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Female Sexuality in the Fiction of Alice Munro

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ABSTRACT

Female Sexuality in the Fiction of Alice Munro

Mavis Assad

Any reading of Alice Munro's fiction reveals a discourse self-conscious about women's identity. From Munro's first collection to her latest, sexuality occupies a central position in this exploration of identity, and functions in a variety of important ways, both thematically and formally. This thesis investigates Munro's interest in the sexual self as embodied, that is, as experienced through a specifically female body, an interest that is embedded within a larger preoccupation with the emergence of woman as speaker, actor and author of her own life.

Informed primarily by a feminist theoretical perspective, the thesis explores the meaning of sexuality in Munro's work by examining first its primary thematic expressions, namely, the formation of the subject in and through sexuality as a rite of passage and sexuality's connection to self-representation, desire and the assumption of gender roles. Then, turning to Munro's forms of writing, it analyzes

her narrative strategy, especially regarding plot, when writing of sexuality. Finally, the thesis considers how Munro envisages sexuality as embodied--specifically in women's bodies--and how this embodiment is expressed through her particular use of figurative language to speak of the female body and female sexuality.

For Dimitri, *sine qua non*.

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ABBREVIATIONS

The following short titles have been used in this thesis to refer to Munro's works:

Dance	Dance of the Happy Shades. Toronto: Ryerson, 1968.
Lives	Lives of Girls and Women. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1971.
Something	Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You: Thirteen Stories. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974
Who	Who Do You Think You Are? Toronto: Macmillan, 1978.
Moons	The Moons of Jupiter. Toronto: Macmillan, 1982.
Progress	The Progress of Love. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986.
Friend	Friend of My Youth. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990.

INTRODUCTION

> I do not claim more for this reading than that it makes...sense. Who can say whether the sense was put there by St. John, as it were for my benefit, or by myself, as it were for St. John's benefit?
>
> --Robert Graves, The White Goddess

Even the most cursory reading of Alice Munro's fiction will reveal a discourse self-conscious about women's identity. Sexuality occupies a central position in this exploration, from Munro's first collection to her latest, and functions in a variety of important and interesting ways, both thematically and formally. In this thesis I investigate Munro's interest in the sexual self as embodied, that is, as experienced through a specifically female body. This interest is, in turn, seen as embedded within a larger preoccupation with the emergence of woman as speaker, actor and author of her own life.

My emphasis on female sexuality grows from Munro's own concern with writing as a woman and about women, and is informed by a feminist theoretical perspective--drawing on psychoanalytical criticism as well--which addresses the relationships between sex, gender and sexuality. Before proceeding, I think it advisable to define how I will use these terms.

I understand sex to exist in the physical realm; involving the biological distinction between male, female and hermaphrodite, a determination by chromosomal

difference. I will also use "sex" in its usual daily meaning, denoting physical sexual relations.

Gender, used to designate "masculine" and "feminine," is not a biological given, but a social and cultural construct that, to quote Greene and Kahn (who, in turn, refer to Althusser), "takes place through the workings of ideology....that system of beliefs and assumptions--unconscious, unexamined, invisible--which represents 'the imaginary relations of individuals to their real conditions of existence'" (2-3). Feminists perceive gender as "a fundamental organizing category of experience" (Greene and Kahn, 1) which has historically been constructed to favour the "masculine" and oppress the "feminine."

By sexuality I mean not only the biological instinct towards sex, "mere" genitality, but a social construction created by and through the physical and social interaction of the individual with those around him or her. Sexuality thus bears the imprint of the culture in which it is developed and is historically specific. It is sex "put into discourse," a discursive practice (Foucault, 1978, 11-12). Munro's fiction reveals a central preoccupation with the varied ways in which sexuality can function as a force that controls and inhibits individuals, but can also empower them.

Thomas Laqueur in Making Sex, writes "Sex, like being human, is contextual" (16), and its difference and

sameness, exhibited in men and women, is interpreted according to cultural demands. Likewise literature is not simply an "imperfect mirror" of sexuality but actually "constitutes the problem of sexuality" (17) by perpetuating and generating sexual difference through representation. In the texts of Alice Munro, the negative aspects for women of sexuality and power are balanced by positive representations of empowerment. Munro's complex representation of women's sexuality does not simply mirror complex social phenomena but demands equality for women and men in the realm of sexuality, in which both are active and unabashedly claim their pleasures and powers. As well as complaining of the pains and deformations inflicted on women's lives by societal pressures, Munro constitutes a vision of active women's lives nearer her heart's desire.

Feminist Theory

Regarding my critical approach to this project, I have chosen my epigraph to suggest my ambivalence as to whether I have chosen to work on Alice Munro's fiction because patterns founds in her texts suggested a feminist response, or because as a feminist I read her fiction as I do most aspects of contemporary culture, that is, as an expression of life in a patriarchal culture. However, my feeling is that feminist literary criticism and Munro's fiction are so admirably suited there is no question of forcing a fit. As Terry Eagleton writes:

> In any academic study we select the objects and methods of procedure which we believe the most important, and our assessment of their importance is governed by frames of interest deeply rooted in our practical forms of social life (Eagleton, 211).

As Toril Moi states at the beginning of Sexual/Textual Politics (xiii), "[o]ne of the central principles of feminist criticism is that no account can ever be neutral." But although I speak as a feminist, I also speak as a student of literature, and cannot forget that it is feminist literary criticism with which I am dealing. I am writing about Munro's representations of gender not simply to further a political end, but because I feel that the themes of gender and sexuality which are so important to Munro's work must be considered, and to neglect to do so is to distort her work. Munro's fiction--written by a woman, almost always about women--seems to me to embody a feminist understanding of gender as a fundamental organizing category of experience, which accounts for the centrality of sexuality in her fiction. Her exploration of female sexuality through fictional heroines responds to an imperative articulated by Rachel Blau DuPlessis in "For the Etruscans": "when the phenomenological exploration of self-in-world turns up a world that devalues the female self, when that exploration moves along the tacit boundaries of a social

status quo, [the female subject] cannot just 'let it be,' but must transform values, rewrite culture, subvert structures" (287). Feminist awareness of gender can act as a corrective to a social ideology in which a male perspective has been "naturalized" and made "universal," and in which biological difference has been used to justify "self-evident" social and cultural differences.

Feminism restores a female perspective by decentralizing this male-centered perspective and by criticizing the way such a "universalizing" perspective marginalizes women. This is not to say that the female subjects of Munro's fiction are "unified," or "monolithic," a kind of "universal" female claiming parity with the "universal" male via a valorization of women's nature or essence. Munro's view of women's subjectivity bears affinity to Linda Alcoff's anti-essentialist conceptualization of "women." Alcoff, drawing on de Lauretis, turns to <u>experience</u> to describe women's subjectivity, showing how habits and practices, as well as language, are influential in the creation of subjectivity. Reliance on lived experience allows one to posit a gendered subjectivity "without pinning it down one way or the other for all time" (431). This materialist, historical dimension avoids the nominalism of post-structuralism which denies a subject, any subject, intentions, natural attributes or a separate consciousness. Alcoff's "positional" definition of women makes the

human agent "an entity in flux" (427), relative to an ever-shifting context, but an agent nevertheless who also influences her context (and thereby can change her identity and subjectivity). Munro presents the diversity and plurality of individual women's lives and thus allows the subjects of her fiction to subvert the "universal" view both in theme and in narrative form. Her fiction "can be read as a double-voiced discourse, containing a 'dominant' and a 'muted' story" (Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," 266) in which women, hitherto denied access to full representation, must use "the master's language" to speak at all. It is a strategy of "double talk" which provides a way of negotiating literary conventions and language which have been used to exclude women's experience.

Between the two great approaches to feminist theory, the Anglo-American and the French, I take up a sort of mid-Atlantic position, or, along with de Lauretis, who states there are "also Italians," I would add there are Canadians, too. I feel that to oppose "French" and "Anglo-American" criticism as if they were mutually exclusive categories is to fall into the humanist binary division. Why not both/and rather than either/or? I prefer a more eclectic theory which draws on whatever theoretical approaches I think will offer insights into the particular text I am examining. As well, I am not a follower of fashion--if a New Critical close reading seems

to be useful, that is what I will use. I feel whatever critical method is used must be able to accomodate both text and critic.

I admire Anglo-American criticism's recovery of women's writing of the past and its exposure of ways in which women authors have resisted various forms of oppression--ways which are also visible in Munro's fiction. Modern French feminist literary criticism, grounded in the materialism of socialist theory, is also heavily indebted to psychoanalytic theory, particularly to Lacan's post-structuralist reading of Freud. Lacan has influenced Hélène Cixous' romanticized vision of the female body as the site of women's writing, Luce Irigaray's critique of patriarchial discourses' repression of women, and Julia Kristeva's emphasis on the construction of femininity, among others. Both of these traditions are relevant in approaching the texts of Alice Munro; the Anglo-American for its history of resistance to the oppressive order, and the French for its particular emphasis on the body. Other critics, whether feminist or not, will find voice in the following pages.

The primarily thematic concerns in early Munro criticism have more recently made space for a greater interest in formal aspects. This thesis contains both thematic and formal criticism relating to sexuality. In the criticism dealing specifically with Munro, sexuality has been considered by some critics--Hallvard Dahlie,

Louise DeSalvo, Margaret Anne Fitzpatrick, Juliann E. Fleenor, Beth Harvor, Miriam Packer, Ildiko de Papp Carrington, and especially Beverly Rasporich--but not in the overall way I have treated this important topic in this thesis.

I must acknowledge the special relationship that the work of Michel Foucault has to this thesis. Although much of the thesis is primarily a thematic reading, elements of his theoretical work have been particularly illuminating in considering how representations of sex and sexuality function in Alice Munro's fiction. His ideas have been subsequently elaborated, refined or clarified by various feminist theorists to account for the question of gender--how aspects of sexuality and desire impact differently on women than they do on men, and there are a number of "convergences" between Foucauldian theory and feminist theory. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, in their "Introduction" to Feminism & Foucault: Reflections on Resistance list "[f]our convergences of feminism and Foucault [that] are especially striking": the concept of the body as the site of power, "that is, as the locus of domination through which docility is accomplished and subjectivity constituted"; the focus on the evasive and extensive "local and intimate operations of power"; the "role of discourse in its capacity to produce and sustain hegemonic power and emphasize the challenges contained within marginalized and/or unrecognized discourses"; the

critique of the way Western humanism has made the experiences of a Western masculine elite "universal" (x). Feminist and Foucauldian theories are therefore compatible in their attempts to illuminate the ways of domination and possible ways of resistance. Particularly, Foucauldian analysis reveals how human subjects are produced to conform to a standard; feminist analysis likewise reveals the ubiquitousness of masculinist power over women. Each of these four points of convergence is discoverable in the fiction of Alice Munro, although, of course, these distinct theoretical categories are not so nicely separated in the medley of fiction. That the body is the "locus of domination" to produce docility is particularly discussed in Chapter III (on women's embodiment) as are the related local operations of power at the level of the body. The body's part in the formation of subjectivity is more specifically addressed in Chapter I, which deals with Munro's themes, while the role of social discourses and the challenges Munro makes to them are the main focus of the analysis of narrative plots in Chapter II. These various ideas cast light on the ways in which Munro's protagonists--through their engagements with sexuality--gain knowledge, and therefore power, often by gaining a voice and becoming speaking subjects capable of creating art.

What I have found particularly important in Foucault's theories is their wide applicability and I must

acknowledge that his conception of a subject constructed via sexuality has been the seed of the conceptualization of the entire project of this thesis.

Chapter Outline

My exploration of the meaning of sexuality in Munro's work begins with Chapter I, "Sexuality, Subject Formation and Self-Representation: Munro's Major Themes," in which the investigation of the subject's formation through sexuality is pursued by examining the themes of many of Munro's texts in which the protagonist, almost always female, gains knowledge and awareness of self through sexual experiences or through encountering and dealing with societal expectations of differentiated "masculine" and "feminine" roles. Engaging in sex (the physical sexual act) is seen as a rite of passage, a mark of coming of age. Sexuality (the cultural encoding of gendered sexual behaviour) is ambivalently experienced in the case of Munro's female protagonists as something valuable and yet also denigrated. Against a background formed by Foucauldian and Lacanian ideas, the voices of critics such as Fleenor, Belenky, Godard, Packer and Biddy Martin will be heard. Munro also engages questions of artistic self-representation, how women may attain for themselves a specifically female voice and transform their experiences into art--in Lives of Girls and Women, obviously, but also in many other works. A word is also in order regarding the preponderance of (necessary) examples relating to

Lives. Some considerations, such as discussions of a text's likeness to a Bildungsroman or Künstlerroman, can only be applied to novel or novel-like form; short stories cannot illustrate these forms with their characteristic compression and exclusion.

Turning to the formal aspects of Munro's texts, Chapter II, "Formal Considerations of the Representation of Sexuality," analyzes her narrative strategy when writing of sexuality. The formal aspects of Munro's storytelling are concordant with, and complementary to, her themes. Instead of adhering to the conventions of romance, Munro uses various narrative strategies which allow for a specifically female voice to be heard. For example, she disrupts the traditional marriage plot by evading or subverting its conventional ending, marriage. She may take a genre like the Künstlerroman and exchange the usual male protagonist for a female one. When writing of heterosexual couple-based sexuality, its position as privileged resolution is frequently undercut by betrayal or lack of fulfillment. In considering this aspect of Munro's work, I am indebted to Rachel Blau DuPlessis' Writing Beyond the Ending for indicating the kinds of strategies that twentieth-century women writers can use for dealing with and delegitimizing traditional plots of romance and marriage.

In Chapter III, "Embodiment: Figures of the Flesh," I consider how Munro envisages women's sexuality as

specifically embodied. If one focusses only on the cultural construct of the "masculine"/"feminine" polarity, without the biological element, the material existence of women at its most fundamental level of experience, the body itself, is negated. The construction of identity depends on the reality of embodiment; whatever else we are, we are surely our bodies. Embodiment is beyond the dualism of essentialist and cultural determinist polarities, partaking of both nature and culture.

Munro envisages sexuality as embodied--in specific women's bodies, in the particularity of individual lives. With the help of various critics (Yaeger, Carrington, Gallop, Bartky) I examine how Munro expresses this embodiment through her use of figurative language to speak of the female body and of the life of the senses. Other critics, such as Berger and Carrington, reveal how "seeing establishes our place in the surrounding world" (Berger 7), especially the way in which women come to regard their bodies as sexual objects subject to the gaze of others. These ways of looking are connected to questions of sexuality, embodiment and power. Also, a particular form of forbidden sexual looking, voyeurism, is present in Munro's stories.

In all these varied ways--by theme, form, language and embodiment--Munro expresses the realities of women's lives in their encounters with the complexities of sexuality. Never simplifying, struggling always for the exact

shading, she manages to illuminate the double hook of sexuality for women, both its darkness and its glory.

CHAPTER I

SEXUALITY, SUBJECT FORMATION AND SELF-REPRESENTATION: MUNRO'S MAJOR THEMES

> Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.
>
> --Charles Dickens, David Copperfield

The themes and subjects of Alice Munro's work are various, but often in her work we find an engagement with issues that relate directly to women's sexuality: the dailiness of the effect of "feminine" roles in women's familial and social life, the insistent claims of bodies--both their pleasures and the shames and humiliations they inflict; and, particularly, sexuality as a rite of passage with the potential to empower through experience and knowledge, to move to agency and self-representation.

I believe it is worthwhile to examine the themes which a writer uses often, for their frequent employment suggests that these themes are particularly important or valuable to the author. As might be expected, Munro's themes are not merely the expressions of previously conceived ideas (since writing is an act of discovery), but are distillations which indicate the total experience of the short story, reflecting what Munro--and her readers--are able to make of that total experience.

Sexuality as a Rite of Passage

One of the most important of Munro's themes is that

sexuality is a rite of passage. Her protagonists, frequently adolescent females, but also mature women and occasionally males, move to greater positions of agency and selfhood through the experience of sex.

In The History of Sexuality, Vol I: An Introduction, Michel Foucault gives an overview of the construction of the human subject in society through the discourses of sexuality. His thesis is that the discourses on sexuality and the powers and pleasures they have produced have served the hierarchies of Western culture over the last few centuries "to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative." (37) This philosopher states that sex itself is an

> ideal point made necessary by the deployment of sexuality and its operation....It is through sex...an imaginary point...that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility...to the whole of his body...to his identity....(155-56)

This Foucauldian idea that the human subject is constructed through the discourse of sexuality is invaluable in examining Munro's representations of emerging female subjects who develop--become "intelligible" to themselves--through sexual experiences which are shaped by social and cultural practices. (The subject as a construct, which can be deconstructed into component systems, has also been discussed by

structuralists such as Saussure and Benveniste.)

In the very first story of her first collection, "Walker Brothers Cowboy" (Dance), Munro gives an early example of the transforming power of sex and sexuality. The protagonist, a young girl, goes with her father to visit an old girlfriend of his, Nora Cronin. The brief glimpses the girl has of her father's "other" side give her the ability to see a greater complexity to his life than she had previously. Although this revelation is mysterious, not completely understood, it nevertheless opens new realms to her:

> I feel my father's life...darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine. (Dance, 17-8)

Although the young protagonist cannot understand fully what has transpired between her father and Nora, she understands that something transformative is operating, and that it is related to the sexual tension between the two adults.

