. Most of the other men are not especially attractive individuals and they are seen only through women's eyes. The absence of fully-developed central male characters might be viewed as a limitation in Munro, but it is probably a simple matter of artistic choice on her part. It is the women who interest her most and who continually surprise, anguish and delight the reader with their experiences, their pain, their passion, their insights and their awareness.

To analyze and explain Munro's stories is, inevitably, to reduce them shamefully. The characters and their situations are most meaningful in and of themselves, needing no external explication. And yet, with a writer as evocative and complex as Munro, one feels a near compulsion to talk, to explain and to share. The first story in *Runaway*, from which the collection takes its title, is perhaps one least likely to be seriously reduced by comment and analysis. It also introduces themes, perspectives and approaches which Munro develops in different ways within the stories that follow.

The principal character in "Runaway" is Carla, a young woman fixed in a relationship with a moody, rather threatening lover named Clark. She is one of the least sympathetic of the women depicted in this collection, with her weepiness, her inability to see herself clearly or control her decisions. She is depicted once as seeing herself as "captive" to Clark (32) and, again, in a scene of crisis, as someone with no existence separate from him. Of course Carla is quite young, so her raw emotionality and shallow sense of self have not yet undergone the trying fires of experience. The narrative voice of the story alternates between Carla and Sylvia Jamieson, an older neighbor whose husband has recently died after a confining illness, but it concentrates mostly on Carla.

"This was the summer of rain and more rain," the narrative voice tells us near the beginning of the story, speaking presumably for Carla (4). Continuous rain sets a pervading atmosphere of apprehension and discord. Apprehension that Carla and Clark's boarding and riding stable will fail for lack of customers, and discord between the couple over Clark's plan to blackmail their neighbor, Sylvia. The rain seems to function as atmosphere and symbol, but when it finally breaks, the relief is illusory. Feelings of resolution and renewed happiness for the couple, which the sun brings with it, prove tenuous and probably temporary. It may be that Munro is quietly

commenting here on the writer's craft, suggesting that symbols can be too rigid and misleading a guide to understanding.

Munro presents her characters without illusion as to their weaknesses. All are flawed, although Carla seems especially so, perhaps only because she is so much the center of Munro's attention. In an effort to please Clark and to stimulate their sex life, Carla has developed a fragmented and fictitious story about how the dying Mr. Jamieson next door has been aroused by her and sought her sexual favors during her visits to help with the housework. Carla is now caught in her lie, being unable to tell Clark the truth – that she was never even once alone with Mr. Jamieson – even as he forces her to re-visit Sylvia after the death of her husband to set the groundwork for his scheme to blackmail Sylvia into giving him money to keep her well-known poet husband's reputation intact.

Part of this rainy summer's anguish for Carla is the absence of her pet Flora, a little white goat to which Carla has developed a strong attachment, maybe as a counterweight to her increasing feelings of uncertainty and distress with Clark. Flora has run away from the stables, adding to Carla's apprehension and discomfort in her relationship. Carla dreams of Flora, a creature which can be seen as representing Carla's earlier, happy, carefree state with Clark or as an object of support or even self-awareness in Carla's apparently disintegrating life. Flora is described as looking at Carla:

. . . with an expression that was not quite sympathy—it was more like comradely mockery. . . . She was quick and graceful and provocative as a kitten, and her resemblance to a guileless girl in love had made them both [Carla and Clark] laugh. . . . but the comradeship with Flora was quite different, Flora allowing her no sense of superiority. (9)

When the narrative voice shifts to Sylvia, we learn that she, having developed a fascination with Carla's spontaneous personality, is eagerly awaiting her visit. But that visit goes very differently than expected for both Sylvia and Carla. Carla breaks down under the stress of what Clark wants her to do. Although she avoids telling the older woman about the blackmail scheme, she does, amidst much weeping, tell Sylvia about the loss of Flora and, when pressed, about her unhappiness with Clark. Sylvia takes control of the situation, urges Carla to leave Clark, to run away, and helps make arrangements for her escape. Affected, perhaps, by the wine and food which Sylvia has provided, Carla brightens up, agrees to the plan and eventually boards a bus for Toronto. So, Carla appears to be headed for a new, more self-examined, independent life, and it seems significant that Flora's absence no longer figures in her thinking.

