

“What do you want me to tell?” The inferential texture of Alice Munro’s ‘Postcard’

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1. Introduction

In this paper, this paper, I discuss Alice Munro’s story ‘Postcard’. The repetition of the noun phrase *this paper* here is deliberate. It echoes the repetition of the word *yesterday* in the opening sentence of ‘Postcard’, a salient feature of the text which is discussed again below. If current pragmatic theories are right, then the repetition here should have caused you to consider what effects it was intended to give rise to which would not have arisen if you had read the sentence with no repetition (‘In this paper, I discuss. . .’). I am expecting that most readers struggled to see why I would have repeated this noun phrase and possibly decided that it must be a mistake. By contrast, there are relatively accessible possible explanations for the repetition in the story and some readers might even struggle to remember later that the repetition was there.

One aim of this paper is to consider how helpful ideas from pragmatic stylistics can be in developing understanding of the production, interpretation and evaluation of this story and of other texts. Naturally, we expect pragmatic theories to account for the interpretation of local phenomena such as repetitions. Discussions of pragmatic phenomena tend to focus on how hearers and readers understand them. This paper suggests that pragmatic theories also have something to say about the production and evaluation of spoken and written utterances. It considers what is likely to be a central focus of inferential activity for many readers: attempting to understand the narrator of this story and her relationships with others in the story. Finally, it considers whether a focus on inferential processes can

help to account for what Stockwell calls ‘texture’, i.e. ‘the experienced quality of textuality’ (Stockwell 2009: 1).

Section 2 of the paper offers some general thoughts about pragmatic stylistics, understood here as work in stylistics which focuses on inferential processes. Section 3 summarises the plot of the story ‘Postcard’ and discusses some features of the story which we would expect a pragmatic stylistic approach to account for, starting from the repetition at the beginning and moving on to consider other inferences about the narrator and her relationships with others. Section 4 focuses specifically on the notion of ‘texture’ (in Stockwell’s sense) and considers how work on inference can contribute to accounts of it.

2. Pragmatic Stylistics: Exploring Inferences

Since the focus here is on a literary text, this work falls within the realm of ‘pragmatic literary stylistics’ as discussed by Chapman and Clark (2014; see particularly the introduction, pp. 1-15). The particular variety of post-Gricean pragmatics applied here is based on relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986; Clark 2013; for discussion of relevance-theoretic pragmatic stylistics in particular, see Clark 2014a, 2014b; MacMahon 2006).

There is space here only for the briefest mention of some of the key points of the relevance-theoretic approach adopted in the discussion below. It is a post-Gricean approach in that it follows from and is influenced by the work of Paul Grice (1989). It does not, however, fall within the group of approaches termed ‘neo-Gricean’ since the pragmatic principles it assumes are not similar to Gricean ‘maxims’. Rather, pragmatic inference is seen as being governed by two law-like generalisations. One of these is a generalisation about human cognition:

- (1) First, or Cognitive, Principle of Relevance:
Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance.

The other is a generalisation about communication:

- (2) Second, or Communicative, Principle of Relevance
Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

To understand these, we need to know what the technical term ‘relevance’ refers to within this approach. Keeping things simple, a stimulus or other phenomenon is relevant to an individual to the extent that it gives rise to positive cognitive effects (roughly, changes in that individual’s cognitive environment which are worth having) and to the extent that the effort involved in arriving at these is small. If I become aware now that:

- (3) The current draft of the paper I am working on is 1,000 words over the word limit.

this is relevant to me since it enables me to become aware of things it is worth my while to know, such as that I will need to reduce the length, that I can modify assumptions about how long it will take to finish the article, and so on. Suppose, by contrast, that I notice that:

- (4) The current draft of the paper I am working on is 10,000 words over the word limit.

Assuming that (4) refers to the same paper as that referred to by (3), this will be more relevant as it has a greater number of effects. It will be much harder for me to reduce its length. Finishing the article will take me lots of time. I might not manage it in time. And so on. In other words, (4) is more relevant than (3) because it has more cognitive effects for me (‘positive’ in that they are worth having, despite many of these being ‘negative’ in other ways!)

Now suppose I consider two ways of informing you of (3), either by uttering (3) itself or by uttering (5):

- (5) If I wrote 6,000 more words, the current draft of the paper I am working on would be 7,000 words over the limit.

If nothing follows for you from (5) that would not follow from (3), then (5) is less relevant to you than (3), since it puts you to greater effort than (3) without this effort resulting in increased effects.

This characterisation of ‘relevance’ is used in each of the two principles mentioned above. The Cognitive Principle claims that our cognitive system tends to be geared towards ‘maximising’ relevance, i.e. deriving as many cognitive effects as possible for as little effort as possible.

The Communicative Principle says that communication gives rise to expectations of ‘optimal’ relevance, i.e. (roughly) to finding an interpretation which leads to enough effects to justify the effort involved in deriving them and without putting us to effort which could have been avoided. In work since 2004 (see, for example, Wilson and Sperber 2004; Sperber and Wilson 2005) claims about how interpretation processes work which follow from the general principles of the theory have been presented with reference to a ‘Relevance-Guided Comprehension Heuristic’ (stated simply here):

- (6) Relevance-Guided Comprehension Heuristic
 - a. Follow a path of least effort in deriving cognitive effects
 - b. Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied.

This leads to surprisingly precise predictions about how we will understand particular utterances. One way to see this is to compare utterances which are minimally different, e.g. (7) and (8):

- (7) He will.
- (8) I’m saying he will.

Suppose someone asks you whether I will cut the number of words in my article to the required length and so be ready to submit by the deadline. If you reply by uttering (7), you will be taken to be saying that I will succeed. There is, then, no need to include the words *I’m saying* at the start of your utterance. However, relevance theory predicts that the extra effort involved in processing the two words in utterance (8) must lead to more effects and so you must arrive at an interpretation which is different from what you would have arrived at on hearing (7). A likely interpretation here is that not everyone would say that I will succeed and so it is relevant to indicate explicitly who is saying it here. This suggests that there is some doubt about whether I will manage and that others would give a different answer. Relevance theory accounts for examples like this with reference to the Communicative Principle of Relevance and the comprehension heuristic which follows from it. Other approaches use different kinds of principles. ‘Neo-Gricean’ approaches such as those developed by Horn (1984, 1987, 2004, 2007) and Levinson (1987, 2000) use principles which have more in common with Grice’s maxims (for introductions to

various neo-Gricean and other approaches to pragmatics, see Birner, 2012; Chapman 2011).

Relevance theory and other approaches to pragmatics have been applied in a number of ways in work on stylistics. The majority of work has focused on accounting for how audiences develop interpretations of texts. More recently, there has been increased interest in how texts are produced and evaluated. Clark (2012), for example, considers the effects of editorial interventions in a short story by Raymond Carver and so considers inferences authors and editors make about what readers will infer. Clark and Owtram (2012) consider techniques used with writers to encourage them to think explicitly about how different formulations of texts will be likely to give rise to different kinds of inferences in readers. Clark (2014c) makes some suggestions about how inferential processes before, during and after reading a text can make it more or less likely that an individual will come to value a text. However, pragmatic stylistic work on production and evaluation is at an early stage and the vast majority of work from this perspective continues to focus on interpretation (work in literary criticism, by contrast, has often focused on questions about evaluation). The rest of this paper also focuses mainly on interpretation but it includes some remarks about production and evaluation as well as about how inferences involved in production, interpretation and evaluation are connected.

3. 'Postcard' and Pragmatics

There is, of course, far too much to be said about 'Postcard' and about inferential processes involved in producing and responding to it, for this paper to come close to covering it all. Instead, the aim here is to give a flavour of what a pragmatic stylistic approach could say about the story, identifying just a few key features of the story and saying something about a few things which a pragmatic stylistic account might develop.

Like other stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, 'Postcard' shares features common to many examples of Alice Munro's writing. It presents events from what we might think of as 'ordinary' life in a small town (called Jubilee) in Canada, gives readers a sense of having a fairly rich and full sense of what the world it presents is like and how it feels to its characters. A key feature of this story is that it encourages us to think about the emotional life of the first person narrator, Helen, and of the

people she interacts with. It encourages us to consider not only what happens in the story but why it has happened and how we feel about this. This section begins with a brief summary and then says a little more about key features of the story (identified here simply from my own intuitions, backed up with reference to discussion by others) which we might expect a stylistic analysis, and a pragmatic stylistic analysis in particular, to say something about.

3.1 What’s in ‘Postcard’

The story begins one morning in late winter when the first-person narrator, Helen, goes to the post office and collects a postcard from Florida from her lover, Clare MacQuarrie. We learn that he has been gone for three weeks and will be back in a few days. This is the only card he has sent. It features ‘a motel with a sign out front in the shape of a big husky blonde creature’ with a speech balloon saying ‘Sleep at my place’. Clare’s message contains a jokey remark about not taking up this offer and some comments on the weather. It closes: ‘Be a good girl. Clare’. We follow Helen home from the Post Office, learn more about her life at work in ‘King’s Department Store’ and with her mother, about her relationships with Clare, her mother, and an earlier lover, Ted Forgie, and her friend Alma. The most significant event in the story comes when Helen’s mother discovers from the local paper, and her friend Alma confirms, that Clare is returning a married man. Alma then informs Helen that Clare and his new bride have already returned to Jubilee. We see Helen, her mother and Alma reacting to the news, culminating in Helen driving to Clare’s house that night, honking her horn repeatedly and calling out to Clare. A local policeman, Buddy Shields, comes to calm Helen down and take her home. While he is there, Clare comes out of the house and advises Helen to go home. She describes him as ‘an unexplaining man’. Buddy Shields drives Helen home, advising her that she just has to accept things and telling her a story to illustrate his point. The story is about two local people caught in a place where ‘they had no business being . . . together’. The woman’s husband had reported her missing and of course they are embarrassed. But the next day Buddy sees them shopping together, showing that they had decided to carry on with their life together despite how unhappy they were about the situation. In the final paragraph of the story, Helen begins by acknowledging that things will continue but says that she can’t understand why seeing Clare there ‘as an unexplaining man’ made her want to reach out and touch him.

