

Postmodern Challenges In Alice Munro's Short Fiction: Issues of Language and Representation

José dos Santos

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais

One of the features of Alice Munro's fiction is that it has challenged and resisted, at various levels, traditional literary taxonomies. Due to the descriptive style of her narratives as well as faithful representation of events, places and rural communities, many critics have placed her short stories within the tradition of literary realism. A glance over her work certainly invites this sort of classification. Most of her stories have the rural and semi-rural landscape of Ontario, Canada as the background. Usually set in small towns, her characters deal with personal conflicts, love relationships, and various kinds of family issues. On the formal level, her narrators usually know exactly what is happening before, during, and after the events being narrated. Munro herself admits to be fascinated with careful descriptions of places and characters. In a comment on this aspect of her fiction, she states: "I always have to know my characters in a lot of depth – what clothes they'd choose, what they were like at school, etc... And I know what happened before and what will happen after the part of their lives I'm dealing with" ("A Conversation"). In another interview she reiterates this comment on the mimetic aspect of her stories: "I'm very, very excited by what you might call the surface of life... It seems to me very important to be able to get the exact tone and texture of how things are" (qtd. in Hoy 100).

Yet, despite this representational aspect of her fiction, what many recent critics have perceived is that one cannot easily classify her production as realist. Bharati Mukherjee, for instance, in a review for *The New York*

Times of her collection entitled *Friend of my Youth* (1990) states that while Munro employs many strategies of realist fiction, she, in many ways, has “deepened the channels of realism” (31). Others such as George Woodcock have gone as far as classifying her fiction as “magical realism” (236). Although some might feel reluctant to place Munro’s fiction within the category of postmodernist fiction (she does seem to be experimental enough), quite a few have stressed several elements indicating that even though on the surface she apparently adheres to mimetic models of reality, in another level, she subverts the very strategies she employs. This view is discussed by Lorraine M. York in an insightful essay in which she investigates how Munro incorporates in her stories several theories of photography. This resource, York states, allows Munro to combine in one scene or take elements naturally opposed such as truth and illusion, fact and fiction, the strange and the familiar (52). Hers is a narrative then where borders are blurred rather than made distinct.

Along with York, Mark Nunes stresses another postmodern feature of Munro’s fiction: her perception of language as an agent of mediation rather than representation. Although her fiction is not highly experimental as many of her contemporaries, he suggests, postmodern characteristics come about in the way she structures her stories and deals with the characters’ dilemmas. Basing his analysis on the examination of stories published in *Friend of my Youth*, he argues that Munro privileges disconnected realities and, in the process, the role of language in putting all the pieces together. This arrangement, always subject to context, takes the form of a narrative constantly open to additions and deletions. Hers is an aesthetic then of contingent arrangements, or, in Nunes’s words, “an aesthetic of piecing, allowing familiar and stable narratives to reveal their condition and contingent nature” (20). Coral Ann Howells corroborates this postmodernist perception of Munro’s fiction, namely, her ability to create something and later disarrange it so as to suggest the temporal, contextual, fleeing nature of reality. She remarks: “There is always something in addition which disarranges any fictional structure, however carefully it is created” (87). Through an aesthetics called by Ajay Heble as “discourse of potential and absent meanings” (7), the reader is caught up in a semiotic web where signs do not lead to a final interpretant, but to other signs and various possible readings. If meaning is indeterminate and mimetic representation no

longer possible, Munro places reality then in the realm of language and narrativization, that is, all one can expect are attempts at putting a whole together.

It is as narratives challenging representational or mimetic conceptions of reality that this essay will analyze two short stories by Alice Munro: "Meneseteung" (1988) and "Runway" (2003).¹ What one notices in these narratives is a tension – present, in fact, in most of her stories but more salient this time² – between representational models of reality and an apparent skepticism towards the ability of language to capture the nuances and complexities of human experience. If on the one hand, these texts attempt to put together fragments of a dispersed reality, on the other they suggest that metaphysical, pre-linguistic unities cannot be achieved.