A reversal occurs almost immediately, however. While Sylvia is thinking over the day's events, Carla's newly gained composure is coming unglued on the bus. Before she reaches the third stop she has run through a gamut of recollections and feelings, including a grudging acknowledgment that she has adapted truth somewhat with Sylvia in order to live up to what she imagined to be the latter's expectations of her, as well as increasing self-doubts and a growing panicky feeling that she is incapable of living without Clark. She gets off the bus and phones Clark to come get her!

Now the sun comes out; the summer is saved for the riding stable; Clark and Carla are in love again; the sex is good. Even a trip which Clark makes to Sylvia's house, ostensibly to return clothing which Sylvia had given to Carla, but really, one suspects, to bully and threaten Sylvia for having urged Carla's attempt at flight, doesn't turn out badly. Just as Clark's presence and talk seem most threatening to Sylvia, Flora reappears suddenly in a kind of magical dance, as highlighted in the fog by a passing car's headlights. The mood shifts; Clark is distracted and gives up any plans he might still have been harboring about blackmailing Sylvia.

The story turns yet again in the final section, however. We learn that Clark did not bring Flora home. In fact, he never told Carla about the goat's appearance at Sylvia's. Carla is stunned, therefore, when she receives a letter from Sylvia mentioning Flora's return. Still, she doesn't act. She is silent, blank.

At night when Clark put his arms around her—busy as he was now, he was never too tired, never cross—she did not find it hard to be cooperative. . . . [But,] it was as if she had a murderous needle somewhere in her lungs, and by breathing carefully, she could avoid feeling it. But every once in a while she had to take a deep breath, and it was still there. (46)

As fall comes on, Carla gets used to the "needle" but finds herself tempted, seduced almost, by an urge to seek a place in the woods where she imagines Flora might have been killed by Clark. To seek "knowledge", as Munro imagines her saying to herself (47). But, the story concludes with these words: "The days passed and Carla didn't go near that place. She held out against the temptation" (47).

What is this "temptation" that Carla feels? What is the meaning of this ending? What is the meaning of Flora? One of the main attractions of this story is that Munro provides no easy answers to these questions. It concludes in subtlety, ambiguity and open-endedness. We may think we have followed the clues successfully and understand that Carla faces a life ahead with Clark which will be more meaningless and more threatening than she has yet experienced. We may think that Flora represented a more independent and self-confident Carla, one now lost for good. But the language of the story refuses to make that explicit.

Upon his return from Sylvia's, in bed with Carla, Clark tells her: "When I read your note, it was just like I went hollow inside. It's true. If you ever went away, I'd feel like I didn't have anything left in me" (42). On first reading this, one is inclined to think of these words positively, as one more nice effect of the sun's coming out. But, upon reflection, it's clear that Clark could just as well be lying to Carla or even threatening her. Munro leaves the meaning ambiguous. And the story's concluding words are ambiguous as well. While we may feel strongly that Carla is foolish and self-deceived to hold out against temptation, *i.e.*, to seek the knowledge of Clark's motives and her own that might come from finding Flora's bones in the woods, and that she is simply making herself vulnerable to some future abuse from Clark once their new sexual high is over, it is also true that we cannot predict for sure. Carla, like anyone, may eventually find an occasion to seek the truth and to liberate herself with self-awareness and self-sufficiency.

Finally, what are we to think about Flora? The little white goat is clearly meant to be a symbol in this story. But almost too obviously so, it seems. Disappearing with the rain! Reappearing with the sun! In a mist of magical meaning! Once again it is hard not to suspect an artist's irony on Munro's part. Symbols are fun, she seems to imply, without ever putting it in words, but once again they are a poor guide to understanding.