Munro illustrates that greater knowledge is gained by more direct experience. In "Wild Swans" (Who), the protagonist is an adolescent girl, Rose, travelling alone

on her first trip to Toronto. Rose encounters a man who claims to be a United Church minister, but who is not wearing a clerical collar, his "uniform," thus confusing his identity. Pretending to be asleep, he lays a hand on Rose's leg and slowly begins to fondle her with "the most delicate, the most timid, pressures and investigations" (63). Without exchanging any words, he continues to caress her and she submits, first from curiosity, "[m]ore constant, more imperious, than any lust," but later from desire, for his hand "was able, after all, to get the ferns to rustle and the streams to flow, to waken a sly luxurience" (63). Rose climaxes amidst a vision of domes which "flew apart in celebration" with "such a flock of birds, wild swans, even....exploding from it, taking to the sky" (64). Not only notable for the transformation wrought to the world of appearances in this stunning imagery, this story also shows how Rose is transformed by being <u>enabled</u> through this sexual experience to appreciate the other world beyond ordinary reality. In Union Station Rose remembers a story her stepmother has told her about her former friend Mavis, who went to a resort masquerading as Frances Farmer. Although Flo disapproved, Rose "thought it would be an especially fine thing, to manage a transformation like that. To dare it; to get away with it, to enter on preposterous adventures in your own, but newly named, skin" (66). These possibilities have opened to her after she has opened to sexual experience, with its

power to transform.

A more mature Rose, in "Simon's Luck" (Who), again has her life changed through a sexual encounter, but this time she emerges from passivity into activity to effect her own transformation. Prophetically, a fortune teller tells Rose, "You've met the man who will change everything....The change has begun already" (168). A divorcee, feeling vulnerable, Rose is drawn to Simon's strength; also she is struck by his accent, "a muddled European accent....such accents spring from a richer and more complicated masculinity than the masculinity to be found in North America...." (160). These qualities serve to emphasize his difference from her, to highlight his "masculinity" in contrast to her weaker, more passive "femininity." After sex with Simon she is fulfilled and happy, but soon Simon leaves and does not return to Rose. After a miserable weekend of waiting, Rose decides to load her car and leave town. This experience has touched on the vulnerabilities she has felt in similar relationships, for Rose has had too many instances of playing the waiting woman, spending money on, and taking risks for, men. She makes the break from this societally expected but self-defeating behaviour by driving away and leaving it behind. The "magnetic" attraction of Simon and love draws her back, but she continues onward, and finally is free of it. Life comes back to her in its reality:

> It was those dishes [in a roadside diner] that

> told her of her changed state....she saw them in a way that wouldn't be possible to a person in any stage of love. She felt their solidity with a convalescent gratitude.... (174)

Rose has escaped the risks of desire, risks which threaten her own subjectivity. Later Rose learns that Simon has died--his luck has run out, but hers has revived with an infusion of luck from him. It is not he, as the fortune teller suggested, who has changed everything, but Rose herself who has been able to effect the change. Her experience with him has pushed her out of her old mould, has pushed her forward into life.

In a similar way, even the experience of sexual betrayal can be liberating. For example, in "Differently" (Friend), Georgia finds temporary escape from her unfulfilling marriage in an affair with a young man named Miles. But when she is in turn betrayed by Miles and her best friend Maya's sleeping together, Georgia finds the experience has transformed her enough to find the strength to leave her unsatisfactory marriage, as well as the affair and the friendship, seeing them all as shams she "could not but destroy" (241). For Rose and Georgia and many other Munro heroines, it is the traumatic experience of the crucible of love that changes them, and, transformed, they return to the reality they have left, but as different persons.

I think there is a psychologically valid reason for

believing that action is stimulated by a preceding sexual experience in the lives of Munro's characters. In the sexual encounter, as the character Georgia states in "Differently," the female subject experiences herself as "another woman" who is released from her everyday, objective self. This everyday self is transformed by sex to a woman "whimpering and tussling...who had been driven hard and gloriously out of her mind and drifted loose"--that is, has experienced loss of her cognitive self--and who, after sex, "gathered her wits and made her way home again" (Friend, 233), becoming an objective self again, yet one not identical to the self before the encounter. Sex seems to entail the silencing of the objective mind and the awakening, along with the body, of the intuitions; it enables a subjective, transformed way of knowing. But is is necessary to pass through desire to come out on the other side, where one's own subjectivity can be claimed.

This movement to greater self-awareness and agency through sexual experience is repeated over and over in Munro's fiction, but Lives of Girls and Women is the most detailed description in Munro's work of a young girl's coming of age and sexual and artistic awakening. Del Jordan, the protagonist, has experiences and thereby gains knowledge through family, friendship, school, and religion, but it is the adventure of her exploration of her sexuality which engages Munro most.

Although her early stages of experience with

sexuality do not in themselves make major changes in Del, they do lead step-by-step to a greater involvement in sex and sexuality, acting as conditioners necessary for the next stage. Like most children, Del is curious about sex, and, with her friend Naomi, draws pictures of men and women with grossly exaggerated genitals and reads sex-education manuals. She points out the passages in Kristen Lavransdatter where the heroine has sex and delivers her first child. Del is aware of who in her class has already had sex, and who knows about sex.

From this general interest in sex, Del moves to a more personal involvement. She has her first crush on a boy in her class, Frank Wales, when, singing the lead role in The Pied Piper, Frank is transformed for Del, who looks at him in a new light:

> I was moved by the story, and still am. I thought how separate, and powerful, and helpless and tragic a character the Pied Piper was....
>
> I loved him, I loved the Pied Piper. I loved Frank Wales. (110)

Del, seduced by scripts, has made a connection between art and sexuality: the tragic script of The Pied Piper and the cultural script of romance. Frank, as the male lead in the operetta, becomes like the Pied Piper: "separate, and powerful, and helpless and tragic," that is, beyond normal reality, unattainable. But this new realm cannot survive the return to everyday reality, for, as the

students resume their classes, Del feels it "to be a time for dispelling illusions" (117) and gradually falls out of love.

For Del, the next stage is an engagement with fantasy--in particular a rape fantasy that begins to move her towards action, transforming her experiences. Can a rape fantasy be empowering for a woman? I think it can, by allowing the experience of daemonic forces, an encounter with the Shadow, claiming all-consuming unity beyond the "world of decent appearances" (135), and serving as an initiation rite. What is important in the female rape fantasy is that control remains with the person fantasizing. In her article, "Rape Fantasies as Initiation Rite: Female Imagination in 'Lives of Girls and Women'," Juliann Fleenor states that rape can be seen as a "patriarchal metaphor for the female state," combining the "characteristics of the female consciousness and imagination, in and out of literature," namely, passivity, powerlessness and masochism (35). However, Fleenor differentiates between the patriarchal rape myth and what she calls the female rape fantasy. In the former the woman is violated against her will yet supposedly finds the penis a source of ecstasy, whilst in the latter, a woman transforms her state of powerlessness into control by controlling the fantasy. Fleenor quotes Molly Haskell: "The point of fantasy is that a woman--or any fantasizer--orders the reality within it, ordains its

terms, and censors it according to her needs" (36).

Which "needs" of the young Del Jordan are satisfied by engaging in the rape fantasy? Fleenor believes that Del's rape fantasy is the underlying structure of the novel, operating as an initiation rite--a rite of passage. Unlike those provided by culture for boys, there are no equivalent female initiation rites for girls [excepting, perhaps, the bat mitzvah], and Fleenor posits that the myths of Europa and Persephone are used instead, in which the two young women are "initiated into their cultures through the actions of the male, not the mother, through rape, abduction, and sexual intercourse" (42). In a patriarchal society women's identification is sought through their relationships with men, since "maleness is normal and healthy" and femaleness is not (37). Fleenor states:

> The rebirth ceremony (or vertical movement) is one of rape in the consciousness of the narrator, Del Jordan, and it exists within the quest for identity (or horizontal movement) of the linear narrative. In an effort to locate an identity out of the patriarchal society to which she and the men and the women of her society are confined, she uses the myth of rape as one of rebirth, and through it she achieves a wholeness which others in her society lack. The girl's rebirth is achieved through a plunge into her

> own nature, out of her restrictive society, and ironically, this rebirth is possible through the transformation of a patriarchal myth, the myth of rape. Thus, the female rape fantasy becomes a cermony of initiation. (37)

Del "tries on" elements of this rape fantasy when her mother's border, Fern Dogherty, acquires Art Chamberlain as a lover. At first Del's fantasies involve visualizations of Fern and Mr. Chamberlain together, but soon change to fantasies involving herself. After Art Chamberlain has told the household about his experiences in Florence during World War II, including being offered a young girl--"No older than Del here" (127)--by the girl's own father, Del leaves the room for the privacy of her mother's bedroom where she undresses and puts on her mother's flowered black "rayon silk" dressing gown. By the warm light of the dressing table lamp she looks at herself in the mirror and fantasizes about being a girl prostitute, feeling "endangered and desired" (127). This fantasy has elements of the female rape fantasy we have been considering, for she would be passive, not active:

> If I had been born in Italy my flesh would already be used, bruised, knowing. It would not be my fault. The thought of whoredom, not my fault, bore me outward for a moment; a restful, alluring thought, because it was so final.... (128)

In this female fantasy the male presence is necessary, but it is not necessarily that of a specific man:

> I never pictured Mr. Chamberlain's reaction. I never very clearly pictured him. His presence was essential but blurred.... (129)

Soon elements of sexual fantasy surface in Del's everyday life. Mr. Chamberlain begins to touch Del and right from the first time Del senses an element of violence in his actions. He rubs his hand against her breast "quick, hard....It was like a slap, to leave me stung" (134). This violence is like the male violence of rape. Del interprets it as "a signal" and a "violation, so perfectly sure of itself, so authoritative, clean of sentiment" (135). Although she does not actively seek his attentions, she does passively: "Next time he came I made it easy for him to do something again" (135). In this she is passive, like a rape victim, yet in control, for she acquiesces by making it "easy," like the fantasizer who controls the direction of her fantasy. Certainly she seems to have her own violation in mind, for when she gets into Mr. Chamberlain's car with him after school one day, she has "expectations of rape" (136).

Del is expectant, indeed, "violently anxious to know what would be done to [her]" (141). However, she is involved only as a spectator, as Mr. Chamberlain withdraws his penis from his pants and masturbates in front of her in his "valedictory appearance."

Del's experiences with Mr. Chamberlain have increased her knowledge and effected a change. At the conclusion of this section ("Lives of Girls and Women") Del is able to enter into a conversation with her mother almost as an equal, no longer completely the child. What has transpired to change the child into a young woman is an "initiation" in sex, although she has still not engaged in sexual intercourse. Although she has been a spectator to Mr. Chamberlain's "performance," this role is not completely passive. Viewing an action adds to a subject's knowledge and watching a sight is one way of possessing it. She has participated also by not being completely passive, for she has sought out the occasions for sexual contact with Mr. Chamberlain--has made her body avaliable for him to fondle, has gone with him in his car with her own "violation" in mind. The major factor in this development in her concept of her own subjectivity is that she has decided that she will not accept the usual overly passive female role, but will act, as men do. She resists the assumption that

> being female made you damageable, that a certain amount of carefulness and solemn fuss and self-protection were 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.

(147)

At this point Del, desirous of the experiences allowable to men, is ready for full initiation. As Fleenor writes, the female rape fantasy as initiation rite "allows the young woman to enter her society in a role of power, not powerlessness" (36).

Like Europa and Persephone, Del must be initiated by a male, in the absence of an older woman role model in her life by whom she wishes to be guided. Del's mother has rejected sex and a traditional female role as dangerous and limiting to women. She lives apart from her husband, works, is an atheist and something of a freethinker. Essentially, she is asexual. On the other hand, Mrs. French, the mother of the boy who will become Del's lover, presents a vision of a woman who manipulates the male who is simply the ostensible head of the family, and embraces the feminine role of housewife and mother. Neither of these roles is acceptable to Del, and neither woman can help her achieve her own sexuality. Therefore it is a male, Garnet French, who

> must initiate her into female sexuality. This act is her rite of initiation and a rape fantasy in two senses, abduction and sexual intercourse. She has been abducted from the world of her mother...and she has concretely experienced the joining of her two natures, the intellectual and the emotional....(Fleenor, 45).

In Garnet Del finds the lover she has hoped for, and in the slow, sensual pleasures of sex she finds "great gifts" (183). Del had anticipated "some sort of special pause before [her first act of sexual intercourse], a ceremonial beginning, like a curtain going up" (188), but the great event takes place unexpectedly. In a gently comic scene, with Del listing her various discomforts and holding Garnet's pants up to avoid detection by passers-by, they make love against the side of her house, and when he climaxes they collapse into the peony border, "coming unstuck somehow" (189) like mating dogs. But it is glorious to Del nevertheless: "I put my hand to my wet leg and it came away dark. Blood. When I saw the blood the glory of the whole episode became clear to me" (189). The blood, proving a torn hymen and loss of maidenhead, is the sign that initiation, a symbolic rebirth, has taken place, as circumcision, fresh scars, or a knocked-out tooth does for a male.

However, in spite of her sexual fulfillment, Del breaks with Garnet. Wanting to marry her, he insists that she be baptized first. Garnet thus forsakes the world of the body and returns to the authoritarianism demanded of the male in patriarchy. When Del refuses, he tries to baptize her forcibly in the river in which they have been swimming. Del is shocked:

> I felt amazement, not that I was fighting with Garnet but that anybody could have made such

> mistake, to think he had real power over me.... 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....I had never really wanted his secrets or his violence or himself taken out of the context of that peculiar and magical and, it seemed now, possibly fatal game. (197-8)

Del realizes that she does not want to be powerless, that any surrender was made only in the context of her creation, whether fantasy, daydream, or acting out with Garnet. Her fantasy and her initiation are her constructs. She has accepted the knowledge and "splendor" of her sexuality, but she will not accept the passive female role. When Garnet attempts to reify their relationship, to turn it into a conventional marriage, she renounces her love affair with him.

The experience of sexuality has empowered Del. At the end of Lives, she has lost her lover, and, because of her preoccupation with him, has lost a potential scholarship. But she has gained the experience and knowledge necessary to set out, "without fantasies or self-deception," to live her "real life," having been initiated into "the real world" of the senses, patriarchal

society and her own assumed subjectivity.

Over and over again in Munro's fiction women gain insight, knowledge, and strength from their sexual experience, and this often involves a greater reliance on self and less reliance on external authority, as in Del's choosing to follow her own "real life" instead of Garnet's, her mother's or society's expectations. Women's Ways of Knowing (Belenky, et al.) is a book which discusses the emergence of "subjective knowing" among women, a knowing which involves the turning from "objective" truth to "a new conception of truth as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited....Truth now resides within the person and can negate answers that the outside world supplies" (54). This kind of thinking parallels that represented by Munro's heroines, and, as in her fiction, this change in thinking usually prompts changes in behaviour:

> The shift into subjectivism is...a particularly significant shift for women when and if it occurs. Our reading of the women's stories [in their study] leads us to conclude that as a woman becomes more aware of the existence of inner resources for knowing and valuing,...she finds an inner source of strength. A major developmental transition follows that has repercussions in her relationships, self-concept and self-esteem, morality, and behavior.

> Women's growing reliance on their intuitive processes is...an important adaptive move in the service of self-protection, self-assertion, and self-definition. Women become their own authorities. (Belenky, et al., 54)

Belenky et al. describe the development of subjective ways of knowing as "liberating"; Munro's fictions illustrate that they are. One of the most important avenues followed by Munro's heroines after they awaken to their own subjective knowledge via the initiation of sexuality is self-representation.

Self-Representation

All representation is in a way self-representation, and the true subject of a representation is the creator of that particular discourse. Barbara Godard, in "'Heirs of the Living Body': Alice Munro and the Question of a Female Aesthetic," describes Munro "in quest of a body experienced by women as subject of their desires not as object of men's desires and of the words and literary forms appropriate to this body" (43). By the never-ending struggle to seize the complexity of one's own reality, both self and body are begotten.

Psychoanalytic theory positions the acquisition of language at the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic Order (using Lacan's terms, echoing a similar transition from Freud's pleasure principle to reality principle, or Kristeva's semiotic to symbolic). This key

transition puts language, the tool of discourse, into the hands of the newly emerging subject at a traumatic moment, for it is the Oedipal crisis, the threat of castration, that ushers the child out of the Imaginary's bliss and into the Symbolic Order (Moi, 99). The castration complex was for Freud the "focal point of the acquisition of culture" (Mitchell, 13), as it establishes the super-ego: principles of morality, law, conscience, authority, as representative of the laws of society, the Laws of the Father.

