Revisiting the Deep Sense of Place in Alice Munro's Debut, 50 Years Later

Dance of the Happy Shades introduces young, female protagonists confronting expectations as firmly rooted as the rural landscape in which they live.

By Jonathan Liebson

Fred Thornhill / Reuters
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On December 21, 1968, writing in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, the reviewer William Morgan starts out admiring of Alice Munro's debut story collection. He says that the author, in her fictitious small towns, creates a "strange mixture of physical freedom and emotional claustrophobia." By the end of that review, however, those same features will come to annoy him. Morgan laments that the "characters and situations are real enough, and yet [they're] enough the same that an unwanted familiarity seems to develop; they were closing in, making one want to escape."

What Morgan takes issue with in the collection, others may see as a virtue. Fifty years ago, *Dance of the Happy Shades* won the Governor General's Award for Fiction, one of Canada's most important literary awards (an honor that Munro received twice more on her way to winning a Nobel Prize, in 2013). Compared with the long, stand-alone stories that later became Munro's trademark, the stories from *Shades* are leaner in page count, more plot-driven, and more conventional in narrative structure; they also have an essential co-dependency. Like James Joyce's *Dubliners* or Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio,* the book coalesces around a sense of place—rural southwestern Ontario—as much as it does around overlapping themes. In a setting where many homes lack electricity or running water, many men still make a living off the land, and many housewives must jar their own preserves, Munro's female protagonists often confront expectations that seem as old, and firmly rooted, as the landscape itself.

In a trio of stories that parallel her father's real life as a fox farmer, Munro explores the distinctive gender roles found within the house versus outside it, as seen through the eyes of the young narrators. Mysterious and inexpressive, rational and work-oriented, their fathers are far more appealing to these girls than are their mothers, who tend to be fussy, opinionated, and overly chatty. In "Images," the narrator shares a quiet bond and tacit understanding with her father as they fetch rat traps along the Wawanash River. He will not condescend to her about being careful where she steps, and she will not pester him with questions about what they're doing. In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," a fox farmer turned traveling salesman takes his daughter on a surprise tour of the countryside. At one house, she observes an unwelcoming customer nearly douse him with a chamber pot of urine; at another, she meets a woman whom she slowly understands to be her father's former sweetheart. The excursion offers her a break from her routine of chores

and acquaints her with a sense of possibility and danger previously unavailable to her.

Even as their fathers offer glimpses into a masculine world less fettered to decorum, the girls' mothers continue to enforce standards of domesticity. The narrator of "Boys and Girls," a proud apprentice to her father's pelting operation, resists her mother's ongoing campaign to smooth out her rough exterior, saying that she "continued to slam the doors and sit as awkwardly as possible, thinking that by such measures I kept myself free." Yet the pressure to conform is ultimately too much to overcome: When her grandmother and younger brother join the efforts to keep her in line, the narrator ruefully concludes, "A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become. It was a definition, always touched with emphasis, with reproach and disappointment."

From story to story, one feels a sustained longing for independence. The desire to speak up—the aching need to call out personal or social injustice—struggles against the heavy weight of collective standards. This pressure is felt more keenly by Munro's older protagonists, who face heightened stakes in their opposition and ever-greater consequences for failure. In "The Shining Houses," a young mother, Mary, admires her elderly neighbor precisely because the old woman is "so unaccommodating." Yet when an assembly of parents circulates a petition to chase the old woman off her property, which they consider an eyesore, Mary is unable to make her own convincing stand. She walks out on the group in weak defiance, knowing that she has succeeded only in alienating herself from the community.

For Mary, as with many of Munro's other women, translating frustration into effective action proves to be a daunting, if not impossible, task. A voice raised in anger is often silenced; a sense of resolve is quickly snuffed out. That pattern repeats itself in "Postcard," when a young

woman learns that the man courting her over the years has gotten married behind her back. Her mother blames her for having been physically intimate with him short of actual marriage (a judgment he is spared), while the man himself, when she publicly confronts him, chastens her again by a show of complete indifference. Too late, she recognizes him as "a man that goes his own way," and that she, as a woman, will never be afforded that same privilege.