3. The Second through Sixth Stories

"Runaway" may serve as a take-off point for a broader investigation of the stories in the collection. Carla is one kind of woman, seen in a particular situation. Munro presents many others. Juliet, for example, is the protagonist in three linked stories, "Chance", "Soon" and "Silence". She is a young grad student turned teacher in "Chance", a still youthful mother visiting her parents with their new grandchild in "Soon" and an older, chastened woman in "Silence", where the crux of the story is Juliet's attempt to deal with the fact that her own daughter has decided to cut off all contact, totally and permanently.

There are several similarities between Juliet and Carla. Each pursues love – for both romance and sex – and each makes a leap into a new life. Carla runs off with Clark and Juliet seeks out a man she met only once on a train and from whom she has subsequently received a single letter. Also, Juliet is eventually forced to endure complications in her relationship with Eric, not exactly like Carla's with Clark, but with the similar effect – as revealed in "Silence" – of making her feel miserable and disaffected. In addition, although in different ways, both of these women have to face death. Juliet's partner dies at sea and her mother dies as well, while for Carla the death she has to confront is a more uncertain and symbolic one. She doesn't know for sure, but she suspects that Flora, her absent comrade and surrogate self, has been killed.

Nevertheless, Juliet is very different from Carla, and the crucial situations she faces are different as well. While she shares a youthful uncertainty (in "Chance") with Carla, and a self-effacing manner, Juliet is not weepy, dependent or living an unexamined life. Even in the first of the three stories she is very much aware of herself and her actions in pursuit of love with Eric. She may have doubts about the wisdom of her impulsive rush to the north country to see him, but she knows what she's doing and is willing to face the consequences. Perhaps this is partly because Juliet is a bright, educated woman, someone with "special" knowledge and a background of reading and study against which she can test herself. This is true, actually, of most of Munro's lead women in this collection (and Sylvia in "Runaway" as well), making Carla's stubborn and maudlin inarticulateness and helplessness something of an exception to the rule.

The three linked stories with Juliet are undeniably about love, but in the case of the last two, the love which Munro investigates is the love of parent and child. Visiting her parents in western Ontario when her daughter is about a year old, Juliet is surprised and pained in "Soon" to discover a great many previously unexamined aspects of her relationship with them. Her lack of real understanding of her mother and father is anticipated in Juliet's earlier choice of a wildly

unconventional Marc Chagall print for her parents' Christmas present. She discovers that picture in the attic when she visits them, and although she's offended, the knowledge that the Chagall did not speak to them as it did to her adds weight to the gathering evidence that she had not looked truthfully before at her parents' thoughts and feelings. She had been too self-centered to see clearly. The father, Sam, whom she had idolized and respected, is now revealed as weakly conservative about many things, as foolishly attracted to a girl who is helping out about the house and as less devoted to his wife than Juliet had always imagined.

Finally, Juliet must face a painful truth about children and parents, and one which Munro does not shrink from depicting. Sara, who is dying, and from whom Juliet has felt disaffected since her teens, tells her daughter near the end of the story, in response to some statements by Juliet about the illogic of religious faith:

My faith isn't so simple. . . . I can't describe it. But it's—all I can say—it's *something*. It's a—wonderful—*something*. When it gets really bad for me—when it gets so bad I—you know what I think then? I think, all right. I think—Soon. *Soon I'll see Juliet*. (124).

Munro, in typical fashion, deals with the effect of this on Juliet indirectly. It is only some years later, upon re-reading a letter she wrote to Eric at the time, that she ruminates on the meaning of "home" and then faces the excruciating fact of her own reticence and self-centeredness. Munro ends the story thus:

When Sara had said, *soon I'll see Juliet*, Juliet had found no reply. Could it not have been managed? Why should it have been so difficult? Just to say *Yes*. To Sara it would have meant so much – to herself, surely, so little. But she had turned away, she had carried the tray to the kitchen, and there she washed and dried the cups and also the glass that held the grape soda. She had put everything away. (125)

Munro's simple words here, small detail piled on small detail, extended out, put the reader in close touch with the anguish and regret which Juliet now feels for her cowardice, or whatever it was that kept her from responding to her mother.

