

Girls and Gender in Alice Munro's Short Stories*

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the young girl who is typically the first-person narrator in Alice Munro's short stories, especially in the collection *Dance of the Happy Shades*, acquires a gender identity during childhood. The objective of this paper is to examine the possibilities for this narrator to establish her own principles based on women's special qualities and personalities and to build a community for women. The organization of this paper follows the girl's experiences through the mother's domestic space and the father's working space. Most of all, I focus on the characteristics of the narrating girl who does not understand the exact meaning of her parents' behavior and attitude, but describes all that happens to her and reveals the hidden reality beyond the obvious world. Also, I pay attention to the gap between her dissatisfied moment with her mother and her unintentional disclosure of how her gendered identity has permeated her everyday life. I propose that the discordant relationship between the mother and the daughter gives rise to the possibility of her considering how to become an adult in future. In conclusion, this paper explores the possibility in Munro's fiction to develop a new female figure that penetrates both gendered spaces. The most remarkable characteristics of characters that do so are the attention they pay to their everyday lives and their transformation into political subjects who face reality and have the ability to analyze their situation in their own voice.

Key words

Munro, first-person narrator, girl, gender identity, uneasiness, duplicity, women's community

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Introduction

Canadian writer Alice Munro has written numerous notable short stories since the publication of her first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, in 1968. She has been lauded as a modern-day Anton Chekhov and won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013. As Brad Hooper writes, “she has developed her own brand of the short story” (Hooper, 2008, p. viii); what distinguishes her short stories are the particular function of the narrator and the recurring theme running throughout her work.

The first and most important characteristic of Munro’s fiction is its first-person narration (Thacker, 2005, p. 19). Twelve of the fifteen stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* have first-person narrators who recount personal stories and experiences that appear familiar to the reader. The narrators’ interests, anxieties, and afflictions, which are rooted in their everyday lives, seem realistic, but their stories “condense a wealth of implication and detail within a minute space” (Duncan, 2011, p. 3). On the surface, the reader can easily follow the plot of the story, but sooner or later, he/she realizes how intricate the structures of the stories are and how densely the subjects of the stories are developed (Duncan, 2001, p. 2). Therefore, the reader requires the ability to sort out the main subjects among trivial events and familiar meanings, especially gender issues that affect women’s conditions and communication gaps between individuals of different ages, education levels, classes, and family backgrounds. The narrators do not seem to have any particular intention, but they reveal just how deeply these problems, which the character unconsciously experiences, penetrate everyday life.

The second remarkable characteristic of Munro’s fiction is the attention paid to the lives of women in patriarchal societies.¹ As a woman, Munro creates female characters who reflect her thoughts about the gendered norms governing women’s lives. She also depicts women’s secret desire to be free from society and their struggle against myths about women. Conversely, Munro’s male characters usually portray the prototypical father figure of patriarchal manhood and symbolize the unknown world in which a father hides his thoughts and desires. In Munro’s stories, male characters and their positions carry ambivalent values and meanings that expose male

¹ Among twelve stories with first-person narrators in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, only “Thanks for the Ride” presents a male perspective.

characters' endeavors to retain their masculinity. Consequently, "the juxtaposition of the two worlds: neat vs. disheveled" arises in some of Munro's stories (Pfaus, 1984, p. 16). Superficially, patriarchal society is a neat society, which male characters always control. As the narrator peers more deeply into society, she can see a strange world, the underbelly of which is full of disorder and violence, thus running contrary to the neat world of the father.

The third distinguishing characteristic of Munro's fiction is the creation of a narrator on the boundary between childhood and adolescence who can easily participate in the worlds of both the father and mother. In Munro's stories, this girl exists as an innocent, vulnerable child who has limited knowledge of the world and needs a safe space. The concept of innocence that I see in Munro's narrator is not that of a child being idealized by adults who try "to protect the characteristics of innocence and to teach them to the child" (Kincaid, 1992, p. 72). Instead, her child narrator uncovers her inability to describe characters and events lying at "the very limits of representation, especially in language" (Heble, 1994, p. 4). She cannot analyze anything that happens to her, but she can describe everything, even the confusing circumstances she does not understand. Munro designs a narrating girl to reveal the tension between the superficial and the hidden reality, between the visible and the invisible substance, and between gendered identities.