I believe this movement parallels the developing adolescent's movement from the life of the family into the wider world of culture, including sexuality. Again, the prime vehicle used is often language as the representations created in language help the subject to create his or her own subjectivity, as, for example, Del's artistic growth assists her movement in Lives from the dyad of herself and her mother into the wider world, a world more specifically defined by men, of school, church, and community life in general, and the world of sexual experience.

Del, in Lives, tries on the role of artist. She finds "comfort" in the "many created worlds" found in the library, and begins her own creative expressions as well, ranging from pornographic drawings to dancing in the school play and imitating a seal. But as well as these more public performances there is a private voice

developing, too. Around the time of her first encounters with Mr. Chamberlain, Del begins writing a poem about a peacock she has seen with Naomi. Although she does not mind sharing the experience of seeing the bird with her friend, she is put out when Naomi calls the peacock "beautiful":

> I was surprised, and a little annoyed, to hear her use the world beautiful, about something like that, and to have her remember it, because I was used to have her act in a certain way, be aware of certain things, nothing else. I had already thought, running home, that I would write a poem about the peacock. To have her thinking about it too was almost like trespassing; I never let her or anyone in that part of my mind. (134)

Here Munro shows a girl claiming creativity and aesthetics, the role of the poet, as part of her subjectivity. That she guards this so jealously--keeping it secret, and resenting that her friend may have similar feelings--testifies to her need to protect her not-yet-fully realized, emerging self. She is still trying on roles, not yet secure in them.

This role of the artistic creator which needs to be protected will soon become a role which can protect the young protagonist from the possible dangers of sexual experience. Miriam Packer's "Lives of Girls and Women: A

Creative Search for Completion" is a reading of Lives as a process of growth towards completion, and discusses in particular Del's relations with her mother and her first sexual experiences. From her mother Del learns that "it is up to us," and Del is ready to take on experiences which will help her grow. Sexuality as experienced in the episode with Mr. Chamberlain "masturbating while she watches....is a potentially damaging and frightening experience" (Packer, 140), but Del's reactions are not the stereotypical ones of horror and fright. She is detached, the observer, perhaps, as Packer suggests, "already the artist, storing the details away" (140). Although at first she wonders, "what would be done to [her]," she soon turns the episode into a performance which she watches. When Mr. Chamberlain exposes his penis, he "reached in to part some inner curtains," as he masturbates, his face is "like a mask on a stick," and he makes sounds which are "theatrical, unlikely": "In fact the whole performance... seemed imposed, fantastically and predictably exaggerated, like an Indian dance" (Lives, 141). Mr. Chamberlain's comment on this scene underlines the performer/observer nature of his and Del's relationship by not mentioning pleasure nor excitement, but saying "Quite a sight, eh?" (142). Del is unable to tell anyone about the incident:

> So I had not the relief of making what Mr. Chamberlain had done into a funny, though horrifying, story. I did not know what to do

> with it. I could not get him back to his old role.... (144)

Del says she "does not know what to do with it" but soon she realizes that she will be a writer and will know what to do with this and all sorts of other material. Here she is representative of a Foucauldian subject constructing herself through discourses (her own and society's) as through representation and especially self-representation she defines herself and her role in the world. Even her own part in her affair with Garnet will be objectified

> I talked to myself about myself, saying she. She is in love. She has just come in from being with her lover. She has given herself to her lover. Seed runs down her legs.

Feminists believe that the patriarchal structure of relations can be dislocated, "that other social and psychic structures are not only possible but desirable" (Garner, et al., 16). For example, Biddy Martin, in "Feminism, Criticism, and Foucault," also considers how one may "rewrite the script" so that those usually disadvantaged may be empowered, those at the margins may claim a little of the centre. The connection of power to language and representation is important in Munro's work, as "acts of power" exhorting obedience to social norms are questioned and new "acts of power" are set forth, claiming a different kind of power for the female subject. As Martin claims, "it is possible to grasp and restructure

the organization of our bodies, psyches, and lives through discourse" (10). This engagement with "acts of power" is particularly well represented by Del's break with Garnet, a giant step in the development of her own subjective power. Del actively rejects the passive female role that society, through Garnet, attempts to force on her, and instead claims her very own "real life," a representation coloured by other representations she has seen of "girls in movies" (Lives, 201). What has caused Del to be able to reject one "act of power" and replace it with another? I believe it is because she has grown through experience. Experience, Teresa de Lauretis writes in Technologies of Gender, is the process by which (for all social beings) subjectivity is constructed; it is one's engagement with social reality, which for women centrally includes social relations of gender (19). Ironically, the strong subjective self which Del has developed in her own self-represenation and which has empowered her to leave Garnet, has been developed through her experience of her sexual awakening with him.

De Lauretis also discusses Althusser's theory of "ideological interpellation" in relation to gender. Ideological interpellation is the process whereby a social representation is accepted and absorbed by an individual as her or his own representation (12). Social representations include such "technologies" as film (de Lauretis's field of expertise) and fiction (such as Alice

Munro's). Thus creative work has the possibility of reinforcing cultural norms by presenting representations in accordance with them, or of undercutting those norms by alternative representations. This engagement is exemplified by Del who, in Lives, learns in many respects how to be a woman through her wide reading, including sex manuals, historical romances, and Victorian poetry. But there comes a time when the absorption of representations is not enough and she must write her own book, that is, must influence representation by her engagement with it, her shaping of reality. In "Epilogue: The Photographer," Del turns from the created worlds of others to her own.

> A time came when all the books in the library in the Town Hall were not enough for me, I had to have my own. I saw that the only thing to do with my life was to write a novel. (203)

By writing, Del hopes to define her own subjectivity more precisely. Barbara Godard, in "'Heirs of the Living Body': Alice Munro and the Question of a Female Aesthetic," describes the different types of writing practiced by the men and the women in Lives and shows Del as wanting to make a synthesis of the two, combining the objective "writing of history" of her Uncle Craig with subjective writing "controlled by the creative imagination, not reduced to a chronicle of facts" (56-6). Unlike her mother, Del will not divorce the personal from the political: "She must free her body from such symbols

that would divide her into parts, finding a new wholeness" (66). During her affair with Garnet and after her break with him, Del has reclaimed "her own body, experiencing it as subject" (67) and has begun to shape a new language, which will serve her art. The "beginnings of Del's aesthetic are sexual," for Del has claimed her sexuality and "as female produces fiction marked by that sexuality" (70). Active sexuality is a powerful liberating force for women because its "rite of passage" prepares the way for other forms of creative self-expression, particularly those such as writing, which, like sexuality, straddle both semiotic inspiration and symbolic representation.

Representation is not wholly positive in Munro's oeuvre, however. For one thing, representation is never full presence. For example, in Lives, Del begins to write her novel, basing the characters on a local family, but modifying that reality:

> I picked on the Sherriff Family to write it about....I changed the family name....The mother I could keep....I moved them out of their house....I...got rid of the older brother (203-4).

But by the end of the book Del, speaking from years later, will one day want everything, not to pick and choose from, but to recreate Jubilee:

> I would try to make lists. A list of all the stores and businesses going up and down the main

> street...a list of family names, names on the tombstones in the cemetery...titles of movies...Names on the cenotaph....Names of the streets and the pattern they lay in.
>
> The hope of accuracy we bring to such tasks is crazy, heartbreaking.
>
> 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. (210)

In a similar manner, in "The Office," (Dance), the protagonist, a woman writer, presents other imperfections of representation, together with the difficulty of the writing life for a woman. She rents a room to write in from a certain Mr. Malley. She does this largely because of the conflict she feels between her roles as "woman" and "writer" when she is working in her home Munro presents a strong sense of identification between the woman and her house, any woman and her house, which is contrasted to the different way a man inhabits a house:

> 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 itself as best it can around him. Everybody recognizes that his work exists....He can shut his door.

> Imagine (I said) a mother shutting her door, and the children knowing she is behind it; why, the very thought of it is outrageous to them. A woman who sits staring into space, into a country that is not her husband's or her children's is likewise known to be an offence against nature. So a house is not the same for a woman....She is the house; there is no separation possible. (60)

Here the woman protagonist is shown trying to make a space for her art by delineating how a woman, in being identified with her house, is identified through her social roles as wife and mother, roles which she has internalized, thus making her, in her wish to write, a house divided. Both the house and the roles confine, but both also shelter: it is not a simple thing to wish to be free of, it is a tender trap. The protagonist has said no separation from the house is possible, yet she tries, thereby making a place in her life that is only for her art. However, soon her calm enjoyment of her office is disturbed by Mr. Malley's interruptions, as he tells her of his own and other peoples' lives, supposing these things will interest her--as a writer? as a woman?--or perhaps with the wish she will write his life story. His gossip is usually "filthy," for "[w]riting and lewdness had a vague delicious connection in his mind" (67). (This vague connection could be the shared characteristic of

attempting to bridge the gap between this world and the "other country" of the Imaginary.) When she refuses to spend more of her time listening to him, he begins to invent stories about her and imaginary friends, culminating in stating that she or they have scrawled obscenities and drawn lewd drawings all over the walls of her washroom. She leaves the office, but she cannot forget the picture she has of Mr. Malley, the picture, she says,

> that I see so clearly in my mind, though I never saw it in reality--Mr. Malley with his rags and brushes and a pail of soapy water, scrubbing in his clumsy way, his deliberately clumsy way, at the toilet walls, stooping with difficulty, breathing sorrowfully, arranging in his mind the bizarre but somehow never quite satisfactory narrative of yet another betrayal of trust. While I arrange words, and think it is my right to be rid of him. (74)

In this disturbing picture Munro has made an equation between her work and the sordid fictionalizing of Mr. Malley. Her fiction also is an "arrangement" of the stuff of reality that distorts that reality as much as Mr. Malley's narratives do. Mr. Malley's narratives are "never quite satisfactory," as desire is never satisfied, and her fictions will likewise never completely satisfy her, as language can never seize full presence. (Compare

this to Del's "crazy, heartbreaking" attempt to capture the reality of Jubilee.) The uneasiness of the woman/writer conflict continues even when the choice to write has been made, for this choice is not made once and for all. In the end, the writer abandons her office and retreats to her home, capitulating to social demands (of which she has not yet been able to be free), again to engage with the conflict between being a woman and being a writer, to struggle to represent herself as a being who can combine the two.

Munro's fiction also comments on the writing self in stories where the protagonist is not the writer. For example, "Material," from the collection Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You, is the story of a woman whose ex-husband, Hugo, is a writer. She encounters a new story of his in which a character based on their old neighbour, Dotty, appears. At first she feels the story is "honest," adding she has been moved by "good tricks. Lovely tricks, honest tricks."

> There is Dotty lifted out of life and held in light, suspended in the marvelous clear jelly that Hugo has spent all his life learning how to make. It is an act of magic...an act, you might say, of a special unsparing, unsentimental love. A fine and lucky benevolence. Dotty.... has passed into Art. It doesn't happen to everybody. (35)

This commentary on how art works is not confined only to Hugo but to all artists, male and female, in general. But not only has art failed to grasp the full presence of the person or event being portrayed, Munro's protagonist objects to the use of people and their lives as mere grist --"material"--for the fiction mill. When she sits down to write to Hugo, she writes "short jabbing sentences": "This is not enough, Hugo. You think it is, but it isn't. You are mistaken, Hugo." Again the gap between reality and the language that strives to capture it is present. Hugo has been called a "moral idiot" by his wife because of the very real difficulties that he caused Dotty when they were living in the same building. The protagonist sees that the details of life, "all scraps and oddments, useless baggage" for her, have been transformed by Hugo; they are "ripe and usable, a paying investment, for him" (36). Her complaint has been that Hugo does not "realize" things, that he will make a "mess" in other people's lives and just walk away--that is, in his concern with fictionalizing he does not consider the effects of his actions on the full presence of Dotty, or his ex-wife, and that has harmed both women. Munro seems to extend this criticism to all writers. (Jessie, in "Jesse and Meribeth" (Progress), also deforms the details of her life and others' lives for her own amusement and also as a way in which to write a new script for her life containing some of the sexual power she longs for: "I am seeing the

power of my own lies, my own fantasy." (249).)

Another account of the way in which representation grasps reality only imperfectly is given in "Friend of My Youth" (Friend). The protagonist hears stories about her mother's early womanhood, in particular the story of a woman named Flora who had lived a life of seeming sacrifice for her sister, her brother-in-law (who was her own fiancé previously), and the nurse who marries him when her sister dies. The protagonist's mother believes she could write a novel based on Flora's life, and she would call it The Maiden Lady. The protagonist rejects this:

> I could see what she would do with Flora, what she had already done. She would make her into a noble figure, one who accepts defection, treachery, who forgives and stands aside, not once but twice....
>
> That is what I believed my mother would make of things. (19-20)

But the protagonist's quarrel with her mother is not about tampering with another's life, but about her interpretation of Flora's story, for she has her "own ideas about Flora's story":

> I didn't think that I could have written a novel but that I would write one. I would take a different tack....My Flora would be as black as hers was white....A Presbyterian witch, reading out of her poisonous books. (20-21)

Later, her mother receives a letter from "the real Flora," a letter surprising in its normality, with no trace of the drama she has reportedly lived through. The protagonist imagines meeting Flora and telling her she knows her story. But Flora shakes her head, for "she is weary of it, of me and my idea of her, my information, my notion that I can know anything about her" (26). In this story four versions--the first-told reminiscence, the mother's interpretation, the daughter's interpretation, Flora's letter--are offered as the truth, so many truths. One suspects there are as many stories as there are tellers.

All of these uses of representation, whether positive or negative, are instances of self-representation. The material of reality that is shaped in stories told represents who the speaker is more than it represents the ostensible "subjects." Thus Mr. Malley represents, by projection, a part of the woman narrator, which leads her to examine her own practice. Likewise, the narrator in "Friend of My Youth" understands that the differing ways her mother and she would shape the story of Flora reflect <u>their</u> differing views of reality--not Flora's view--and also the different notions prevalent in their specific historical times. The true subject of these fictions is the speaker, the creator of the discourse, and to the speaker goes the added power of the insight gained and self-assertion exercised in these acts of representation.

Desire

Sexual desire--its appearance, command, disruptiveness, force--is a major theme in much of Munro's work. It is desire that moves our engagement with sexuality beyond the purely physiological, instinctual basis of sex, that makes our experience of sex uniquely human. According to psychoanalytic theory, desire is formed from lack, during the Oedipal crisis. The castration complex experienced at this time is also tied to the creation of the unconscious. The loss of the mother's body, the loss of the experience of being with her, and the resultant desire for her body are repressed by the child (the "primary repression"), a repression which opens the unconscious. Previously, there had been no unconscious since there was no lack. Thus the foundation of desire in our lives is both central and powerful.

It is not surprising that everyone tries to fill this lack, this wanting. Social constructions and discourses posit sexual desire as the main venue for satisfaction, but within this, the specific objects of desire remain contingent. Thus the object of one's affection could be male or female, young or old, of any hue or cast, suitable or not. It is just necessary that there be an object to receive the subject's desire.

Two kinds of socially or culturally constructed types of love are defined by Munro in "Hard-Luck Stories"

(Moons):

> There's the intelligent sort of love that makes an intelligent choice. That's the kind you're supposed to get married on. Then there's the kind that's anything but intelligent, that's like possession. And that's the one, that's the one, everybody really values. That's the one nobody wants to have missed out on. (195)

The kind no one wants to miss is the kind generated not by friendship, is not "in one's best interests...doesn't have anything to do with normal preferences" (195), but is generated and fueled only by sexual desire. In "Mischief" (Who), Rose, thinking of the two kinds of love, takes comfort when she feels criticized by her friend Jocelyn or her neighbors in the thought of the second kind of love: "She thought of love....She was loved, not in a dutiful, husbandly way but crazily, adulterously, as Jocelyn and her neighbors were not" (126-27). Rose's passion for Clifford is kept at a high pitch by lack, in the frustration of their efforts to consummate their relationship. When they finally arrange to meet in another town, Rose arrives to find Clifford has changed his mind: "he looked as if he had shed a skin, and it was the skin that had hankered after hers" (124). Rose suffers acutely from this rejection. When they finally do have sex, years later, with his wife present and consenting, the sex is not a consummation of desire, but an

event which again opens lack, therefore desire, in Rose's life. "She found...that cold and hurtful need, which for a while she had been free of....She felt that they had made a fool of her, cheated her, shown her a glaring lack" (134-5). Munro shows that although desire is compelling, it is never satisfied and never completely satisfying.

Munro illustrates the shifting nature of the locus of desire in "Postcard" (Dance). Halvard Dahlie's "Unconsummated Relationships: Isolation and Rejection in Alice Munro's Stories" discusses Clare and Helen's on-going affair in this story and cites "incomprehensibility" as a characteristic of the character Helen. I believe that this is, rather, a characteristic of desire itself, not of any one character. When Helen begins seeing Clare, on the rebound from an unhappy romance, she tells him friendship is all she can offer. Although they have sex, it is without desire on her part.

