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Gender Construction
in Alice Munro's Writing
A Comparative Study
of
Early and Late Stories

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Title: *Gender Construction in Alice Munro's Writing: A Comparative Study of Early and Late Stories*

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Abstract: It is civilization, and not biology, that constructs gender. The formation of children into gendered adults is made “naturally” by invisible societal structures and is consequently troublesome to reveal.

My thesis is that often literary works expose implied gender patterns and hence can assist in increasing the awareness about gender formation in society. In this essay, I explore the formation of young girls into women depicted in six short stories from two collections by the Canadian short story writer Alice Munro. The focus of the study is on the relation between mothers and daughters and on the division of space and power, areas acknowledged to be of importance in the construction of gender. An element of time is added to the study in order to examine whether Munro's critique is different in the two collections and whether there is an observable change concerning women's conditions in her more recent stories compared to her earlier ones.

My findings show that gender is still seen as a construction and that the struggle for selfhood goes on in Munro's writing. Despite economic and civic liberties, Munro's characters still fight to define themselves beyond gender boundaries. However, in her later stories, society's expectations are mainly manifested psychologically within the female characters, while in the earlier stories, the expectations are of a more social character.

Keywords: Gender construction, mother-daughter relations, women's mothering, spatial division, division of power, domestic and public space, the feminist quest, Alice Munro

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Introduction

“Is it a boy or a girl?” It is most likely that you will be asked this question when you introduce your newborn to someone peeping into the baby carriage. In our Western society, there is a strong inclination towards labeling humans as male or female in order to prescribe what behavior or what qualities to go with which sex. The American feminist sociologist and psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow states “we are not born with perceptions of gender” but that “society constitutes itself psychologically in the individual” (“Mother-Daughter Code” 35). When gender is created in a “natural” and invisible way without being separated from the biological sex, every attempt to change these “natural” gender patterns will become troublesome.

In this study, I am going to examine the short-story writer Alice Munro’s¹ milieu and female protagonists, meticulously created by the author in order to criticize invisible patriarchal structures in which gender is produced. My aim is to make these mechanisms of gender production more visible to show how literary works possibly could effect a change in the way we view traditional formation of children into men and women.

When feminist criticism developed as a part of the women’s movement in the late 1960s, it was discovered that women writers had a literature of their own, a fact which had been obscured by the dominating patriarchal values of our culture (Showalter 6). As fiction traditionally has been the looking glass of society and its dominant culture (Rasporich xii), I find it of great value to apply a feminist approach to the work of a female writer who started her writing career in the commencement of the women’s movement. The Canadian author Alice Munro describes her stories as made of “real material” (Thacker 163); in other words, they reflect her own life and history and may therefore act as a looking glass of her Canadian society. A recurrent theme in Munro’s writing is the young girl who is about to form her individual self and who rebels against societal constraints put upon her due to her gender. Although Munro has “no overt feminist agenda,” she dismantles very effectively “the operations of our patriarchal structures” (Redekop xii). In Alice Munro’s writing, the social processes, as Nancy Chodorow notes, “create the meaning and significance of gender” (“Mother-Daughter Code” 36), are made visible although not as a didactic social criticism.

Most of the feminist studies carried out on Munro’s writing have been devoted to individual stories without any comparison to other texts by the same author. The book *Dance of the*

¹ Canadian author and Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature 2013.

Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro (1990) is an exception where Beverly J Rasporich takes on an overall view of Munro's production from her first published collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* from 1968 to *The Progress of Love* from 1986. Rasporich argues that although she considers Munro's feminism to be "loosely grounded in a melancholy social determinism" (38) where no solution is offered, Munro expresses the feminist quest for freedom and identity by fictionalizing women's lives.

According to Nancy Chodorow, the key factor in the construction of gender is the relationship of the child to its mother as it is the mother who is the primary caretaker in most cultures (*The Reproduction of Mothering* 7). Alice Munro describes herself to be obsessed with the relation between mothers and daughters, a fixation found in many versions in her stories (Redekop 4). In her work *Mothers and Other Clowns: The Stories of Alice Munro* (1992), Magdalene Redekop discusses the mother figures of Munro's writing. Redekop suggests that Munro is exploring female experience by "rethinking an old conflict" (xii). In patriarchal society, mothers have historically carried the burden of being compassionate and nurturing. By emphasizing, and perhaps exaggerating, certain maternal characteristics, Munro reveals hidden societal expectations on how mothers are expected to behave. Redekop names this exaggerated mother a "clown" whereas the mother, disguised behind her clown mask, more easily can relate to the expectations put upon her (4).

Although I was brought up in the postfeminist era, where the battle for equality between the sexes more or less seemed to be resolved, I find nevertheless that patriarchal and traditional structures still are operating in the structuring of gender. Therefore, I find it of great interest and importance to study the fictional world of Alice Munro where by using "real material" she depicts fixed gender patterns. I will study what devices she uses to pinpoint the underlying structures in society which form gender and which seem so natural but nevertheless are cultural constructions. In Alice Munro's writing, I have especially focused on three areas which I suggest imply gender criticism. First is the relationship between mothers and daughters regarding Chodorow's ideas about how the mother-daughter relation forms the core of women's lives and therefore is important in the formation of gender. Additionally, I am going to study how the world is arranged in Munro's stories. According to Simone de Beauvoir "this world has always belonged to males" (71) and women have tended to be placed in outside positions. A central question in my essay is whether there is a hierarchic division of space between male and female territory in Munro's fiction and how this division is created. In her work "Penning in the Bodies: The Construction of Gendered Subjects in Alice Munro's 'Boys and Girls'" (1990), Marlene Goldman discusses the fundamental feminist quest for

freedom and identity by exploring female and male boundaries in the short story “Boys and Girls” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 1968). Goldman emphasizes the paradigm of an inside/outside world corresponding to the traditional notion of spheres as female/male. Related to the notion of space as divided in male/female space is the power (im)balance between the sexes. Goldman states that male space relates to power, which is exemplified by the fact that outdoor work often generates money while domestic work is unpaid.