The final notable characteristic of Munro's fiction is the heavy attention it pays to how girls acquire their gender identities. To Munro, the concept of gender is based on the "myth of home and family" in which a "father and mother [are] devoted to the moral and/or spiritual well-being of their offspring" (Thiel, 2008, p. 5). Encountering very clear traditional male and female roles, the narrator decides how to respond to them, even though she is still a child herself, in order to become a member of society. The action of her responding to them implies that she achieves "a more broadly conceived sense of order and generality that comprises adult society" (Jenks, 1996, p. 3). Therefore, to the main character, childhood is not merely a "space sheltered from adult corruption and responsibility" (Hintz & Ostry, 2003, p. 5). Instead, her childhood is a critical, intense political space in which she has to learn about gender identities.

The objective of this paper is to study how the young girl, the first-person narrator, acquires a gender identity during childhood and becomes a

gendered subject in a patriarchal society that reproduces the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity. To examine how the girl responds to gender identity, I study the different qualities of fathers and mothers portrayed by the first-person narrator, especially as she is presented as a girl who does not have enough experience about the world, but who wants to transform herself into an ideal adult. To make clear the reason she chooses a narrator between father and mother, Munro puts the families in remote rural areas where traditional gender roles are regarded as the natural order of things: the father works outside the home to support the family while the mother performs domestic duties in the home. Simply stated, the father symbolizes confidence and certainty, displaying a visible occupation to his daughter, whereas the mother usually exists in an unsatisfied state characterized by negative conditions such as nervousness, tiredness, and hysteria. The reason Munro creates these distinct gender roles that are already familiar to the reader is because she wants to lead the reader into the hidden world beyond these two roles.

I also examine the opportunity for Munro's narrator to establish her own principle by exploring women's special qualities and personalities throughout her childhood. In other words, I aim to investigate the different connotations of women's words, properties, and places that are usually ignored or viewed negatively and to suggest the possibility of building a community for women in Munro's short stories. In this paper, the *Dance of the Happy Shades* collection is the main text studied; and *Lives of Girls and Women*, Munro's only novel, is the secondary book.

I investigate the distinguishing characteristics of the mother's and the father's spaces in section II "The Mother's Uneasiness" and section III "The Father's Ambivalence," respectively. These two sections discuss how the mother struggles to adjust to her situation and the father's persistence in maintaining a masculine society. Next, section IV "The Daughter's Selection" focuses on how the daughter changes into a different subject and the qualities she selects as her identity after experiencing "the quest pattern-departure/return" (Redekop, 1992, p. X). Finally, I conclude by discussing the importance of her awareness of her new life and of the necessity for her to have a community.

The Mother's Uneasiness

The common inquiry regarding whether a newborn baby is a boy or a girl indicates the prevalent tendency to classify even babies in the gendered dichotomy of male and female. This gendered classification helps children to easily follow a “conventional model of familial expectations” (Chancer & Watkins, 2006, p. 19). Children try to meet expectations to belong as members of society and, in doing so, unconsciously internalize gendered dichotomies into their own behavior and thought.

In this process, however, a boy might grow into a masculine man while a girl might deem herself to be a secondary subject who does not have masculine characteristics, which are regarded as the primary qualities in childhood gender categories (Burman, 1994, p. 17). I think that Munro focuses on this theory of the difference between the boy and the girl. From the start, a narrating girl reluctantly achieves femininity and pursues masculine qualities, which are highly valued and viewed as the standard in patriarchal society (Kramarae & Spender, 1992, p. 10). In other words, whereas the boy internalizes masculine qualities as general social standards and expectations, the girl consciously learns feminine qualities, which seem to be excluded by the standard and are treated as inferior to masculine ones. Therefore, caught between masculinity and femininity, she confronts the problematic reality in which she exists as an insufficient, negative being and an insecure subject in patriarchal society. Moreover, she does not find any role model who represents the proper feminine quality or identity, so, unaware of what proper femininity is, she feels anxiety about her unstable situation.