"Meneseteung," published in 1988, is one of the best illustrations of Munro's concern with questions of language and representation. Here, she suggests that reality is not a ready-made entity at the full grasp of an all-knowing subject with a god-like eye-view of the facts at hand. Reality in "Meneseteung" is constructed in a narrative process with no clear beginning or tidy ending. The story opens with a narrator trying to understand the life of a poetess named Almeda Joynt Roth. The first document she examines is a poetry book, called *Offerings*, published after the poetess's death, which contains a picture and date of the book's publication. On observing the photograph, she starts to make connections and construct a possible subject out of the physical traces registered in the picture. All the way through, she acknowledges the tentative and limited aspect of her endeavor:

It is the untrimmed, shapeless hat, something like a soft beret, that makes me see artistic intentions, or at least a shy and stubborn eccentricity, in this young woman, whose long neck and forward

¹ "Meneseteung" was chosen for being one of the best illustrations of Munro's concern with issues of language and representation. "Runaway," published more recently, illustrates very well how this concern is still very much a part of her fictional production.

² For more on issues of language and representation in Munro's early fiction, see Heble, Ajay, *The Tumble of Reason*.

inclining head indicate as well that she is tall and slender and somewhat awkward. From the waist up, she looks like a young nobleman of another century. But perhaps it was the fashion. (477)

As the word “perhaps” suggests, right from the beginning we notice the narrator’s reluctance in making a positive assertion as to facts before her. She recognizes she is interpreting a document, a perception that might be clear off the mark.

The narrator proceeds with the reading, now quoting *verbatim* a long passage from the preface of the book. Here, she learns more about the family background and, especially, the poetess’s artistic intentions. From her early years, Almeda felt too clumsy for crochet and embroidery, thus preferring poetry to domestic tasks. The narrator proceeds now comparing a photo taken back in Almeda’s days to the present setting as it stands before her. Quite a few things have changed.

However, it is from the local newspaper, the *Vidette*, which delights in publishing all sorts of stories about the people in town, that she learns the town’s customs, gossips, disputes and settlements. In other words, the social, political, economic and religious context in which Almeda lived. Of the newspaper, she comments: “This is the *Vidette*, full of sly jokes, innuendo, plain accusation that no newspaper would get away with today” (482). From the *Vidette* she gets several pieces of information on Almeda’s social life. She finds out about her interest, at least according to people in town, for James Poulter, a salt miner who lived next to her house. At this point, the narrator provides a great deal of information (it is not clear where she gets it from, though) on Almeda’s habits, expectations, hopes and fears. Almeda struggles with insomnia, probably as a result of loneliness. The doctor prescribes her laudanum and asks her to avoid intellectual activities, to get more involved with household tasks. Following the doctor’s advice, she decides to make grape jelly to give away as Christmas presents. In her many sleepless nights, she has all sorts of strange thoughts. It is in these moments of delusions that she feels the most inspired to write poetry. She feels like writing a long poem that would encompass all the other poems she ever wrote: “The Meneseteung,” the name of the river.

“Meneseteung” ends with an excerpt from the *Vidette* reporting Almeda’s death by pneumonia. The narrator concludes the story reporting her visit to the cemetery to visit Almeda’s grave. She reflects on her effort

to put Almeda's life story together, and in the process acknowledges her inadequacy at making the right connections: "I may have got it wrong. I don't know if she ever took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don't know if she ever made grape jelly." Above all, she continues, she is just another one trying to understand Almeda's past. Others will come with "notebooks, scraping the dirt off gravestones, reading microfilm, just in hope of seeing this trickle in time, making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish" (497).

"Meneseteung" stands out then as a narrative where construction rather than representation of reality is the main concern. Here, reality comes about in fragments – from the *Vidette*, the poetess's book, photographs – and becomes along the narrative not a tidy, linear set of events, but an assemblage of bits and pieces with no closure. As the narrator puts Almeda's life in narrative form, the reader is obliged to make the same types of inferences she has made. Consequently, the whole effort is open to all sorts of possible connections and interpretations. In other words, the reader embarks in the interpretive journey along with the narrator only to find out that the narrative does not provide clear distinctions between fact and fiction, truth and reality. The story problematizes, in this manner, representation models of reality by placing language and narrative at the center of our world conceptualizations. Here, as Nunes remarks, narration constructs meaning and arranges facts into a reality: "truth... always exists within the creation of narrative itself, as a contingent, uneasy harmony" (18).