That said, little is known about how the passage of time has affected Munro’s implied feminist criticism of a gendered and patriarchal society. Although the work of Beverly J. Rasporich informatively discusses Munro’s stories from a gender perspective, her discussion takes an end in the late 80s. Therefore, I am interested in whether there is an observable change concerning women’s conditions in Munro’s more recent work compared to her early writing. Hence, my third aim in the present paper is to study Munro’s milieu and female protagonists in stories from different times in order to find out whether Munro’s feminist quest has been answered or not. My paper will revolve around stories about nuclear families in rural Ontario, Canada, and I do not claim this study to be general in its understanding of gender construction and in the way feminist ideas may have progressed.

In this essay, I will study the relation between mothers and daughters as well as the division of space and the gendered power balance in six short stories from two collections: *Dance of the Happy Shades* from 1968 (Munro’s first published collection) and *Runaway* which was published in 2004. The earlier stories deal with the issues of coming-of-age for a young girl in a patriarchal society where she rebels against traditional gender restrictions. The more recent stories form a triptych where the periods of adolescence, adulthood and old age are presented together with complicated mother-daughter relations. Additionally, I will compare the stories in terms of gender implication and relate these to time, as there is a gap of almost forty years between the two story collections.

There are internal differences within the concept of feminist criticism. I have chosen to apply the version of Anglo-American feminism, a branch of the second wave, to the writing of Alice Munro. This version accepts the conventions of literary realism and understands literature to represent women’s lives and experience (Barry 119). The American critic Elaine Showalter, the major representative of the Anglo-Americans, proclaims that there is a connection between female images, themes and plots throughout history and across national boundaries which justifies a certain female aesthetic (6). In my opinion, Alice Munro’s writing expresses this female aesthetic in its appeal to readers all over the world despite its regional character. Her style is said to be of a “documentary quality” although perceived as

universal by her readers (Howells 3). Munro herself proclaims: “A lot of people think I’m a regional writer. [...] But I don’t have any idea of writing to show the kind of things that happen in a certain place” (Howells 3). Showalter further suggests that there is a source of strength in the female cultural tradition that generates its own experiences without being subjected by the male tradition. In Munro’s stories, the female experience is expressed by the rebelling voices of young girls who despite patriarchal as well as mothering structures try to find their individual voices.

The fundamental notion of gender as a social and cultural construct, on which my essay is based, dates back to the ideas of the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir. She asks in her famous treatise *The Second Sex* (1949) the rhetorical question “What is a woman?” (5), which forms the basis for her further discussion. De Beauvoir states that in a patriarchal society woman is seen as “the Other” whereas the male is the subject (6). Furthermore, she argues that it is civilization, and not biology, that constructs “this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine” and states that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (283).

In order to understand the complicated relations between mothers and daughters commonly expressed in Munro’s texts, I will rely on Nancy Chodorow’s ideas on gender identity from a psychological perspective. Chodorow argues that there is a division of psychological capacities between men and women, which leads to a reproduction of how to divide labor between the sexes. She calls it the “Reproduction of Mothering” which implies that mothers produce daughters with nurturing capacities and sons with repressed nurturing abilities (*The Reproduction of Mothering* 7). Additionally, Chodorow claims that because of women’s mothering, mothers form the core of domestic organization while men find their primary location in the social and public sphere (9). Thus, male dominance is constructed and reproduced due to women’s mothering and therefore male and female structures are allowed to remain in society in a natural and invisible way. For these reasons, I will study Munro’s way of depicting the crucial relation between mothers and daughters in order to examine the nature of this reproduction of mothering.

Additionally, I will discuss Judith Fetterley’s theories on power designs in fiction from her essay “On the Politics of Literature” (*The Resisting Reader* 1978). Fetterley argues that although literature claims to speak “universal truths,” literature is political and male and therefore confuses the female reader in her identification with a reality that is not hers (xi). Fetterley notes that the power designs are made to look natural but are nevertheless created to maintain men’s power over women. I am interested in how this sexual political design is dealt

with in Munro's fiction and will study Munro's attempts to reveal concealed power structures by reversing the roles between the sexes.