Of the stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” “Images,” and “Boys and Girls” have similar main characters: a daughter who is the first-person narrator and the firstborn in her family. She takes care of her younger brother and alternates between masculine and feminine identities. Although only a young child, she dimly senses that she should act as a girl and that there are differences between her brother and herself. Perceiving herself as insecure, she divides the world into two separate spaces: one is her father’s, which fascinates her and where she feels safe; the other is her mother’s, which she hesitates to join and feels uncomfortable about. She thinks that her father’s space deals with more important issues and is more authentic than her mother’s environment, which

makes her long for her father's space. Based on the narrator's ambivalent attitudes and feelings, I study the dual categorization of female characters. These two types represent the diverse positions of women in patriarchal society: one type tries to perform the femininity that people expect but fails to conform to it completely and feels unsatisfied; the other is awkward in everything she does and feels burdened.

First, to the narrator, some female characters are too feminine to be regarded as the norm. For example, in *Lives of Girls and Women*, the aunt of the first-person narrator represents the traditional feminine lady: "she reached some extreme of feminine decorativeness, perfect artificiality, that I have not even known existed; seeing her, I understood that I would never be beautiful" (Munro, 2001, p. 97). From the aunt, what the narrator learns is that to be a beautiful woman in society, a woman must disguise herself with feminine decoration in both behavior and appearance. Through the aunt's gross exaggeration of femininity, the narrator realizes that the gendered identity is not a natural characteristic of women and that the aunt has failed to internalize this.

Moreover, in "Walker Brothers Cowboy," which is "a microcosm for the whole of Munro's work" (Heble, 1994, p. 20), the mother of the narrating girl pretends to be a "lady": "She walks serenely like a *lady* shopping, past the housewives in loose beltless dresses torn under the arms" (Munro, 1998, p. 5, emphasis in original). Her good dress does not match the situation and makes her appear ridiculous, so the narrator avoids walking with the mother (Munro, 1998, p. 5). As a child, not understanding her mother's efforts to be more than herself, to be a "lady" (Redekop, 1992, p. 38), she complains about her mother's unnatural appearance and abnormal behavior, which does not adhere to the ideal of motherhood that usually sacrifices the mother's interests. She is also annoyed by the mother's deep attachment to the past when the mother used to drink a little tea with her in "the most leisurely days before my brother was born" (Munro, 1998, p. 5).

Based on the narrator's description, my reading of the reason the mother acts like a lady and is nostalgic about the past is that the mother does not sufficiently adapt to the mother's present environment or even to the mother herself: she resists the reality that people force her to accept as her life and destiny. Further, she pretends to be a lady because she refuses to adjust to the poor economic status brought on by her husband's struggling business. As a result, while describing how unrealistic and unstable her

mother is, the girl unconsciously shows the mother's unsatisfactory position between the ideal woman and her real-life situation. I think that the mother unconsciously remonstrates against any unjust evaluation of her based on her husband's ability and social status: her extraordinary behavior is a symptom that demonstrates how repressed she now feels.

Similarly, in "Images," throughout the narrator's perspective, the mother acts like a child and exists as an "infantilized mother who is the object of her mothering" (Redekop, 1992, p. 41). Treated as a "fragile and mysterious object," she is absent during the main events of the story and, moreover, appears very spiritless and lethargic.

My mother crocheted squares for an afghan, in all shades of purple. They fell among the bedclothes and she did not care. Once they were finished she forgot about them. She had forgotten all her stories which were about Princes in the Tower and a queen getting her head chopped off while a little dog was hiding under her dress and another queen sucking poison out of her husband's wound; and also about her own childhood, a time as legendary to me as any other. (Munro, 1998, p. 33)

Chris Jenks notes that "children practically have 'need' of their parents and adult companions, a need that is a combination of the material, physical, emotional and so on" (Jenks, 1996, p. 41). According to Jenks' opinion, the girl narrator can begrudge her situation because she does not receive care from her mother.

The mothers in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" and "Images" do not embody characteristics relating to "the idealized images of maternity" (Redekop, 1992, p. 8). One mother pretends to be a lady and exaggerates femininity; the other regresses to childhood. They do not have their proper identities, so they become "virtually bodiless" (Redekop, 1992, p. 37). As a result, the daughter cannot learn the traits of motherhood from her mother, who is unhappy, tired, and aimless.