3.2 Inferences in production, interpretation and evaluation

As mentioned above, pragmatic stylistics should be able to say something about the inferential processes involved in production and evaluation as well as interpretation. The discussion here does not go into great detail on any of these areas and focuses mainly on interpretation. However, each of the inferences discussed could be described with reference to Munro's inferences (and those of any editors involved) about what readers would be likely to infer before, during and after reading, and about how these inferences might contribute to evaluation of the story. In other words, this discussion assumes that all three of these processes interact to some extent.

A key feature of this story is that it encourages us to make inferences about the main character Helen, about the other characters she tells us about, and about her relationships with them. The key other characters are: her mother, Alma, Clare, Buddy Shields and, more indirectly, Clare's sister Porky (Isabelle), Porky's husband, and Clare's new bride. Arguably, one reason for the sense of richness and of our involvement in a fairly realistic work is that we discover quite a lot about these characters in a short space of reading time and that these inferences are 'sticky' (in that we keep returning to think about them) and open-ended (to the extent that we cannot say we have ever finished thinking about them and that we can continue to derive more conclusions over an extended period). This could be a key feature in accounting for how the story is evaluated. Clark (2014c) suggests a number of factors which might contribute to positive evaluations. These include ease of representing the text or aspects of it as a whole, the extent to which relevant inferences follow from the text, and the extent to which relatively complex inferential processes lead to relatively rich cognitive effects. The possibility of thinking about the central event in the story, what we can infer from it, and our ongoing consideration of the nature of Helen, her situation, and her relationships, are likely to lead to relatively positive evaluations of the story.

It is of course a key feature of many texts which are positively valued that they leave questions unanswered. We cannot decide for certain what we think about Helen and her relationships and the inferences we make about these are complex and ongoing. Part of my own early response to the story was to focus on the sadness of how things had turned out for Helen and to think about why things had turned out this way. I had a fairly negative view of Clare and thought that in some ways he had 'used'

and misled her. I then thought about Helen’s attitude to him and others. As discussed below, some of Helen’s comments suggest an element of superiority and possibly a lack of warmth. I then began to think more fully about this central relationship and a lack of warmth in both directions. This led me to think further about Helen’s relationship with her mother and others. There is not enough in the story to provide definitive answers to these questions and so readers can continue to make inferences about them after having read the story. Some of the pleasure from this story surely comes after reading as new ideas occur to readers developing their interpretation. Using relevance-theoretic terminology, the story warrants the derivation of a relatively wide range of weak implicatures (for discussion of the application of the notion of weak implicatures in accounting for literary, or aesthetic, effects, see Pilkington 2000).

A very striking example of this complexity and open-endedness comes at the very end of the story. The final paragraph is:

Oh, Buddy Shields, you can just go on talking, and Clare will tell jokes, and Momma will cry, till she gets over it, but what I’ll never understand is why, 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.
(Munro 1968: 146 [italics in original])

The key question this raises, of course, is why exactly Helen felt that she wanted to reach out and touch Clare. Readers might think of fairly clichéd explanations such as that she wants him more now that she can’t have him. They will, of course, notice that she felt this ‘for the first time’, suggesting that she had little or no interest in him physically before this moment. Perhaps readers will think about the phrase ‘as an unexplaining man’. Does the fact that he is ‘unexplaining’ make him more attractive? This is also likely to confirm the sense of coldness in Helen’s attitude to Clare. Perhaps we will think she has indeed been, as she wondered about herself earlier, ‘a heartless person, just to lie there and let him grab me and love me and moan around my neck and say the things he did, and never say one loving word back to him?’ (Munro 1968: 135). We are hardly likely to be convinced that she is not heartless because ‘I was never mean to Clare, and I did let him, didn’t I, nine times out of ten?’

One intriguing thing about this final paragraph is that at least once Munro omitted it when reading the story in public. Douglas Kneale (2013) reports Munro reading the story when visiting his class at Western University. He reports that she announced that she was going to read it

‘the way she would have written it if she were writing it today.’ She then read the story exactly as published until, at the end, she did not include the final published paragraph. She gave a reason for omitting it, saying: “A good short story should say everything it has to say before the final paragraph.” (As one reviewer commented, this idea is one that ‘presumably cannot apply recursively’!) This raises another possible way of finding out more about the story and how it works, namely to consider how interpretations would be likely to change if the final paragraph were not there and the story simply ended after Buddy Shields has delivered his mini-sermon, advising Helen at the end to ‘just be a good girl’ (echoing the comment near the end of Clare’s postcard message), to ‘go along like the rest of us’ and concluding that ‘pretty soon we’ll see spring’ (Munro 1968: 146). (Susan Lohafer has carried out a significant body of research exploring questions about how and why stories end where they do. See, for example, Lohafer, 1983, 2003)

My intuition is that the omission leaves things more open for readers to make inferences about the story, and its ending, with less guidance than is provided by the final paragraph. While Helen’s reported desire to touch Clare is puzzling and raises unanswered questions, this paragraph nevertheless creates a focus on Helen’s mind at this precise moment and raises questions about this one line of thinking she is experiencing. Without this paragraph, a wider range of possible directions are open for reader inferences. Whether or not the final paragraph is included also has implications for the balance between the extent to which the story can be understood as involving ‘showing’ and ‘telling’. While Helen as narrator tells us things, we can understand the story as a case of showing since it shows us this character telling us what she chooses to tell. At the same time, her report of Buddy Shields is telling us what he did and said, leaving us to make inferences about what Helen is feeling and revealing about herself by telling us this. Her telling is simultaneously a case of Munro showing. There is a significant difference, even within this complexity, between readers making inferences about what Helen is feeling based on what is shown by the rest of the story and making those inferences based on what she chooses to tell us about her mental state. The complex relationships among various ways of thinking about showing and telling in the story are mentioned again in section 4 below.

3.3 Inferences about Helen

This subsection considers some of the inferences we make as we work through the story, and think about it afterwards, beginning by considering the repetition in the first sentence. This is just one of a number of individual, and in some cases quite local, features of the text which give rise to interesting inferences. There is no space to do justice to these here so instead this subsection considers just a small number of inferences which the text suggests. Each of these contributes to broader aspects of interpretation, including the characterisation of Helen and our developing understanding of her and her relationships.

Starting at the beginning, then, we have already mentioned the repetition of *yesterday* in the first sentence:

Yesterday afternoon, yesterday, I was going along the street to the Post Office, thinking how sick I was of snow, sore throats, the whole dragged-out tail-end of winter, and I wished I could pack off to Florida, like Clare.
(Munro 1968: 128)

What is a reader likely to make of this? Pragmatic theories predict that the repetition will give rise to a pragmatic effect. For relevance theory, the extra effort involved in processing the repetition gives rise to an expectation of further effects which would not have followed without the repetition (for discussion of the stylistic effects of different kinds of repetition, and relevance-theoretic predictions about them, see Sperber and Wilson 1995: 217-224). A likely hypothesis here is that the author is representing a narrator as if talking to someone. Conventions of prose fiction writing mean that we do not need to decide who they are speaking to. We might not make a decision between, for example, the thought that the narrator could be talking to herself, talking to a friend, or that this is just a novelistic/prose fiction device not reflecting any real conversations the narrator might have had. Still, without resolving this, we can make inferences about why a narrator might repeat the word *yesterday* here. A likely one is that the narrator is checking we have fixed the intended time reference (this hypothesis is arguably supported by the repetition occurring as a parenthesis here rather than the arguably more fluent repetition *yesterday, yesterday afternoon*). Another is that the narrator thinks their addressee is not very attentive and needs repetition to make sure they understand. Another is that there is something significant or surprising about the fact that it was yesterday when these events happened. Sperber and Wilson (1995: 219) suggest that repetition can give rise to inferences

about the speaker's attitude illustrating with an utterance of *There's a fox, a fox, in the garden* indicating excitement; we can imagine different prosodic cues when reading the story aloud which would support various assumptions to varying degrees. A reader is likely to make some tentative hypotheses along these lines and then confirm or disconfirm them as they read further. My own assumption having read and thought about the story is that the interpretation most consistent with my other assumptions about Helen is that the repetition suggests that she is confident in her own ability to understand things but less so in that of her mother and other people. For Helen, the repetition largely functions to help a less insightful addressee to keep track. For Alice Munro, it functions to help us understand what kind of person Helen is.

This is part of the beginning of the complex process of developing a sense of this character. Reading on, the reader will find various kinds of evidence which support particular hypotheses more strongly than others. Helen seems to think she understands the world better than other people and can see through things which other people can't. Later on the first page she points out that 'King's Department Store', where she works, 'is nothing but a ready-to-wear and dry goods, in spite of the name.' This, and the omission of a noun phrase such as *store* after *dry goods*, might reinforce the idea that she thinks she understands things better than other people.

Carrying on, we see that Mr. King used to make a fuss of her when she was young. Giving her raisins, he would say that 'I only give them to the pretty girls'. We infer that she enjoyed receiving this compliment and perhaps felt special because of it.

She thinks of herself as a strong and special person pointing out that the manager 'doesn't pick on me, knowing I wouldn't take it if he did'. (Munro 1968: 128)

A key theme running through the story, contributing significantly to the characterisation of Helen, concerns her attitudes to class and her own social status. While Clare's family are not members of one of the highest classes in Canadian society at the time, they have higher social status than Helen and her mother. Helen's attitude to this shares properties with other attitudes. She seems to be resentful that others have higher status than her, to suggest that the higher status is not meaningful or deserved, but also to want to move up to that status. Feeling like 'a thief' as she looks at the linen, china and silver in the MacQuarrie dining room, she says, 'But ... why shouldn't I have the enjoyment of this and the name MacQuarrie

since I wouldn’t have to do anything I’m not doing anyway?’ (Munro 1968: 133).