To further my understanding of Munro's writing, I will refer to additional criticism regarding the selected short stories. Ann Coral Howells adds fascinating perspectives to the division of space between men and women in Munro's stories (*Alice Munro* 1998). Whilst Marlene Goldman examines the geographical boundaries within the texts, Howells searches beneath the surface of detailed street maps and finds "shadowy" maps of imaginary alternative worlds (4). Howells points out that the reader in these alternative worlds discovers female destinies beyond gender stereotypes. Additionally, Robert Thacker's renowned biography *Alice Munro – Writing Her Lives* from 2005 will be helpful in my search for a possible development of Munro's feminist quest. Thacker follows the parallel tracks of life and texts and can provide important insights. Furthermore, I will turn to the article "Between Collection and Cycle: The Mini-cycle" (2009) by Allan Weiss to further my comprehension of the stories "Chance," "Soon" and "Silence" (*Runaway* 2004). Weiss focuses on the relationship between short stories in story collections, which is not a part of my study. Even though *Runaway* was published ten years ago, not much has been written on its subject. Weiss article contributes to my study by noteworthy information regarding family relations within the Juliet triptych.

Although Alice Munro does not pronounce herself as a spokesperson for feminist theory, I have recognized in her writing three areas illuminating the aspects of life where gender is formed by societal forces. I have for these reasons structured my essay in three chapters where I discuss my findings. In chapter one, I examine the relation between mothers and daughters. My focus in chapter two is on the division of space in male and female domains and chapter three deals with Munro's feminist quest for freedom and identity in a time perspective.

Chapter One: The Relationship between Mothers and Daughters

The relationship between mothers and daughters is a recurrent theme in Munro's writing. Munro's young protagonists are rebellious daughters who not easily align themselves with the expectations from their mothers. Alice Munro's own mother suffered from Parkinson's Disease during her adolescence, which complicated their relationship. Munro has said she was "the object of my mother's care" and that "her care was in shaping a person. Not the person that I wanted to be. I think that was always the conflict between us..." (Thacker 53). In several of Munro's stories, the divergence between the dreams and hopes of the daughters and the expectations from their mothers is reflected upon. Munro is responding to the dilemma of how to deal with maternal expectations by either "celebrating" the mother or "getting rid" of her (Redekop 9) which is expressed through the narrator in "Red Dress – 1946": "She loved me, and she sat up late at night making a dress of the difficult style I wanted, for me to wear when school started, but she was also my enemy" (117). Nancy Chodorow explains this ambiguity in the daughter's feelings by stating that the daughter's love for her mother contains both a threat to selfhood as well as a promise of identification: "Unity was bliss, yet meant the loss of self and absolute dependence" (194). The two key components in the relation between mothers and daughters, unity and dependence, are recurrent elements in the short stories from both collections discussed below.

Red Dress – 1946

In "Red Dress – 1946" (1968), the first-person narrator finds herself in an environment where girls are expected to become pleasing objects but where she tries to remain autonomous. The story is about a thirteen-year-old girl who is about to attend her first high-school dance. The dance becomes a rite-of-passage into adulthood, which the young narrator fears and tries to hide from "behind the boundaries of childhood" (151). The story deals with an ambiguity within the daughter where she senses the dependency of her mother and the female world whereas she at the same time has a strong need of defining herself as an individual. The narrator describes her poor mother's efforts to make her a nice dress to wear for the dance, but is at the same time critical towards her. The mother dresses her in a "new stiff brassiere" (152) and turns her into something that she is not. She feels like a dress-maker's dummy where the fit of the dress matters more than her own person.

Simone de Beauvoir argues that girls are taught to please and "must therefore renounce [their] autonomy" and hence are treated like living dolls (295). In "Red Dress – 1946", the

narrator's mother does not reflect upon her daughter's ambiguous feelings towards going to the dance and tells dreamily about the dresses she wore in her youth. The narrator tries to distance herself from her mother's influence by admitting, "[a]ll the stories of my mother's life which had once interested me had begun to seem melodramatic, irrelevant, and tiresome" (149).

In her search for an identity outside her mother's control, the narrator criticizes the mother's creaking knees and her legs, which are "marked with lumps of blue-green veins" (148). To make it possible to deal with the power projected into the mother, as the mother represents society's expectations upon a young girl, Munro makes use of what Redekop calls the "clown" or the "mock mother". By emphasizing the mother's body parts instead of herself as an individual, a mocking distance is produced which helps the girl to handle the maternal power.

However, the narrator does not succeed in her intention to avoid the dance and once there her worst fears come true when her partner abandons her on the dance floor. She finds a refuge in the girls' washroom where she meets an older unattractive girl. The narrator is invited by the other girl to go for a hot chocolate instead of staying at the dance. At first she agrees, but when she is about to leave, she is asked to dance by another boy. The narrator abandons her new friend and leaves instead the party with the boy. Returning home, she thinks of her mother who is waiting for her with a "doggedly expectant face" (160). The narrator realizes that she is expected to be happy as she has "been to a dance and a boy has walked me home and kissed me. It was all true. My life was possible" (160). She had succeeded in the female rite-of-passage into womanhood expected by a patriarchal society, but at the expense of her inner self. She does not really want to participate in the "sexual competition" (150) for male attention. The narrator would rather have left with her new female friend than have kissed the boy. In the story, Munro makes an attempt to reverse traditional gender roles through the girl's wish not to participate in the "sexual competition" and as an alternative seek female friendship.

In "On the Politics of Literature" (1978), Fetterley discusses the power designs which are found in literature, and which give men power over women and she states that these designs can only be changed "by changing the consciousness of those who read" (ix). When Munro exposes gender structures by her revolting young narrators, the norm is challenged and an alternative to the traditional gender roles is offered. Apparently, the narrator is unable to break loose from society's patriarchal constraints, upheld by mothering elements. She accepts finally the male norms which are made natural by the implied sexual design of society.