Some of this comes around again in "Silence", for here it is Juliet who is abandoned by her own daughter, Penelope. The circumstances are different, of course, and there is no actual death which might eventually take away some of the pain and regret. But, the daughter is gone just the same. Munro charts the manner of Juliet's response, the long wearing way in which her loss eats at her and the slow dawning of understanding and a kind of acceptance. "Silence" is an exceptional story, a powerful story, but not one which can be easily encapsulated or explained. While it contains – like many of Munro's stories – at least one scene of vivid, imaginative extravagance, in this case a description of the local seamen burning Eric's body on a great wood pyre by the sea, it is very much an internal story of Juliet's state of mind, told in a quiet style with great restraint. Munro's method is simply accretive. She adds small irony to small irony, one of Juliet's thoughts to another, thus achieving an overall effect which must be experienced first hand to be fully appreciated. In other words, to read the story is to feel that we **are** Juliet, experiencing her anger, her agony and her small gains of understanding for ourselves.

The fact that Munro develops Juliet over the course of three stories is significant. Munro is able to explore her character's motivations, reactions and self-assessment at greater leisure than is her norm, something more in the manner of a novelist. The reader appreciates the care with which Juliet is given a chance as an older woman to reflect back on key aspects of her life. However, in this she is not unique in *Runaway*. Grace looks back in "Passion", Robin does so in "Tricks", and Nancy reflects on her earlier self in "Powers". The difference between the three Juliet stories and the others is simply the amount of space Munro gives herself to explore the ironies, the self-assessments and understandings that come to her characters with age. We are very glad for the opportunity to follow Juliet's life through "Chance", "Soon" and "Silence", feeling rewarded for the fuller picture that Munro provides. However, the same investigative process is also present in "Passion", "Tricks" and "Powers", although more compressed, more suggestive, more allusive and less specific. Suggestion and allusion have their special magic, of course, and these stories do not seem in any way lesser treatments of their women characters. We may welcome the chance to read an extended fiction by Munro, but we are equally delighted when she returns to the individual story form.

"Old confusions or obligations." This is a key phrase from "Passion", the fifth story in *Runaway*, and it can be fairly applied backward and forward to earlier and later stories. It might be a key phrase for the whole collection, as well as an author's comment on her craft. "Passion" begins with Grace, in her sixties, revisiting a scene of crisis from her youth. Before the narrator tells the tale of that crisis, she asks, presumably in Grace's mature voice:

What was Grace really looking for when she had undertaken this expedition? Maybe the worst thing would have been to get just what she might have thought she was after. . . . To find something so diminished [the house and area where this scene from her youth occurred], still existing but made irrelevant . . . might be less hurtful in the long run. . . . And what if you find it gone altogether? You make a fuss. . . . But mightn't a feeling of relief pass over you, of old confusions or obligations wiped away? (161)

Munro puts her idea directly forward here in "Passion", but every one of the stories in *Runaway* deals with the rock bottom truth that one never finds relief from past thoughts and actions, nor escape from the steps of fate which determine one's destiny. It may also be that Munro is quietly suggesting something about her own work as an artist in seeking out "old confusions or obligations" and putting them to the test of time to see whether they disappear or remain for life.

Looking back to the earlier stories, it is clear that the whole story of Juliet, told in its three parts, is one about old confusions and obligations which developed in her life and which haunt her still. The motif is less direct in "Runaway", but the strong implication at that story's conclusion is that Carla will **not** escape the confusions and obligations which have occurred in her young life. And, looking ahead quickly, it can be easily seen that the same theme pervades stories like "Trespasses", "Tricks" and "Powers".

