

## **Travelling Between Genres: Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women***

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### ***Abstract***

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*The object of this paper will be to show that in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) Munro achieves a dynamic form by travelling between genres, particularly by choosing to place the plot of this narrative work between that of a regular novel and a cycle of inter-related short stories, but also by her interspersing the mimetic mode of traditional realism with elements of Gothic romance, and with a rich use of intertextuality and metafictional comments. Munro regards it as an episodic novel, deeming there is greater tension and intensity in the short fiction form. The paper demonstrates how the narrative pattern of the stories/episodes in *Lives* hinges on a climactic epiphany that brings an illumination to the character experiencing the events, this intensity lending to Munro's rendering of ordinary experience an aura, and turns this narrative into an exciting novel of a young Canadian woman writer's formation*

### ***Keywords***

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*realism, Gothic, epiphany, intertextuality, metafiction*

Alice Munro is one of the most prestigious contemporary Canadian writers who has three times won the Governor General's Award for Fiction – the highest Canadian award – for *Dance of the Happy Shades*, her first collection of short stories (1968), and two more collections of short stories *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978) and *The Progress of Love* (1986). For *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), her second published book, she won the Canadian Booksellers Award. Alice Munro's reputation has an international dimension as well: she was the winner of the 2009 Man Booker International Prize for her lifetime body of work, and she has also several times contended for the Nobel Prize. The referential substance of her work is her native Southwestern Ontario, hence she is usually regarded as a regional writer and she has been placed within the realist tradition, frequently with an adjective added: magic realism or "heightened realism" [5, 8]. Another literary genre that she is usually associated with is the so called Southern Ontario Gothic [7, 1085], which points to a romantic streak in her realist frame. She has never been associated with postmodernism, some critics categorizing her as a late modernist. But although she frankly, and somewhat deprecatingly

admitted: “I’ve never been an innovator or an experimental writer. I am not very clever that way” [10, 9], her art has never been static, it has kept evolving towards new modes of expressing her fresh perceptions.

The object of this paper will be to show that this dynamic form is achieved by her travelling between genres<sup>1</sup>, particularly by her choosing to place the plot of *Lives Of Girls And Women* between that of a regular novel and a cycle of inter-related short stories, but also by her interspersing the mimetic mode of traditional realism with elements of Gothic romance (in the acceptation that Northrop Frye gives this concept) and with a rich use of intertextuality and metafictional comments. Munro regards it as an episodic novel and has confessed that for her the chapters had to work fairly well as stories first, which also explains why she wrote the sections in a different than the were placed in the final version:

I started writing it as a straight novel, and everything was working the way things work in the traditionally patterned novel except that it wasn’t working for me, I got a third of the way into it... and there again, I didn’t think about what I was doing. I just went back and started tearing it apart and putting it into these little sections, because that’s the way I wanted to tell the story to myself. So it had to be done like that in order to be told to me in a way that interested me most. I guess that’s why I can’t write a novel. I lose interest. [10, 14-15]

Munro considers that there is greater tension in the short fiction form, or as Struthers puts it, that a short story is more “conclusive” than a chapter in a novel. In this way there is a greater intensity in the short narrative, which makes the episodic *Lives of Girls and Women* a quite exciting reading. And it is this intensity that lends to her rendering of ordinary experience an aura, and turns it into something extraordinary. The narrative pattern of her stories/episodes in *Lives* hinges on a climactic epiphany that brings an illumination to the character experiencing the events. The fact that the 8 episodes are not numbered may suggest the idea that chapters are relatively more independent and that their order is not as rigid as in traditional novels. France Theoret comments that Munro’s subsequent evolution towards the inter-related short stories is a multiple form of writing which splinters the concept of literary genre” [11, 363].

I think we could extrapolate to our analysis of *Lives* Catherine Sheldrick Ross’s observation referring to *Dance of the Happy Shades*, Munro’s first

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<sup>1</sup> In the Anglo-Saxon critical tradition, genre is a term with multiple applicability, as Cuddon’s definition shows: “a kind, a literary type or class” [1, 366]

collection of short stories. She identifies there three levels of experience, the realist, the Gothic and the metafictional ones:

There is the ordinary, shapeless world of everyday experience that presents itself in the fiction as “real life .These everyday objects of “real life”, observed with great intensity, open to reveal sometimes a lower, imprisoning world of madness and death, and sometimes an upper, redeemed world or art and ritual order. [9, 114]