Munro's concerns with issues of language and representation continue to be an important element in her more recent fiction. Several of her most recent stories – "Runaway" (2003), "Passion" (2004), "Dimension" (2006) – all deal, in one way or another, and in different levels, with issues of representation and narrativization. "Runaway" serves as a good example of a recent text where Munro departs once again from mimetic models by making meaning and reality construction a central theme. The story, set in a small countryside town, has Carla and her husband Clark as the main characters. They live in mobile home in a trailer park and run a type of horseback riding business, which at the time is barely making ends meet. Hardly anyone is showing up for rides, even though they have taken the effort to pass out fliers around town advertising the business.

The narrator also lets the readers know, mostly through textual clues and bits of dialogue, that the relationship between Carla and Clark

is based on imposition of authority. Although she voices her opinions around the house, Clark seems to have not only physical but also psychological control over her. She shows signs of fear over his usual ill humor, especially his rows with neighbors and some of the people in town. On one occasion, she responded to one of his rows with “You flare up,” to which he coldly replied, “That’s what men do” (2). To make some extra cash, Carla has worked up to the moment to Mrs. Jamieson – Sylvia, helping her watch over her terminally ill husband.

“Runaway” starts out thus with a setting typical of most of Munro’s fiction: a small community with characters dealing with illnesses, death, and financial and domestic strife. Thus far, realist depiction of events and people set the tone of the narrative. However, as the story progresses, Munro subverts linear representational models by making meaning a constructive, semiotic and inferential process all the way through. The reader is brought to the scene of events, and much like the narrator in “Meneseteung,” has to probe the narrator’s account and put together his or her own narrative. The first instance involves Sylvia’s attachment to Carla, who has been working for her during the period of her husband’s illness. The narrator mentions that one day, as Carla scrubbed a window on top of a ladder, she caught Sylvia staring at her in a unusual way: “Sylvia looked up, surprised by the watery sunlight that had come out – or possibly by the shadow of Carla on top of a ladder, bare-legged, bare-armed, her resolute face crowned with as frizz of dandelion hair that was too short for her braid... They both began to laugh. Sylvia felt this laughter running through her like a sweet stream.” Later, the narrator continues, when heading to the kitchen, Carla drops a kiss on Sylvia’s head, a gesture that “Sylvia saw...as a bright blossom, its pedals spreading inside her with a tumultuous heat, like a menopausal flesh” (4). On her trip to Greece, Sylvia comments with her friends several times about Carla and how she had become attached to her, to which her friends replied: “There’s always a girl... We all come to it sometime. A crush on a girl” (5). Sylvia did not like the word “crush” and even saw her feeling for Carla as repressed maternal love, but even then she brought her a special present. The nature of this attachment, whether homoerotic or not, is never made clear in the narrative, even though it is provocatively suggested. Here, the reader is left to decide as to the nature and implications of Sylvia’s feelings.

The second, certainly most important instance, has to do with Carla's decision to leave Clark. On the day Sylvia returns from her trip, Carla shows up at her house to tell how miserable she felt with Clark. It is important to stress that violence, whether physical or psychological, is never directly mentioned in the story. Sylvia comforts her and suggests that perhaps it would be better for both of them if she moved to another town. Arrangements are made with a friend of Sylvia and Carla does not go back home that night. She borrows some clothes and takes the evening bus to a town a few miles away. On the way off, she changes her mind and calls Clark up in the middle of the night. Clark shows up at Sylvia's house to break the news of Carla's return and tell her to mind her own business. A few days later, Carla receives a letter from Sylvia mentioning Clark's visit and something he had never told Carla: Flora's return. Flora was a pet goat that had been living with them for quite some time. One day the animal mysteriously disappeared without a trace. In the letter, Sylvia talks about Flora's mysterious appearance at her house the night Clark came over and how happy she was that both of them returned home safely.