In "Trespasses" the obligations and confusions embedded in the emotionally fraught situation which a pre-teen, Lauren, learns about from her mother and father and from another woman,

Delphine, are certainly there to stay in all their lives. For Lauren especially questions will persist. Was I adopted? Was Delphine my birth mother? Were Harry and Ellen lying in saying that it was an earlier child, a sister who died as an infant, who was the adopted one? Like Juliet and like Grace, Lauren may very well come to wish as she grows older that the old confusions or obligations might be wiped away.

The paradigm of “old confusions or obligations” is present again in “Tricks”, but works a bit differently. Learning the truth about an early, ill-fated love only in her old age, Robin would not for a second wish the memory of those awful, unfair confusions, those truly devastating tricks of fate, to be wiped away. Painful as they are, they define her. She is grateful, in fact, for the all-too-late revelation of the truth about what happened to separate her permanently from Danilo. Not his fault! Not hers either, although she cannot stop entirely from blaming herself.

All of which is another reminder of how important it is not to reduce Munro’s stories to a single theme or motif. Even where similarities are visible, the execution each time is different, surprising and uniquely clarifying. That is one of the special fascinations of these stories, along with the seemingly infinite variety of ways in which Munro is able to portray her characters’ interior dialogues with themselves. They step forward in thought, pull back, test one idea against another. Munro shows them speculating, assessing (always assessing!) and pitting one emotion against its opposite or its companion. It is in the quiet intensity of these internal dialogues, coupled with the often crippling ironies which she constructs for her characters, that Munro’s excellence as a writer shines most brightly.

In “Passion” Grace is a young high school graduate who stands out against the norm with her strong thirst to read and learn, against the odds of her family’s meager means. She stands out also for some strong feminist views (the only ones openly expressed by any female character in this collection) and for her cold-eyed assessments of the boy, Maury Travers, who has fallen in love with her. She stands out particularly for her quick decision (not nearly as impulsive as it seems) to drive off from her fiancé’s home with his married half-brother, Neil. She imagines herself having a satisfying sexual encounter with Neil, very unlike the frustrating gropings she has endured with Maury, who believes passionately in the inviolability of her virginity. However, from her day-long travels with the alcoholic, despairing Neil she learns about a totally different kind of passion, finds herself facing death in an indirect but forceful way and makes what she herself describes as an irrevocable leap toward a different life for herself. “. . . it was as if a gate had clanged shut behind her” (182). From Neil’s resigned desperation during their day-long travels and from his suicide that same night in a car crash, Grace learns that there are different kinds of passion, as well as different kinds of lives which must be lived.

Munro tells us almost nothing about the changes which occurred in Grace’s life after that “gate” slammed shut. All we are told is that Maury ends their engagement and that Mr. Travers shows up to give Grace a check for one thousand dollars – guilt money from the family, perhaps, or an implied bribe. The story ends with this line: “In those days, it was enough money to insure her a start in life” (196). Whatever she did in the forty or so years between the events of the story and the

present, we know from the opening paragraph that Grace never outlived her past, never stopped wondering about the “old confusions or obligations” gathered in her youth, never stopped seeking to know the meaning of what happened, and never stopped assessing herself and her circumstance. In these respects, Grace is a true sister to the protagonists in *Runaway*'s other stories.

Like Grace, most of Munro's women are recognizable characters who seem very real to the reader and who are brought especially close to us by their self-deprecating ordinariness and by Munro's habit of punctuating scenes of high emotion or dramatic import with colloquial expressions of everyday, north-American use. There is always a sense of irony in this, of course, but the reader cannot help feeling disarmed as well, drawn more closely to the characters and encouraged to feel even more strongly the extent to which those characters' thoughts, feelings and experiences are reflections of her or his own.