Walker Brothers Cowboy

Similarly, in “Walker Brothers Cowboy” (1968), the reader meets another young girl coming of age. Essential to the story is the relationship between the first-person narrator and her father. The narrator avoids identifying herself with the mother whom she apprehends to be ridiculed by the neighbors and idealizes instead her more relaxed father. Chodorow notes that the father’s role “serve[s] in part to break a daughter’s primary unit with and dependence on her mother. For this and a number of other reasons, fathers and men are idealized” (*The Reproduction of Mothering* 195). The young girl accompanies her cheerful and adventurous father on one of his sales trips while the sickly mother stays at home. During the trip, the young narrator takes a step away from the enforced unity with her mother and bonds with her father as a way for her to find selfhood and maturity. The young girl prefers her father’s company where she can be herself with her “knees unscrubbed, my hair unringleted” (6). Together with her mother, she feels objectified: “a creation, wretched curls and flaunting hair bow, scrubbed knees and white socks – all I do not want to be” (5). The mother is a bodiless clown, disguised into a lady in her “summer hat of white straw”, and she merely consists of a pair of sewing hands (5).

The girl’s search for individuality, beyond the enclosed female world where she feels like merely “a creation”, is encouraged by her father’s boldness and simplicity. Although she is still a young child and does not completely comprehend what is expected from her due to her gender, she struggles for her independence while she at the same time is aware of her dependency upon the mother. Similar to “Red Dress – 1946”, the mother represents the patriarchal structures of society where the girl is predetermined to an objectified existence excluded from the public world.

Boys and Girls

As in “Walker Brothers Cowboy”, the first-person narrator of the story “Boys and Girls” (1968) is attracted by the power of freedom found in the male world. She finds herself threatened by the word “girl” as it implies to her something that she “had to become” and not something she was (119). Her gender is not yet fixed and she is torn between her urge to help her father in his outdoor work at a fox farm and her mother’s wish to get help with the household: “It seemed to me that work in the house was endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing; work done out of doors, and in my father’s service, was ritualistically important” (117).

Chodorow argues for the importance of the father as he provides a “last ditch escape from maternal omnipotence” (*The Reproduction of Mothering* 195). A girl cannot risk driving her father away and that is the underlying cause for the girl’s idealization of her father. The young narrator in Munro’s story admires her father and “worked willingly under his eyes, and with a feeling of pride” (115). The mother is described as an enemy who is “plotting” in her attempts to get the daughter’s help in the kitchen and that “she would do this simply out of perversity, and to try her power” (118).

Simone de Beauvoir claims that adolescence is difficult for women because as a child she has been an autonomous individual but in adolescence she has to accept the social pressure to become a passive object. She notes that there is a contradiction for the young woman “between her status as a real human being and her vocation as a female” (336). In Munro’s story, the rebelling girl protests against her mother’s expectations and “continued to slam the doors and sit as awkwardly as possible, thinking that by such measures I kept myself free” (119). Nevertheless, she is diminished and objectified by a visiting salesman who declares, “I thought it was only a girl”, when he sees her helping her father (116). The attempt by the girl to reverse traditional gender roles is jeopardized when a mare gets loose at the farm and her father wants her to prevent it from escaping. The girl finds herself unable to shut the gate for the fugitive who she knows will end up as food for the foxes if it is caught. She disappoints her father, “he was not going to trust me anymore, he would know that I was not entirely on his side” (125). Goldman notes that the narrator “radically breaks from her male-identified position” when she refuses to participate in the mare’s brutal fate (68). While her younger brother returns home from the hunt with blood on his shirt, the girl is not able to stand up to the male norms. Consequently, the narrator seals her fate and is reduced to be “only a girl” (127). The girl finally accepts her given gender role and the feminine traits that goes with it; she is prescribed to behave in certain ways, which due to family organization is reproduced from mother to daughter.

In the three short stories, patriarchal structures in families reproduce themselves and force upon children fixed gender roles. The mothers uphold the social norms while male dominance, as a result of a social organization where women’s mothering constitutes and preserves certain gender traits, suppresses the narrator’s struggle for individuality.

The Juliet trilogy

In the Juliet trilogy from *Runaway* (2004), Munro's continuous concern with relations is perceptively expressed in the relation between Juliet and her mother, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, between Juliet and her daughter. *Runaway* consists of three linked stories, "Chance," "Soon" and "Silence" which each, in the voice of a third-person narrator, presents a distinct stage in the main protagonist's life. In "Chance," Juliet meets the man who will become her common-law husband, in "Soon," she visits her parents with her newborn child and in "Silence," Juliet is a middle-aged woman deprived of any contact with her daughter. Munro describes the common struggle between how reality often is constituted and what is expected by society in her portrait of a modern successful woman who despite her attempts to reach her daughter is unable to connect. Juliet does interviews for television and is considered "a celebrity" (130) and despite her envied position she feels that she let her daughter "see too much misery. My stupid misery" (149).

Chodorow argues that for women of today who are expected to spend as much time as men in the labor force, the production of gender differences which still are in operation could be problematic. She declares that expectations upon gender are generated through generations, and they state implicitly that it is more important for women than for men to find their primary identity in the family, in other words to be the compassionate and nurturing parent (*The Reproduction of Mothering* 175).