The second type of female character eagerly adopts the idealized images of maternity and is devoted to working in the kitchen and raising her children, especially her daughter: she tries to be a good caregiver. In "Boys

and *Girls*,” the girl narrator focuses on how busy her mother is in the kitchen, describing the mother’s hair: “Her hair was tied up in a kerchief, wisps of it falling out. She would tie her hair up like this in the morning, saying she did not have time to do it properly, and it would stay tied up all day” (Munro, 1998, p. 116). After all these activities, the mother is exhausted and silent (Munro, 1998, p. 117). Ironically, the mother’s exhaustion propels the narrator to view her mother’s work in a negative light: “It seemed to me that work in the house was endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing” (Munro, 1998, p. 117). The mother does not receive her daughter’s acknowledgement for her devotion but is isolated from her daughter and her husband and excluded from the center of events. Although she eagerly performs the typical motherly role, she exists as being “bodiless,” similar to the first type of mother. Also, their mother’s caring is perceived as annoying and does not serve as a positive lesson to the daughter about becoming a woman: she is not a good caregiver, but a pointless laborer. Although, in Munro’s stories, the mother devotes her life to her family as the ideal mother figure does, the mother’s efforts turn out to be either excessive or overly awkward and do not translate naturally into motherly affection.

In conclusion, the mother figures in Munro’s stories become bodiless in the main event. The mother’s bodiless character not only evidences her failure to adopt the socially approved gendered identity, but it also exposes the artificiality of the gendered norms burdening her life. Moreover, since she is not a good caregiver who can both show her children affection and demonstrate control over their behavior and mind, she loses “hegemony to provide a moral and philosophical context for social relations” (Jenks, 1996, p. 42). Most of all, Munro’s mothers’ unnatural performance of the maternal role dramatizes how unhappy they are in patriarchal society. Describing all of her mother’s uncomfortable experiences and awkward attitude toward society, the girl unconsciously reveals the irrationality of the gendered norms in which her mother has to play the roles of the good wife and mother in patriarchal society.

I think this is a very important experience for the daughter as she observes the woman that does not follow the rules inherent in the gendered norms of everyday life. She accumulates resources or knowledge that equip her in gaining a different perspective about gender and the mother’s situation when she herself will become an adult woman. In other words, the

discordant relationship between the mother and the daughter seems to emphasize the difference between them; however, their incompatible relationship gives rise to the possibility of maintaining some distance between the daughter and a gendered identity. Also, this paradoxical relationship helps the daughter to think about how to become an adult in the future.

The Father's Ambivalence: Certainty and Uncertainty

While the girl fails to build an identity by imitating her mother's behavior and attitudes toward society, she is fascinated by her father's world, believes his explanation about the world from which the mother is excluded, and follows him as her caregiver. After exploring his space, however, the girl narrator sees the other side of her father's world and becomes confused. In this section, I discuss the ambivalent aspects of the father's space and trace how the girl changes her thoughts about her father's world.

At first, the father, who imparts some knowledge of the world to the daughter, symbolizes certainty. In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," the father is a salesman of "all liniments and oils, for everything from corns to boils" (Munro, 1998, p.4). Whenever the girl feels tired from her mother's bother some making of dresses, her father rescues her from this irritating situation, asking "Want to go down and see if the Lake's still there?" (Munro, 1998, p. 1).

He tells me how the Great Lakes came to be. All where Lake Huron is now, he says, used to be flat land, a wide flat plain. Then came the ice, creeping down from the north, pushing deep into the low places. Like that—and he shows me his hand with his spread fingers pressing the rock-hard ground where we are sitting. His fingers make hardly any impression at all and he says, "Well, the old ice cap had a lot more power behind it than this hand has." (Munro, 1998, p. 3)

A savior as well as a teacher, the father explains how Lake Huron came into being. She thinks that her father provides her with certain values and knowledge of the world and believes that he is teaching her how to

“acknowledge the expectations of our gender roles in order to survive and succeed in society” (Jacobson, 2011, p. 17). The problem, however, is that he does not have accurate knowledge of the lake and just tells his daughter a baseless story. This means that the manner of imparting knowledge of the world is parallel to the way she is taught about gender identity: gender identity is not the truth, but it is based on a generally accepted idea. Unaware of his lack of knowledge, she clings to his words and depends on him because she thinks that to her he is the only caregiver who “exercises a continual control over the other in the name of ‘what is best for them’” (Jenks, 1996, p. 42). The context of “what is best for children” gives her a feeling of comfort, which makes her willing to deliver her rights to him.