We see that Helen is intimidated by the higher social status of the MacQuarries when she says that she ‘thought about it afterwards and burned’ whenever she made a mistake such as producing *irrelevant* rather than *irrelevant* when talking to Clare’s sister Porky. She goes on:

‘I know it serves me right for trying to talk the way I never talk in Jubilee. Trying to impress her because she’s a MacQuarrie, after all my lecturing Momma that *we’re* as good as *them*.’
(Munro 1968: 130)

Questions about class and Helen’s attitude to her own and other people’s social position run in parallel and also interweave with questions about her relationships, in particular those with Ted Forgie and Clare MacQuarrie. The parallelism and the connections add to the complexity and also the interest of the inferential processes which the story gives rise to.

Putting just these few things together, we are beginning to develop a sense of Helen’s character. She is strong and sees herself as special and, in some ways, superior. She resents others being seen as belonging to a higher class, or having higher social status, than herself and she does not see why she should not be entitled to the same things as other people. At the same time, she is to some extent intimidated by the higher social status of others.

In her relationships with men, we see Helen as potentially being in a victim role but refusing to accept this and retaining a sense of superiority to her lovers. Her knees went hollow when she went to look for mail from her earlier lover, Ted Forgie, and she wonders whether being in ‘a stupor’ over him affected her relationship with Clare. Before she has heard about Clare’s marriage, she tears up the final letter she had received from him, one which has had a powerful effect on her every time she has looked at it (‘a feeling of love, if that is what you want to call it’ – a phrase which is telling, revealing her ability both to be moved and to disparage that feeling at the same time). Tearing up the letter suggests that Helen is moving through a process of getting over her relationship with Ted Forgie, perhaps moving towards a more positive stage in her relationship with Clare as she comes out of her ‘stupor’. Of course, this turns out to be too late when we discover that Clare is married and, later, are presented with her view of him as an ‘unexplaining man’.

Also contributing to our understanding of how Helen responds to what might be seen as her victimhood, there is a recurring sense that Helen is at home in her environment (using phrases like ‘It being Wednesday’ which suggest a calm sureness in her everyday life) and that she remains confident despite what she has gone through. She responds to what we assume must be emotional turmoil by doing something, even if this can be seen as ineffective with regard to her social standing or her relationship with Clare. She drives to Clare’s house, honks her car horn repeatedly and calls out to Clare. The final paragraph of the story suggests that she is strong and resolved even after this embarrassment.

Despite her air of being aware and having a sophisticated understanding of things, we see that Helen has been most unobservant in some aspects of her relationship with Clare. He sends her just one postcard in three weeks away. He goes to Florida every year but never invites Helen. He refuses to tell her much about his time away (aggravating Helen by asking her ‘What do you want me to tell?’) Readers will assume that Helen has misunderstood the nature of her relationship with Clare in some fundamental ways.

The discussion so far has not involved any technical notions from pragmatic theory. Instead, it has indicated some of the kinds of inferences which readers are likely to make when reading. It has not explored the complexity of these inferences but the fact that this discussion has only scratched the surface suggests the complexity of the inferential processes involved in reading a story (or any other text). The next section considers some ways in which thinking about this complexity can help us to understand the ‘texture’ (in one sense) of the reading experience.

4. Inferential ‘Texture’

The discussion above, while very partial, suggests how reader inferences contribute to an emerging understanding of a text, developing and revising hypotheses as they go, during and after reading. This section suggests that exploring inferential processes which happen before, during and after reading can contribute to an account of ‘texture’ in the sense used by Stockwell (2009).

Traditionally (since the beginning of the twentieth century), the term ‘texture’ has been used to describe how various linguistic elements are interconnected (‘woven’ together, metaphorically). Nørgaard, Busse and

Montoro (2010: 157-158) discuss this sense and explain its etymology. On this view, they say, a text is ‘a stretch of sentences . . . linked together by various means to form a unified whole’ (Nørgaard, Busse and Montoro 2010: 157).

Stockwell (2009) explores ‘texture’ in a different sense which he describes as ‘the experienced quality of textuality’ (2009: 1). In fact, the history of both terms (‘texture’ and ‘textuality’) is slightly confusing and different authors have used them in different ways. Stockwell uses ‘textuality’ to refer to the property of being a text (‘woven together’, as suggested above) and ‘texture’ to refer to what it feels like to experience a text. Stockwell is not the first to discuss this topic but his books applies ideas from cognitive poetics to this topic in an extended discussion which has not been attempted in this way before.

Stockwell discusses how we can account for this experienced quality (or qualities) from a number of perspectives, including the application of a range of ideas from cognitive linguistics and cognitive science more generally. He considers aspects of meaning but does not apply ideas from the post-Gricean pragmatic perspective adopted here. The previous discussion here suggests that accounts of pragmatic inference can play an important role in accounting for the ‘experienced quality’ of this story and other works. This section begins to address this more explicitly by considering two aspects of relevance-theoretic pragmatics: the notion that implicatures can vary in strength; the showing-meaning continuum, and the notion that interpretative processes can be more or less spontaneous. The aim here is not to suggest that these are the only relevant ideas or that they are privileged in some way. The more modest aim is simply to make a start in thinking about inferential texture by considering these.

4.1 Strength of implicatures

Relevance theory assumes that implicatures can vary in strength. Put simply, the more confident an addressee can be that a particular inferential conclusion was intended, the more strongly it is implicated. Consider, for example, (9), Clare’s habitual response when Helen asks him to send letters when he’s away to describe what things are like on his travels:

- (9) I can tell you just as well when I get back.

This provides some evidence (to Helen from Clare's utterance and to us from Alice Munro showing us Clare's utterance) for each of (10a)-(10f):

- (10)
- a. Clare will not write Helen a letter.
 - b. Clare does not see the point in writing letters.
 - c. Clare's relationship with Helen is not strong.
 - d. Clare's relationship with Helen will not last.
 - e. Clare does not want to tell Helen about his travels.
 - f. Clare does not find what he encounters on his travels very interesting.

We would not think that Helen had understood Clare or that we had understood Munro unless she and we understood that his utterance was communicating (10a). This means that (10a) is strongly implicated. We can be much less sure of (10f). Clare's utterance provides some evidence for this but we cannot be sure that it follows. Perhaps, for example, he finds what he sees very interesting but does not want to tell Helen about it for other reasons. In fact, (a)-(f) are roughly ordered with regard to strength of implicatures.

We could, of course, have come up with a longer list of potential conclusions from Clare's utterance and we could have included some which are so weakly implicated that we might not want to describe them as implicatures. Clare's utterance, for example, shows that his lungs are working (since the utterance requires movement of air caused by them) but we would not suggest that the utterance communicates this.

It is typical of utterances, in general as well as in fiction, that they provide evidence which supports to greater or lesser degrees a range of possible conclusions. It is also typical of both utterances in general and, arguably more strongly, of fictional utterances, that we continue to assess evidence as we go so that the strength of evidence for particular conclusions is continually adjusted. We are less likely to think that Clare finds little of interest or worth reporting on his travels once we discover that he is married. The news of his marriage also, of course, provides evidence to support or disconfirm to varying degrees a range of other conclusions we might have been tentatively considering. This pattern of constantly emerging ranges of potential inferential conclusions and their ongoing adjustment is typical of inferential processing, is arguably more marked in many cases of reading prose fiction, and is surely an important feature of what readers experience in their encounters with a text.

Related to this, we can consider the well-known observation that there are different communicative relationships involved in a work of prose fiction. Authors produce their utterances to communicate with readers. Authors show characters producing utterances. The utterances and other behaviours of the characters convey meanings to other characters. The author gives rise to meanings for readers by showing the communicative and other behaviour of characters. When Helen tells her mother that ‘It’s understood’ that Clare and Helen will marry after his mother dies, her mother infers that Helen thinks she and Clare have an agreement. This is an implicature of Helen’s utterance for her mother. If we assume that her mother thinks of herself as worldly-wise and believes that Helen is no more than an easily-available mistress for Clare, she might also infer that Helen has not understood properly and that Clare and Helen will not get married. This is a non-communicated implication for Helen’s mother but Alice Munro is providing evidence for this to us and so this is an implicature of the story for us.

The relationships among various parts of the text and the status of various conclusions as implicatures of varying strengths, as non-communicated implications, as cases of showing or meaning, add to the complexity of our experience of reading and to its texture in the sense used by Stockwell (2009).

4.2 (Non-)Spontaneousness

Furlong (1996, 2001, 2007, 2011, 2012) has developed an account of literary interpretation which sees non-spontaneousness as playing a key role. Furlong suggests that interpretations can vary in how spontaneous (in a specific sense) they are. A relatively spontaneous interpretation is one which, in relevance-theoretic terms, follows the general comprehension heuristic mentioned above until it finds an interpretation consistent with the communicative principle of relevance. A relatively non-spontaneous interpretation is one which involves devoting more time to exploring possibilities, considering a range of evidence for and against particular conclusions, perhaps never deciding that enough evidence has been considered and so never considering that the interpretation process is complete.

Certain texts are more likely to be the objects of fairly spontaneous interpretations, e.g. an everyday utterance such as (11) uttered in response to a question about when the speaker finishes work:

(11) I'll be home in time for tea.

The addressee will be likely to conclude that the speaker will not be held up for a long time at work, that the speaker and addressee can eat together, perhaps that the speaker won't be too tired this evening, and not much else.

Literary texts are likely to be the object of relatively non-spontaneous interpretations. Shakespeare's works, for example, have been the object of extended interpretation processes by many people over many years. Other texts lie at various places along the continuum from fairly spontaneous to fairly non-spontaneous.

Some texts encourage interpretations which are less spontaneous than might have been expected. A filmgoer who has just seen a David Lynch movie might well be seriously puzzled by what they have seen. They might spend considerable time thinking about it. They might ask friends what they thought, or consult websites. To the extent that they do this, they are developing fairly nonspontaneous interpretations. On the other hand, some viewers might just 'give up' and decide that they can't make sense of what they have just seen.

What about 'Postcard'? Again, the option is there for readers to decide how spontaneous or not they will be. Consider the repetition of *yesterday* discussed above. Some readers might barely register this repetition, carry on reading and focus mainly on what the story reveals, developing an understanding of the events narrated, the characters, and what they think of the story. Others might notice the repetition and think about its effects more fully. Professional writers might well focus on details of particular texts far more closely than other readers. No doubt stylisticians also have different reading practices from other readers.