> The fuss he made at first made me sorry for him. I used to look down at his round balding head and listen to all his groaning and commotion and think, what can I do now except be polite? He didn't expect anything more of me, never expected anything, but just to lie there and let him, and I got used to that. (135)

Clare marries another woman, who presumably returns his affection, and Helen drives to his home to confront him. Clare tells her simply: "'Go on home.' That was all he

meant to say", and Helen realizes he will not give her an explanation--perhaps cannot, for desire is no doubt incomprehensible for him, too. Lack triggers her desire: "right now, seeing Clare MacQuarrie as an unexplaining man, I felt for the first time that I wanted to reach out my hands and touch him" (146). This is a perfect example of showing desire as the product of lack. As long as Clare has been "available," Helen has not been interested in him sexually. It is only when she lacks him that she desires him.

The pull of desire and its contingent nature in choice of object is also shown by Munro as operating on the very young in the same intense and irrational way as it does on adults. "Privilege" (Who) presents a picture of desire that has not yet been socially directed into heterosexual love. Rose is obsessed with Cora, one of the "three big girls" at school: "She was tall, solid, womanly....she was splendid at the moment" (31-2). Munro does not dismiss this love as a childish crush but specifically identifies it as sexual:

> There was some sharpness lacking, some urgency missing; there was the incidental difference in the sex of the person chosen; otherwise it was the same thing, the same thing that has overtaken Rose since. The high tide; the indelible folly; the flash flood. (34)

Likewise, in "The Turkey Season" (Moons) Munro again

reinforces the link between desire and lack, and shows how desire will find "unsuitable" objects.

An important story regarding this shifting object of desire is "Lichen" (Progress). David, a mature man, an ageing man, is visiting his ex-wife, Stella, at her home overlooking Lake Huron, in the company of his current lover, Catherine. At the same time he is preoccupied with thoughts of Dina, with whom he has begun an affair. One man is thus presented with three objects of his desire. One of the attractions of Dina for David seems to be her youth. That he is concerned with losing his is expressed from the opening of the story. When he arrives at Stella's place he sees her stepping out of the blackberry bushes, "a short fat, white-haired woman, wearing jeans and a dirty T-shirt. There is nothing underneath these clothes, as far as he can see, to support or restrain any part of her" (42). His "fuming" response to the sight of her is, "She's turned into a troll" (43). Presumably he still feels an identification with his ex-wife, and, as he knows they are of the same generation, Catherine's identification of Stella as "an older woman" cannot be pleasing to him.

Catherine, Munro reveals, is younger than Stella. When David first met her the previous year he believed she was "a little over thirty....She has aged since then. And she was older than he thought to start with--she is nearing forty" (44). Although she was young enough for him

then, she is not young enough now. Dina is only twenty-two.

For David, the lack of his youth is the lack that prompts his desire, that kindles the passions involved in the primal lack. When Stella and he matured, he separated from her. Catherine attracted him with her remnants of "girlishness," but seeing her true age, and his true age reflected in knowing her (she knows he dyes his hair, for example), he wants to leave her, too. Dina, however, is so youthful she still plays with wind-up toys, and "she has betrayed him. She betrays him all the time" (65). The fact that she is not dependent upon him for her happiness, as Catherine is, the fact that she is in some ways (in her youth and sexual liberty) unavailable to him, increases his desire.

David realizes that he is involved with the second kind of love. "Real love--that would be going on living with Stella, or taking on Catherine" (65):

> David knows what he's doing. This is the interesting part of it, he thinks, and has said. He knows that Dina is not really so wild, or so avid, or doomed, as he pretends she is, or as she sometimes pretends she is. In ten years' time, she won't be wrecked by her crazy life, she won't be a glamorous whore. She'll be a woman tagged by little children in the laundromat....He knows that sooner or later, if

> Dina allows her disguise to crack, as Catherine did, he will have to move on. He will have to do that anyway--move on.
>
> He knows all this and observes himself, and such knowledge and observation has no effect at all on his quaking gut, zealous sweat glands, fierce prayers. (65-6)

Such knowledge can have no effect since it can never effect the primordial absence which gives rise to desire. David, like others, will go on moving ceaselessly from object to object, never finding complete satisfaction. This is true even in cases like this one, where the subject is acutely aware of the dynamics behind his changing desires.

Desire will be always attractive, irresistably so, but also can never be fully satisfactory. Munro represents this over and over in her fiction. One passage in Lives in particular could be her definitive metaphor for David's desire for his various women, or Et's for her sister's husband in "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You," or Clifford's desire in "Mischief," or for many, many other examples in Munro's work, revealing the attraction--the short-lived attraction--of desire:

> Along the edge of the water, on both sides, were carpets of lily leaves spread out, and here and there a yellow water lily, looking so pale, tranquil, and desirable....Brought to shore, the

> flowers seemed coarse and rank and began to die immediately. I walked on forgetting about them, mashing the petals in my fist. (37)

Lining Up as Male or Female

It always startles me how vehemently people react to the sight of a person on the street--usually young, slim, long haired, wearing jeans--whose gender is not immediately discernible. They are distressed not to be able to tell male from female because without this vital piece of information they don't know how to speak to or act towards--him? Her? They are angered to encounter people who are not definitely "lined up" as either male or female. Such blurring of boundaries in those who are not unequivocally "masculine" or "feminine" suggests that these distinctions are neither "natural" nor fixed. The formation of the human subject is formed through his or her sexuality, which in turn is constructed in language--something outside of the person, not arising within, something that comes to him or her from the speech of other persons.

The assumption of gender is not without its difficulties, as Freud has indicated. Hallvard Dahlie's "Unconsummated Relationships: Isolation and Rejection in Alice Munro's Stories" states that the tensions or conflicts in Munro's short stories are dramatized as "unconsummated relationships" in various forms. Unconsummated relationships can be represented by structural

devices such as narrative strategies which undercut traditional narratives--this will be discussed in Chapter II. Other unconsummated relationships grow out of the "tensions and conflicts" inherent in the assumption of gender roles. For example, the beginning of understanding of gender differences leads the young protagonist of "Boys and Girls" to learn exactly where that differentiation will position her in society. What Dahlie calls her "temporary triumph," her moment of emancipation, forever cuts the young girl off from the male world she had previously been so at home in. She will henceforth be condemned, not good enough, "only a girl." Munro indicates that this "lining up" is not without difficulty, ambivalence or pain for the female subject. In this story the protagonist makes the change from being a "child" to being a "girl," with all the social baggage that entails. She is proud that she is helpful to her father; when he refers to her when talking to a feed salesman as "my new hired man," this causes her to become "red in the face with pleasure" (116). However, the salesman, who doesn't know anything of the particularity of her situation (her usefulness), dismisses her with, "I thought it was only a girl." She enjoys working with her father, attending to the foxes he raises, but hates "the hot dark kitchen" where her mother works, regarding her mother's work negatively, her father's positively: "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). The girl feels that her mother is "plotting" to get her into the house more, away from her father, and that this plotting extends to others, too.

> It seemed that in the minds of the people around me there was a steady undercurrent of thought, not to be deflected, on this one subject. The word girl has formerly seemed to me innocent and unburdened, like the word child; now it appeared that it was no such thing. 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. Also it was a joke on me. (119)

This being defined through the speech of other persons echoes Althusser's "interpellation" by which a subject takes on the attributes others see in him or her. And, indeed, the protagonist's sense of self does begin to change.

The girl's feelings towards her father are modified after she witnesses his shooting a horse for fox feed: "there was a new wariness, a sense of holding-off, in my attitude to my father and his work" (124). Another indicator of her shift in her conception of herself is in the stories she tells herself at night before she falls asleep. At first her stories are showcases for her

actions, but later, just a little older, when she begins to make her bedroom "fancy," the stories change to depictions of her being rescued, details of her dress, and so on, and "the real excitement of the story was lost" (126). The passivity that is a growing girl's lot is reflected as the protagonist reshapes her narrative, and thereby herself, to fit the demands of social expectations, and a world narrowing with limitations.

The act that finally positions her as a "girl" is opening the gate so that another horse, a mare, Flora, can escape, when her father is attempting to shoot her. The protagonist knows this act will alienate her from her father, for "when my father found out about it he was not going to trust me any more; he would know that I was not entirely on his side (125)". Yet she cannot do otherwise: "I did not regret it; when she came running at me and I held the gate open, that was the only thing I could do" (125). She tries, however futilely, to aid in the escape of one female into freedom. When her father learns the truth, he at first makes "a curt sound of disgust"--as he might when any trusted person let him down. But when she begins to cry, he treats her like any female:

> "Never mind," my father said. He spoke with resignation, even good humour, the words which absolved and dismissed me for good. "She's only a girl," he said.
>
> I didn't protest that, even in my heart.

Maybe it was true. (127)

Although in many ways the girl's diminution has been painful, Munro does not oversimplify. There is also a positive note in choosing not to side with those who slaughter, those who, like her younger brother Laird can callously say, "We shot old Flora...and cut her up in fifty pieces" (127). And even this note is modified, for the girl realizes that her father kills to produce a livelihood for his family. The previously distrusted mother is also shown to have similarities to the girl when she tells Laird, "I don't want to hear about it" [the death of Flora] (127), hinting perhaps that tacitly she would agree with the girl's decision. But in all this complexity Munro states clearly that being identified as a girl has "absolved and dismissed" her "for good" from an important part, an active part, of life. Certainly Munro represents the "lining up" as feminine as complex and problematic.

In many of Munro's stories there is often a distinction made between traditional "male" and "female" roles, with the male ones represented as intrusive. It may be presented as the actual "intrusion" of male work and the male presence into the house, the latter often seen in Munro's work as a female space, which is populated by various female dyads. The "intrusion" may also be represented by authoritarian, legalistic social structures--institutions such as school or church--within

which Munro's heroines have to function.

Many other young protagonists in Munro's fiction also experience difficulty assuming the socially sanctioned "feminine" role. In "Baptizing," Del extends her experience of sex and sexuality by going with Naomi to a dance hall, where they dance with men, go with them to a hotel room, tell jokes, and drink too much, all in an effort to "fit in." Later, drunk, Del walks out on everyone and goes home where she sleeps on the porch and is sick the next morning. She has "a sense of failure and relief" (161) and dreams of a life removed from such a crass reality: "I dreamed a nineteenth-century sort of life, walks and studying, rectitude, courtesy, maidenhood, peacefulness" (161). She is not interested in the "normal life" of people like Naomi, "that complicated feminine order": "I was not going to be able to do it" (161). Her "failure and relief" relate to the "feminine" role, that "solemn fuss," not to the physical experience of sex, the idea of which she welcomes. Del experiences complex emotions regarding a social order within which she has wished to succeed--or feels she must succeed--and "relief" at being free from it all, feeling liberated through her very failure. This foreshadows her rejection of traditional roles by rejecting Garnet's demand that she be baptized, in order to marry him. Although she is ambivalent about marriage and children, wanting and not wanting them, she definitely does not want them on the

traditional terms of society.

While Del in Lives kicks against the pricks, the protagonist in "Red Dress-1946" first tries to avoid and then to meet societal expectations for girls, and comes to greater self-realization and growth through her initiation into femininity. Her school "was full of the tension and excitement of sexual competition, and in this, in spite of daydreams of vast successes, [she] had premonitions of total defeat" (150-1). She tries to avoid having to attend an important school dance by trying to catch a cold. On the day of the dance she does her hair in curlers for the first time, wanting "the protection of all possible female rituals," thus taking a step towards engaging in sexual competition. Yet, ambivalently, she longs "to be back safe behind the boundaries of childhood" (151).

At the end of the story the protagonist has a special insight into the nature of the mother-daughter relationship. There is a continuity of the relationship between the mother and the female child which is unlike the separation necessary between mother and male child. Thus daughter and mother continue to identify with one another and the mother treats her daughter as an extension of herself, not an independent individual. This make the daughter say she has an "obligation" to be happy, to succeed somehow in "the ordinary world," not to make her mother unhappy. This is something she fears will be

difficult, for the dance has shown her that a girl is passive, and must be "rescued" by a boy. Yet she has also seen at this dance that there can be "self respect" and "plans" and that there is a possibility of living her own life without waiting for anyone to choose her. The girl is attracted to both these scripts. Munro's presentation of the conflicting desires of the developing girl skillfully shows the difficulties of "lining up" as feminine.

Another girl who does not want to disappoint her mother is Del, in Lives. Del finds her Uncle Craig "restful" because of his "masculine self-centredness" (26). Although he may disapprove of Del, she claims "[h]e himself was not hurt or diminished in any way by my unsatisfactoriness....This was the great difference between disappointing him and disappointing somebody like my mother, or even my aunts" (25-6). The expectations of women for their girls are tied in with the validation of their own lives. To move too far away from their mothers' world is in a way to deny the mother, causing pain to the mother, guilt and pain in the daughter.

The differing ways in which males and females line up in their social roles is reflected in Del's aunts' expectations of men and women's work.

> They respected men's work beyond anything; they also laughed at it. This was strange; they could believe absolutely in its importance and

> at the same time convey their judgment that it was, from one point of view, frivolous, non-essential. And they would never, never meddle with it; between men's work and women's work was the clearest line drawn, and any stepping over this line, any suggestion of stepping over it, they would meet with such light, amazed, regretfully superior, laughter. (27)

Because Uncle Craig is a writer and Del wishes to be, she is in a way stepping over the line, or at least straddling it, for her mother, too, is a writer of sorts, firing off letters to the local paper or bucolic descriptions to the city newspaper. Barbard Godard, as previously mentioned, describes Del as attempting a synthesis of these objective and subjective forms of writing, thus keeping the place of woman, yet extending it into the realm of men. Thus Del, on reading an article about different male and female habits of thought, learns to her dismay, according to a famous psychiatrist, that when a boy and girl look at the moon, "[t]he boy thinks of the universe, its immensity and mystery; the girl thinks, 'I must wash my hair'" (150). Del is "frantically upset":

> It was clear to me at once that I was not thinking as the girl thought; the full moon would never as long as I lived remind me to wash my hair....I wanted men to love me, and I wanted to think of the universe when I looked at the

> moon. I felt trapped, stranded; it seemed there had to be a choice where there couldn't be a choice. (150)

Del feels something is trying to "bite" her when she sees magazine articles with such titles as "Femininity--It's Making a Comeback!" or "Is Your Problem that You're Trying To Be a Boy?" It has "never occurred" to her "to want to be a boy" (151); she feels she wants both sides of experience, but she feels the pressures of society to line up unambivalently as feminine.

In a similar way, in "The Beggar Maid" (Who), Rose falls into the romantic object role expected of women. She is chosen by Patrick, a wealthy man, to be his wife, but she is ambivalent about the role: "It was a miracle; it was a mistake. It was what she had dreamed of; it was not what she wanted" (79-80). Like Del, Rose wants it all. But she falls into social roles: "She dimpled and sparkled and turned herself into a fiancée with no trouble at all" (91), and her role-playing eventually leads her into a disastrous marriage with Patrick. Because of women's conditioning to build their lives around men, she has not developed any alternative to the social role:

> she did not know how to do without his love and his promise to look after her; she was frightened of the world and she had not been able to think up any other plan for herself. (97)

Conflict in accepting social roles for women sometimes has very unhappy consequences in Munro's fiction. Almeda Joynt Roth, the protagonist of "Meneseteung" (Friend), a story unusually for Munro set in the nineteenth century, is a writer, a "poetess," and thus has thought of a "plan" for herself beyond social expectations. However, when Almeda rejects the societal expectation of women's dependence on men by refusing to marry, she is subject to great pressure. She turns to poetry but fails in her desire to encompass all in her writing as a way of bearing all, and sinks into madness. As a nineteenth-century heroine Almeda is ultimately defeated in her attempt to challenge social roles and her story stands as a testimony to the costs taken on such women who resist. In the following chapter, different, and more enabling, ways of dealing with inherited roles will be examined.

CHAPTER II

FORMAL CONSIDERATIONS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF SEXUALITY

Form follows function.

--Louis Sullivan

Form in literature is generally thought of as the manner in which the work is composed as distinct from what it is about. My epigraph suggests that what a work is about determines what form is used, and that there is therefore less difference in "form" and "content" than that binary division would suggest. This is particularly the case in the fiction of Alice Munro where much of her message is in her medium. Thus the formal aspects I will discuss in this chapter under the large divisions of "plot" and "poetics of place" also engage directly with the function of Munro's fiction.

The Plots of Munro's Fictions

Munro wants the male-female relationship to succeed, and doesn't so much posit alternatives as modifications to the basic plot of romance. She wants the "fulfillment" of couple-based heterosexuality--within marriage, or outside it--but she wants it with the Bildung (narrative of education) or Künstlerroman (narrative of the artist) plot as well. This is her ideal; in practice she most oftens subverts the romance plot by denying its "proper" resolution in marriage, by preferring the Bildung plot instead, or by undercutting the resolution by a marriage

to a "wrong" or "different" character.