One example of the way these qualities – self-deprecating comments by characters and colloquial, deflating expressions – work in Munro's fiction may be seen in “Tricks”, the penultimate story of *Runaway*. Packing a powerful emotional impact, this story is somewhat different from the others in the collection for its directness and simplicity. As a young, unmarried woman who is solely responsible for an older, bitter and sarcastic sister who has been “Stunted, crippled in a way, by severe and persisting asthma from childhood on” (237), Robin has inner urges, partially suppressed, for a richer, more fulfilling life. Against her sister's wishes and against the norms of her small-town neighbors she goes alone once a year to see one play at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario (a real place and real festival, by the way). We learn that the previous year she met a man there, fell immediately and deeply in love with him and arranged to meet him again in one year, after his return from his native Montenegro, but without specifying a particular date or time. In the present, the story follows her back to Stratford to the planned rendezvous, depicting her as full of hope and joy, imagining the ways in which her life will be changed. But, a cruel fate intervenes. When she reaches Danilo's apartment, he seems to reject her without a word. However, in the story's final section Robin, a much older woman now, accidentally learns the awful irony of what happened to change her life so forcefully, although hardly in the way she had so eagerly anticipated. The man who rejected her in Stratford was not Danilo, but his twin brother, a deaf mute whom Danilo had brought back to Canada from Montenegro. Danilo himself had simply been out of the house when Robin arrived.

The events of this story are more charged with high drama than is typical of the other stories in *Runaway*, it being the only one in the collection to come even close to being sentimental. But, it is not really sentimental either, despite the powerful sense of regret, grief and anger which it arouses in the reader. For one thing, the “trick”, the irony, is muted by the context, for the setting is Stratford, after all, and Robin knows that “Shakespeare should have prepared her. Twins are often the reason for mix-ups and disasters in Shakespeare. A means to an end, those tricks are supposed to be” (268). In addition, however, the sentimental is forestalled as well by Robin's self-deprecating reactions in the minutes and hours after the rejection, as well as by the colloquial expressions which Munro uses to undercut the open, welling sentiment. Here are some of the words from the text:

With horror she understood what he was doing. He was putting on this act [slamming the door in her face without saying a word] because it was an easier way to get rid of her than making an explanation, dealing with her astonishment and female carrying-on, her wounded feelings and possible collapse and tears. . . . And deep down, Robin was not surprised, either, but the blame was for herself. . . . No apologies, no explanations, no hope. Pretend you don't recognize her, and if that doesn't work, slam a door in her face. The sooner you can get her to hate you the better. Though with some of them it's uphill work. Exactly. (259–60)

Munro's style in "Tricks" is typical of her approach to both character and event throughout *Runaway*. In "Chance", for example, Juliet indulges in self-deprecating self-chastisement for having pulled away from Eric's kisses on the train and for having said, in explanation, that she was a virgin.

How stupid, how disastrous. Afraid, of course, that his stroking hand would go farther down and reach the knot she had made securing the pad to the belt. If she had been the sort of girl who could rely on tampons this need never have happened. And why *virgin*? When she had gone to such unpleasant lengths, in Willis Park, to insure that such a condition would not be an impediment? So now he could tell someone how he listened all evening to this fool girl showing off what she knew about Greek mythology, and in the end – when he finally kissed her good night, to get rid of her – she started screaming that she was a virgin. (80)

Munro's use of colloquial language is also apparent here, especially in the final phrases.

Another example may be noted in "Silence". Here Munro's narrative voice uses a common colloquialism to undercut both Juliet's continuing hurt over Penelope's loss and her rather pretentious, academic interest in a late Greek romance by Heliodorus. Having described the tale, with its obvious parallels to Juliet's own loss of a daughter, the narrator, *cum* Juliet, concludes, "Interesting themes were thick as flies here. . ." (151). This technique reduces Juliet's sense of specialness, and it resists any pull toward the sentimental.

4. The Final Story

"Powers", as noted above, is the concluding story, a challenging work in which Munro once again explores motifs and strategies which she has used before. One might even say that "Powers" helps put the rest of the collection in perspective by stressing certain themes and approaches. There are some techniques and strategies we have not seen previously, such as the use of diary entries and letters, the division of the story into five titled sections and the use of a male character's perspective for part of the story. Nevertheless, it is the commonality of "Powers" with its sisters in *Runaway* which is most striking and, perhaps, illuminating.

