

Child-Women and Primitives

In the Fiction



Alice Munro

of Alice Munro

by Beverly J. Rasporich

In his foreword to Alice Munro's first book of short stories, Dance of the Happy Shades, Hugh Garner writes in praise of her authorial ability to vitalize "ordinary people in ordinary situations living ordinary lives."⁽¹⁾ The danger in this comment is that, as a half-truth, it belies the grotesque and hysterical reality of Munro's "other" world which constantly challenges the quiet and often nostalgic calm of what appears to be a fiction of simple observation. That edge is there, particularly in Munro's exploration of the feminine psyche and its authentic life, a concern which is at the heart of her fiction. In her various and subtle renderings of female characters from childhood to old age, she probes the nature of their true identities beneath their artificial, disguised or misin-

terpreted social faces. Moreover, from her first book, through her novel, Lives of Girls and Women, to her last collection of short stories, Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You, the sense of female alienation has become increasingly more strident. In such recent short stories as "Material" and "The Spanish Lady," the emotions of the narrators, provoked by unsatisfactory and deceptive relations with men, are exposed as more blatantly hostile and threatening than they have been in earlier situations. One compares, for example, the ironic and inept gesture of the jilted Helen in "Postcard," yelling and honking her car horn outside her newly wed lover's home,⁽²⁾ with the narrator's scathing denunciation and hatred of male authority in "Material." In this last collection, the questioning underground voice of Munro's women has become more vocal.

That is not to say that the author, as she articulates the dilemmas of female sexual identity, preaches simplistic or futuristic solutions. For Munro's novelistic art rests both on a haunted

awareness of the complexity of all human relationships and on her historical or social intuition. Hers is a historical sense which is not self-conscious or academic as in the case of earlier Canadian novelists such as Hugh MacLennan, but one which is implicit--the artist's sensitive response to the environment he or she knows best. And unlike her character, Gabe, in "Material," Munro cannot erase "the language of her childhood."⁽³⁾ Many of her female characters belong to a dying or defunct Faulkneresque world of small town Southwestern Ontario, a world which is often made immediate through the narrator's remembrances of times past. And in her assessment of feminine roles, there is a continual anachronistic collision of the past with the present. Her recurrent characterizations of childish and decorous Victorian women who, as they are subordinated by an older patriarchal order, betray sublimated and strangled discontent, or those poor white women, the Snopeses of rural Ontario, who lash out with gestures of primitive, frustrated aggression, are part of the psychological landscape of the author's contemporary urban female consciousness. The "edge of hysteria" (Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You, p. 177) underlying such an artificial relationship as that of the two "modern" women in "The Spanish Lady," centring their lives about an unspoken competition for the narrator's husband (we were attracted to each other because of the man, or to the man because of each

other, p. 177), is a continuum in Munro's female domain. Many of her contemporary figures with their internalized conflicts and existential quests for self-identity are caught in the grip of old value systems; they are immature and insecure personalities in process.

The childish, unfulfilled character of Munro's women is most obvious in her domesticated aunties, grandmothers and spinsters who inhabit a decaying gothic milieu of the small town Victorian past. Their sense of self, like Auntie Lou and Aunt Annie in "The Peace of Utrecht" from Dance of the Happy Shades or Auntie Grace and Aunt Elspeth in Lives revolves about being a member of the family,⁽⁴⁾ a responsibility which demands dutiful self-sacrifice to parents or masculine ambition. (Lives, p. 27) Victims of the Victorian "grave, accusing, Protestant" code ("The Peace of Utrecht," p. 206), they play out the nineteenth-century role of "angels in the kitchen."⁽⁵⁾ Their houses become "tiny sealed off countries" (Lives, p. 50) where honesty, intellect and overt sexuality are forbidden. Instead, these women live an ordered life of intricate domestic and private social ritual, of elaborate verbal games or childish pranks. From the sensitive, developing heroine's point of view in Lives, the traditional polarity between the masculine and feminine roles in the house at Jenkins' Bend, supports a grotesque masquerade. She understands that after the death of their brother, Craig, her aunts' existence

becomes one of stagnant disorientation: They told their same stories, they played their same jokes, which now seemed dried out, brittle with use; in time every word, every expression of the face, every flutter of the hands came to seem something learned long ago, perfectly remembered, and each of their two selves was seen to be something constructed with terrible care; the older they got the more frail and admirable and inhuman the construction appeared. This was what became of them when they no longer had a man with them, to nourish and admire, and when they were removed from the place where their artificiality bloomed naturally. (Lives, p. 50)

While Del is in revolt against those conventions which demand that she be passive and puritan, she is not untouched by their authority. At the funeral of Uncle Craig she is particularly affected and defeated by the repressive Calvinist denial of the life of the body. In response to the artificiality and unnaturalness of the funeral ritual, she exercises her "freedom" by desperately biting her cousin. Yet, not only does Del interpret her own physical act as one of evil alienation, she also gives in to feelings of shame, to an overwhelming horrible and obscene vision that: "To be made of flesh was a humiliation." (p. 48) The "Fathers of Confederation" and the puritan Irish family have their way when the child

Del assumes the appropriate behaviour by quietly drinking her tea. And although Del will make in adolescence that active decision to do as men, "to go out and take on all kinds of experiences and shuck off what they didn't want and come back proud," (p. 147) Munro leaves her character, at the conclusion of the novel, distracted and indecisive--in an elusive mental state, which, while lyrically satisfying to the reader, still implies the old impotence in the lives of girls and women.