There is an ambiguity in the Juliet trilogy between the "threat to selfhood" alongside the "promise of primal unity" (Chodorow, *The Reproduction* 194), which is brilliantly depicted in the character of Juliet. She is a non-stereotypical woman who has chosen a life outside the implied rules of her society and who encounters prejudices not only from society but also from her closest family. When Juliet in "Soon" visits her parents after some time of absence, she finds her mother Sara weakened by heart problems. Juliet feels alienated from Sara and cannot respond to her, "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*" (125). Munro responds in "Soon" to what Redekop called the mother "dilemma". To provide a solution to "How to celebrate her" and at the same time "How to get rid of her?", Juliet's mother is "rendered helpless" by her sickness (*Mothers and Other Clowns* 9). Sara is replaced by what Redekop calls a "surrogate" (9), in this case Irene who is the caregiver and "our good fairy" ("Soon" 91). Paradoxically, Juliet reconnects for a moment with her mother thanks to Irene, the surrogate mother, when they make fun of the hair on Irene's arms. There had been "the time of their being women together" when they were "intertwined" but after some time

Juliet frees herself from her mother and turns to her father since “she had wanted instead to talk to Sam late at night in the kitchen” (100). Chodorow claims that it is the father’s role “to break a daughter’s primary unit with and dependence on her mother”. Since the mother experiences her daughter as one with herself, her love is “narcissistic” and therefore the daughter looks to her father for a sense of separateness (*The Reproduction* 195).

Simultaneously, and that is her dilemma, the daughter reproduces what is expected from her as a female because she has been nurtured by a woman.

Redekop’s notion of women’s “old conflict”, which she contends is the expectation upon a woman to be nurturing and compassionate, is reviewed in the character of Juliet who struggles with a sense of inadequacy in the relation to her daughter Penelope. In contrast to Sara, Juliet seems to be caught in the dilemma between her own needs as a career woman and the needs of her daughter. Already in the beginning of the story “Silence,” Penelope has left her home and the reader realizes through flashbacks that Juliet’s and Penelope’s relation has been slightly complicated. Juliet does not at first admit to any problems but maintains the idea that “Penelope has scarcely ever given her cause for complaint” (127). Weiss notes that Juliet is a dishonest protagonist who alienates herself from the needs of her daughter (83). She does not admit to Penelope’s friends that she is ignorant of her daughter’s activities but lies and tells them that she is travelling. When Juliet meets the head of a religious retreat, to where Penelope first went, she is blamed for her daughter’s unhappiness and loneliness: “she has come to us here in great hunger” (132). Juliet realizes that perhaps her daughter has had needs that she has not been aware of.

In the Juliet triptych, the same conflict is dealt with as in the earlier stories; how is it possible to combine dreams with society’s expectations? However, in the more recent stories, the dilemma appears mainly within Juliet when she blames herself for not responding to traditional female demands. Due to her age, but perhaps also to the passage of time, Juliet is more conscious about the dilemma compared to her fellow sisters of *Dance of the Happy Shades*.

Chapter Two: The Division of Space

A house is all right for a man to work in. He brings his work into the house, a place is cleared for it; the house rearranges as best it can around him. Everybody recognizes that his work *exists* [...]. So a house is not the same for a woman. She is not someone who walks into the house, to make use of it, and will walk out again. She *is* the house; there is no separation possible.
(Thacker 174)

In an interview, Munro comments on the dissimilarities concerning space between men and women. This is particularly palpable in her early stories where she uses spatial division as an oblique critique of the gendered society. The way space is divided between men and women indicates the amount of power, and hence freedom, given to each sex. Traditionally, the outside world has been a male space since man historically has been the breadwinner and female space has been the domestic, inside, world. Simone de Beauvoir notes that the household historically has been communicating with the rest of the world through the father, which makes him “the embodiment of this adventurous [...] world” (301). The traditional boundaries between male and female space have been sharp and it is the woman who has lost out in the call for freedom: “The woman herself recognizes that the universe as a whole is masculine; it is men who have shaped it and ruled it and who will still today dominate it” (639). The stories discussed below all illustrate how space is used to implicitly criticize gender construction.

Red Dress – 1946

In “Red Dress – 1946” (1968), the domestic world represents to the protagonist the safety of childhood. The narrator fears the school dance because she is aware of the expectations put upon her to behave according to traditional gender roles. When she recognizes some drawings she made some time ago, she “longed to be back safe behind the boundaries of childhood” (115). Powerless, she is made to go to the dance by her mother who has made her the red velvet dress, the entrance ticket to the adult world. Hair curlers and face powder become her protection against the public world, “today I wanted the protection of all possible female rituals” (151). The public world is represented by the school, where she “had premonitions of total defeat” when it came to “sexual competition” (150). With the aid of Mary Fortune (the girl who asks her to accompany her for some hot chocolate), the narrator finds the short-lived power to govern her own will: “I was not waiting for anybody to choose me. I had my own

plans” (158). The girls’ washroom becomes a female refuge from the patriarchal dance floor and it is in the washroom that the girls invent their alternative independent world.

Simone de Beauvoir notes, “to be able to understand what problems women are faced with”, we need to ask how she is taught to “assume her condition” (279). Despite the narrator’s wish to leave the dance, she is trapped in what is expected from her. De Beauvoir states that it is “civilization as a whole” (283) that produces the self-denying woman and thus the narrator abandons Mary Fortune for what is expected by society and thereof her mother, that is to succeed in the sexual competition.