We might also map out the story with regard to how likely particular parts are to give rise to spontaneous or non-spontaneous interpretations. Readers will vary in the extent to which they think about what kinds of evidence various parts of the story provide about Helen, her life and her relationships. Some parts of the text, however, are likely to encourage more inferencing. The final paragraph, for example, is likely to encourage readers to think about why Helen felt she wanted to touch Clare and perhaps to think back to the rest of the story looking for more evidence.

Exploring the puzzle of why Helen now wants to touch Clare is a good example of an open-ended interpretation process which we can think about without ever being sure we have come to a conclusion about it.

There are notions of ‘texture’ involved here in the non-technical sense of what it feels like to touch something as well as what it feels like to have an emotional response to something. We can think about what it would feel like for Helen to touch Clare and for Clare to be touched by Helen. We can think about why people touch each other in general (love? more general empathy? to convey emotions?) And of course there is a poignancy in thinking about this while knowing that Helen will not now be touching Clare. The feeling that she wants to touch him has emerged too late for it to be realised. Helen has gone through an emotional process which includes the moment when she becomes able to destroy Ted Forgie’s letter and which leads her to an emotional state where she feels something like love or empathy (with a physical aspect) for Clare. The process was happening while Clare was away getting married and is possibly entangled in complex ways with Helen’s coming to terms with the fact of his marriage.

We can explore these questions more or less spontaneously and feel that we are developing our understanding of the story while never becoming confident that we have reached the end of this process. Variations in spontaneousness of interpretative processes contribute to the texture of the story and accounting for this will help us to understand how the story is experienced by various readers.

5. Conclusion

The above discussion has only scratched the surface of what we might achieve by considering the inferential processes involved in producing, interpreting and evaluating a text, and of what we can discover about ‘Postcard’ in particular. Clearly, pragmatic stylistic approaches have a role to play in the stylistic analysis of texts. This paper has argued that they also have an important role to play in accounting for ‘texture’.

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“WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO TELL?”
THE INFERENTIAL TEXTURE OF ALICE MUNRO’S ‘POSTCARD’

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Teenage in the Ironic Mode: A Study of the Drafts of “Red Dress–1946” by Alice Munro¹

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Several stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* are connected by a protagonist presenting recurring traits: a girl who lives in Tuppertown, has a younger brother, a dominating mother, and a father, Ben Jordan, who is first a fox-farmer then a salesman. These stories include “Images,” “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” “Boys and Girls,” and “Red Dress—1946.” Considered together, they trace a girl’s development from the age of about five to thirteen and evoke various experiences and discoveries: fear and anxiety (“Images”), grown-ups’ secret past lives (“Walker Brothers’ Cowboy”), the constraints of gender roles as the teenage years arrive (“Boys and Girls”), the rituals of boy-girl relations in a context of budding sexuality, and the need to move away from a dominating mother (“Red Dress—1946”). As is well known, relations between men and women, and between mothers and daughters, became two of Munro’s favourite topics. As she gets closer to these subjects in this collection, she deploys a subtle form of irony in this story (the other childhood stories focus instead on the child’s sensations, instincts, curiosity and imagination). Calling on the ironic mode is an early sign of the “battle for authenticity” Munro would wage “in the field of sex,” to quote Margaret Atwood (Atwood 2008 np). Here the battle is in the field of mother-daughter relations: it aims at

¹ A different version of this article, focusing on the theme of “growing up” rather than on genetic criticism, is included in Chapter 4 of Ailsa Cox and Christine Lorre-Johnston, *The Mind’s Eye: Alice Munro’s Dance of the Happy Shades* (Paris: Fahrenheit, 2015).

getting to the core of the protagonist's inner feelings and motivations, peeling off the outer layers of theatricality needed in social context. At the same time, the girl is still between childhood and teenage, so the viewpoint also reflects a growing girl's sensitive emotions, and Munro's gently ironic style reflects this liminal position.

In her theoretical work, Linda Hutcheon has observed that irony is often defined as "involving saying one thing and meaning another" (Hutcheon 1994: 37), but that it is more complex than that. Hutcheon points out how "irony happens as part of a communicative process; it is not a static rhetorical tool to be deployed, but itself comes into being in the relations between meanings, but also between people and utterances and, sometimes, between intentions and interpretations." (13) She sees it primarily as "the mode of the unsaid, the unheard, the unseen" (9), and insists that "there is an affective 'charge' to irony that cannot be ignored and that cannot be separated from its politics of use" (15). All these factors give irony what Hutcheon calls its "edge," that is to say its critical potential. This paper aims at examining the emergence and functioning of irony as discursive practice in "Red Dress—1946" by comparing the drafts of the story which are available in the Special Collections of the Taylor Family Digital Library at the University of Calgary,² and the version first published in *The Montrealer* in 1965, and then collected in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968).

The different versions of the text are typewritten and archived in seven files (numbered 37.6.41, 37.6.42.1, 37.6.42.2, 37.6.43.1, 37.6.43.2, 37.6.44 and 37.6.45; the pages of each draft are also numbered: f1, f2, etc.).³ The texts are not dated so the numbers of the folders do not correspond to a clear chronological order, but there is a sequential

² Warmest thanks to Annie Murray and Allison Wagner at the Special Collections of the University of Calgary for their precious help during my visit there in April 2014. I also wish to acknowledge the financial support of LabEx TransferS (ENS / CNRS / Collège de France) for that research trip, and the help of Josette Rio at ARIAS in managing the archival material.

³ File 37.6.45 is a photocopy of the story published in *The Montrealer* in 1965, which is almost strictly identical to the 1968 published version. (The only changes concern some words that were capitalised in *The Montrealer* and that were then lower cased in the collected version – high school, principal, physical education – the italicisation of *The Last Days of Pompeii*, and minor aspects of punctuation that do not alter the style or meaning.) Because the 1965 published version is not significantly different from the 1968 one, this study will ignore it and refer to the 1968 text in the comparison of the versions.

arrangement to their numbering, with a rough progression towards versions of the text that are fuller and closer to the published one. The texts certainly give us an insight into the writing as process (De Biasi 11), which we will aim at interpreting by comparing the various versions of the text, following the principles of genetic criticism. This study will focus on the most significant variations in the text, which illustrate two main points: the dress as source of irony, and narrative voice (together with characterisation, setting, and ending) as a factor of reflexivity.

The dress as source of irony

The dress the mother makes for the girl is foregrounded in the title as a central element in the story. As often with a Munro story, a protagonist's garment acts as a metonym, telling the reader about the person's character as well as about her social and, in this case, filial relationships. The dress is the mother's creation in a way that reflects the fact that she would like to shape the fate of her daughter as a young woman, for she has romantic scenarios in mind for her. This is clear in draft 37.6.42.1, where we read about the mother's life prior to her marriage: "My mother remembered dresses. The story of her life – I mean of the romantic and interesting part of her life before she married – was told to me serially on Saturdays when she was in a good mood, and she always paused to describe a dress [...]." And it is explicit in draft 37.6.43.1.f5: "She could still remember every detail of [her dress], even the mother-of-pearl buttons. Those were the happiest days of her life, as she expected these to be of mine." The mother's nostalgia for her youth and the fine dresses she used to wear means that she has hopes and expectations for her daughter.

In the published text the mother's stories no longer interest the girl, for they "had begun to seem melodramatic, irrelevant, and tiresome" (Munro 1968: 149); an emotional gap is growing between the two of them, reflecting the gap between the mother's memories of youth and the girl's experience of it. The mother is presented as a fairly hard, quick-tempered person, who complains indirectly in the presence of Lonnie about her daughter's ingratitude. This signals a more antagonistic relationship, while also emphasising the girl's docility, although she is fuming inwardly. The mother is meaner, less complicit with the girl than

in the two drafts quoted above, paving the way for the girl's reticence when she comes back from the dance.

The mother is also figuratively trying to corset the girl, although the mother herself wears "no corset or stockings at home" (148), much to her daughter's embarrassment at her aging body in front of Lonnie. In some drafts the dress is very tight: "Half an inch more around the middle would be your ruination, it fits you like a glove." (37.6.41.2) – or even too tight – "'I like it,' I said. 'Its just the armholes are too tight.'" (37.6.43.1.f4) – so the mother has to adjust it. In no version of the text are her ideals of feminine elegance and beauty adapted to the changing body of her daughter, so those ideals are bound to make the girl feel worse about a physical reality that she is obviously not yet used to and not comfortable with.

All this is seen retrospectively, something the title hints at. The phrasing "Red Dress-1946" is blunt in style, a bluntness that is emphasised if we compare this title to the slightly different one given to the story in three of the drafts: "A Red Dress, 1946."⁴ In both cases the title reads somehow like a label for an object in a museum, casting the remembered dress into historical perspective, in the immediate post-World War II period, inscribing it in a context that has since undergone many transformations. It also conjures up a visual image, a memory that the narrator has, which is associated with that time, and with many other memories that are described in the story. So the dress as object and its colour act as triggers for the narrator's remembrance – visual, sensual, emotional. This is a well-known creative writing device, sometimes used in workshops, as Wayson Choy recalls from his course with Carol Shields in the Creative Writing programme at the University of British Columbia in 1977, when she asked her students to start a story from a colour they picked at random.⁵ The title "Red Dress—1946" thus casts the narrator

⁴ The drafts in the first three files have no title; the next three read "A Red Dress, 1946." The seventh file has the final title given to the *Montrealer* version: "Red Dress—1946."

⁵ "For one assignment, she tore up pieces of paper, each marked with a colour, and set the rule: whichever colour you picked up, that colour had to become a major part of your next short story assignment." (Sellers 36) This led to Choy writing "The Jade Peony," which was published first as short story and then as novel (1995). American-born Carol Shields (1935-2003), one of the major Canadian women writers of the last third of the 20th century, is best known as the author of *The Stone Diaries* (1993), which won the US Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the Governor General's Award in Canada.

into a position of reminiscence and narration, that is to say the position of a storyteller. Had Munro used the indefinite article in the draft title, followed by a comma rather than a dash before the year, it would have made the dress more generic and anonymous, less sharp in the storyteller's memory. Alternately, Munro could have used the definite article – “*the red dress*” – which would have made the dress the explicit focus of the story, but it is not: it is only a starting point, the visible sign, to be deciphered, of the girl's feelings at the time, and of the social rituals that she had to go through. The choice of a dash rather than a comma in the published title makes it more abrupt, less narrative; the material for narrative is just put there in front of storyteller and reader, so the story can start.