Thus in the first episode, “The Flats Road”, Del, the protagonist-narrator who lives on the peaceful fox farm of her parents, comes into contact with uncle Benny’s world. By marrying a mail ordered wife, Uncle Benny manages to bring over the terrifying world of the tabloids he reads, a world in whose existence Del, given the reassuring surrounding objects of her familiar life, she can hardly believe in at the beginning. Yet, as she confesses: “I was bloated and giddy with revelations of evil, of its versatility and grand invention and horrific playfulness” [6, 5]. But after coming into contact with Madeline, the violent mother who abuses her own child and behaves violently to neighbours, Del has the revelation of the many different worlds that can lie juxtaposed in her very vicinity, including the world represented in Gothic fiction:

So lying alongside our world was uncle Benny’s world like a troubling distorted reflection, the same but never at all. In that world people could go down in quicksand, be vanquished by ghosts or terrible ordinary cities, nothing was deserved, anything might happen.” [6, 26]

In this concluding epiphany Del, although a mere child, sees that an apparently quiet life can turn suddenly complex and threatening, and at the same time has an inkling of how life can provide the raw material for art, once distance in time can bring retrospection: “We remembered her like a story”, a story of madness [6, 27]. It is a very subtle anticipation of her self discovery that will determine Del to decide to write a novel in the Epilogue. This last episode suddenly orders the previous episodes into the literary archetype or genre of the Bildungsroman: the portrait of the artist as a young Canadian girl. Like Stephen Dedalus she is fascinated with words, which fire her imagination ... “the words themselves still gave off flashes of power” [6, 167].

The second episode “Heirs of the Living Body” relates the twelve-year old girl’s encounter with death, the death of her Uncle Craig, which triggers off a revelation of her own strong vitality and also of the family as a living body,

characterized by cohesion in spite of divergent views. Thus when forced by her cousin to go and see the dead man, she behaves wildly and bites her arm. This mad wild attitude has been anticipated by her impulse to furiously hit a cow's carcass, the dead cow fearfully fascinating the girl at the same time. And it is to vanquish this fear that she finally goes to look at Uncle Craig in his coffin where she has an apprehension of mysterious dangerous forces, again the substance of Gothic fiction.

A hardworking clerk, Uncle Craig is also a diligent historian, having written a chronicle of Wawanash County since it was settled in the 1860s, his typewritten manuscript being however an exclusive record of men's achievements. Del becomes aware of how much official accounts live out of the ordinary existence of people and places and she resolves to tell "her story", the female perception of life. In this way as a novelist she will show "how traditional realistic writing can be made to include moments of intense subjectivity and visionary perception, illuminating some of the dark secrets hidden within the living body of history" [3, 41]. She begins with a description of her aunts, uncle Craig's two spinster aunts who have adoringly kept house for him. She discovers that they hold values opposite to her mother's, and again contrary to Del's mother, they never state anything directly. Devout servants of the patriarchy, they have given up their lives to tend to a male member of the family. And Del will make out that she is nevertheless much more like her mother.

The next episode, "Princess Ida", focuses upon Del's mother's portrait. The intertextual title alludes to the Gilbert and Sullivan opera (1884) whose libretto is based on Tennyson's poem *The Princess* featuring a princess keen on women's education: instead of marrying she has set up a college for young women from which all men are barred, but she ends up marrying Prince Charming. This title subtly sets in the mildly ironic tone specific to this chapter. The episode introduces two role models: that of her mother who, out of social ambition and an interest in knowledge, chooses to become an independent woman who makes a living selling encyclopedias door-to-door, but has very strict moral principles, and that of Fern Doherty, the woman of lighter morality Del's mother shares her rented house with, who has Mr. Chamberlaine for a lover.

If Flats Road, where her father's farm was located, was "not part of town but... not part of country either" [6, 6], for Del her mother's option is associated with the town they move into and this section illustrates how strongly Munro's fiction relies on a sense of place.

I missed the nearness of the river and the swamp, and also the real anarchy of winter, blizzards that shut us tight in our house as if it were the Ark. But I loved the order, the wholeness, the intricate arrangement of town life, that only an outsider could see. [6, 69]

The swamp and river are associated with a direct, natural behaviour, while townspeople are snobbish and false. Del witnesses her mother's terrible struggle for social acceptance and her failure is compounded by Del's sense that the bond between her parents is broken.

Though by learning more about her mother's past Del is impressed by her heroic efforts to get an education, recognition and status, she feels humiliated by her mother's public gestures (writing lofty letters to the newspaper) or embellishing descriptions of their Flats Road life. Yet, despite losing some of her respect for "the Princess", Del realizes she is not so different from her mother, but conceals it and accepts her social isolation (she only has one friend, Naomi).