In "The Office," the narrator has to contend with similarly inflexible attitudes and rigid standards. As an aspiring fiction writer, she seeks relief from her domestic responsibilities and a proper workspace to pursue her creative ambitions. She notes that it is perfectly acceptable for a man to work from home, while a woman cannot reasonably cut herself off from crying children or a ringing telephone. Echoing the sentiments of the young protagonist of "Boys and Girls," the narrator complains that a mother "*is* the house, there is no separation possible." Unfortunately, even in her rented office, her work will be sabotaged
by her obtrusive landlord, who refuses to take her writing, or her privacy, seriously.

In spite of the prevalent sexism these characters often contest, Munro, looking back on her career, has been reluctant to call herself a mouthpiece for her gender. "I never think about being a feminist writer," she said in a 2012 interview with *The New Yorker*, "but of course I wouldn't know." She does, however, own up to the crucial influence of her biography. "I'm part of that background," she stated in a 1974 CBC interview. "I think I could never be anything else."

While many of the stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* borrow from the lives and rural settings of Munro's childhood, it is her mother's lengthy affliction with Parkinson's disease that gives rise to an important shift in the book. Munro admits in the same CBC interview that her mother is "probably the most painful subject I can deal with,"

and in correspondence with her editor at *Canadian Short Stories* (a CBC radio program that featured her early work), she describes her great difficulty in transforming that material "into the kind of writing I wanted." That struggle may well have enabled the breakthrough story "The Peace of Utrecht," whose expansive style and elastic structure most clearly resemble the later work her fans would come to expect.

Written after a 1961 return visit to Munro's hometown, a year and a half after her mother's death, "Utrecht" centers on Helen, a mother of two who has traveled cross-country under similar circumstances. Helen has tried to avoid the entrapment of so many other characters in the book—such as that of her older sister, Maddy, who remained in their childhood house and continued to look after their long-ailing mother. Alive, their "Gothic" mom was a spectacle to the community and a source of constant embarrassment. Deceased, she has left her daughters uncomfortable with each other and defensive about their life choices.

The least plot-driven of any work in *Shades*, "Utrecht" has by far the greatest bandwidth. In what would become vintage Munro style, the act of storytelling feels more like an act of synthesizing, as Helen weaves together flashbacks from childhood, descriptions of the house and front porch, and snippets of dialogue or remembrances. She is reluctant to hear about her mother's last days, as well as her own daughterly neglect, and the story's many detours seem intentional, like one more way to shake off these overbearing restraints.

By the end of *Dance of the Happy Shades*, there is an emerging sense of new forces starting to shape these small-town lives. Some women look bravely to the future, while others remain more cautious. "Take your life, Maddy," Helen orders her sister. "Take it." But it is unclear whether her sister will do so. Likewise, Munro's direction as a writer would remain up for grabs, at least for a few more books. After some

indecisive bouts with novels that are really linked stories (see *The Lives of Girls and Women* and *The Beggar Maid*), the author would eventually settle on a greater length and more flexible structure for her fiction, allowing her work the breathing space it needed to develop fully, yet subtly, while still shielding it from the exigencies of plot.

Well before then, *Dance of the Happy Shades* would establish Munro as the great writer she was destined to become. In the half century since the book's publication, the characters remain faithful to their time period and rural setting, even as their struggles continue to resonate with contemporary readers. Though Munro's writing does not divide her from her background, it may nevertheless offer some lasting form of liberation. Consider again Helen, from "The Peace of Utrecht," whose thoughts about her sister might well reflect Munro's own mind-set whenever she begins a story. She asserts, "All I have ever been able to think, to comfort me, is that she may have been able and may even have chosen to live without time and in perfect imaginary freedom as children do, the future untampered with, all choices always possible."

About the Author

Jonathan Liebson

Jonathan Liebson teaches courses in writing, literature, and culture at Eugene Lang College of The New School. His reviews and short fiction can be found at *jonathanliebson.com*.