Carla feels something ominous in the air, a feeling telling her to be cautious. From that day on, the narrator observes: "It was as if she had a murderous needle somewhere in her lungs, and by breathing carefully she could avoid feeling it" (14). As the days went by, she felt tempted to go into the woods nearby and see for herself, but she never did it. The story ends with no sure knowledge of what happened to Flora. Did Clark use Flora as a scapegoat, meaning that in the future he would do the same to Carla? The final lines provide no closure to the case. Maybe, if she walked into the woods she would find "the skull, with shreds of bloodied skin still clinging to it..." but "[p]erhaps something else had happened. Suppose he had chased Flora away, or tied her in the back of the truck and driven some distance and let her loose. Taken her back to the place they'd gotten her from. Not to have her around, reminding them of this bad time" (15).

In "Runaway" Munro once again starts out in a straightforward manner only to complicate the plot as the narrative progresses. Sylvia's attachment to Flora is mostly suggested, yet never explained or resolved. In fact, the text mentions other occasions when Sylvia felt a similar kind of attachment to girls. As a teacher, she met quite a few girls during her career, and "every so often there had been a special student girl in one of her classes..." (5). However, the reader is left to make the inferences and

come to his or her own conclusions. Clark's psychological abuse of his wife Carla is mostly suggested as well through short dialogues, and later, in his possible killing of Flora, their pet goat. Like Carla, Flora had also run away and returned, coincidentally, on the night Carla left and then came back to Clark. Whether Clark did or did not put an end to Flora is not directly stated in the story, although the reader is left with the clear impression that, given his strange behavior, he probably did it. The only clue the text presents is Carla's noticing the recent presence of several birds and crows flying over the woods nearby. It was sort of strange how they would go "circling and dropping to earth, disappearing over the woods, [and] coming back to rest in the familiar bare tree" (14). In the end, it is uncertain whether Flora was killed or taken back to where she came from.

In a postmodern manner, both "Meneseteung" and "Runaway" depart from representational models of reality by stressing a fluid, malleable reality grounded in language and narrativization. If on the one hand, her narratives focus on apparently clear and straightforward aspects of human existence, on the other, as the examples above suggest, her texts challenge dualistic conceptions of reality by blurring the borders between fact and fiction, truth and illusion. Almeda's past in "Meneseteung" can only be reconstituted through language, and in the process, both writer and reader can never be sure as to the veracity of the connections and inferences made. Carla's doubts as to whether Clark used Flora as a scapegoat will continue at the reader's level as well, since the narrative focuses more on suggestions rather than factual statements. The apparent realistic presentation of facts and characters in the beginning of the stories is replaced by ambiguity and uncertainty in the end. Reality or existence, she seems to suggest, is never simple and cannot be understood apart from the mechanisms and tools utilized to stage it out – language and narrative.

References

Heble, Ajay. *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994.

Hoy, Helen. "'Dull, Simple, Amazing and Unfathomable': Paradox and Double Vision in Alice Munro's Fiction." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 5.1 (1980): 100-15.

Howells, Coral Ann. *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970's and 1980's*. London: Methuen, 1987.

Mukherjee, Bharati. Rev. of *Friend of My Youth*. *The New York Times Book Review* 18 March 1990: 1, 31.

Munro, Alice. "Meneseteung." *Selected Stories*. New York: Vintage, 1996. 476-97.

_____. "The Runway". *The New Yorker*. (11 August 2003). 15 Sept. 2007. <http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/08/11/030811fi_fiction>

_____. Interview. "A Conversation with Alice Munro." *Bookbrowse*. (October 2007). 14 Oct. 2007. <http://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm?author_number=1071>.

Nunes, Mark. "Postmodern 'Piecing': Alice Munro's Contingent Ontologies." *Studies in Short Fiction* 34.1 (1997): 11-26.

Woodcock, George. "The Plots of Life: the Realism of Alice Munro." *Queens Quarterly* 93.2 (1986): 235-50.

York, Lorraine. "'The Other Side of Dailiness': the Paradox of Photography in Alice Munro's Fiction." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 8.1 (1983): 49-60.