In a fashion which is typical, for this collection at least, Munro develops her chief protagonist slowly and deliberately, first of all with hints and suggestions from the youthful Nancy's own diary entries and from letters she writes as a young woman, as well as from comments made by Ollie, a young man her own age who is her husband-to-be's cousin. Nancy strikes us as

a bright, impulsive woman, self-centered and conventional certainly, a bit condescending and rather thoughtless about other people's feelings. However, Ollie is probably unfair in bluntly characterizing Nancy as "spoiled, saucy, and egotistical" (285) because she does express hints of self-awareness about her weaknesses from the beginning. Unfortunately, that sense of self-awareness is not nearly strong enough to prevent her from accepting a loveless but conventionally happy marriage to the older Wilf or from casually showing off her acquaintance, Tessa, to Ollie by descending on her home and insisting that Tessa demonstrate her special psychic powers by telling Ollie what he has in his pockets. When Tessa succeeds, Nancy gets the satisfaction of seeing that Ollie is greatly impressed. Still, when he questions her about Tessa on their walk home, he causes her to wonder – but only very briefly – whether she hadn't been at fault in showing Tessa off "Like a freak" (295).

The action of "Powers" unfolds continuously in the first and second sections, but forty-one years go by between the second and third sections. Now Nancy is about sixty-three, with a husband falling into dementia. Having just received word of Tessa for the first time in many years, she visits a private hospital where Tessa has been incarcerated for decades. Forty years ago Tessa had agreed to run off with Ollie, thinking he loved her and was proposing marriage, in order that they might investigate her psychic powers in a scientific way. Now Tessa tells Nancy that Ollie is gone; she believes that he's dead, because she saw him so in her mind's eye after she was committed to the hospital and because he has never come to rescue her.

Nancy has come to this hospital, having been notified that it is about to close and that Tessa's future is therefore in limbo, out of a presumed good intention to help. But, she does not help. She does not take Tessa with her when she leaves, and although she promises to write, she never does. In other words, we see Nancy still as a generally sympathetic person, but someone more inclined to "act" nice, to do the conventionally proper thing, than someone who is truly good and benevolent. In this respect, she is the total opposite of Tessa who is someone so direct, so simple, so non-judgmental as to be scarcely of this world. Like Irene in "Soon", Tessa is presented as something of a gothic figure. These two women stand out from the norm in *Runaway* because of their odd physical appearance and farm background. Tessa stands out even more with her naiveté and psychic powers. However, it is the fact that Munro shows other characters treating them as freaks which most emphasizes their gothic aspect. Tessa and Irene are interesting, if shadowy, characters in their own right, but Munro uses them primarily as foils to the protagonists, serving to expose weaknesses or pretenses in their more educated companions.

The fourth and fifth sections of "Powers" reinforce our view of Nancy, but in a different and painful way. Sixty-seven years old, a widow now, returning from a cruise meant to help her recover from Wilf's death, Nancy meets Ollie, totally unexpectedly, on the streets of Vancouver. She says nothing to him about what she learned from Tessa, even though it is sharply in her mind, and Ollie lies more directly by describing how Tessa died years ago and how he spread her ashes in the Pacific. They both paste over the truth with pleasant conversation, and once more our earlier assessment of Nancy is reinforced. She's still vain, she's still bound by convention, and she can still be bright and sarcastic when on display.

Now, however, a seemingly minor crisis intervenes. Ollie drives Nancy to her hotel, and she, without forethought it seems, prepares to invite him in for the night. His refusal provokes a suddenly piercing light of understanding and self-awareness. Nancy now seems to understand something of the desire she must have felt for Ollie all these years. She seems to accept that her failure to tell him about meeting Tessa four years earlier is a direct, damning and cowardly form of lying. She seems to accept that her long marriage to Wilf was a loveless sham and that she has “traveled light” all her life, making “the road easy” for herself by shutting out real emotions, real commitments and honest self-evaluation (329). In other words, the obligations and confusions of her life are suddenly writ large for her to see.