Plot is not merely a question of mechanics; it has the hightest importance in expressing the meaning of a story. Jane Rule has stated, "Plot is morality" (class visit, 19 October 1987). By this she means there is a political and moral design, as well as aesthetic considerations, in setting up the parameters of fiction. The main plots of women's fiction (and much of men's) involve romance and marriage, and these are concerns central to Munro's fiction. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in Writing Beyond the Ending, positions the romance plot, marriage plot and quest plot as structural forms within the larger field of narrative discourse. These narrative structures are

> like working apparatuses of ideology, factories for the 'natural' and 'fantastic' meanings by which we live. Here are produced and disseminated the assumptions, the conflicts, the patterns that create fictional boundaries for experience. Indeed, narrative may function on a small scale the way that ideology functions on a large scale.... (3)

While the ends of patrocentric society may have been served by the conventional resolutions to romance plots, the ends of the heroines involved in these plots have been subverted by their co-optation into marriage. DuPlessis, identifying narrative structure as "the place where ideology is coiled," identifies some of the constraints

placed on women by that ideology:

> As a narrative pattern, the romance plot muffles the main female character, represses quest, valorizes heterosexual as opposed to homosexual ties, incorporates individuals within couples as a sign of their personal and narrative success. The romance plot separates love and quest, values sexual asymmetry....In short, the romance plot, broadly speaking, is a trope for the sex-gender system as a whole. (5)

The necessity for this control and shaping of a woman's story to fit the dominant social mores is explained by Freudian theory, in which "normal femininity" is the desired resolution to the oedipal crisis. This "bears an uncanny resemblance to the nineteenth-century endings of narrative, in which the female hero becomes a heroine and in which the conclusion of a valid love plot is the loss of any momentum of quest" (DuPlessis, 35). The qualities of the female hero--"defiance, activity, selfishness, heroic action, and identification with other women"--are the very qualities that must be suppressed or denied by the woman seeking "normal femininity" (35). Munro's numerous examples of unhappy and unfulfilled women caught in "normal femininity" who find the role binding echo Freud's acknowledgment that the difficulties involved for women in the movement from the "bisexual" preoedipal stage to "normal femininity" may not be easily resolved.

For women the oedipal crisis, with periods of alternation between identification with males or with females, can "follow an individual woman right into adulthood. Or, to say it another way, the 'feminine' or 'correct' resolution of women's gender identity comes easily unstuck and cannot be counted on" (DuPlessis, 36). This precarious "progress" is shored up by cultural technologies such as narrative fiction. "Freud," writes DuPlessis

> suggests a massive slippage of effectiveness, so that the learning of the rules of gender may need a good deal of extrafamilial reinforcement, especially where the girl is concerned.... education as an institution of gender, and culture as a whole, including literary products like narrative, channel the girl into dominant structures of the sex-gender system. The romance plot in narrative thus may be seen as a necessary extension of the processes of gendering.... (38, emphasis added)

The narratives of nineteenth-century fiction are structures that survive into our own age, and thus bear examining. "Once upon a time, the end, the rightful end, of women in novels was social--successful courtship, marriage--or judgmental of her sexual and social failure--death. These are both resolutions of romance" (DuPlessis, 1). In Duplessis' "once upon a time," the nineteenth century, novels about women did often attempt a

combination of the romance plot and the quest or Bildung plot. Although the main body of the narrative may be taken up with the combination of these plots, the resolution often smooths over the contradiction inherent in the two plots by providing an ending which subsumes the quest element under the romance element. Either the heroine marries, or she dies. In either way, the quest is over. These nineteenth-century conventions grew out of eighteenth-century practice regarding women's "ability to negotiate with sexuality and kinship; death is caused by inabilities or improprieties in this negotiation, a way of deflecting attention from man-made social norms to cosmic sanctions" (DuPlessis, 4). Thus God the Father was called in on the side of men. DuPlessis draws on Nancy Miller's exploration of

> the poles governing the heroine's ascent and integration into society and her descent into death. The 'euphoric' pole, with its ending in marriage, is a successful integration with society, in which the gain is both financial and romantic success in the 'heterosexual contract'; the 'dysphoric' pole, with an ending in death, is a betrayal by male authority and aggression. (4)

These conventions were not acquiesced to without some defiant resistance. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic details the reactions to these

limiting narratives. In this study the authors make a case for nineteenth-century women's writing as being essentially revolutionary in its attempts to rewrite the dominant images of femininity which are derived from male fantasy and creativity. Gilbert and Gubar state that writing was seen as a phallic activity, and creativity itself as male. Therefore representations of women were considered male-posited: binary opposites of the "monster" (sexual, willful women engaged in "male" activites) and the "angel" (chaste, selfless and restrained women). Gilbert and Gubar contend that women writers felt an anxiety regarding authorship, because they had internalized the idea that creativity is a male prerogative. The "rage" of these authors was represented by the figure of the "Madwoman" who stood in as an author's double. Th ·gh images of confinment and escape nineteenth-century women writers expressed the female impulse to struggle free from social and artistic containment through redefinitions of self, art and society. I have reservations about Gilbert and Gubar's essentially static analysis of women's struggles, and their model of action and reaction--what men do to women, then how women react--but they are nevertheless valuable in revealing the tradition of women's revolt.

This tradition of revolt has survived into the twentieth century (including the fiction of Alice Munro), often expressed in the alteration of plots. "To change

stories", writes DuPlessis, "signals a dissent from social norms as well as narrative forms" (20). She identifies some of the ways twentieth-century writers have delegitimized the nineteenth-century plots:

> These strategies involve reparenting in invented families, fraternal-sororal ties temporarily reducing romance, and emotional attachment to women in bisexual love plots, female bonding and lesbianism....inventing narratives that offer, in the multiple individual and the collective protagonist, an alternative to individual quests and couple formation. (xi)

These strategies are evident in writers such as Toni Morrison or Alice Walker, but in Alice Munro's fiction these themes (invented families, brother-sister ties, female bonding, etc.) usually apply to secondary characters, such as the "maiden aunts" or "widowed sisters." These forms of living, although sketched as valid, are generally assumed by default, as substitutes for marriage. Her real subversions are her underminings of the romance plot, and the following pages will cite examples from several of her works which illustrate this argument. First I indicate some of her many representations of the "failure" of the marriage plot, by showing other plots as more desirable, or subverting the romantic plot by changing its ending. I will then consider Munro's attempts to meld artistic vocation and

love by combining the Bildungsroman or Künstlerroman with the romance plot. In my final section dealing with plot I will illustrate how even when Munro allows the consummation of heterosexual romance, it is undercut as privileged resolution by betrayal or lack of fulfillment.

Failures of the Marriage Plot

In the "Princess Ida" section of Lives, Del listens to her mother's stories of her youth, centering on the difficulties she overcame in order to get a high school education, such as escaping from a domineering father and working for her keep in a boarding house. Her mother is quite caught up in her own Bildung:

> my mother could not help, could never help, being thrilled and tender, recalling this; she was full of wonder at her old, young self. Oh, if there could be a moment out of time, a moment when we could choose to be judged, naked as can be, beleaguered, triumphant, then that would have to be the moment for her. (65)

The fate of Del's mother's teacher, the beloved Miss Rush, who "married, rather late, and died having a baby," does not bode well for going along with the marriage plot, but nevertheless Del's mother does marry. This resolution to her story is unsatisfactory to Del, for it does not carry the importance in her mother's telling that her earlier adventures did.

> Was that all? I was troubled here by a lack of

> proportion, though it was hard to say what was missing, what was wrong. In the beginning of her story was dark captivity, suffering, then daring and defiance and escape. Struggle, disappointment, more struggle, godmothers and villains. Now I expected as in all momentous satisfying stories--the burst of Glory, the Reward. Marriage to my father? I hoped this was it. I wished she would leave me in no doubt about it. (67)

Munro's critique has two parts. On one hand she makes the Bildung of Del's mother's early life much more dramatic and interesting than the romantic side of her tale, and on the other, she suggests that the anticipated "reward" of marriage is a disappointment.

Munro questions the importance of romance in marriage in other parts of the novel as well. She presents the decision of Del's friend Naomi to marry in purely materialistic and pragmatic terms. Naomi's thinking about marriage runs along economic lines, as she has pots, pans, silverware and linen put away in stores on layaway plans, to be ransomed with payments from her paycheques, made on regular Saturday afternoon rounds to view her possessions. This is a nice twist on the usual expectation that the man will be the material provider in a marriage. Naomi does not have the traditional storybook romance; she marries because she is pregnant. When Del discusses

possible alternatives with her, Naomi replies, "I've collected all this stuff, I might as well get married" (195). Munro thus shows Naomi as marrying under force of circumstance--physical, in being pregnant, and social, in having accumulated household items--and not from her own considered choice or any "romantic" reasons, such as being in love.

Munro shows Del also facing a decision about marriage, in which she does not go along with the socially acceptable roles of lover, fiancée or wife. Although she is somewhat ambivalent about it, she rejects all of these feminine roles in order to maintain her subjectivity, to be her own person. Del's reaction to Garnet's talk of marriage is not to reject it out of hand, for when he asks if she would like to have a baby, she says she would: "Where would such a lie come from? It was not a lie" (196). But this ambiguity of her own feelings is clarified into "no!" when Garnet attempts to impose his will on her. She has been acting out a typical romance plot in her affair with Garnet, but she undercuts it, refuses the logical conclusion, although he plays on, with "true intent" (198).

Munro also undercuts the romance plot by showing that the person with whom one is paired in marriage may change with circumstance, not following the romantic notion of lovers "made for each other." Lacan's conception of the contingency of the object of desire is materialized in

several of Munro's stories, as both men and women marry someone other than the original object of their affections. For example, "Postcard" (Dance) subverts the marriage plot in this way by veering away from the original romantic couple into a marriage with a third character. Clare's courting of Helen seems sincere enough, and she is certain he will marry her, but, without explanation, he marries another woman. A similar situation is shown in "How I Met My Husband" (Something), but here is is the woman who marries another man. This story progresses as a romance between a young girl and a dashing aviator. That something may go wrong is foreshadowed by his jilting of a former girlfriend. When he leaves, the girl waits patiently by the mailbox hoping for a letter from him. Her persistence in waiting plays into another plot, constructed in the mind of the mailman who interprets her regular appearances at the mail box as a stratagem to meet him. In the end she is not reconciled with the aviator, and marries the postman.

Munro's works present many other examples of this type of undercutting, as lover after lover disappears ("Bardon Bus", "Tell Me Yes or No" and "Simon's Luck"), marries another ("Friend of My Youth") or is lost to madness ("Oh, What Avails"). Even when a love affair leads to an eventual, obstensibly happy, marriage ("Accident"), it is only at the expense of the death of the man's young son; thus the marriage is always tinged

with sorrow.

Previously I stated that rather than the alternatives of the "either/or" of romance and marriage or Bildung and death, Munro wants the "both/and" narrative pattern that combines the two: "I wanted men to love me, and I wanted to think of the universe when I looked at the moon" (Lives, 150). Lives is the most obvious example of this plot in Munro's fiction.

The Oxford Companion to English Literature, edited by Margaret Drabble, defines "Bildungsroman" as

> the term applied to novels of 'education' (in the widest sense) [in which the hero is an] innocent, inexperienced, well-meaning, but often foolish and erring, young man who sets out in life with either no aim in mind or the wrong one. By a series of false starts and mistakes and with help from well-disposed friends he makes in the course of his experiences, he finally reaches maturity and finds his proper profession....The genre overlaps with the older type of the picaresque.... (100)

Lives has been described by one reviewer (Rae McCarthy Macdonald, quoted in Rasporich, Dance of the Sexes, 160), as "episodic, repetitive...a scrapbook of anecdotes," thus similar to picaresque. The Bildungsroman is set within the wider question of identity, and for this reason customarily has a young protagonist, an adolescent:

> The concept of 'identity' is related to that of life stages in that, although identity grows throughout a person's life, it consolidates at a specific stage--that of the adolescent identity crisis....The traditional Bildungsroman chronicles a young man's identity crisis and its resolution in a known social world. Feminist critics find the female novel of development has its own concerns--apprenticeship to social constraint or sudden awakening--that do not fit a linear male model of steady progress. (Gardiner, 126).

Munro substitutes a female protagonist for the usual male one. She also colours this Bildungsroman with the Künstlerroman, the narrative of the artist, for Del's "proper profession" is to be a writer.

Del's interest in love is not represented overtly by Munro as an impediment to the life of an artist. The implied "either/or" grows out of the idea of "the psychic economy of women suggest[ing] that a fixed amount of energy exists in her life; what is spent is never replenished or recreated. Hence the either/or choice persists and controls the character" (DuPlessis, 90). DuPlessis discusses this choice with reference to The Story of Avis, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward's novel on the relation of a woman, artistic vocation, and love.

Avis's two major art works embody the conflict

> between vocation and love. One is the catalyst for her marriage, a portrait of her future husband. The other is the sphinx, a work of a thwarted artist, encoding both the powers and failures of her genius. In the sphinx is depicted the muted, riddling, and inarticulate drive of woman artists in particular and of women in general.... (DuPlessis, 91)

Neither of these extreme choices is present in Munro in a fixed, mutually exclusive, way. In "The Office," for example, Munro shows that the demands of home and family are distractions to the woman writer and help generate the ambivalences she feels about writing, but they do not prevent her from writing. It is possible to have it all, but Munro never implies it is easy.

The ending of a work of fiction is a particularly powerful place for acquiescing to or subverting social norms, as the moment of closure can underline or erase what has gone before. Thus it is only at the end of Lives that Munro reveals Del has decided in favour of being a writer. In "Epilogue: The Photographer" we learn that Del had determined, "The only thing to do with my life was to write a novel" (203), and that this apparently has been in her mind throughout her friendship with Jerry Storey, her musings on old Mrs. Sherriff, and so on. Munro has commented on this in a discussion of the conception of Lives as a novel that embodies elements of the

Künstlerroman--elements which are not overtly present in the whole book but which nevertheless colour it and also give it importance::

> this was sort of a chronological, growing-up, traditional type of novel, [Del's decision to write] had no place in the novel, it didn't fit in....Up until now this was not the story of the artist as a young girl. It was just the story of a young girl. And this introduced a whole new element....And yet, I found eventually that the book didn't mean anything to me without it. (Struthers, The Real Material, 25, italics added).

Although there are quite strong hints of Del's interest in writing (her observations, her poetry, her love of stories), Munro waits until after love has been rejected to develop this interest fully. Thus in the main body of the novel there is no conflict between art and love. This leaves open the possibility that later she may be able to reconcile both in her life. In a similar manner, in Who, Rose's engagement with love and her acting are never presented in ways that conflict.

As well as tinkering with the marriage plot, Munro pursues a larger feminist critique by undercutting the privileged status of heterosexual love, married or not, as resolution. Characters may be married, are at least coupled, but this does not necessarily bring lasting

satisfaction. Munro frequently presents portraits of relationships undercut by betrayal or lack of fulfillment. Even in stories in which the consummation of sexual relationships is an essential part of the action, there is often no satisfying resolution, for either partner. For example, in "The Beggar Maid" (Who), Rose becomes engaged to Patrick, who offers wealth and "worship" of the romantic kind. Although she breaks off the engagement, she is nevertheless later the victim of the "compelling picture of herself.... throwing her arms around him...giving everything back to him." When she acts on this "impulse to hurl herself...off a cliff or into a warm bed of welcoming grass and flowers" (96), the romantic drama lands her in marriage with Patrick. This marriage ends disastrously and painfully, after years of fighting, for "[t]hey could not separate until enough damage had been done, until nearly mortal damage had been done." By the end of this story Patrick's "worship" of Rose has turned into "disgust and loathing" (97).

The privileged end of romance in marriage is often undercut by adultery. Betrayals of marital vows are rife in Munro's fiction. Marriage is often presented as unfulfilling, boring, and onerous. Something always seems to be missing, and sometimes adultery is undertaken to find that missing element. Ewart, the husband in "Memorial" (Something), finds that his marriage does not allow him the necessary emotional range to grieve for his

dead son, that his wife does not allow some things to be discussed. He has sex with her sister Eileen, who is the "opposite of June" and "comes out of the same part of the world accidents come from. He lies in her to acknowledge, to yield...to whatever has got his son, whatever cannot be spoken of in his house" (180).

Munro often presents the adultery as more complex. In "The Spanish Lady" (Something), the protagonist is betrayed by her husband and her best friend. She has been particularly wounded in this affair because of the sense she has of false friendship. Not only her marriage but her friendship has been betrayed. This friendship was particularly strong, but knowledge of the subsequent affair colours the protagonist's way of looking at it: "We were attracted to each other because of the man, or to the man because of each other" (143). Yet this is not a simple case of adultery, for she has had affairs of her own: "You see it is not so simple, not so plain a case as my grieving now, my sure sense of betrayal, would lead anybody to believe....I have lied as well as I have been lied to" (147). The protagonist also is surprised into a reevaluation of the people she thought she knew so well:

> Why is it a surprise to find that people other than ourselves are able to tell lies?...They are both shy, Hugh and Margaret, they are socially awkward, easily embarrassed. But cold underneath, you may be sure, colder than us easy

> flirts with our charms and conquests. They do not reveal themselves. (144)

The extent of her sense of disruption over this incident is so great that it takes an encounter with death itself for her to see that, compared to death, "[w]hat we say and feel...is slightly beside the point" (153), and to come to some sort of resolution.