Walker Brothers Cowboy

In “Walker Brothers Cowboy” (1968), the topography is distinctively mapped out in a male outer world and a female domestic one. Instead of representing safety as in “Red Dress – 1946”, the domestic world symbolizes here a sense of frustration and powerlessness. The cowboy in the title is the young narrator’s father, a peddler who cheerfully overlooks his sale territory. His world is vast and adventurous, only waiting out there to be discovered: “Want to go down and see if the Lake’s still there?” (1). In her search for individuality and adulthood, the girl turns to her father who is less aware of gender norms than the mother and who opens up his space to the girl. The mother, on the other hand, staying home sewing, embodies the fixed gender patterns of society.

Howells points out that there is a binary pattern of center and periphery where the story extends outwards tracing the girl’s initiation into adulthood (17). Initially, her father takes her to Lake Huron and tells her how it once was formed by the ice. She realizes that there was a time before her existence and even before her father’s and that she will not be in this world forever. Later in the story, the father, “the embodiment” of the “adventurous world” (de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 301), brings his children far away from their domestic sphere when he takes them on one of his sales trips: “Then we are backing out of the driveway with the rising hope of adventure” (6). The father takes the opportunity to make a social visit to an old girlfriend, Nora, who seems to be both colorful and vivacious in comparison to the narrator’s sickly mother who is left at home. Nora appears outside the narrator’s familiar domestic sphere and is consequently found to be more powerful and independent than the narrator’s mother. She laughs loudly, invites the girl’s father to dance and makes him drink whisky although “my father never drinks whisky” (15). On the way home, the girl reflects upon the day’s events and realizes that there are covert worlds within the adults that she knows as little about as she knows about the Ice Age.

Boys and Girls

The milieu in the short story “Boys and Girls” (1968) is explicitly mapped out in male and female space as well. In her essay, Marlene Goldman notes that the division, however arbitrary, is upheld by “the force of opinion and tradition” (65), where the inside is female space and the outside male space. Munro’s map is detailed in its description of the small rural world, which besides the house also contains the fox farm run by the narrator’s father. The farm is male territory where only the father and his hired man are allowed, and also the narrator before her gender has been stabilized. Later, she is excluded from this male territory because “she’s only a girl” (127). The narrator’s mother is mostly occupied inside the house and “did not often come out of the house” (116). When she one time is seen outside the barn, the narrator responds strongly: “I felt my mother had no business down here” (117). Her mother stays in the “hot dark kitchen” (117) where the young girl hates to be. She does not consider her mother’s domestic chores to be as “ritualistically important” as her father’s work, which she values much more and carries out “with a feeling of pride” (115). Although the young narrator may be unaware of the imbalance of power between her mother and her father, the lack of balance shines through from her description of the enclosed world of the foxes where her father is in charge and by the fact that he brings money to the family by selling the pelts.

Through the young girl’s claim to belong to the male sphere, the traditional gender roles become reversed for a moment and hence reveal concealed power structures in society. Using the voice of the rebelling girl, Munro questions this sexual design of societal power, which traditionally has been considered “natural”.

More and more, the young girl is confronted by the demands of her environment to join the domestic world and she “no longer felt safe” (119) in her attempts to stay in the public sphere. Her mother complains that “[i]t’s not like I had a girl in the family at all” (117). The bedroom, which the girl shares with her younger brother, is neither female nor male as it is unfinished with no clear distinction between the two halves. The bedroom frightens the children: “We were afraid of *inside*, the room where we slept” (112). Goldman compares the unfinished bedroom to the siblings’ unfinished gender roles (68). By the end of the story, the bedroom is divided into two separate sections where the girl’s bed is made with “lace curtains” (“Boys and Girls” 126) and hence given a feminine touch. Simultaneously, the narrator establishes her gender role by opening the gates for the escaping mare. Goldman notes that the girl “challenges his [the father] unquestioned right to legislate who moves across the borders” (68) and therefore she finally gets excluded from the male world. Instead of being seen as her

father's "new hired man", the girl is reduced to an object when referred to as "she's only a girl" ("Boys and Girls" 116,127). The narrator does not protest against that, not "even in my heart" and observes that "maybe it was true" (127). Simone de Beauvoir comments that "the child would not grasp himself as sexually differentiated" (283) and neither does the young narrator until she is labeled by her society.

Ann Coral Howells approaches the division of space differently when she argues that Munro's maps chart alternative spaces within the female characters from where they are able to speak, and hence represent a "social geography" (4-5). The young narrator in "Boys and Girls" turns to story-telling when she fails to identify with her mother's female world. In her stories, which "presented opportunities for courage, boldness and self-sacrifice", she is the male savior who rescues people from disasters, but in a world that was "recognizably mine" (113). The narrator layers her alternative fictional world alongside her geographical one, what Howells calls "textual mapping" (5). By the end of the short story, the girl's fantasies change simultaneously with her gender role and suddenly, she finds herself being rescued by male saviors.

In the short stories from *Dance of the Happy Shades*, the narrow worlds are distinctively mapped out in male and female spheres. Despite the young narrators' attempts to deny what is expected from them because they are girls and despite their attempts to shape their individual selves, they finally find themselves trapped in fixed gendered worlds.