Munro's treatment of the dress, and through it of the girl's feelings, is ironic in a way that makes the viewpoint simultaneously compassionate and humorous. She could have opted for a more dramatic approach, as shown in an early draft in which the third-person narrative starts with a description of the dress:

When she opened the wardrobe in her room, no matter what she came to get, it was always that dress she saw, hanging alone in the ghostly folds of the plastic bag her mother had bought for it, and she flapped it back with her hand but couldn't stop seeing it, until one day she made herself take it right out and move it back behind everything else she owned, including her winter coat; this was an improvement but the bottom of the plastic bag was still visible. She just blinked and pretended she hadn't seen it. Sometimes she thought her mind was furnished with nothing but trap-doors, insecurely fastened, and she had to keep running around jumping on them so things wouldn't pop up on her. Things she had pushed down there to get them out of the way. (37.6.41.f2)

This passage is Gothic in tone: the dress is like a skeleton in the closet, “a secret source of [...] pain [...]” (*OED*). The plastic bag, instead of sealing it away, only enhances its ghostly nature. The shift from actual vision, in the sense of eyesight, whereby the protagonist sees the dress every time she opens the wardrobe, to mental vision, whereby the dress obsessively haunts the girl's mind, signals her inability to discard the old dress, and with it the unpleasant memories and feelings it evokes. The image of the trap-doors suggests the permanent danger of living with her past weighing over her and preventing her from moving on. The final sentence, about “things she had pushed down” under trap-doors, unambiguously evokes the failed repression of old emotions from consciousness, into the

subconscious. Altogether, this passage makes for a more dramatic and painful evocation of emotions linked to adolescence, with the narrator less distant from them. Such an opening would certainly preclude the ending of the story as we can read it in the published version, which focuses on the girl's successful distantiating from her mother.

By contrast with the Gothic tone of the first paragraph in the draft previously quoted, the dress in the published version is described in humorous terms:

My mother, never satisfied, was sewing a white lace collar on the dress; she had decided it was too grown-up looking. [...] The dress was princess style, very tight in the midriff. I saw how my breasts, in their new stiff brassiere, jutted out surprisingly, with mature authority, under the childish frills of the collar. (Munro 1968: 151, 152)

The clashing styles of the childish collar and the tight midriff signal the mother's contradictory double impulse, to acknowledge and underline the femininity of her daughter's figure, and also to protect her like a child. It echoes the girl's feeling, who dreads the school dance and "longed to be back safe behind the boundaries of childhood" (151), while being aware of the failure of the dress. This awareness is a sign of her maturity, and contrasts with the time when she wore clothes made by her mother "with docility, in the days when I was unaware of the world's opinion" (148). The description of the outfits the mother made before this dress is comic, first of all through an effect of accumulation, and then, because of the mother's pretention to styles that are outmoded. She made: "a flowered organdie dress with a high Victorian neckline edged in scratchy lace, with a poke bonnet to match; a Scottish plaid outfit with a velvet jacket and tam; an embroidered peasant blouse worn with full red skirt and black laced bodice" (147-8). The child is like a doll the mother dresses, and her outfits look like costumes rather than children's clothes, especially with the matching hats that are from another time (the poke bonnet, which became fashionable in the early 19th century) and another place (the Tam O'Shanter or Scottish bonnet, named after the eponymous hero of Robert Burns's 1790 poem). The first dress sounds particularly uncomfortable, with the stiff cotton of the organdie and the "scratchy lace." The third outfit, which one pictures as traditional central European in style, seems out of place.

Altogether these clothes signal the mother's nostalgia for a Victorian culture in which children were meant to be "seen and not heard," and for her presumably Scottish origins. They contrast with the physical reality of the girl's body, which makes her uncomfortable, especially at school. The irony of these descriptions thus derives from the implied discrepancy between the mother's idea of style and the reality of her adolescent daughter's life, but also from the discrepancy between the mother's tastes and those of the times, as reflected in Lonnie's bought dress, which the narrator admires and envies her. It is a case of "a double significance which arises from the contrast in values associated with two different points of view" (Leech and Short 278), repeated twice. Irony is based not on antiphrasis (saying one thing and meaning its opposite), but on the interpretation by the reader of the meaning implied by the narrator; it is therefore relational, to use Linda Hutcheon's terminology (Hutcheon 58), and based on the presence of a strong first-person narrative voice.

Narrative voice, characterisation, setting, ending, and reflexivity

Like the other stories dealing with a similar narrator, "Red Dress—1946" is a first-person narrative. However, two of the drafts reveal that Munro started by telling the story in the third person. In draft 37.6.41.1 the mother, called Adelaide, walks into the house, bringing a box that contains a dress she has bought off someone. This opening foregrounds the mother as a theatrical woman who bosses around her daughter Lois and another character called Frank, presumably her son, so the daughter is out of the limelight for a whole page—this is probably not the effect Munro wanted to achieve. It is worth noting that the names chosen here are the same as those of two characters in "Thanks for the Ride": Lois and Adelaide are the two friends who go out with the narrator and his cousin, and they are sexually promiscuous in a way the girl in "Red Dress—1946" is unlikely to become. What the two stories have in common though is a mother flaunting her daughter's youthful figure, but the mother in "Red Dress—1946" is virtuously proud of her sewing skills and thrift, while the one in "Thanks for the Ride" is hoping to obtain some benefit from her daughter's encounters, so the two are morally contrasted. The fact that both mother and daughter are unnamed in the published version of "Red Dress—1946" lays the emphasis on their respective roles as relatives rather than on their individuality.

In a second draft also in the third person (37.6.41.2), the opening paragraph is a description of a dress that has been put away in a wardrobe (see the passage quoted above, starting with "When she opened..."), and it is followed by the scene of the mother, Adelaide, entering the house with the box containing that same dress, calling for the attention of her daughter Robina and of two other characters called Frankie and Theo (probably Robina's siblings). This opening, with a shift back in time between the first two paragraphs, sets up a retrospective perspective on the dress, establishing links between the girl's present obsessions and memories linked to the dress (which are not developed in this unfinished draft). This retrospective outlook is maintained in the published version of the story, where it is reinforced by the use of the first person, as it gives the story resonance, but now in a reflective rather than a dramatic or sentimental way (as in draft 37.6.41.2). The use of the first person here implies access to a greater variety of confusing inner feelings in the girl, and, combined with the retrospective perspective, leads to "a complex weighing up of one attitude against another, especially of sympathetic identification [with the girl narrator] against ironic distance" and complicity with the adult narrator (Leech and Short 283).

For instance, while the (adult) narrator's listing of the outfits her mother made her over the years has a distancing ironic effect, as we saw earlier, her mentioning the discomfort she feels at school (as a girl), fearing she may have stained her skirt when she has to go to the blackboard, or having sweaty hands when she has to use the blackboard compass, lead to a form of sympathetic identification on the part of this reader. Irony can also be directed at herself: this is the case in the passage where she relates her various failed attempts at getting sick or incapacitated to attend the dance, and which ends in an ironic oxymoron: "Every morning, including the day of the dance, I rose defeated, and in perfect health" (Munro 1968: 151). This type of irony is a form of self-protection through self-deprecation (Hutcheon 1994: 47); as the narrator remembers her young self, she gives the remembrance comic relief, while also implying that as adult narrator she is now at ease with her own body, and is able to laugh at her own failings.

Lonnie plays an important role in the definition of the narrative voice, which turns into the plural "we" when the two girls retire to the

narrator's bedroom to discuss boys and sexuality. The anaphoric accumulation of the plural pronoun in this passage creates an atmosphere of complicity and gives the narration univocality, but that is undermined by the end of the paragraph, when the narrator reveals something she has kept secret from Lonnie about the high school Christmas Dance: "I did not want to go [...]" (Munro 1968: 149). The intimate friendship between the two girls emphasises the narrator's feeling of alienation. This is different from draft 37.6.42.2, in which the friend is called Irene Dark; the draft starts with the girl narrator setting off to walk to Irene's place before the dance. When the girl gets to their place Irene reads her "Do's and Don'ts for Dance-time Fun." This characterisation takes the focus away from the girl and shifts it to Irene and her house. Draft 37.6.43.1 is overall closer to the final version but in it the girl also goes to pick up her friend, now called Lonnie, on the way to the dance, instead of Lonnie coming to pick her up. Lonnie's family is described as being two-faced, which puts the girl in a more vulnerable position and brings complications to a different aspect of the plot.

By contrast with these scenarios, the published version establishes an intimate friendship between the narrator and her friend Lonnie, one in which the narrator nonetheless has secrets that she keeps from Lonnie, and in which Lonnie is deceitful in that she knows how to flatter adults. The girls' complicity is also reinforced by the fact that they read together the dance-attendance advice given to girls in a magazine, rather than Lonnie reading instructions to the narrator about do's and don'ts. In the draft, this passage is more didactic, a comic piece in six points, a parody of girl's magazines inserted in the text, juxtaposed to rather than worked into the narrative (37.6.43.1.f8-f9). By contrast, in the published text, the girl remembers similar advice *in situ*, as she is confronted with the fact that no boy has invited her to dance yet. The process of remembering the article is brief and limited to about two lines in italics in the text: "*Be gay! Let the boys see your eyes sparkle, let them hear laughter in your voice! Simple, obvious, but how many girls forget!*" (Munro 1968: 154) The advice is condensed and graphically stands out (with the italics), so it is identifiable as echoing the voice of girls' magazines. The ironical critique is more powerful and comical than in the longer version of girls' magazine parody, as the discrepancy between the magazine's advice and the girl's experience undermines its relevance on the spot, in action. The girl-narrator is left to

her own judgment, which leads to situational comedy, complete with the girl absurdly smiling at no one.