Another kind of failure of marriage is shown in "White Dump" (Progress), in which Isabel sees her married life as one of dutiful obligation. On her husband Laurance's birthday, she feels that the day is "full of hurdles, which she had so far got over" (404):

> Not much to her credit to go through her life thinking, Well, good, now that's over, that's over. What was she looking forward to, what bonus was she hoping to get, when this, and this, and this, was over?
>
> Freedom--or not even freedom. Emptiness, a lapse of attention. It seemed all the time that she was having to provide a little more--in the way of attention, enthusiasm, watchfull-ness--than she was sure she had. (413)

Her married life has become a long string of neverending obligations to others, embodying in many respects the social imperative for women to live out their lives through their husbands and children. She is not even really concerned with her husband's feelings. When he

returns from his birthday-gift flight

> He seemed happy. She thought that she seldom concerned herself about Laurence's being happy. She wanted him to be in a good mood, so that everything would go smoothly, but that was not the same thing. (415)

A veiled invitation from the pilot to Isabel to return to him seems to answer her hidden desire for "a leaping, radical invitation" (416). Just the thought of this new romantic possibility makes her happy, and she recalls for her family the possibilities of the "White Dump," made up of the sweepings of icing and marshmallow from the biscuit factory behind her school which were dumped outside for the children to swarm over. The White Dump symbolizes all the possibilities of her childhood in its glittering plenitude: "the most wonderful promising thing you could ever see" (417). These possibilities have been lost in the dailiness and taking-for-granted of marriage. When she begins her affair with the pilot, she moves to another stage: "She felt rescued, lifted, beheld, and safe" (421) in the romantic role she sees for herself. Still, this lover is only another form of the "glittering plenitude" of desire, for the story ends with her recollecting the sordid elements of this passion and of other affairs that came after, with their various dissatisfactions. In this story Munro shows both marriage and adultery to be without lasting satisfaction.

In these and many more stories Munro undercuts the privileged status of heterosexual love and marriage. She sometimes portrays the betrayal of friendship by one woman to another as more painful than the loss of a husband or lover. She shows that marriages are fraught with betrayals and that in love relationships women can find a great well of dissatisfaction. Although she holds out the possibility of enduring, mutually-respectful love between men and women, she rarely depicts it.

Munro's subversions of the traditional plots flow from a critique of those plots made from the vantage point of women's lived experience. The traditional plots spell out a romantic life which is a kind of death for most women, in which their energies and passions are confined to the strictures of domesticity, beauty and love--yet this is masked as the satisfaction of women's desire! Since, according to Lacan, the subject is always a desiring subject, it is necessary for the female subject to find other objects to desire, objects which can demand the utilization of all her resources and talents, objects over which her powers can range freely. If this is not available, the alternative, as in Chopin's The Awakening, is death. Romance is not enough, death is to be avoided: between these two extremes Munro searches for possible solutions.

Munro's search is wide ranging, for considerations of romance and the sexual and social roles attached to it

form part of every collection. Typical is the story "Five Points" (Friend) which centres around a woman whose reasons for an affair seem primarily to find escape from the responsibilities of her marriage. The dissatisfaction of her marriage is symbolized by her lover's being "light and wild on top of her" whilst her husband's "bulk settl[es] down possessively, like a ton of blankets" (48). They quarrel, but the woman realizes that their fight will not end the relationship, only move it to a different phase: "what you think--and, for a while, hope--is the absolute end for you can turn out to be only the start of a new stage, a continuation" (49), a stage in which she feels her lover's "heaviness." Her affair has become another responsibility like her marriage. So not only is the marriage undercut, so is the extramarital heterosexual coupling.

The same paired failures plague the heroine, Georgia, in "Differently" (Friend). The story is structured around a woman's recollection of the time she lived in Victoria, newly married but already bored with her husband. She has an affair with a man who soon betrays her by sleeping with her best friend. Georgia refuses to speak to her friend, and terminates her friendship and her love affair at the same time. She does not retreat back to her marriage; rather she leaves it, for she feels that her married life has been a "sham":

> She took no care--she had hardly any wish--to

> avoid unkindness....She saw herself as a person surrounded by, living by, sham. Because she had been so readily unfaithful, her marriage was a sham. Because she had gone so far out of it, so quickly, it was a sham. (241)

For Georgia, not only has her marriage been subverted, but her affair as well. On top of that, she has lost her friend. When this loss becomes permanent, because of her friend's death, Georgia realizes that she has had the hope of one day making a reconciliation. Again, as in "The Spanish Lady," Munro indicates that it is only in the face of death that the hurts and humiliations of failed relationships can be soothed by a sense of perspective.

As well as the betrayals of marriage which occur so frequently, Munro also paints pictures of the general lack of fulfillment women find in heterosexual relationships which do not culminate in marriage. As mentioned, "Simon's Luck" and "Bardon Bus" both present satisfying love affairs which are fulfilling for a time, but in both cases this pleasure is undercut by a lover who does not return to the woman who waits and suffers. In "Mischief" (Who) Rose's romantic longing to be with her lover for a night together is put down by his characterizing their love as only "mischief." "Wigtime," "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "Dulse," and "Hard-Luck Stories" all likewise present the pain and dissatisfaction of love. "Lichen" presents a whole series of unfulfilling arrangements.

Munro's constant undercutting of traditional plots delegitimizes those plots for women. Her valorization of the Künstlerroman and her examples of Bildung point to possibilities beyond the old plots. The expectations for women of the traditional plots--love, romance, marriage and domesticity--are depicted as inadequate for true heroines. Munro's hope--longing--for an ideal love relationship between man and woman is not actualized, though striven for, but the dissatisfaction and unhappiness of women who attempt to conform to the old roles are depicted mercilessly and clearly. In this way, Munro protests the old plots' hemming in of woman, thereby suggesting that there must be a different, and better, way to be a woman, and that women should continue striving to find them. Joanne Hedenstrom, in "Puzzled Patriarchs and Free Women: Patterns in the Canadian Novel," suggests that, "as distinct from the tradition of Canadian male novelists" (2), Canadian women authors such as Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro--among others--have rejected traditional roles for women:

> Unable to accept the limitations of their defined role, Canadian women have created heroines whose main goal is to somehow expand that role, to ask for greater freedom in movement or in emotional range, or to try desperately to escape the role altogether. (5)

In Munro's work, the limited or unsatisfactory roles for

women determined by the assumptions and ideology of a patriarchal society and expressed in the plots of marriage and romance are deliberately and persistently undercut by the undercutting of plot.

Munro's Poetics of Place

There exists an area in geographical reality, in southern Ontario east of Lake Huron, that can be called "Munro country," and residents or visitors can attest to Munro's accuracy in depicting its physical aspects, its sights and towns. But there is another aspect to this specificity of place that is particular to the author. Grounded in the same corner of Ontario as its other residents, Munro nevertheless makes the place convincingly, personally, hers. She does this by the subjectivization of the territory, an identification with the land that is particularly feminine.

In Subject to Change, Nancy Miller writes of a

> "poetics of location" that would acknowledge both the geographics of the writing it reads and the limits of its own project...which, in an emphasis on local specificities...works against the temptations of a feminist reuniversalization. (4-5)

Likewise in Dance of the Sexes, Rasporich states

> In the wake of modernism, feminism, and postmodernism, literary theorists and critics, too, are insisting that the so-called

> 'universals' of aesthetic valuing are culturally determined, and dependent on a cultural ideology that is particular to a historical time and place. (121)

I believe these are valid descriptions of an aspect of the poetics of Alice Munro which goes beyond regionalism in a particularly feminine way.

Munro's descriptions of Jubilee, Hanratty and other small towns are replete with descriptions of public buildings, houses, businesses, streets, and the dust, mud, sunshine and snow which establish the identity of place. Likewise her scenes of farms capture the beauty of dappled shade and the shock of spilled blood in an entirely convincing way. Rasporich quotes Eudora Welty as identifying the "mystery" of place with the fact that the place has a more lasting identity than any human author could have, and "we unswervingly tend to attach ourselves to identity" (122-23).

Below the lovingly detailed surface of these small southwestern Ontario towns hides a "mythic reality...one which has gender implications" (Rasporich, 123). Rasporich interprets the desire of Munro's heroines to return to their hometowns as a desire to return to the maternal body. Thus the particularly strong resonance Munro's work seems to have for women can be found in the readers' and characters' sense of a "source of female identity" (123). The psychological colouring of landscape and townscape is

accounted for by Rasporich as follows:

> For the female author...who lives the life of the body as the source and vehicle of reprod tion and whose female self is objectified and splintered by patriarchal fiat, ego is transformational with an ambiguous sense of boundary, encouraging the investment of self in exterior place. (124)

Thus Del in Lives, comparing herself with Jerry Storey, remarks, "I whose natural boundaries were so much more ambiguous, who soaked up protective coloration whenever it might be found, began to see that it might be restful, to be like Jerry" (166). Del here comments on the difference between male and female. Jerry need not invest himself outside of himself; for Del, the "ambiguous subject," it is necessary to define and redefine according to the circumstances in which she finds herself, including the circumstance of place.

The physical reality of place is tied directly to psychological reality. For example, Munro describes an "earthy" scene in Lives:

> Cows had been down to the river and had left their hoof prints in the mud. They left cowpats too, nicely rounded, looking, when they dried, like artifacts, like handmade lids of clay (37).

This description prompts a similarly "earthy" psychological state in Del--in this case, her physical

investigation of a dead cow is linked to a meditation on animal existence. Likewise, when she has beat a retreat from the world of heterosexual dating practices typified by the Gay-la Dance Hall, she "dreamed a nineteenth-century sort of life" (161) of calm and peacefulness, and the scene she gazes on reflects this: "I could see low weedy meadows beyond the CNR tracks, purply with June grass. I could see a bit of the Wawanash River, still fairly high, and the silvery willow trees" (161). Again, interior reality is reflected in the reality of place.

Beyond the precision of surface detail, the photographic realism, there is always this interior landscape, adding another dimension to reality. The girl protagonist of "Walker Brothers' Cowboy" for example, feels her

> father's life flowing back...darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly , ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine. (Dance, 18).

This underground or interior landscape is also addressed in Lorna Irvine's "Changing is the Word I Want," in which Lives is described as a narrative of two opposing movements. On the surface there is the Künstlerroman, in

which "the stories are only superficially chronological, for they are continually forced askew, pulled out of shape, darkened by a secrecy that has less to do with Del's general artistic development then with her development as a woman artist" (107). One narrative is fairly straightforward and chronological, "the other backtracking, revealing discordant memories, illustrating underground lives: the lives of women, secret, mostly unarticulated. The women of the collection thus pull against the straightforward development of the plot and will not allow clarification to occur" (107). In this is located the "cone of darkness at the centre" which Roy Pascal, quoted in Nancy K. Miller's Subject to Change (58), finds incorporated in autobiography. This "cone of darkness" is the part of self that the author recognizes as unknowable.

Munro's subjectivization of place and her psychological layering in narrative produce the particulars of her own subjectivity, a woman's subjectivity. It is founded on the particularities of lived personal experience. Paradoxically, in rejecting "the indifference of the aesthetic universal" for "a poetics attached to gendered bodies" (Miller, 97) Munro has created a "universal" art. For the truly universal can only be that which is grounded in the author's specificity.

In these ways Munro leaves the mark of a woman author, a particularly female sensibility, on her work.

She also leaves these markings on a more limited level, the level of individual words and images. These will be examined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

EMBODIMENT: FIGURES OF THE FLESH

> Isn't the final goal of writing to articulate the body?
>
> --Chantal Chawaf

I have chosen this epigraph because it reflects the importance for women writers of embodiment--by which I mean the tangible part of individuality; not simply the clothing of spirit with a body, but an emphasis on the concreteness of that tangibility. The reason for the importance of this concentration on the materiality of women's bodies is simply that this very materiality has been neglected and denied far too long. Jane Gallop writes that in the male-dominated philosophical tradition of the west, "[r]ather than treat the body as a site of knowledge, a medium for thought, the more classical philosophical project has tried to render it transparent and get beyond it, to dominate it by reducing it to the mind's idealizing categories" (3-4). In spite of these attempts to "get beyond" the body, the body is, as Foucault has shown, the locus of docility and the site of the evasive and extensive intimate operations of power that are brought to bear on women (Vol. I, 139-40). Repressive and restrictive disciplining of the body is carried out by various forms of controls and directives which shape the ideology of gender through the physical shaping of the body. There is a positive side to

embodiment as well, for the body is also the site of our most personal actions and experiences, and the site of creativity, both physiological and cultural. This constructive side is creatively bodied forth by Munro in depictions of the particularities of female experience and women's language. The complexity of this duality is not underplayed in Munro's fictions, in which the body is source of both pleasure and humiliation.

Women's embodiment is presented by Munro as linked to elements of life that in themselves are tangible, material and corporeal. The cultural demands of "femininity" are examined by Munro, as is the practice of viewing the body, whether through surveillance, self-surveillance, or the practice of voyeurism. Also important are the particulars of women's embodiment, such as the routines of domesticity, identification with the objects and inhabitants of nature, women's relationships to clothing and food, and, of course, the physical body itself. As well, Munro gives language its own corporeality by embodying words as concrete realities. Each of these issues will be examined in turn, but first I wish to look at some of the theoretical factors which inform this argument of the role that the material body can play in a critique of male-centred thought.

A major part of this critique is offering particular and <u>concrete</u> experiences to counteract the abstract ideal of "Woman." Diamond and Quinby claim many feminists see

women's bodies as the locus of masculinist power, the place where this subordination is maintained, and, I would add, the locus where this power can be challenged. Since differences attached to bodies are not fixed and immutable, it is possible to change them, to challenge them. Therefore, "it is possible to grasp and restructure the organization of bodies, psyches, and lives through discourse" (Martin, 10). Munro, by pointing to the particularities of lived existence, posits alternatives to women's usual mediated relationships to their bodies.

The disciplining of the body by social and cultural discourses is specifically gendered. Sandra Lee Bartky details the "disciplinary practices" through which the ideal body of femininity--hence the feminine body-subject--is constructed. Bartky categorizes the various disciplinary practices in which the discourse of power is enacted on female bodies. There are three broad categories: "those that aim to produce a body of a certain size and general configuration; those that bring forth from this body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements; and those that are directed toward a display of this body as an ornamented surface" (65). Thus a body of a certain type must be produced through diet and exercise, movement is not only constricted but must also exhibit a certain grace and eroticism, mixed with modesty, and finally the body must be displayed to advantage by the use of makeup,

permanents, hair removal, and clothing to make it as attractive to men as possible.

Munro interrogates these practices which create a form of embodiment that is specifically "feminine," those "forms of femininity [that] render women's bodies docile" (Bartky, xviii). An important example is "Red Dress--1946" (Dance). In this story the protagonist is trying to make herself beautiful and attractive for her first school dance. Her mother is making her the red dress of the title, to transform the protagonist, who feels "like a great raw lump, clumsy and goose-pimpled," into an acceptable girl. She wishes she was like her friend Lonnie, a "feminine" type: "light-boned, pale and thin" (148). Even though the protagonist has felt feminine in her new red velvet dress (her breasts "jutted out surprisingly, with mature authority") she compares herself unfavourably with Lonnie on her arrival.

> She had on a pale blue crepe dress, with a peplum and bow; it was much more grown-up than mine....Her hair had come out as sleek as the girl's on the bobby-pin card....I saw that crooked teeth or not, her stylish dress and smooth hair made me look a little like a golliwog.... (152)

At the dance she has the humiliating experience of waiting to be chosen by a boy to dance. Although she has done her best to look attractive--has "wanted the protection of all

possible female rituals" (151)--she is still frustrated because there is nothing more to do, she can only be the object of another's choice. The behaviour expected of her is simply to wait to be chosen, and she mentally reviews articles in teenagers' magazines which have instructed her to smile in a certain way, while she remains on display.

Munro presents many other examples of the oppression of the constant anxiety of conforming to society's expectations of "feminine" bodies. Jessie, in "Jesse and Meribeth" (Progress), compares herself to her friend MaryBeth who is described as very feminine:

> MaryBeth was a short girl, rather chubby but graceful, with large eyes that shaded from hazel-green to dark brown, an almond-colored skin free entirely of spots or freckles, and a pretty mouth that often had a slightly perplexed and pouting expression.... (220)

Jessie looks at her friend and at herself; in comparison, she feels, "a crude piece of work altogether" with her "strong legs and hefty bosom--robust and sweaty and ill-clad, undeserving" (225). Like the protagonist of "Red Dress--1946" she feels physically undesirable. MaryBeth's older sister Beatrice wants to attract a boyfriend and to this end she practices the rigorous disciplines required to conform her body to an ideal type. She "drank vinegar to take away her appetite. She

drank glycerine to strengthen her fingernails" (223).

The anxiety regarding one's shortcomings in meeting society's standards of femininity are expressed in Lives. Del states: "Well-groomed girls frightened me to death. I didn't like to even go near them, for fear I would be smelly" (149). She feels they "always talked about washing, either washing their sweaters or washing their underclothes or washing their hair" (149). In comparison she feels her hair and clothes are "grubby...greasy... discoloured," but this does not inspire her to wash things. Del can spend hours in front of the mirror experimenting with makeup and tweezing her eyebrows, but still is doomed to failure.