The Juliet trilogy

In the stories from *Runaway* (2004), a vaster world is presented compared to the small worlds of *Dance of the Happy Shades*. In "Chance," the young Juliet leaves Ontario to find her own life in British Columbia, and in "Soon," she returns home as an adult to visit her old parents. In "Silence," Juliet, now a widow, moves from the countryside to Vancouver. Munro's milieus are less "mapped out" in the Juliet triptych than in the earlier stories, but a spatial division is nevertheless present.

In "Chance," Juliet meets her future husband on a train, a non-gendered space between home and Juliet's future work in British Columbia, where both Juliet and Eric are free to tell each other things they normally would not: "Then she told him what she had always known that she should never tell any man or boy, lest he lose interest immediately" (71). Juliet had majored in Greek and Latin at college, which often put her "in the same category as a limp or an extra thumb" in the town where she grew up (53). Juliet reveals to Eric that her reason to study these subjects was "because I love it. I love all that stuff. I really do" (71). On the train,

Juliet is powerful enough to talk honestly to a man and also to reject another, who she thinks is flirting with her. Nevertheless, she is reminded about the fact that her power is limited due to her sex, “people interrupt women [...] easier than men” (67).

Later, Juliet seeks out Eric in his hometown and finds his housekeeper alone in the house. Juliet decides to wait for him and offers to help in the kitchen. Finding herself defenseless in the traditionally female domain, Juliet is discarded by the housekeeper and observes, “such women never want your help. They can tell what you’re like” (76). Juliet, who at the time had chosen a non-traditional profession within the classics, does not fully belong in the female world and is not trusted with traditional female chores. In “Soon,” Juliet brings her baby daughter with her to visit her parents. She is immediately reminded that she leads a non-stereotypical life that differs from what society expects from a young woman. As an unmarried woman and “the gawk, the scholar” (103), she is told by her parents to get off at a railway station in a nearby town instead of in her parents town: “Apparently the train did not stop there anymore” (89). After a while, she realizes that the train does stop in her hometown, but that she embarrasses her parents: “You didn’t want me getting off here. *Did you?*” (105).

Nevertheless, Juliet finds herself redeemed coming home as a mother and fitting in better than before when people identified her as “the girl who talks Latin” (113). By undertaking the traditional role of a mother and a wife, although unmarried, Juliet is able to enter the enclosed space of the rural town.

Juliet’s world is more emancipated with lesser distinct boundaries between male and female space, than is the case in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Nevertheless, because of her non-traditional profession and family situation, she finds herself questioned and not totally accepted by her environment.

Chapter Three: The Feminist Quest for Identity and Freedom

In Munro's fiction, the female search for identity is a central ongoing theme. In order to control their lives, Munro's heroines struggle to move beyond traditional gender roles. Comparing her writing over time, the search for feminist self-discovery is omnipresent, albeit less palpable in her more recent stories. In *Runaway*, the female protagonist's struggle takes place primarily on the inside and becomes psychological, while in Munro's earlier stories, the battle for self-identity is fought mostly on a social level. In the traditional and rural milieu of *Dance of the Happy Shades*, the boundaries which enclose the young narrators are of a powerful cultural nature. The girls are prevented to form their inner selves by their parents' demands upon them, which inevitably make them into fixed gendered adults.

Changes in society concerning gender and liberty are perceived in Alice Munro's long and extensive authorship. Rasporich notes that Munro shows an "exceptional progress as a feminist writer", and that she ages alongside her heroines (88). The protagonists of her more recent stories are older and more mature compared to the ones in her early collection. Thacker states in his biography that Munro is a writer who "has lived and written on, and changed" and her ideas "mature with every book" (521). Moreover, Rasporich adds that Munro was more concerned with the "traditional female concerns with personal relationships" in her early writing while her later writing includes "a wider and wider swath of human experience" (88).

Munro's early more autobiographical stories are told in a linear perspective by first-person narrators, young girls still on the threshold of womanhood, while the Juliet triptych is told by a third-person narrator and represents a more mature protagonist. The shift in narration creates a distance between the story and its protagonist that indicates a change in Alice Munro's expression of her female experience and hence her perception of female living conditions. In *Runaway*, the plot is fragmented by time gaps and flashbacks and the world is vaster with less distinct boundaries than the one depicted in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Additionally, her stories have increased lengthwise to more resembling the form of the novel. Hence the complicity of modern life is depicted where the split between being a nurturing mother and a working woman is emphasized.

Although telling their stories in first-person, the female protagonists of the early collection are subjugated into objects by their environment. The patriarchal society is given the power to name the protagonist as "only a girl" and they are all treated by their mothers as dolls lacking free wills. In the later collection, both Juliet and her daughter Penelope act independently while being in charge of their lives. Ironically, Penelope's freedom to choose is turned against

Juliet when her daughter feels free enough to reject her mother. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Penelope chooses the traditional “life of a prosperous, practical matron” (“Silence” 156), far away from Juliet’s emancipated public life.