Throughout the novel the narrative is retrospective with a grown up Del as first person narrator and her younger self, or rather her younger selves between the age of 8 and 18, as focalizer(s). Sometimes it is very difficult to realize whose voice the reader is listening to as the narration certainly incorporates images and intellectual perceptions of the little girl. Thus in the passage above if the word anarchy certainly belongs to the mature Del, we can never decide if the image of the Ark fired the imagination of the little girl or of her older self. But it is a passage that most brilliantly illustrates Munro's method of achieving depth and intensity, as described by Catherine Sheldrick Ross: "For the texture of her stories she relies on her almost photographic recall of experience. But for the arrangement of her details, she turns to myths and legends, rituals and ceremonies" [9, 113]. The man-made Ark tossed up by the anarchic waters associated with her father's farm suggests his concern with mere survival, whereas the mother's association with the orderly town conveys her mother's concern with knowledge and intellect. On the other hand it is the artist's eye that perceives the order, the design of things and wishes to give it visible and perennial artistic form. The image of the Ark also introduces the intertext of the Bible, anticipating Del's inner struggle between believing or not believing in God, the central theme of the next episode, "Age of Faith".

Needing to defy her atheistic mother, Del turns to the church, eager to discover a design in the universe. She goes secretly first to the United Church and to the Anglican Church, impressed with religious ceremonies. An adolescent now,

Del needs a sense of the transcendent for feeling protected and also in response to her urge for artistic creation.

But she gives up going to church when she is challenged by her desperate brother to pray in order to save his dog from being shot by their father. She suddenly realizes that the boy's fervent prayer will not set back their father. She wonders if "missionaries ever have these times, of astonishment and shame" [6, 114] and is left with a bitter taste of man's vulnerability.

Chapter 5, "Changes and Ceremonies" reveals the adolescent Del's first crush for a boy and her seeking to know "real life" through "the created worlds" of art [6, 116], the books she borrows from the library and the participation in the performance of the operetta that Miss Farris stages every year. She shows some discern when abandoning the cheap westerns and melodramatic romances of Jeffrey Farnol and Marie Corelli for the Nobel Prize winner Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter*. First encountering a form of female rebellion against patriarchal tradition she becomes interested in finding literary representations of female sexuality. At the end of the episode she epiphanically realizes that romances may reflect real life events as Miss Harris' drowning in the river (most likely suicide on account of the unrequited for Mr. Boyce, a fellow teacher) will always remain "a mystery presented without explanation and without hope of explanation [6, 139]. Del becomes aware that the forces of darkness, desolation, madness and death may lurk in any ordinary person's life.

"Lives of Girls and Women", the section that lends the novel its title, gives an account of Del's romantic yearnings and her sexual fantasies, as well as of the small town setting of the dissatisfied sexual lives of the girls and women of her acquaintance.

Sex is a forbidden subject in Del's mother's house. But the morals of Fern Doherty, her mother's boarder, are less severe. She has a regular visitor, Mr. Chamberlain, who however finally deserts her, involving Del in retrieving his letters of promise. Del's encouraging behaviour to Mr. Chamberlain has been regarded as that of a "Calvinist Lolita, who idealizes and objectifies lust" [8, 48]. His "reward" is a perverse one: he takes her out of town and masturbates himself in front of her. The landscape intensely mirrors the character's emotions. Thus when Del is in Mr. Chamberlain's car anticipating some sexual play, she "saw that the whole of nature became debased, maddeningly erotic. It was now just the richest, greenest time of the year... ploughed fields beyond rearing up like shameless mattresses [6, 165]. Whereas after Mr. Chamberlain's exhibitionist act "the landscape was postcoital, distant and meaningless" [6, 167]. What could have been

a trauma for many a girl, becomes only a memorable experience for Del, frustrating in so far as she could recount it to nobody (except her friend Naomy, after awhile).

Patterned on the pagan archetypes of the biblical Eve and the Lilith figures of Semitic mythology [8, 34], the siren-like Nile, Uncle Bill's sensual second wife, becomes the prototype of the femme fatale for Del, offering her the possible model of female desirability and a life of conquest, whereas Fern's suffering at her desertion provides an opportunity for Del's mother to lecture her on the lives of girls and women about the change she saw coming, and to provide advice:

advice that assumed that being female made you damageable, that a certain amount of carefulness and fuss...was called for, whereas men were supposed to be able to go out and take on all kinds of experiences and shuck off what they didn't want and come back proud. Without even thinking about it I had decided to do the same. [6, 173-74]

The mother advises her not to get distracted over a man, or else her life will never be her own. In spite of her decision however, sexual drives do have a say and a young man does distract her from her goal of getting a scholarship for the university.

This is the substance of the next episode "Baptizing", where, after a spiritual partnership with the one intellectual boy in the school, Del falls for Garnet French, a mysterious ex-convict and regenerate Baptist. Attracted to his body, she also likes his inarticulateness, and moves out in the country with him.

Del regards Garnet French as a "solid intrusion of the legendary into the real world" [6, 211]. With him she shares the world of legend that is of the archetypal relationships that form the gist of myths, and, when their relationship is ended, she perceives the ordinary world as "uncoloured", resuming "its own, its natural and callous importance [6, 236].