> It was sustained attention I was not capable of, though everything from advertisements to F. Scott Fitzgerald to a frightening song on the radio--the girl that I marry will have to be, as soft and pink as a nursery--was telling me I would have to, have to, learn. Love is not for the undepilated. (150)

All these girls no longer need to be instructed by outside forces such as the ones that Del mentions. They are now self-critical and self-policing. The woman who checks her makeup, is concerned about rain on her hair, worries her stockings may have run, and strictly monitors all food,

> has become...a self-policing subject, a self

> committed to a relentless self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy. It is also the reflection in women's consciousness of the fact that she is under surveillance in ways that he is not, that whatever else she may become, she is importantly a body designed to please or to excite. (Bartky, 81)

As we have seen, in Munro's works the representations of these specific "disciplinary practices" on women's embodied materiality is frequently tied to the surveillance of the body. This surveillance includes both watching one's own body and behaviour and being watched. It is through this practice that the disciplines detailed by Bartky are made to operate at the level of bodies.

Surveillance is one of the most useful concepts in the Foucauldian theorization of technologies of self (argued in Discipline and Punish), which entails both surveillance by others and self-surveillance. The rise of parliamentary institutions and the growth of political liberty paralleled a new and unprecedented discipline designed to regulate the body. This discipline was exercised through institutions such as the army, hospitals, schools, and prisons, to increase the usefulness of the body, augment its forces, in the production of "docile" bodies. This surveillance has also been related specifically to women by Simone de Beauvoir,

who has written that 'woman,' constructed as man's Other, has been denied the right to her own subjectivity and to her own freedom of action. Women themselves have internalized "this objectified vision, thus living in a constant state of 'inauthenticity' or 'bad faith' as Sartre might have put it" (Moi, 92). This inauthenticity of women is related by the Marxist art critic John Berger to women's divided selves: they are watched and watchers, at once:

> To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split in two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.
>
> And so she comes to consider the <u>surveyor</u>--and the <u>surveyed</u> within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her

identity as a woman. (Berger, 46).

The "surveyor" of this divided woman is male: "In contemporary patriarchal culture, a...male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other" (Bartky, 72). Women live this way for advantage, for they know that if they are attractive to men they have a better chance of obtaining work in male dominated establishments, and/or of getting and remaining married, thus buying into the "relative power" of being part of a heterosexual couple. Also, schooling in the "feminine" accomplishments of nurturing and domestic duties ensures that a woman will be acceptable in her social relationships with other women. Berger writes that a woman must constantly survey all she is and does

> because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another. (46)

The "surveyor" within the woman is male, the "surveyed" is female. "Thus," writes Berger, "she turns herself into an object--and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (47). Part of her subjectivity has been assumed by the male spectator which culture has ensured will reside

within. This is illustrated by Munro in Lives, in which Del watches herself--literally, in the mirror--when she is fantasizing about being an Italian girl prostitute. Although Mr. Chamberlain is not present, he is present in her daydreams for somehow the male presence is necessary for her to see herself in this split way. Metaphorically, he--the male spectator--provides the "stab of light".

> Beyond the moment of revelation [being seen] my dream did not go....The moment of being seen naked...was a stab of light. I never pictured Mr. Chamberlain's reaction, I never very clearly pictured him. His presence was essential but blurred; in the corner of my daydream he was featureless but powerful, humming away electrically like a blue florescent light. (128-9)

Munro has drawn a powerful image of a girl internalizing the male spectator into her own psyche.

Lives also presents a scene of the "moment of revelation" acted out. When Jerry Storey asks Del to undress one evening, because it would be "educational," since he has never seen "a real live naked woman," the idea is appealing to Del. Although she has of course seen herself naked, she has never seen herself as a "naked woman" in this sense before, that is, as an object of another's gaze, and therefore knowledge. She undresses and stretches out on Jerry's bed, feeling "absurd and

dazzling" (169). Instead of just her naked self, she has been transformed by his gaze, and her own "male" gaze directed at herself.

Another important form of watching occuring in Munro's work is that of the voyeur. This is not simple looking, but looking at or watching sights which are forbidden, usually sexual in nature. In two stories a young girl watches emotional adults dealing with sexual problems through a window. In the uncollected "At the Other Place" the girl protagonist spies on an uncle and aunt but "doesn't really understand the subtly sexual nature of what she sees" (Carrington, 9). In "White Dump" Denise watches through a window into the dining room as the wife of her mother's lover confronts her father with the news of the affair. Again, she does not really understand what is happening. In both scenes, however, a sense of unease is depicted.

In these and the many other examples of voyeurism in Munro's fiction it does not seem to make a difference if the voyeur is a male or a female, perhaps because the "spectator" within one is construed as male. Often there is a feeling of shame or humiliation involved, as when Et sees that her sister Char has "abdicated" her powers by making love to Blaikie in "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You"; sometimes there is a positive feeling of knowledge gained, or confirmed. "Marrakesh," "Walking on Water," "Privilege," "Mischief," "The Moon in the Orange

Street Skating Rink," "White Dump," and "Eskimo" all present scenes of voyeurism. Sometimes the voyeurism is not straightforward: in "Wild Swans," Rose internalizes the voyeur and watches her own actions and responses and comments on them (Carrington, 10), whilst "The Spanish Lady" presents an imagined voyeur scene in which the narrator imagines seeing her husband and his mistress in bed together, and of beating them. These scenes seem to split the viewer and the viewed (sometime the same person) in an attempt to gain control over a disturbing situation.

In "Oranges and Apples" (Friend) three people are involved in the most bizarre and blatent example of voyeurism in Munro's work in a scene which indicates the strong sexual frisson gained by simply viewing the body. Murray watches through his binoculars "a face like his own--a face partly hidden by binoculars. Victor had them, too. Victor was looking through binoculars at Barbara" (126). A voyeur is watching a second voyeur watch the first voyeur's wife. And the wife, Barbara, is also a voyeur of sorts, for internally she is watching herself as she arranges her body to be attractive to Victor:

> [Murray] saw her lift one arm....Then she lifted her hips, she changed her position slightly. The movement might have been seen as entirely natural, casual--one of those nearly involuntary adjustments that our bodies make. What told Murray that it wasn't? Some pause or

> deliberateness, a self-consciousness, about that slight swelling and settling of the flesh made it clear to him--a man who knew this woman's body--that the woman wasn't alone....in her own back yard, she lay on the grass inviting [Victor]. Promising--no, she was already providing--the most exquisite cooperation. It was obscene and enthralling and unbearable. (Friend, 126-7).

There is an element in Munro's work which relates voyeurism to photography. The shamefulness of such surveillance is revealed in a pair of related stories: "Bardon Bus" in The Moons of Jupiter and "Lichen" in The Progress of Love. In both the heroine struggles against the humiliation of being a metaphorical voyeur. In "Bardon Bus," she "watches" a continuously playing mental movie of herself just after intercourse, in a state of exhaustion, amazement and horror, for the lovers have "almost finished each other off" (124). When she first separates from her lover, she enjoys the memory, but later she finds it undermines her, yet she cannot stop it. The heroine refers to herself as "a woman," and "she," thus creating a distance between herself as subject and herself as object. In "Lichen," as Carrington has noted, the heroine, unwillingly,

> is forced to look at her ex-husband's photograph of his young mistress's exposed genitalia. But

> this aging man is the real voyeur, frantically scrabbling for the power to control his sexual humiliation by his mistress. His behavior illustrates Susan Sontag's definition of "[t]aking photographs" as setting "up a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world": she specifically compares the act of "photographing" with "sexual voyeurism".... (10).

Photography's ability to fix an image emphasizes the element of looking, makes it concrete. Using a camera eliminates any possible escape from shame by eliminating the "accidental" nature of much of the voyeurism in Munro's stories. As with the two male voyeurs in "Oranges and Apples" who use binoculars, those who use cameras are moved into a different realm, the realm of those who seek out and are prepared to watch the sexually forbidden. The spectator has thus reified the act of looking into a material entity.

The internal spectator of Munro's women characters, as well as watching the self in relation to the appearance and behaviour of the body, also watches the self in terms of the elements of "domesticity" prescribed for the feminine subject. In Munro, the house is frequently a metaphor for the woman of the story and so, by extension, her self-surveillance is also brought to bear on the house as another aspect of her "body." The tiresome litany of the chores surrounding the acts of cleaning, washing and

cooking comments on the constant battle to be adequate, to avoid the shame of not fulfilling housewifely duties in the prescibed manner. For a woman, housekeeping can either be done adequately or be a cause for disgrace. For a man, even occasional participation can be seen as a bonus, something special that he has done; for a woman, the incessant details, if all completed, are simply "what's expected" or, if not done, are a cause for shame. In "Royal Beatings" Munro underscores this gender division when Rose describes her brother: "Brian... [b]eing a boy, free to help or not, involve himself or not. Not committed to the household struggle" (13). Likewise, in "Household Science" (Lives), Del's manual ineptitude, displayed in sewing class, causes her anxiety and "public shame" (86). Her mother is sometimes in the same situation. In "Winter Wind" (Something) the girl protagonist is shamed by her grandmother's attempts to help with the domestic routine of the girl and her mother, for such offers of assistance point out all their shortcomings:

> I was embarrassed to think we needed help....the disgraces came unfailingly to light, and it was clear how we had failed, how disastrously we fell short of that ideal of order and cleanliness, household decency, which I as much as anybody else believed in. Believing in it was not enough. (156-7)

Styles of housekeeping can be a physical manifestation of women's character as well. In "Memorial" (Something) Eileen has a run-in with her sister June about kitchen orderliness. When June takes Eileen's crumpled paper bags out of the drawer in which they have been stuffed and folds them flat so more can be put in the drawer, Eileen calls her "compulsive" and says, "Order is an anal perversion" (168). June's precision of housekeeping parallels her emotional tightness which will forbid her husband's expression of grief when their son dies. Since she cannot control the uncontrollable in her life, she attempts to control her physical environment. Eileen in contrast is said to come from the same place accidents do, a wild irruption into the smooth surface of life. The two sisters are angry with each other, because the difference in domestic practice reflects their emotional differences, and both want their way to be seen as the right way, or at least acknowledged by the other.

Sometimes women, frequently older women, are seen as "feminine" not by their appearance but by their domestic skills. For example, in "The Stone in the Field" (Moons), one of the young protagonist's aunts has "hands red as a skinned rabbit" (26) from scrubbing the floor with lye to keep it white. The pine floor is "white, gleaming, but soft-looking, like velvet" (26), a description more apt for a woman's hand than for the floor. In "A Queer Streak" (Progress) the reversal of roles between mother

and daughter is symbolized by the daughter doing the housekeeping and her mother tracking in the dirt. The daughter, Violet, only ten years old, is "[h]ouse-proud and dictatorial...She would spend all Saturday scouring and waxing, then yell and throw herself on the couch and grind her teeth in a rage when people tracked in mud and manure" (288). As Violet ages and weakens and is closer to death, she is described as not being "anything like the careful housekeeper she used to be" (342). Women's roles are tied closely to domesticity and they view their homes as extensions of themselves.

These representations are examples of the restrictive discipline that domesticity can be for women. But, although these characters have difficulties with domesticity, there are also many positive associations in Munro's fictions with the little things of house and home. By associating themselves with these things, female characters in Munro's work are self-defined through language as feminine, domestic, connected to nature, and so forth, in a positive, self-affirming way.

Munro makes these connections mostly through comparisons, by metaphor and simile. Emile Benveniste states

> Language is...the possibility of subjectivity because it always contains the linguistic forms appropriate to the expression of subjectivity, and discourse provokes the emergence of

> subjectivity because it consists of discrete instances. In some way language puts forth 'empty' forms which each speaker, in the exercise of discourse, appropriates to his 'person', at the same time defining himself as I.... (Problems in General Linguistics, 227)

Metaphor is the linguistic form most used by Munro to define a sense of womanliness through references to domesticity and the body, sometimes linking that body to the wider natural world by comparisons to animals or plants, vegetables or fruit. Other images relate to common foods, or make reference to homely items, that is, are drawn from everyday household life. Much of her imagery is shaped by the domesticity of farm life. There is great beauty, charm and simplicity in these natural images.

The association of "female" with nature is double-edged and its problematic character is explored in Alice Munro's fiction. On the one hand, the essentialist equation of "man" with "culture" and "woman" with "nature" has entailed the dismissal of the latter. On the other hand, identification with the natural world, with that which will endure after our brief passage here, is precisely that which (as has been discussed in Chapter II regarding Munro's "sense of place") provides one with a sense of identity and self-definition. Also, the creativity of women in all the arts is paralleled by her

physical fecundity. Munro establishes associations between her protagonists and nature through images drawn from it that are usually very positive.

The examples of imagery embracing women and the natural world include Mrs. Sherriff's embodiment of the fierce pride of "an eagle on its perch," as she sits proudly on her church pew. Del's first sexual experience is symbolized by the domestic metaphor of a cat's killing a bird. The physical beauty of animals and their movement is caught in "Tell Me Yes or No" in which young girls move as "smoothly as eels." The old lady in "Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass" has skin that is "brown, like the skin of a russet apple," an appropriate physical description and identification with simplicity, beauty and strength, all through one image. Frequently in Munro's work images that link people to various forms of plant life emphasize a return to a pre-linguistic, primitive, state. Thus Del's body feels "like big cabbage leaves loosening and spreading on the ground" when it is loosened by sex. Stella, seeing David's photograph of his mistress's genitalia, thinks her pubic hair looks like "lichen," then "more like the dark pelt of an animal, with the head and tail and feet chopped off. Dark silky pelt of some unlucky rodent." This is appropriate, for his photograph does not show the woman's head. David has depersonalized his mistress into a body only, thus well described by these metaphors from the natural world.

Similarly, domestic images deal with the conceptual world by relating it to women's everyday life. Mysterious psychological "caves" are associated with "kitchen linoleum" to show their closeness to everyday life, whilst in "The Peace of Utrecht" a pink cut-glass bowl is used to symbolize the world.

Many of Munro's comments on the female body are made through the description of what women wear, for what could be more closely allied with the body than dress? It takes our forms; its various parts--arms, neck, back--are called by the same names we use for ourselves. A large family of Munrovian metaphor is associated with dresses, and characters are as often described by what they are wearing as by how their faces look. Bright lipstick and pink feather slippers represent "arbitrary touches of femininity" in "The Office" (62). In "Red Dress--1946" the protagonist recalls several dresses her mother has made which are rather costumelike, thus suggesting different possibilities of varying personae available to the young protagonist. Much of the associations with dress are positive. "In a pink wool skirt and bolero, I joyfully passed peanuts," Munro has Del say in Lives (61) and the cheerfulness and youth of her outfit match her mood. Likewise the characters of the protagonist's aunts and grandmother in "Winter Wind" (Something) are reflected in their dress. The aunt who is a seamstress, "understanding what suited her," (156) wears "a tight,

simple, high-necked affair, black with some sparkle about it, perhaps of jet," and is classic and refined, while her sister wears "something with floppy sleeves and a wide velvet collar...something seems askew....She wears this outfit with no authority and indeed with a shamefaced, flushed, half-grinning and half-desperate apology" (156). This sister in contrast seems childish and vulnerable. Flo in "Royal Beatings" (Who) is represented as consciously rejecting the pressure to conform through rejecting the pressure to be fashionable.

That clothing presents a material metaphor for the emotional life of a woman is shown in "Simon's Luck" (Who) where Rose's discomfiture in being at a party is reflected in the discomfort of her dress, "too short in the waist and too tight in the bust to be comfortable. There was something wrongly youthful or theatrical about it. Perhaps she was not slim enough to wear that style" (157). However, greater comfort and even strength through dress is shown in "Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection" in which the protagonist's aunts are corseted "into firm curves and proud slopes [that] had nothing to do with sex, everything to do with rights and power" (1). This is in contrast to women who go "wobbly as custard" and show weakness by their bodies' slack. Later in the story one of the aunts visits the protagonist when she is grown up, her hair "gilt," dressed in a "sumptuous peacock-blue dress decorated at one shoulder with a sort of fountain of

gold spray....she looked splendid" (14). Again Munro ties the dress in with the person's attitude, showing her as a woman who represents what she thinks and does through her dress. She is not stylish and chic, following the dictates of fashion which tell her what she should be, and the protagonist's husband, representative of the social order, scorns her for this. But the protagonist sees her worth:

> Iris's lipstick, her bright teased hair, her iridescent dress and oversized brooch, her voice and conversation, were all part of a policy which was not a bad one; she was in favor of movement, noise, change, flashiness, hilarity, and courage. Fun. (16).