The certainty that the father represents arises from the concrete jobs he holds, including salesman, fox farmer, and hunter. Although not rich, he seems satisfied with his situation. Unlike the mother, whose value derives from her husband’s social status, the father is appraised on the basis of his own ability and labor, so he works hard, believing that his success depends on his own endeavors. Therefore, the children respect his work and like to spend time with him, especially the girl narrator who wants to escape from her mother’s messy kitchen: “work done out of doors, and in my father’s service, was ritualistically important” (Munro, 1998, p. 117). In “Boys and Girls,” the girl narrator thinks that her father is more professional than her mother because he did “not talk to me unless it was about the job we were doing” (Munro, 1998, p. 115). She awards great value to his taciturnity, favorably comparing it to her mother’s talkativeness. Thus, she wants to gain recognition from her father: “nevertheless I worked willingly under his eyes, and with a feeling of pride” (Munro, 1998, p. 116).

For her, the most critical factor supporting the value of her father’s space is her desire to escape the fear of the unknown that children often feel. Usually, the house occupied by the mother symbolizes safety and happiness, and the function of the house is to offer protection from outside aggressors that pose potential dangers, such as nature and neighbors. In some of Munro’s stories, however, the house is full of danger.

We were not afraid of *outside* though this was the time of year when snowdrifts curled around our house like sleeping whales and the wind harassed us all night, coming up from the buried fields, the frozen swamp, with its old bugbear chorus of threats and

misery. We were afraid of *inside*, the room where we slept. At this time the upstairs of our house was not finished. (Munro, 1998, p. 112, emphasis in original)

To the girl narrator, the house is scarier than the outside where the wind blows because the unsafe house represents the anxious, tired mother who either acts in a childlike manner or seems to be overwhelmed by other things. Therefore, the house pushes the daughter to go outside where the father works. Also, from the outside world, the father brings home concrete results: money in “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” muskrats in “Images,” and fox pelts in “Boys and Girls.” With these visible materials, the father helps his daughter overcome her uncertainty, fear, and anxiety about the world. As a result, the more insecure she feels in the domestic sphere, the more she is attached to the outside world and the visible outcomes delivered by her father.

Another factor propelling her to go outside is that other adults treat her as a useless girl. In “Boys and Girls,” she does not understand the statement uttered by a worker at the fox farm: “I thought it was only a girl” (Munro, 1998, p. 116). Highly traditional and masculine, the worker calls the baby “it” but labels her “a girl” (i.e., female), not “a child” (i.e., not an adult). Calling her “a girl” shows that he devalues her ability because of her gender, not her age. Claudia Nelson asserts that “children’s gender was comparatively unimportant, since both boys and girls should be obedient” (Nelson, 1991, p. 9). According to Nelson’s opinion, the reason the worker intentionally calls her “a girl” is because she is not obedient to the rule of the general gendered norms in which the boy works with the father and the girl stays in the kitchen.

Although she might be weaker than her brother, however, she refuses to accept that she is useless because she is “only a girl.” To break with this prejudice, she needs to develop her identity and becomes willing to accept her father’s invitation.² By going into her father’s space, she hopes to

² There are some similarities between “Walker Brothers Cowboy” and “Images.” Both fathers are named Ben Jordan, and the families have four members: a father, mother, older daughter (the first-person narrator), and younger son. The daughter’s process of self-awakening follows the same structure of the quest pattern: the father allows her to go with him, and she experiences the outside.

achieve two goals: to escape her mother's negative atmosphere and to experience an exciting adventure that will help her develop her abilities to be like her father who, from her perspective, can deal with any given situation.

Then we are backing out of the driveway with the rising hope of adventure, just the little hope that takes you over the bump into the street, the hot air starting to move, turning into a breeze, the houses growing less and less familiar as we follow the short cut my father knows, the quick way out of town. (Munro, 1998, p. 6)

She perceives her father as a magician who can change the weather, shorten routes, and take her to another world. Like the poor but good girl who turns into a beautiful princess by means of her fairy's magic in a childhood tale, the girl narrator looks forward to experiencing an exciting adventure.