By having a relationship in which differences between the two girls are not foregrounded but minimised, Munro chooses to have a tighter unity of character as well as place (the girls meet in the narrator's room, in the house where all other personal events happen, the other, public location being the dance hall). But this is only to emphasise the girl's distress: she cannot confess her fear to her friend, because she is acting a part; even the house is a place for theatricality and role-playing.

Unity of setting and location also reinforces the identity of the kitchen as a gendered space. It is the room where the mother does the sewing, where the girl has a bath before the dance in some of the drafts, where her friend and mother interact in an overall atmosphere of female complicity; it is where the female body is being prepared for the ritual of the dance. While waiting, the girl lies on the kitchen couch, above which she can see the marks of old games she played with her brother, and she thinks: "I looked at them and longed to be back safe behind the boundaries of childhood" (151). The kitchen thus acts as a diachronic place, where the various stages of the girl's life, and even, through reminiscence, her mother's, can be envisioned all at once, syncretically. It is also where the mother waits for her at the end, drinking tea, and the girl, seeing her from outside, envisions their future relationship.

The importance of the feminine ritual of preparing for the dance is emphasised by the absence in the published version of the father, or even of the brother, who is only mentioned and relegated to the world of remembered childhood and the times when the narrator played Xs and Os with him. In one of the drafts, the father is more present:

My father was a fox farmer. That is, he raised silver foxes and sold their pelts to the Montreal Fur Auction or the Hudson's Bay Company, and they sent us every year a magnificent calendar, showing some scene out of the imagined past of this country. [...] I had what may have been my first premonitions of nostalgia. The kitchen seemed to me blessedly familiar, warm and sheltering. My father was in the cellar. Christmas was also pelting time, and he worked in the evenings, as he had worked most of the day, skinning foxes and stretching their skins inside out on long boards, to dry. The smell of blood and animal fat, as well the scent of the fox itself, rose in our house, reassuringly seasonal as the smell of figs and oranges and drying pine needles. My father had taken the radio down to the cellar and

was listening to the hockey game. I almost wept with my longing to stay home with them. (37.6.42.1.f2-f3)

In this draft the girl's perspective, as reflected in her description of the family environment, is more childlike than in the published version. Her worldview is based on sensations, on familiar seasonal smells that convey the reassurance of repetition, regularity and homeliness. The whole passage is nostalgic and sentimental in a way the published version is not: there, the girl is already at odds with her mother, although she does not verbalise it. And the fox-farmer father in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" and "Boys and Girls" is not even mentioned in the final text of "Red Dress—1946," so the focus is on the mother-daughter relationship and on the feminine world. The paragraph quoted above was used though, after some reworking, as the first two paragraphs of "Boys and Girls": they refer to the fox-farmer father, the fur trade companies and their calendars, the cellar where the pelting goes on, the seasonal smells. But there is no mention at all of nostalgia: the girl is eleven at the time of the story, and very much part of her father's world still, although on the point of being excluded from it. By the end of "Boys and Girls", this has taken effect: Laird has become "a real help" (Munro 1968: 117), while she is "only a girl" (127). By the time of "Red Dress—1946," two years later, the girl, willy-nilly, has become part of the mother's sphere, whom she perceives as "my enemy" (117) in "Boys and Girls." By the time the girl is thirteen, there is acceptance and docility on her part, but also repressed frustration.

The variations on the ending of the story are revealing of Munro's uses of irony in the narrative voice. In draft 37.6.46 an unnamed, unknown Grade Ten boy, after dancing with the narrator twice, walks her home. He talks to her about hockey, she shares a piece of Kleenex she has for them to wipe their noses with – a more modern, anticlimactic, and less romantic item than the "handkerchief soaked in Violets" she puts in her pocket before the dance in another version (37.6.43.f7). Then they say goodbye:

We faced each other across a couple of feet of snow. At such times did people kiss. Nothing seemed more improbable.

"Good night."

"Yeah, good-night."

I went around the house to the back door, thinking, I have been to a dance and a boy walked me home. It was true. My life was possible."
(37.6.44.f12)

Even though the thought of a predictable kiss crosses her mind, she is not disappointed that it does not happen, and considers the evening a success even so. So what did Munro add to the scene in the published version by turning the anonymous boy into a boy from the girl's class, Raymond Bolting, whom she has never talked to, and by having him kiss her rather than not? She added irony, with Raymond being "the boy next door" rather than an older, stranger, therefore more glamorous boy. And the kiss is a quick one: Raymond "kissed me, briefly, with the air of one who knew his job when he saw it, on the corner of my mouth" (Munro 1968: 160). He is performing his role, following an established ritual of courting. The kiss is a chaste one, and the girl need not think about "what to do when a boy tried to go too far" (149), as she and Lonnie have been reading about in magazines. But she feels rescued and brought back into "the ordinary world" of boys and girls her age. Affectionate irony is found here in the gap between the imagined kiss and the actual one, which to the girl at the time nonetheless performs its role of making her feel normal.

We saw that the unpublished drafts had the narration in the third person with a dominant mother, or foregrounded the dress as a key element in a Gothic atmosphere. In the published version the story opens and closes with a vision of the mother, so structurally she really frames the narrative, suggesting that the girl cannot escape her presence or influence, or the type of female condition that the kitchen suggests. However, a lot happens between these two scenes, and this is reflected in the focalisation. In the opening, the mother is seen making the girl's dress in the kitchen, as the girl comes home from school. The mother is by the window for the light, and to look out at passers-by. In the final paragraph, the girl walks past the kitchen window and sees her mother. The fact that the mother is seen from outside, framed by the kitchen window, rather than from inside, establishes a distance between her and her daughter's perspective, whereby the mother appears as in some sort of tableau, and the girl is in observer position; the mother is seen, and no longer sees; she has lost that kind of control.

The insistence on the mother's sitting and waiting lays the emphasis on her immobility, as well as her confinement to the kitchen, which culminates in the hypallage found in the phrase "the waiting kitchen" (160), with the transfer to the kitchen of the epithet linked to the (waiting)

mother. The mother thus becomes the kitchen that she belongs to, in a metonymic process that definitely binds her to the home, in a suspended state of expectation rather than action, by contrast with her more commanding self, the self which earlier made the dress in which her daughter will confront the larger world.. Focalisation is perceptual, relating what the girl sees, but from “And I would not do it, I never would,” it is also explicitly psychological (Toolan 72-74), as the girl evaluates the situation and makes a resolution for the future that will define her relationship with her mother, this girl who hitherto has been mainly passive while the mother was pinning her and making the dress. Through her future silence she will deliberately withhold information, rather than simply being forced to be silent and to keep her feelings in check, as when she tries the dress on: “She [my mother] enraged me [...]. My head was muffled in velvet” (Munro 1968: 148). It could even be argued that focalisation here is ideological (Toolan 74), in the sense that by deciding not to tell her mother about her encounters with boys in future, the girl raises the possibility of defeating her mother’s expectations regarding her daughter’s future happiness; perhaps in her future she will be happy in ways that her mother cannot imagine. She may thus be able to escape the traditional notion of female happiness, which in the mother’s mind, as in many people’s, hinges on conventional marriage (Ahmed 7).

“Red Dress—1946” is a successful experiment for Munro in a style that is simultaneously subtly ironic, comic and tender. By choosing the first-person narration, she puts the narrator in charge of her own story, giving her the means to deal retrospectively with her younger self and with her mother. This is achieved through the creation of a dual ironic tone, whereby the narrator looks back at her awkward teenage self in a gently self-mocking way, and reassesses her relationship with her mother, retrospectively, identifying what it is that happened at that time. The story thus ends with the narrator’s becoming aware of her decision that night not to tell her mother about her encounters with boys, and thereby to retain her privacy. In doing so she protects both of them: she spares her mother possible disappointment, and spares herself her mother’s necessarily inadequate comments.

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“Bizarre but Somehow Never Quite Satisfactory”: Storytelling in “The Office”

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Identifying tendencies in the modern short story since Chekhov, Charles E. May discusses the implications of a particular interest in subjective points of view:

[...] a basic impressionistic apprehension of reality itself as a function of perspectival point of view. The ultimate result of these characteristics is the modernist and postmodernist focus on reality itself as a fictional construct and the contemporary trend to make fictional assumptions and techniques both the subject matter and theme of the novel and the short story. (May: 199)

‘The Office’ is the first of Alice Munro’s stories to address ‘fictional assumptions and techniques’ explicitly through the figure of an author. The question of how reality is transmuted into fiction becomes an important theme in her next book, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), one she returns to in many subsequent stories, including ‘Material’ (*Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You*, 1974) and ‘Family Furnishings’ (*Hateship, Friendship, Loveship, Courtship, Marriage*, 2002). These stories shed light on her own creative practice, investigating the ethics of authorship. They also use the figure of the author to explore the wider question of the relationship between the self, identity and external reality. How can the complexities and contradictions of lived experience be contained within conventional narrative patterns?

As Munro has disclosed in several interviews and an essay on the story, ‘The Office’ draws on her own experience, when she rented a place to write outside the home, away from the distractions of domesticity. The

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story, recounting the author-protagonist’s lack of progress because of interruptions from the landlord, is, she says, the only piece of writing she managed to complete there. The text appears deceptively simple, yet contains many contradictory voices within the first person narration. The writer confesses her vulnerabilities with self-deprecating irony: ‘if cowardice and insincerity are big vices of mine, curiosity is certainly another’ (Munro 2000: 66). This ironic, even jaunty, style, inviting intimacy with the reader, comes close to journalism, especially in the punchy opening paragraphs:

The solution to my life occurred to me one evening while I was ironing a shirt. It was simple but audacious. I went into the living room where my husband was watching television and I said, ‘I think I ought to have an office.’ (59)

Indeed, the generic husband, who makes several appearances, but, in contrast with the other characters, is never described, is reminiscent of similarly anonymized figures in newspaper columns or feature articles. However, many other voices and types of discourse are interwoven as the story becomes an exercise in different modes of storytelling, and hence an investigation into the fiction-making process. I shall examine the interplay of these different modes through a close reading of the text.