However, no solution is offered to the protagonists on how to live their lives, neither in Munro’s early stories, nor in her more recent ones. On the surface, Juliet seems to have accomplished her gender role, which allows her an independent life as an emancipated woman. Whilst her sisters from *Dance of the Happy Shades* fight their battle for individuality mostly on the social arena, Juliet is permitted by her urban milieu of the 21st century to make her own choices. Although women of today are given civic liberties, society is still influenced by expectations on women and their responsibilities. De Beauvoir notes that the independent woman is “divided between her professional interests and the concerns of her sexual vocation [motherhood]”. Therefore, she has trouble finding her balance (736). Hence, Juliet’s struggle to define herself as an individual, a woman and a mother, continues on a psychological level where the inherited demands deriving from being a female are making themselves felt. Society’s expectations upon women, reinforced by mothers upon daughters, make women responsible for the emotional welfare of their loved ones and women much more than men are expected to find their primary identity in the family. Chodorow argues that this gender difference is produced because of family organization and ideology despite the fact that modern women spend as much of their life as men in the labor force (*The Reproduction* 175). She points out that society cannot be changed unless men share family responsibilities and that society needs a system with more than one isolated primary caretaker (“Mother-Daughter Code” 38). When Penelope, Juliet’s adolescent daughter, disappears silently without a word to her mother, Juliet turns to self-denial and lies. Encapsulated in the women’s “old conflict”, she can admit neither to herself nor to her environment that her daughter feels emotionally abandoned and therefore revolts towards her mother in such a strong way. Howells discusses the use of secrecy and silence in Munro’s stories and implies that these are camouflaged strategies in order to resist traditional conventions (4). Munro’s protagonists do not stage loud or oral protests against the traditional formation of children into men and women. Instead, the girls invent alternative fictional worlds or protest quietly by sitting “awkwardly” (“Boys and Girls” 119). While Juliet tells lies and Penelope hides in silence, their fellow sisters from *Dance of the Happy Shades* invent alternative independent worlds when denied to form their individual selves. All in all, the feminist quest is perhaps without clear answers but Alice Munro nonetheless offers glimpses of a female reality that has changed during the last forty years. Instead of

proposing solutions, she depicts a society where gender formation still exists but on a different level. Women's dependency may have diminished due to economic and social liberty but the character of Juliet shows that restrictions are still put upon women by society. The feeling of not fitting in continues to be experienced within Munro's female characters. Despite societal changes, Juliet needs to defend her choices in life, not only to her environment but also to herself.

Conclusion

Women's emancipation has made progress since the 1960s and with the aid of laws and regulations women have gradually found their place in the public sphere.

However, expectations and prejudices concerning women's commitments may remain deeply rooted in our minds and therefore hard to overcome, despite a more equal society. Cultural and societal prescriptions upon women on how to behave and what to embrace still today manifest themselves both in society as well as in the woman herself.

The present paper provides a discussion about how expectations, put upon women by a patriarchal society, affect gender construction. In my exploration of Alice Munro's short stories from the late 1960s, it is noticed that societal forces construct gender and I argue that despite society having changed, it is still the case in her later stories from the 1990s, although in a slightly different form.

In my thesis, it is implied that literary works reflect society and therefore I claim that literature can help illuminating patriarchal structures which entrap women in traditional gender roles. Alice Munro uses her own life and experiences to form the backdrop from which her characters perform. According to Anglo-American feminist criticism, the fictional world provides important information about our real world. Munro implicitly criticizes gender formation in her contemporary Canadian society by emphasizing certain features and structures in the description of her characters and milieus. By refusing to accept traditional gender roles, the young protagonists question the order between the sexes and hence societal inequalities and injustices are made visible. The purpose of this essay is to illuminate the implied elements of gender construction and hence make them observable and hopefully changeable.

By studying the relations between mothers and daughters, I have come to the conclusion that gender is reproduced by the fact that women are mothers and primary caretakers and thereby the social organization of gender is passed on. Munro's intricate mother-daughter relations describe daughters who fight their battles by creating "mock mothers" in order to avoid being the repetitions of their mothers. Additionally, I have noted that the father provides an escape route to the young girl in her search for an individual self. In my study of spatial division, I have found a gendered society where there is a clear separation, both physically and psychologically, between male and female space and where Munro's unspoken critique of the patriarchal society comes to light. In my comparison between the collections, I have noted that gender is still produced "naturally" and that certain prescribed behaviors are still

associated with the female sex. Munro's central theme concerning a female search for identity is still in progress even in her later writing. I have found elements in Munro's more recent stories which point towards a progress concerning women's conditions. Hence, Munro's perception of the gendered society is different in *Runaway* compared to *Dance of the Happy Shades*, which among other things is visible in the fragmented narration of the Juliet story. The narrative style in *Runaway*, which includes a non-linear time perspective with flash backs and time gaps, creates a sense of confusion reflected in the Juliet character. Juliet's struggle for definition is merely psychological in her continuous questioning whether she is compassionate and nurturing enough. Whereas in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, the struggle is fought on a more physical arena where it is society itself that creates the boundaries and prevents the girls from making their own decisions.

The scope of my study is limited to six short stories which offer an image of contemporary Canada as well as of the rural society in the 1960s. For these reasons, my research findings cannot be generalized to hold a wider understanding of gender construction.

Throughout my reading of Alice Munro's short stories, her exquisite and subtle descriptions of the relationship between mothers and daughters have attracted my interest. To further the understanding of this important element in gender production, it would be of interest to dedicate a more profound study in the future, constructed purely on Alice Munro's "obsession" with the mother-daughter relation.

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