However, throughout the adventure, the girl not only sees that her father's life is harder and more brutal than she has imagined but also realizes that his strength and ability are less than she had expected. Coral Howells maintains that "to read Munro's stories is to discover the delights of seeing two worlds at once: an ordinary everyday world and the shadowy map of another imaginary or secret world laid over the real one" (Howells, 1998, p. 1). With her father, the narrating girl sees that his ordinary life consists of the secret and tired life that he hesitates to tell about. In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," the father is completely different from the person whom her mother knows. When he leaves his wife, he turns into a stranger who drinks whisky and dances. He also reveals his own circumstances and emotions: he feels shame before customers who do not open their doors and feels a sense of guilt about his taking over the dead coworker's section. As a result, the comic songs that he habitually sings while driving actually imply his difficult, mournful situation: "Old Ned Fields, he now is dead, So I am ridin' the route instead [...]" (Munro, 1998, p. 7).

The reality that the daughter discovers during the trip is that her father does not adjust to his poor circumstances in society but attempts to disguise them with silly songs. Since he does not know how to overcome his sense of shame, he visits his first lover, Nora, who remembers his youth and his desire. By meeting her again, he tries to revive the energy he had

when he was young, but he soon realizes that he is no longer that person. While the mother acts in an abnormal way, the father chooses self-mockery: the mother symbolizes either exaggerated femininity or tired subject while the father lives a duplicitous life.

So my father drives and my brother watches the road for rabbits and I feel my father's life flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon, 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. (Munro, 1998, p. 18)

Meeting her father's friend Nora gives the daughter the opportunity of a glimpse of the other side of his life, which seemed secure. The narration about the scene transforms "ordinary and familiar" into "something you will never know": "from 'touchable' into 'mysterious'" (Howells, 1998, p. 1). Usually after experiencing something new, the main character gains knowledge by it. Ironically, in this case, she becomes more confused than before, and "she sees her father in a new light; she has an adult epiphany" (Hooper, 2008, p. 5). The girl narrator comes face to face with the reality in which her father is as fragile and vulnerable as her mother. I think that her father's situation is more precarious than her mother's because he ignores his thoughts and feeling while her mother somewhat expresses her thoughts. She observes the reality that the certainty displayed in her father's words and behavior is a "mask" hiding uncertainty mixed with anxiety, agony, and vulnerability (Redekop, 1992, p. 38).

In addition, in "Image," Munro shows that how the truth or knowledge about the world can be made by a personal intention throughout the daughter's adventure. The narrating girl meets with a stranger, Joe Phippen, who carries an axe and thinks that illusional characters, the Silases, whom Joe creates, plundered his property. Joe lives alone underground to avoid an attack by the Silases and forces his cat to drink whisky. On the way home, the father asks his daughter to keep Joe's axe secret because the father does not want to scare his wife and sister Mary: "but don't say anything about it at home. Don't mention it to your Momma or Mary, either

one” (Munro, 1998, p. 42). Arriving at home, the father teases Mary and talks to her about Joe without mentioning the axe. Except for the axe, Joe is simply a crazy man who burns his house down and creates the fantasy of the Silases: he is a silly man who “lives in his own dirt” (Munro, 1998, p. 43). The father thus talks about Joe at the dinner table to have fun.

For the girl, meeting Joe is not a scary event but an important opportunity to see the inside of her father’s world. The father’s instruction “don’t say anything about it at home” gives the girl a sudden insight into how reality is constructed.

Like the children in fairy stories who have seen their parents make pacts with terrifying strangers, who have discovered that our fears are based on nothing but the truth, but who come back fresh from marvelous escapes and take up their knives and forks, with humility and good manners, prepared to live happily ever after-like them, dazed and powerful with secrets, I never said a word. (Munro, 1998, p. 43)

Like the children in the fairy tales, the narrator decides to pretend that she does not know anything and, to keep the house safe, connives with her father not to tell the truth. Through these actions, she realizes two aspects of her father’s world: that safety can be wound up in a lie and that he does not trust her ability to deal with the truth. Asking his daughter to keep the secret, he speaks about Joe, except for the axe, and makes her “alien to her own experience” (Howells, 1998, p. 9). She sees that facts are manipulated in the name of safety and learns the reality in which she is not allowed to work with her father. Although present at the central event, she must remain silent like her mother and Mary (Howells, 1998, p. 10). This depicts the woman’s position in society: whether or not she is involved in the event, her existence or thoughts do not matter to the man and to society.