The first sentence, quoted above, is hyperbolic and startling, juxtaposing the grand statement, ‘the solution to my life’, with the mundanity of the domestic chore. The parodic tone and choppy syntax continues in the paragraphs that follow, the fragmented sentences and colloquial language also suggesting the spontaneous flow of thought. The Russian critic M.M. Bakhtin claims that we all ‘author’ ourselves through inner speech in dialogue with a putative other. The narrator is addressing that internalized other when she asks: ‘What do I want an office for?’ (59). The sequence of responses to her question strive to create a satisfactory self-image, switching between the self-defining noun ‘writer’ and the more nebulous ‘write’ and ‘try to write’:

[...] here comes the disclosure which is not easy for me: I am a writer. That does not sound right. Too presumptuous; phony, or at least unconvincing. Try again. I write. Is that better? I try to write. That makes it worse. Hypocritical humility. Well then? (59)

This passage also challenges the reader by addressing her directly, ‘disclosing’ the shameful fact of literary aspiration. The sequence of

question and answer becomes a rhetorical defense of her own status for the benefit of an implied reader.

Munro has often spoken about an inherent distrust of artistic endeavour in the small town community where she grew up. Writing is regarded as narcissism, without practical value, and related to an unhealthy introspection. In this story, 'people are kind' (59), their suspicion is tempered by 'the solicitude of friendly voices', 'ready and tactful voices' (ibid), as if writing might be some form of debilitating illness. These disembodied voices might be read as those of friends, family or neighbours - perhaps those suburban women who are so unsettled by the piano playing in 'Dance of the Happy Shades'. But they are also internalized voices who sabotage the narrator's attempts at autonomy. Accusations of self-centredness are directed away from the act of writing itself and projected onto the office: 'I was at once aware that it sounded like a finicky requirement, a piece of rare self-indulgence' (60).

The narrator often invokes the discourse of the second wave feminism of the 1960s and 70s, seeking equal rights for women. She makes sociological comparisons between male and female attitudes to domestic space, justifying her need for an office as a way of freeing her from responsibility and also aligning her work as an author with a professional male world, marked out by clear boundaries. Her struggle for agency through an autonomous space of her choosing is placed in opposition to the stereotyped objects of female desire: 'I could almost more easily have wished for a mink coat, for a diamond necklace; these are things women do obtain' (61). She contrasts the male ability to compartmentalize, closing the door behind him within the space of the house, with a woman's unending responsibility: 'She is the house. There is no separation possible' (60). This overtly political discourse is, however, intercut with another voice, more languorous and diffuse:

At certain times, perhaps on long spring evenings, still rainy and sad, with the cold bulbs in bloom and a light too mild for promise drifting over the sea, I have opened the windows and felt the house shrink back into wood and plaster and those humble elements of which it is made, and the life in it subside, leaving me exposed, empty-handed, but feeling a fierce and lawless quiver of freedom, of loneliness too harsh and perfect for me now to bear. Then I know how the rest of the time I am sheltered and encumbered, how insistently I am warmed and bound. (60-61)

This epiphanic moment is itself 'bound' within parentheses, separated from the account of her negotiations with her husband and the acquisition

of the office. It evokes a liminal state of consciousness, in the first stirrings of spring and close to the sea. The house is restrictive, yet because it is animate, it is also a fluid and a boundless space. The almost oxymoronic pairings of ‘harsh and perfect’, ‘sheltered and encumbered’, ‘warmed and bound’, reveal the contradictions of the existential freedom that she longs for and, temporarily, obtains.

‘To write, as everyone knows, you need a typewriter, or at least a pencil, some paper, a table and a chair’ (60). But the process of writing entails something beyond the purely mechanical. The mysteriousness of the creative process, ‘a woman who sits staring into space, into a country that is not her husband’s or her children’s’ (60), might explain her own anxieties and the resistance of others. Throughout the text, concepts of a heterogeneous, indefinable creativity are placed in dialogue with the discourse of logic, boundaries and positions. We might even identify these modalities with the ‘semiotic’, maternal modality and the paternal ‘symbolic’, that Julia Kristeva regards as the essential components of the signifying process.

Once the decision is made to rent the office, another kind of storytelling is brought into play, packed with the descriptive detail we might expect from conventional fiction. The narrator provides a character sketch for Mrs. Malley, who, along with her husband, owns the block where the office is situated. Their apartment is crammed with model ships, potted plants and kitsch, including a gilt-framed photograph of Mr. Malley himself. Mr. Malley regards the narrator’s writing as more of a hobby than a profession, referring to his own model-building as a cure for the nerves.

Mr. Malley is a fat man, moving with ‘a ponderous matriarchal discomfort’ (63-4). His offer to help feminize the empty space of the newly rented office with a carpet, curtains and ‘a nice easy chair to sit in, while you’re waiting for inspiration to hit’ are rebuffed (64). By maintaining a sterile, empty space, the narrator is shedding domestic responsibility; without ornaments, there is no need for dusting. Mr. Malley presents her with a house plant, a teapot, a waste paper basket, a cushion, disturbing her solitude with this parade of superfluous objects. He is an utterly grotesque figure; through him Munro parodies Philistine attitudes towards creativity: ‘if you ever run out of things to write about, I got a barrelful’ (66). Through his rejected gifts he is also implicating her in an inescapable emotional exchange, encroaching on the self-contained, autonomous subjective space reserved for the writing process. The more

she rebuffs these attempts, the harder he tries, confiding the tribulations of his own life story, in the unspoken belief that she might write it down. Coming back unexpectedly to the office at night, she discovers him secretly reading her work.

She does not tackle Malley. Throughout the whole saga, she resorts to hints and subterfuge, only occasionally making herself plain in ‘a cold voice that is to be heard frequently in my thoughts but has great difficulty getting out of my cowardly mouth’ (65). After she catches him snooping, she keeps her door locked from inside, typing loudly when he comes near: ‘He called my name, as if I was playing a trick; I bit my lips together not to answer’ (69). Only now does she have the strength of will not to water the plant that he gave her. Finally, he leaves a note, calling her into his office, where he speaks with ‘a rather stagey reluctance’ (69) about his tolerance in renting the room to a writer: ‘I didn’t let that worry me, though I have heard things about writers and artists and that type of person that didn’t strike me as very encouraging. You know the sort of thing I mean’ (ibid.). As he continues his monologue, his insinuations echo and exaggerate the negative voices she has internalized:

That’s not a normal way for a person to behave. Not if they got nothing to hide. No more than it’s normal for a young woman, says she has a husband and kids, to spend her time rattling away on a typewriter. (70)

He questions that she really is a writer, since he has never heard of her; we might remember, the definitions and redefinitions of ‘writer’, ‘I write’, ‘try to write’, in the opening page (59). Malley’s speech resembles that of a fictional detective, a Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, confronting a suspect. Munro implies that both characters stage and rehearse their speech; both the writer and the landlord apply the techniques of fiction to experience, constructing narratives around their own lives and those of others. Earlier, the narrator describes herself ‘trembling with anger and gratification’ because Malley’s snooping in the office at night has given her ‘just cause’ for resentment (69).

Malley follows up his allegations with a series of notes accusing her of various kinds of anti-social behaviour:

As the notes grew more virulent our personal encounters ceased. Once or twice I saw his stooped, sweated back disappearing as I came into the hall. Gradually our relationship passed into something that was entirely fantasy. He accused me now, by note, of being intimate with people from

Numero Cinq. This was a coffee-house in the neighbourhood, which I imagined he invoked for symbolic purposes. (71)

Eventually there is a final face-to-face encounter. This time Malley’s demeanour resembles that of religious zealotry, ‘another face, remote and transfigured, that shone with the cold light of intense joy at discovering the proofs of sin’ (71). The lavatory attached to the office she is renting has been covered in lipsticked graffiti: he accuses her of being responsible, along with ‘your friends’ (72). When she blames bored teenagers, he begins to threaten her right to creative practice from a new perspective:

It’s a shame the kids get blamed for everything, when it’s the elders that corrupts them. That’s a thing you might do some thinking about, you know. There’s laws. Obscenity laws. Applies to this sort of thing and literature too, as I believe. (72)

Until this point, as I have suggested, the narrator has repressed her anger, preferring to counter Malley’s interference with the traditionally feminine tactics of avoidance and appeasement. Now there is a change:

This is the first time I ever remember taking deep breaths consciously, for the purposes of self-control. I really wanted to murder him. I remember how soft and loathsome his face looked, with the eyes almost closed, nostrils extended to the soothing odour of righteousness, the odour of triumph. If this stupid thing had not happened, he never would have won. But he had. Perhaps he saw something in my face that unnerved him, even in this victorious moment, for he drew back to the wall, and began to say that, actually, as a matter of fact, he had not really felt it was the sort of thing I personally would do, more the sort of thing that perhaps certain friends of mine- (73)

‘I remember’ frames this description as a reconstruction, but it also foregrounds the intensity of an impression which has lodged itself in the writer’s memory. The narrator’s fury is driven partially by an ideological resistance to censorship, but the intellectual element is subsumed by a visceral, even phobic, disgust. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva analyzes the nature of phobias and taboos through the concept of abjection. That which is abject, for instance, bodily fluids and faeces, can never be fully expelled from the self, yet is simultaneously outside the unified subject, the ‘own and clean self’ (65). The abject is that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules’ (4).