Another woman whose dress is distasteful to a man is Barbara, in "Oranges and Apples" (Friend). She offends and shames her husband, Murray, by her taste for "cheaply provocative clothes....in the style...not of Audrey Hepburn but of Tina Louise" (120), causing her husband "embarrassment". But to her credit, Barbara doesn't care. Murray is a rather wealthy merchant who expects his wife to reflect his class standing:

> Traditionally, a woman dressed in money has been assumed to be making a statement not about herself, but about a man. Her expensive clothing was thought to signal to the world that her husband or other male provider was so

> wealthy he could afford a clearly useless luxury....the woman herself is relegated to the position of a passive object much like a clothes hanger in someone else's closet. (Chapkis, 79)

That Barbara rejects being a "clothes hanger"--as she rejects possible socially desirable careers--shows that she is her own woman. In a similar way, Hazel, in "Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass" (Friend), discards the outer control of society by discarding her makeup:

> She threw out all the colored pastes and pencils and magic unguents she had bought in moments of bravado or despair. She let her hair grow out whatever color it liked and pinned it up at the back of her head. She broke open the shell of her increasingly doubtful and expensive prettiness; she got out. Years before Jack died, even, she did that. It had something to do with how she took hold of her life. (82)

To be feminine is to have a body and exist in domestic space. To be feminine is to be a body in a beautiful dress. Munro challenges these demanding, masculinist assumptions by showing that a house can be a prison and a dress a straitjacket. She also reveals the visceral, embodied pleasures of these roles, beyond societal demands in their very real connection to women's very real bodies.

After air and water, we require food, it is elemental

to our bodily existence. Food is another wide-ranging body metaphor for Munro, associated with the failure or success in measuring up to domestic demands. Like housekeeping, food preparation is a domestic skill, and a woman can therefore be judged as adequate or wanting in relation to her cooking. Food is also about psychological and emotional nourishment, as well as nourishment for the physical body. Women, especially mothers, have been taught that all forms of nourishment are their responsibility.

In some cases, as in "Dance of the Happy Shades" (Dance), below standard fare such as curling-edged sandwiches reflect the deterioration of Miss Marsalles' ability to act in the regular sphere of womanly activities. In Lives, in contrast, the plentitude of country life and the richness of friendship is symbolized by the bounty brought to Uncle Craig's funeral, lovingly listed by Munro. Since no particular women are singled out, it is a tribute to the entire community; there is bounty enough for all.

> Everywhere I looked I saw food. A cold roast of pork, fat roast chickens, looking varnished, crusted scalloped potatoes, tomato aspic, potato salad, cucumber and beet salad, a rosy ham, muffins, baking-powder biscuits, round bread, nut break, banana loaf, fruitcake, light and dark layer cake, lemon meringue and apple and

> berry pies, bowls of preserved fruit, ten or twelve varieties of pickles and relishes. Watermelon-rind pickles. Uncle Craig's favorite. (44)

When Rose makes a home for herself and her daughter Anna after she has divorced Patrick ("Providence" in Who), she sees her living arrangements reflected in her daughter's dinner. Anna likes to watch television and eat homely things out of a bowl: chili, scrambled eggs, sandwiches, wieners wrapped in biscuit dough, even cereal.

> But then [Rose] would think there was something disastrously wrong when she saw Anna in front of the television set eating Captain Crunch, at the very hour when families everywhere were gathered at kitchen or dining-room tables, preparing to eat and quarrel and amuse and torment each other. She got a chicken, she made a thick golden soup.... (143)

Rose sees how her domestic arrangements fall short of the ideal of the nuclear family, sharing their life in the "correct" domesticity. While shortfalls in housekeeping are seen as a hurdle to be got over somehow, inadequacies in providing meals are not simply limited to that. There is a greater poignancy associated with the "failure" to provide "proper" nourishment than to keep a tidy home, perhaps because we ingest food and it becomes our bodies and we "merely" inhabit houses.

Although the domestic sphere, clothes, and food all provide concrete particularities of an embodied life, nothing is more evocative of that embodiment than Munro's writing about the body itself. She responds to the imperative of Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa":

> She must write her self....By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display ....Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. (In Marks and de Courtivron, 250)

Munro does not censor the body; she exposes it, presenting in many stories the shame and the pleasure of embodiment.

Frequently Munro presents the body as sick, aging or dying, and these representations are presented with a sense of humiliation. "The Peace of Utrecht" in Munro's first collection has a representation of the physical disintegration of the protagonist's ill and dying mother, one of the first of many in Munro's work. In "Red Dress--1946" the girl protagonist is ashamed of her mother's body, how it is clothed and how it moves, how "her legs were marked with lumps of blue-green veins" (148). Soon after this she expresses distaste for her own body, a "great raw lump." Another teenage girl, in "Half a Grapefruit," suffers because of humiliation connected with menstruation. There are many other negative

instances associated with embodiment including the litanies of suffering and humiliation of middle aged women in The Moons of Jupiter. "Dulse," "Bardon Bus," and "Prue" all present stories of women who are at an age in which they are becoming no longer sexually attractive to men. This realization is accompanied by the pain of loss, as the women lose their men to younger women. The protagonist in "Labour Day Dinner" does not lose her man, but he does express disgust with her aging body.

But there is a very positive side to Munro's bodily explorations as well. In Lives many passages pile up the delight that Del feels with the body of her beloved, details of his appearance such as the delight of his forearm hairs lining up parallel as if they had been combed, and every detail of their lovemaking:

> I would go home from these sessions by the river and not be able to sleep...because I had to review, could not let go of, those great gifts I had received, gorgeous bonuses--lips on the wrists, the inside of the elbow, the shoulders, the breasts, hands on the belly, the thighs, between the legs. Gifts. Various kisses, tongue touchings, suppliant and grateful noises. Audacity and revelation. (181)

Likewise, in "Wild Swans," Rose's pleasure is so intense that it is reflected in the households and people she sees from the train, and her orgasm seems to trigger an orgasm

in the gates, towers, domes and pillars of Toronto's Exhibition Grounds as well. The moments after orgasm are so intensely pleasureable to the protagonist of "Bardon Bus" that she replays them over and over again in memory.

Individual body parts seem, in Munro's work, to be almost personified. Like the hand that is masturbating Rose in "Wild Swans," other body parts seem to take on a life of their own also: "She thought of flesh: lumps of flesh, pink snouts, fat tongues, blunt fingers, all on their way trotting and creeping and lolling and rubbing, looking for their comfort" (Who, 63). The most spectacular example of this must be Del's marvellous commentary on Mr. Chamberlain's penis when he masturbates in front of her. In her book Thinking Through the Body Jane Gallop distinguishes between phallus, the transcendental signifier of the symbolic order, and penis, referring simply to the male organ. But she also adds that these terms become mixed together, conflated whenever one actually thinks of real men in the real world, that it is difficult to think of the masculine in our world as not being phallic. In Del's case her attitude to Mr. Chamberlain's penis--presumably shown to frighten or amaze her--could seem to be disrespectful also of the phallus, and through it, of the patriarchal order:

> Not at all like marble David's, it was sticking out in front of him, which I knew from my reading was what they did. It had a sort of

> head on it, like a mushroom, and its color was reddish purple. It looked blunt and stupid, compared, say, to fingers and toes with their intellignt expressiveness, or even to an elbow or a knee. It did not seem frightening to me, though I thought this might have been what Mr. Chamberlain intended, standing there with his tightly watching look, his hands holding his pants apart to display it. Raw and blunt, ugly-colored as a wound, it looked to me vulnerable, playful and naive, like some strong-snouted animal whose grotesque simple looks are some sort of guarantee of good will....It did not bring back any of my excitement, though. It did not seem to have anything to do with me. (141)

In this passage Munro reduces the phallocentricity of patriarchal society to a simple penis. Rather then suffering from penis-envy of a fear of the phallic, the young girl states that it has "nothing to do with [her]." With this stroke Munro makes it possible for her protagonist to seek for meaning, art and life outside of the social constraints of patriarchy. One body in-different to another has liberated the whole person. I believe it is from this point on that Del is enabled to make the choices that she does, engaging in passionate sex with Garnet, but rejecting socially expected behaviour.

Munro has provided a kind of elegant frame for her entire project of writing the feminine body. There is a progression in her collections that parallels the life of women. From the child's eye viewpoint of many stories of Dance, through adolescence, to the viewpoints of young, mature and middle-aged women, Munro's latest collections pass into the point of view of menopausal women, the post-menopausal, the elderly and the dying. This organic tracing of the lives of many girls and women is another example of how Munro's work embraces embodiment.

Munro extends her expression of embodiment to the very words she uses. They are particular and concrete for the most part, for Munro draws her readers' attention to the materiality of words, but what is most striking is that they are used in a buoyant and joyful manner. The theories of Patricia Yaeger are particularly appealing to me in dealing with Munro at the level of words, for she seeks a new way to think about the work done by women's texts. Rather than the sense of "estrangement" from language that Kristeva posits as women writers' lot, Yaeger speaks of the "happy orality" of "honey-mad women"--women "mad for the honey of speech" (4). This "happy orality" echoes l'écriture féminine, particularly "Hélène Cixous...[who] is a honey-mad woman par excellence" (73). She states, "It is my conviction that the feminist critic must do all she can to rescue the emancipatory potential of the texts she reads" (69), and

she finds such emancipation in writing which addresses moments of pleasure for women rather than "moments in literary texts when women fail to describe their desires, when women are made into objects of 'masculine' language" (1).

At the level of the word itself, regarding its power, Munro again presents the negative and the positive--but she is almost wholly in the camp of the positive. She is sensitive to words that can offend, like the words that boys use against girls: "Hello hooers," the boys call in Lives, "Hey where's your fuckhole?" These words hold all the contempt males have for females: "The things they said stripped away freedom to be what you wanted, reduced you to what it was they saw, and that, plainly, was enough to make them gag" (98).

But there are many more times when Munro breaks into Yaeger's "happy orality." Words are not transparent in Munro, they are as sticky as honey and as sweet, bodied forth as concrete entities with lives of their own. The materiality of her speech is illustrated in "Oh, What Avails" (Friend) by "the name Matilda" which "started shining like silver. The 'il' in it was silver. But not metallic....the name gleamed now like a fold of satin" (187). This same materiality is shown in Lives, where a dead cow is called "Day-ud cow" as Del "expand[s] the word lusciously" and repeats it a few times. She visualizes words:

> Heart attack. It sounded like an explosion, like fireworks going off, shooting sticks of light in all directions, shooting a little ball of light--that was Uncle Craig's heart, or his soul--high into the air, where it tumbled and went out. (39)

Words have a life of their own for Munro. Del's awakening to sexual concerns makes her think of or reinterpret different words, usually by relating them to things in the world, thus the words become embodied, reified: "I liked the word mistress, a full-skirted word with some ceremony about it...." (153). Also

> [t]he very word, pleasure, had changed for me; I used to think it a mild sort of word, indicating a rather low-key self-indulgence; now it seemed explosive, the two vowels in the first syllable spurting up like fireworks, ending on the plateau of the last syllable, its dreamy purr. (181)

Munro has given physical shape to sound. Likewise, Et in "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You" is also sensitive to words and muses on them: "Lovers. Not a soft word, as people thought, but cruel and tearing" (11), that is, with attributes of a wild beast. Similarly, the protagonist of "The Spanish Lady", after her husband and friend have betrayed her, thinks of vocabulary distinctions in a way which personifies each word:

> Girl friend. Mistress. No one says mistress any more, that I know of. Girl friend sounds brash, yet has a spurious innocence, is curiously evasive. The possibilities of mystery and suffering that hung around the old-fashioned word have entirely disappeared. Violetta could never have been anybody's girl friend. But Nell Gwyn could, she was more modern. (142)

Rose in Who is an actress, and like Del, the writer, she is particularly interested in language. She enjoys how Flo runs "bad women" together, like "badminton." She uses sensual, lush language to describe the French teacher in school she finds attractive: "She saw him lapping and coiling his way through slow pleasures, a perfect autocrat of indulgences" (62). She characterizes "wife" and "sweetheart" as "[t]hose mild lovely words" (80). She has fun with puns as when she hears about a lecturer who burned all his poems and remarks, "How flamboyant of him" (109). When she encounters the old lady in the nursing home who only speaks in order to spell words, she wonders what form those words take in the old woman's mind, how they are embodied.

> Did they carry their usual meaning or any meaning at all? Were they like words in dreams or in the minds of young children, each one marvelous and distinct and alive as a new animal? This one limp and clear, like a

> jellyfish, that one hard and mean and secretive, like a horned snail. They could be austere and comical as top hats, or smooth and lively and flattering as ribbons. A parade of private visitors, not over yet. (188)

In the story of the same name, Rose visualizes and embodies Flo's expression, "royal beatings":

> The word Royal lolled on Flo's tongue, took on trappings. Rose had a need to picture things, to pursue absurdities, that was stronger than the need to stay out of trouble, and instead of taking this threat to heart she pondered: how is a beating royal? She came up with a tree-lined avenue, a crowd of formal spectators, some white horses and black slaves. Someone knelt, and the blood came leaping out like banners. (1)

It is Rose's delight in language and its absurdity, her happy orality, which gets her in trouble as she sings:

> Two Vancouvers fried in snot!
>
> Two pickled arseholes tied in a knot! (12)

When forbidden to sing this "filth" she still hums it, she does not want to let it go, for the sheer embodied pleasure of the images the words command:

> It was not just the words snot and arsehole that gave her pleasure, though of course they did. It was the pickling and tying and the unimaginable Vancouvers. She saw them in her

> mind shaped rather like octopuses, twitching in the pan. The tumble of reason; the spark and spit of craziness. (12-13)

Rose's delight in the unimaginable Vancouvers is her delight in the "possession of language [which] is equated with the possession of a delicious excess of meaning that is forbidden, but therefore twice delicious" (21), as Yaeger writes regarding the female author's "good appetite." It is important to note that Rose's persistence in enjoying the honey of speech leads her to the "royal beatings" Flo has threatened. Yes, language can be dangerous for women, but, pace Kristeva, we can also identify instances in which women find language empowering. "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time," writes Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (250). Munro's embracing of the body has ensured that her voice is raised joyously, in her subtle strategies of female self-representation and emancipation.

CONCLUSION

Just how feminist is Munro? In Controlling the Uncontrollable Carrington writes (in a misrepresentation of feminism) that Munro is not a feminist because she is too complex and independent a writer to accept "feminist oversimplification"(182), that she will not blame culture for physiological processes (citing one character's extreme reaction to menstruation). But Carrington overlooks the frequent subtle critiques of the way women are feminized in culture which is a trademark of Munro's writing. She quotes Munro as saying she requires a complete separation of her support for such feminist projects as homes for battered wives from her writing, if feminism is "defined...as an attitude to life which is imposed on [her] by someone else" (Munro in Carrington, 183). I would suggest that feminism does not impose any attitude, let alone an attitude, a singularity, on women. It does reveal, though, how women's lives have been shaped by patriarchal culture and gives them the hope that things can be changed for the better. This is congruent with Munro's depictions of women, which likewise show the formative--or "deformative"--influence of male-dominated culture on women, and suggest that, although not easy, it is possible for women to find a more congenial and affirmative way of living. Therefore I would say, it is certainly

possible, even easy, to read Munro as a feminist author.

This thesis has argued that the exploration of sex and sexuality is central to Munro's fiction, and that she presents a dual vision of the positive and negative aspects of almost all elements of sexuality. Sex functions as the key dynamic in the action of several stories and plots are often structured or patterned around themes of sexuality, especially sexuality as a rite of passage, sexuality as an element in the formation of self-representation, the always problematic question of desire, and the difficulties for women in the assumption of gender roles. Each of these themes shows sexuality as the avenue of either restraint within existing social and cultural forms, or as a way to rewrite inherited scripts. Also, Munro's undercutting of traditional plots of romance and marriage by turning aside from them to more dynamic plots for women, involving "education" in the widest sense or artistic development, point to different ways of existence beyond the status quo. Her devaluation of the proper end of the romance plot--marriage, or at least a heterosexual coupling--is accomplished by exposing its fragility and emptiness for many women who do not live "happily ever after." In her sense of the physical presence and embodiment of women Munro also depicts the discomfort involved in being "a sight" for

men, or of feeling inadequate before impossible cultural standards of beauty and "femininity." But, as usual for this complex writer who never oversimplifies, she also presents the glory of embodiment, and makes claims for the delights of the flesh and speech.

This reading has been feminist, and has looked to the emancipatory strategies implied in Munro's texts. Munro is a woman writer, who writes almost always about women; she is a woman writer who is popular with women readers, who frequently comment that she seems to be writing about their own lives--lives of girls and women. Unlike depictions of women in masculinist works, which emphasize how women are outside of power, the centrality of women and their sexuality to Munro's fiction is welcomed by women searching for reinstatement or admission into the mainstream of culture with the anticipation that the situation of women can be changed for the better when this occurs.

This thesis has only sketched the larger forms of Munro's involvement with sexuality, forms which can be embroidered with countless passementerie, such as the intricacies of the connection of sexuality and mysticism, or an examination of the gaps, absences and silences regarding sexuality which, like the silences in music, say so much. Munro never offers simple answers, but she does, along with her protests, present

the possibilities that sexuality can have to better women's lives. Like her own writing, such solutions are complex and densely-woven, but this extraordinary writer has also indicated how they can be filled with joy, how when asked to join "the dance of the sexes," our answer should be "yes."

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