Unlike the traditional hero, “Munro’s narrator neither finds comfort in nor derives any benefit from the new knowledge she gleans” (Duncan, 2011, p. 20). The daughter fails to achieve her goal of becoming like her father and loses the right to tell the truth as she becomes an accomplice conspiring against her mother. As a result, when describing the events hap-

pening around her, she realizes just how difficult it is for her to overcome her gendered identity constructed by the man's preference. Her awakened awareness of her situation as a girl again helps her to think about her identity in relation to her mother's environment and to shape a different figure of a woman. In the next section, I discuss the characteristics of the new model developed by the main characters.

The Daughter's Selection

In some stories, Munro's narrator can probe inside the surface of reality and test the authenticity of things she once took for granted. Among the most interesting changes, she can establish her own principles that run counter to typical gender identities and the interests of the community. The reason she can be powerful is because she has grown up all along experiencing the back seat of an everyday life overlaid by a mother's hysterical world and a father's bifacial world as well as because she is no longer naive and immature in her yearning for physical and emotional support. By moving from the mother's world into the father's outside, the daughter recognizes the reasons behind her mother's anxiety in society and her father's disguise. Therefore, the female narrator is not the same as the young girl who blindly admired her father and can now see the "dialectic between present and past, between experience and understanding" (Duncan, 2011, p. 19).

For example, in *Lives of Girls and Women*, Ruth turns down a scholarship offer and decides to stay at home instead. The mother of the narrator, who does not appreciate Ruth's situation, regards her as a coward because the mother believes that one must go to college to succeed in society. The narrator, though, thinks that Ruth knows what is best for her life and determines to go her own way. From the perspective of the girl narrator, Ruth does not follow the rules and principles of others. Rather she makes her a model of self-reliance who seeks freedom from gendered norms and breaks down the general expectation of a society in which people believe a college degree ensures success.

Similarly, the narrator of "The Office," who is a housewife as well as a writer, rents an office to write and rest. Her demand for an office sounds unrealistic and absurd to others as she explains, "it was really the sound of the word 'office' that I liked, its sound of dignity and peace. And pur-

posefulness and importance” (Munro, 2001, p. 60). In “The Office,” the narrating character is not as concerned about others and expresses her need for an office. She argues that the house provides her with shelter where she does not feel “a fierce and lawless quiver of loneliness” (Munro, 2001, p. 61) but also demands her time and labor so that she becomes “the house” itself (Munro, 2001, p. 60). Thus, she needs a separate space from the house, which is closely related to the dominant gendered norms. Moreover, she assigns meaning and value to her works as a writer, which are not visible to others: she seeks her own sanctuary, expresses her own ideas about the world, and achieves freedom of which other mothers never dreamed. She also obtains safety, which “allows them to ask difficult questions, and uncomfortable issues and to face ‘critical self-analysis’” (Kramarae, 1996, p. 319). For her, to possess dignity is to severely criticize her situation and to know precisely what she needs, not merely to complain or blame others.

Whereas the narrator in “The Office” needs a separate space to build her identity and to maintain her dignity and purposefulness, Mrs. Fullerton, an old obstinate woman, prizes her shabby house in “The Shining Houses.” The main character, Mary, thinks that although her house is not considered good enough in industrialized society, it should be preserved due to individual rights. After listening to Mrs. Fullerton’s story, Mary understands that a house is not merely a tangible, material piece of property but exists as an intangible memory and emotion to people such as Mrs. Fullerton. She thinks that Mrs. Fullerton is not a stubborn, outdated elder who fails to adjust to modern society; rather, she is an interrogator who questions how easily people lay claim to individual rights. Understanding Mrs. Fullerton’s situation and intentions, Mary advocates for the other woman’s interests against those of the community.

“I can’t sign that,” she said. Her face flushed up, at once, her voice was trembling. Steve touched her shoulder.

“What’s the matter, honey?”

“I don’t think we have the right. We haven’t the right.”

“Mary, don’t you care how things look? You live here too.”