Somehow Munro makes this a moment of great sadness and pain for the reader as well. We are made to feel the intensity of Nancy’s regret for a largely wasted life in which she so seriously, willfully, misunderstood others and herself. This is especially so in the final section, which describes a dream of Nancy’s in which she imagines a reversal of destiny for Ollie and Tessa, one in which the two are reconciled and make a new commitment to each other just before Ollie is about to follow through on his plan to commit Tessa to a mental hospital in order to be rid of her. But, Nancy cannot maintain this wishful desire to cancel out her pain and obligations. Munro describes it thus: “Gently, inexorably [someone – maybe Wilf – is] leading her away from what begins to crumble behind her, to crumble and darken tenderly into something like soot and soft ash” (335).

5. Conclusion

The ending of “Powers” makes one think of parallel situations or experiences in the other stories, of other moments in which a flash of truth or recognition comes to a character, or in which, sometimes, Munro brings that flash of illumination directly to her readers. One thinks of Carla, for example, choosing to avoid the temptation to seek knowledge in “Runaway”, or of Juliet, in “Soon” and “Silence”, forced to face the crushing truth about the ways in which the love of parent and child are taken for granted, sometimes severed and never mended. And, one remembers Grace, thinking at the beginning of “Passion” about the great relief that would ensue if the memories of old confusions and obligations could simply be wiped away. Finally, there is Robin’s agony and anger to recall in “Tricks”. As readers we cannot help but feel intensely for the painful self-awareness and knowledge these characters all come to face.

“Powers” is also a particularly good example of the way Munro keeps her main characters in a kind of balance. They are both weak and strong, with their weaknesses and strengths blending subtly together. They are blind to themselves **and** they are aware. They are presented always with sympathy and compassion, but Munro sometimes judges them harshly as well, although never directly and openly. They are always judged first and foremost by themselves, not by the author alone.

Parallel to this is a habit in Munro’s writing of juxtaposing a most realistic, detailed, often colloquial style with brief lyric passages of great beauty. “Powers” is an excellent case in point. Munro has Nancy present herself in a colloquial manner that is sharply realistic and true to character. But,

Munro also has her speak, indirectly through the narrative voice, in the poetically evocative final lines quoted above: “. . . to crumble and darken tenderly into something like soot and soft ash.”

Here, in addition, is Carla near the end of “Runaway”:

She had only to raise her eyes, she had only to look in one direction, to know where she might go. An evening walk, once her chores for the day were finished. To the edge of the woods, and the bare tree where the buzzards had held their party. And then the little dirty bones in the grass. The skull with perhaps some shreds of bloodied skin clinging to it. A skull that she could hold like a teacup in one hand. Knowledge in one hand. Or perhaps not. Nothing there. (47)

And here is Juliet in “Soon” describing the letter she wrote home to Eric years ago:

When she read the letter, Juliet winced, as anybody does on discovering the preserved and disconcerting voice of some past fabricated self. She wondered at the sprightly cover-up, contrasting with the pain of her memories. Then she thought that some shift must have taken place, at that time, which she had not remembered. Some shift concerning where home was. (125)

Lastly, here is Grace’s voice, presented by the narrator, in “Passion”:

She’d thought it was touch. Mouths, tongues, skin, bodies, banging bone on bone. Inflammation. Passion. But that wasn’t what had been meant for them at all. That was child’s play, compared to how she knew him, how far she’d seen into him, now. What she had seen was final. As if she was at the edge of a flat dark body of water that stretched on and on. Cold, level water. Looking out at such dark, cold, level water, and knowing it was all there was. (193)

With the ring of Munro’s words in our ears, this is a very good place to end. We are reminded yet again that this author, like all others, speaks best for herself. There are common threads among the stories which may be commented on, to be sure, and there are points of explication which may be helpful, but in the end each story is a unique and powerful exploration, utterly unto itself.

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