The Baptism of the title does not refer only to Del's initiation into sex, but also to Garnet's at first playful, then dramatic, attempt to baptize her into his faith and make her accept his proposal of marriage. The fight becomes real and frantic, as it is really about self assertion, and Del realizes that she had never really committed herself to a permanent relationship:

I was too amazed to be angry I forgot to be frightened; it seemed to me impossible that he should not understand that all the powers I granted him were in play, that he himself was – in play, that I meant to keep him sewed up in his golden lover's skin forever, even if five minutes before I had talked about marrying him. [6, 234]

The Wawanash River is important to the inhabitants of Munro's Southwestern Ontario, it becomes the background of their baptism, of their sexual initiation, of their suicide by drowning. It testifies to the fundamental part landscape plays in their sense of identity.

Walking back home, Del feels her loss, but also her gain, she knows she is isolated but she is also aware of her power, and is determined to get started on her "real life", cut off from the mistakes and confusion of the past. She feels "free...and not free, relieved and desolate" [6, 237] at the same time. Del resorts to the intertext of Tennyson's "Mariana" to set off the difference between the helpless woman stereotypical image and her different fibre, stating that it was "one of the silliest poems I had ever read" [6, 238].

We may also remark that the fragmentary narrative structure (six distinct sections) justifies Coral Ann Howells' opinion that this episode undermines the notion of the protagonist's single identity by showing that the selves of the protagonist-narrator are rather unstable and the this narrative structure "emphasises discontinuity, crisis and indeterminacy as it traces Del's changing relationships and the choices she makes" [3, 42]. Rosalie Weaver generalizes this idea attributing it to the impact of national image and gender that she considers "operate in Canadian women writers' imaginations as forces that produce a sense of narrative incompleteness and discontinuity, which subverts the conventional narrative movement towards closure in a unique way" [12, 9] and also disrupt a sense of a continuous and unified identity for their characters [12, 62].

The last episode, "Epilogue: The Photographer", has a marked metafictional dimension being focused on the discussion of the novel Del has been keen on writing. The Photographer of the title is the generically named main character of this novel which forms the subject of the Epilogue asserting the protagonist-narrator's decision to take up writing as a profession. The photographer's activity can be seen as a metaphorical equivalent of the writer's scrutinizing gaze.

Del's novel draws on the "real life" Sherriffs, a family of that has had its share of Tragedy" [6, 239]: one brother had died an alcoholic, one was in an asylum, and the sister had committed suicide in the Wawanash river. Talking to Bobby Sherriff who was home from the asylum for an indefinite while, and who appeared perfectly sane, Del has an epiphany, a revelation of the deceptiveness of appearances and unpredictability of life: "People's lives, in Jubilee and elsewhere were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable – deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" [6, 249]. The metaphor of "the caves" suggests the deep layer of the

unconscious that Freud called the *id* that hides under familiar homely appearances its frightening unplumbed depth, the realm that Gothic fiction explores.

Del also gives a description of the type of art she would like to achieve, which she realizes would definitely draw on her first hand knowledge of Jubilee as life as she has experienced it in Jubilee if full of the drama and mystery which as a teenager she had associated with gothic fiction. She will produce the very novel that we have been reading, which foregrounds “the circular pattern” of her memory [8, 177], as she returns to uncle Ben’s chronicle of their town. But her ambitious chronicle would be different, true, not just “real”:

It did not occur to me then that one day I would be so greedy for Jubilee. Voracious and misguided as Uncle Craig out of Jenkins Bend, writing his history, I would want to write things down.

I would try to make lists. A list of all the stores and businesses ...A list of the titles of movies that played...Names on the cenotaph...Names of the streets...

And no list could hold what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together – radiant, everlasting [6, 249].

It is a passage that starting from the realist writer’s stance aims for that *radiance* that Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus mentions as the supreme achievement of art:

This supreme quality is felt by the artist when the esthetic image is first conceived in his imagination... The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony is the luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure, a spiritual state very like to that cardiac condition ... called the enchantment of the heart. (Part 5)

Del uses the archetypal image of darkness to suggest the anarchic nether territory of the unhomely or the unaccommodated Other, and that of light to hint at the superior order of art.

We may therefore conclude that in *Lives of Girls and Women* Munro gives us “a perception of a fragmented and constantly shifting world of disturbing irony, ambiguity and painfully persistent paradox” [2, 4] in a novel that because of its

episodic structure has the more peculiar intensity and concentration of the short story. Its ironic mingling of realism and romantic Gothic elements, its rich use of intertextuality and self-reflexive comments place it in a generic in-betweenness that lends an unsuspected depth to a deceptively traditional piece of writing.

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