(Munro, 2001, p. 28)

When she advocates for Mrs. Fullerton's rights to other community members, her face "flushed up." Her red face indicates that how difficult it is for the individual, especially for a woman, to express her own idea that does not match up with others' expectation. Mary, however, does not limit her attention to her own business or family but is willing to take responsibility for her neighbor and community and takes care of others. The attention Mary pays to Mrs. Fullerton's situation transforms the otherwise invisible and weak elder into an important subject who drives Mary to think about her ideas about her neighbors and to change her attitudes toward industrialized society, which had formerly been consistent with the patriarchal viewpoint.

Some relationships between the women in Munro's work offer the possibility of building a "supportive world constructed by women" (Foss, Sonja, & Cindy, 1999, p. 49). In "The Shining Houses," the narrator, Mary, criticizes the tendency to ignore individual rights in the name of the good of the community. These female characters have their own voice to tell their thoughts and emotions and to select their way of living. Moreover, they become guardians, protecting others from indiscriminate attacks against individual rights, and appear sufficiently independent and confident to enjoy their own lives and freedom. Furthermore, these relationships among women engender "interactions that are characterized by trust. The participants freely admit their lack of knowledge of their need for help and trust that others will not take advantage of the vulnerabilities they reveal" (Foss et al., 1999, p. 49). The relationship between Mary and Mrs. Fullerton shows how each woman supports the poor position of the other and tries to live together with her in society. Mary realizes how happy she is to communicate with others and how valuable it is to share her emotions and thoughts with others. Although Mrs. Fullerton reveals her weaknesses to Mary, she never worries about it because she trusts Mary. The relationship between them emerges as an ideal relationship.

In conclusion, the relationships between women portray how vulnerable subjects grow up together and demonstrate the possibility of building a supportive community full of mutual trust among women. My reason for focusing on mutual trust among women is because a girl might easily grow up into a distorted woman who is controlled by the male-dominated values inherent in the gendered identity, which devalues a woman's ability and power. Such a woman should struggle to give careful attention to another

woman who is confused, discouraged, and powerless. These women can help each other because, as underestimated beings in patriarchal society, they know the other woman's common sufferings despite their living in different places.

Conclusion

To understand how a girl becomes a controversial, challenging figure who precipitates discussion of gender issues, I investigated the characteristics of the first-person narrators in Munro's short stories. These narrators are usually young girls who find it easy to travel into different gendered spaces whose metaphors are "partially figured in myths and fantasy" (Howells, 1998, p. 5) and affect the narrating girl's mind and behavior. Thus, she is prone to keeping a distance from her mother and describes her mother's works and character in an objective manner. Conversely, she admires her father's work and space and believes that if she follows his rules and tries to imitate him, she will grow up to be like him. Exploring this world, however, she realizes that gendered roles are applied strictly even to children's lives and faces the harsh reality that she is only a weak, useless girl who "is treated in terms of [her] potential (or actual) womanliness and sexuality, in terms of child-bearing as well as sexploitation" (Burman, 1994, p. 17) and should be obedient to the rule. Also, she uncovers that the reason she regards herself as a negative being in society is because there is the irrational definition of woman as possessing a negative, hysterical nature.

Munro conceives of an escape for girls who experience injustices due to the irrational ignorance and unfair treatment. She suggests that the ideal woman figure neither severs relationships with other women nor naively joins the father's world. Instead, she interacts with women, faces reality, and finally engages in self-analysis about her everyday life. By emphasizing this new awareness of building relationships with others and analyzing oneself, Munro builds a female "counter-discourse, suggesting alternative maps for women's destinies beyond traditional pattern of male authority and gender stereotyping" (Howells, 1998, p. 4). Her most important resource is to look back on her life in connection with other women around her and to communicate with them to understand their minds. They can also take care of themselves and do not have to depend on the man's care and pro-

tection, which can have a negative impact on a woman's independence.

Although she focuses on connections among women, Munro does not pretend to solve all gender issues in their lives. Rather, her suggestion has to do with how to live everyday life by transforming her characters into political subjects: she thinks women should take the initiative to improve each other's lives, not just leaving from another's space. One of the best ways to do so is to communicate with those ready to share their experiences and emotions. This act will help them heal their physical, mental, and emotional pain. Women should also re-examine their own particular qualities and define them as positive abilities in terms of the power to act. Through this process, women can assert their voices and fight against unfair treatment stemming from gender identity. Women thus continue "the endless negotiation of a crossroads" (Fraiman, 1993, p. 131).

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