In her study, *Mothers and Other Clowns*, Magdalene Redekop relates the narrator’s difficulty in repelling Malley’s unwanted

ministrations to a difficulty in shedding the maternal, caring role even in the masculine space of the office. Malley's 'soft and loathsome' features (73) could be read as those of the surrogate child whose needs cannot be expunged from the narrator's psyche. His assumptions about writing and sex are 'so wistful, so infantile' (67). Her response to his neediness, in the early days of his present-giving and his 'eatin' into her time' (66) is that of the guilty mother: 'I did not even really pity him. It was just I could not turn away, I could not turn away from that obsequious hunger' (66). Yet the mother/child roles are constantly shifting. Malley, with the 'ponderous matriarchal discomfort' of his gait (63-4) also assumes a maternal position. The love of gossip is a conventionally feminine attribute, along with the quasi-maternal attempts to nurture the narrator, and then to police her behaviour. Magdalene Redekop points out the importance of these shifting identities for the central themes of the story: 'The kaleidoscopic reversals expose the patterns of family behaviour as human constructs open to change. What holds the kaleidoscope still for the space of this story is the focus on the act of writing' (49). We can relate the narrator's phobic reaction to Malley to her own ambivalence about the confined space of the office and the psychic boundaries that it represents for the female writer. In this light, those office walls 'cold and bare, white with a little grey' (63), stand for the blank page facing all of us who, metaphorically speaking, pick up the pen.

In her Paris Review interview Munro describes the difficulties of trying to write at home:

Some part of me was absent for those children, and children detect things like that. Not that I neglected them, but I wasn't wholly absorbed. When my oldest daughter was about two, she'd come to where I was sitting at the typewriter, and I would bat her away with one hand and type with the other. (McCulloch and Simpson)

These comments echo the narrator's in 'The Office': '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' (60). The children's persistent, almost, willful interruptions also recall another story, 'My Mother's Dream' (*The Love of a Good Woman*, 1998) in which a small baby starts her screaming every time the mother picks up the violin to practice. Biographical studies by Catherine Sheldrick Ross and Robert Thacker, and a memoir by Munro's daughter Sheila, refer to a painful and frustrating period in Munro's writing life, which we can see reflected in

‘The Office’. The conflict between artistic dedication and maternal duty is ultimately irreconcilable, as the story demonstrates, and as Munro’s regretful comments make be taken to imply.

When Malley withdraws from the final confrontation, another gender reversal takes place, as he adopts the narrator’s own appeasement and avoidance strategies, eventually taking to his bed. The narrator goes into the office, closes the door for one last time, and packs her things to leave. She regrets giving up her office. In the coda at the end of the story, she says, ‘I think that I will try again some day, but not yet’ (73):

I have to wait until at least that picture fades 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. (73-4)

The contrast between the long, ruminative sentences of the closing paragraph and the punchy, journalistic opening indicates a shift in mood and attitude. The qualified statement, ‘I think that I will try again some day but not yet’ (my emphasis), communicates uncertainty and hesitation. This paragraph foregrounds the story’s self-reflexivity; the story the narrator is writing is the story we have now finished reading. The ambiguities are obvious, though they are not entirely new to the attentive reader.

The narrator still yearns for that space behind a closed door, where clear boundaries are laid between an autonomous self and the outside world; where the professional and the maternal are divided from one another. Most writers, male or female, share an insatiable longing for the time and space to concentrate entirely on their work; this is the reason behind artists’ retreats, such as the prestigious Yaddo residencies in the USA. The division between the professional self and the maternal in ‘The Office’ stands for a wider struggle, both practical and psychological, to reconcile living a life with making art. It is possible to read ‘The Office’ as a parable about the obstinacy of patriarchal values, and the enduring relevance for women writers of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. However, a more nuanced reading explores the breaching of fixed boundaries, including gender roles, and an ambivalence towards the sealed space of the office. There can be no ‘solution to my life’ (59). Munro’s

response to the clash between art and living is to embrace an approach to storytelling that incorporates disruption at its source.

Storytelling in ‘The Office’ is not confined to a dedicated space or to the professional artist. Malley is a skilled oral storyteller, dramatizing his own life and those of others. One of his stories concerns the previous tenant, a chiropractor:

The only trouble was, he gave more adjustments than was listed in the book of chiropractory. Oh, he was adjusting right and left. I came in here after he moved out, and what do you think I found? Soundproofing! This whole room was soundproofed, to enable him to make his adjustments without disturbing anybody. This very room you’re sitting writing your stories in. (66-7)

Like other authors, Malley builds up suspense, controls the pace of the narrative and even plays with words to comic effect (‘chiropractory’ is a neologism.). The narrator observes that his pleasure in offering this story to her as raw material for fiction derives not merely from the frisson of gossip, but also from a ‘vague delicious connection’ between ‘writing and lewdness’ (67). She dismisses that notion as ‘infantile’ (67) Yet it is not entirely ridiculous. Many of Munro’s later stories, including ‘Meneseteung’ (*Friend of My Youth*, 1990), ‘Carried Away’ (*Open Secrets*, 1994) and ‘To Reach Japan’ (*Dear Life*, 2012) draw connections between creativity, sexuality, inebriation and altered states of consciousness. The liminal state of consciousness evoked parenthetically on pages 60-61 is not directly sexual, but it is sensuous and intuitive. The obscene graffiti on the lavatory wall might be seen as an eruption of the Dionysian drives that the narrator has repressed in the sterile space of the office.

In ‘On Writing the Office’, Munro describes herself feeling blocked, ‘staring at the walls and the Venetian blinds’ for hours on end (259). During those long hours, external intrusions are clearly not the problem. The door is firmly shut and the blinds, we may infer, are closed, excluding the outside world completely. The Paris Review interview, along with other interviews such as that with Harold Horwood, confirms that, being inside any space dedicated purely to writing has a ‘paralysing’ effect on Munro’s creativity; since the experiment represented in ‘The Office’, she has written mostly at home. ‘On Writing the Office’ reveals that what Munro was failing to produce during those wasted hours staring at the walls was in fact a novel. I would suggest that the story she eventually completed articulates a poetics of distraction, which is related to Munro’s

choice of form and her ongoing exploration of the interaction between fiction and reality.

In ‘The Office’, as we have seen, Munro rehearses varieties of storytelling, including autobiographical and oral forms of discourse. Both the narrator and her landlord stage their own realities and ‘arrange’ lived experience within narrative patterns. The repetition of ‘arrange’ in the final paragraph draws an obvious parallel between Malley ‘arranging in his mind the bizarre but somehow never quite satisfactory narrative of yet another betrayal of trust’ and the narrator’s compositional process (74). The focalization blurs in the key phrase, ‘bizarre but never quite satisfactory’; are those tales deficient from their author’s point of view, or from the listener’s? Of course, the image of Malley scrubbing the walls is also a speculative reconstruction, and we have been reminded throughout the narrative that the events in the text are recollected from hindsight.

As the narrator prepares to leave the office for good, she comes across Mrs. Malley. Earlier, Mrs Malley is introduced through a densely descriptive character sketch:

Mrs. Malley was a black-haired, delicate-looking woman, perhaps in her early forties, slatternly but still faintly appealing, with such arbitrary touches of femininity as the thin line of bright lipstick, the pink feather slippers on obviously tender and swollen feet. She had the swaying passivity, the air of exhaustion and muted apprehension, that speaks of a life spent in close attention on a man who is by turns vigorous crotchety and dependent. (62)

Mrs. Malley is presented as the ‘round’ character of realist fiction. In this type of storytelling, the accumulation of specific visual details, such as the lipstick and the feather slippers, build a vivid impression of a character whose internal motivations are linked to what may be observed externally. The narrator notes the ‘swaying passivity, the air of exhaustion and muted apprehension’ that defines a whole lifestyle. The narrator undercuts this confident rendition of Mrs. Malley with the reflection that her observations have been shaped by hindsight: ‘How much of this I saw at first, how much decided on later is of course impossible to tell’.—However she does re-instate some of her authority as a trustworthy reader of character: ‘I did think that she would have no children, the stress of her life, whatever it was, did not allow it, and in this I was not mistaken’ Mrs. Malley is also a character in her husband’s melodramatic ‘stories of himself’ (68), in which her health is described as poor and her temperament unstable. But she herself disappears until the final pages when she quietly helps the narrator carry her bags to the car. She is no

longer a colourful character, merely ‘practical and resigned’ (73): ‘she was so still I felt my anger leave me, to be replaced by an absorbing depression’ (73.).

The figure of Mrs. Malley, presented initially through the vivid lens of fiction, then as a character so ‘still’ she becomes virtually invisible, demonstrates an ambivalence towards conventional modes of storytelling. Dense descriptive passages are far from infrequent in Munro’s first collection, but in ‘The Office’ the Malleys and their apartment have clearly been appropriated for their value as fiction. Mr. Malley, hyperbolized by his physique, the gilt-framed portrait and his exaggerated stories, is aligned with excess and ornamentation. When Mrs. Malley re-appears, it is as if the nondescript ‘real’ person from ‘real life’ has stepped on stage, foreshadowing the anxiety of that final fragmented sentence: ‘while I arrange words, and think it is my right to be rid of him’ (74). Mr. Malley dominates the story, just as his portrait dominates his apartment, but it is Mrs. Malley, the more peripheral and mysterious character, who prefigures Munro’s approach in her later fiction.

If the narrator’s anxiety derives at all from ethical concerns about using real people as models for fictional characters, this is overshadowed by the stronger suggestion that the distractions they provide might generate a different kind of storytelling. The narrator conceals which type of fiction she is writing, just as she hides ‘the manuscript’ from Malley (70), but the reader might wonder if, like Munro, she is trying to write a novel. As a fragmented, elliptical genre, the modern short story is able to build seemingly random digressions into an image-based structure. Its resistance to closure means that the incomplete, contradictory and ‘never quite satisfactory’ are more easily assimilated than in the conventional novel.

By the end of the story, ‘I try to write’ is no longer an expression of ‘hypocritical humility’ (59) but a recognition of storytelling as a provisional reworking of an elusive reality. The doors are left open between art and life; autobiography, fiction and the fiction-making process cross back and forth. ‘She is the house. There is no separation possible’ (60). Munro’s well known analogy between a story and a house in her essay, ‘What is Real?’, gains extra resonance when we consider the house as not just a metaphor for narrative structure but the creative environment in which the writing is produced: ‘Everybody knows what a house does, how it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way’ (224). In that

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same essay, Munro recognizes the inevitability: ‘Every final draft, every published story, is still only an attempt, an approach to the story’ (225). The coming to terms with failure finds its perfect form in the short story, and in an aesthetic which accepts distractions and digressions as a stylistic necessity.

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