In "The Peace of Utrecht," a story identified by Munro herself as autobiographical,⁽⁶⁾ the Young Mother, Helen, also finds herself at the mercy of the past. Having escaped the restrictions of Jubilee, she returns to visit her unmarried sister, Maddy, only to discover in a moment of angst that they too, like Aunt Annie and Auntie Lou, may be trapped in the old insular and stylized relationship:

I have a fascinated glimpse of Maddy and myself, grown old, caught back in the web of sisterhood after everything else has disappeared, making tea for some young, loved and essentially unimportant relative--and exhibiting just such a polished relationship; what will anyone know of us? (p. 203)

Of Maddy we know very little except that in her secretive sexual relationship with Fred Powell and her own teasing ritualistic games, she has become absorbed by that country of "quiet decaying side streets where old

maids live and have bird baths and blue delphiniums in their gardens." (p. 196) In this story, the "feelings of hysteria" (p. 201) which once characterized both sisters in their reaction to their ailing "Gothic mother" and to Jubilee, has been dissipated in Maddy to the point of brittle nervousness and replaced in the estranged Helen by a melancholic horror--a horror which is substantiated by the ancient faces of the old aunts who are childish virgins locked into crumbling bodies. All four women are overcome by the past in the insufficiency of their identities and the guilt they experience for their failures and lack of responsibility in family relationships.

While Munro tends not to explore the inner life of the Victorian child-women in Dance of the Happy Shades, in Lives, she scratches the surface illusion of their personalities. Beneath the facade of Grace's and Elspeth's girlish innocence, Del discovers an undercurrent of hostile emotion. They have acquiesced to their civilized and subordinate positions but in their jokes and conversations they betray "tiny razor cuts" (p. 31) of malice and a murderous disposition. The primitive motivation of Elspeth who playfully took the butcher knife, the "long wicked knife" to the German immigrant, who had "the very devil of a temper, excuse my language" (p. 28) is more fully realized in the chilling tale of her last volume, "Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You."

Here, the Victorian "web of sisterhood" turns in upon itself with ghastly repercussions. The old maid Et, who has always lived an ordered, watchful life on the fringes of her sister Char's, is overcome by her desire to protect, and possess as her own, her sister's husband. In Et, who begins to suspect Char of slowly poisoning the husband, Arthur, Munro suggests the roots of a primal, immature female imagination: "She did think maybe she was going a little strange, as old maids did; this fear of hers was like the absurd and harmless fears young girls sometimes have, that they will jump out a window, or strangle a baby, sitting in its buggy." (p. 14) When Et, through an intimate knowledge of her sister's psychology, occasions, or, at the very least, thinks she has occasioned, her sister's suicide, the reader is left with a grotesque insight into the confused, aggressive and hysterical spirit of an old woman, whose emotional identity is frozen in her childish past. That easy transition from a girl turning cartwheels to a respectable town fixture has only been a superficial one, for Et's desire to annihilate Char proceeds also from a vengeful childhood jealousy. The awful irony in "Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You" is that the town's interpretation of Et as a joking "terror" is, in fact, a serious indication of a potent hostility.

For Alice Munro, the question of female innocence is an ambiguous one. On the one hand, the false Victorian code in

its moral absolutism creates only its fiction. When Del Jordan in Lives mistakenly prefers to interpret the prostitute Peggy as either being in a condition of "perfect depravity" or "sainthood" (p. 128), she ignores the natural, ordinary, human character of Peggy's life. Later, Del will realize that all human relationships are much more complex and relative, that "People's lives in Jubilee, as elsewhere were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable--deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum." (p. 210) While Munro, in a great many of her stories and particularly those which celebrate female sexual awakening, is denying the old strictures of a puritan value system, she is also inclined to apotheosize and mourn the passing of the Victorian ideal.

In her earlier short story, "Dance of the Happy Shades," Miss Marsalles, the music teacher, and her sister are genuine innocents, "babies" (p. 218) who were "gay as invulnerable and childish people are; they appeared sexless, wild and gentle creatures, bizarre yet domestic, living in their house in Rosedale outside the complications of time" (p. 214); and who are able to give of themselves in a way the cynical, middle class narrator cannot. Although Miss Marsalles is a grotesque and her way of life a social masquerade, her commitment to musical integrity and her ideal view of children is generous. Ultimately, it is even truthful. In the "miracle" she works with the "idiots," the retarded

children whose retardation is of no consequence to her, she expresses her saintliness. In her natural charity Miss Marsalles hauntingly speaks to the more sophisticated narrator, and to the reader, "from the other country where she lives." (p. 224)

This "other country" as underlined by Munro has greater implications both for her own philosophical view of reality and the collective Canadian consciousness. In his "Conclusion" to a Literary History of Canada, Northrop Frye identifies the heart of all social mythology as the pastoral myth, the vision of a social ideal which romanticizes childhood, nature or an earlier social condition such as pioneer life, the small town, the habitant experience--that can be identified with childhood.(7) He explains:

The nostalgia for a world of peace and protection, with a spontaneous response to the nature around it, with a leisure and composure not to be found today, is particularly strong in Canada. It is overpowering in our popular literature, from Anne of Green Gables to Leacock's Mariposa, and from Maria Chapdelaine to Jake and the Kid. It is present in all the fiction that deals with small towns as collections of characters in search of an author. (p. 840)

In "Dance of the Happy Shades" Munro is in the process of exorcising this ghost and not without some regret. The women who patronize Miss Marsalles are drawn

together by an allegiance to the "ceremonies of their childhood, to a more exacting pattern of life which had been breaking apart even then but which survived, and unaccountably still survived, in Miss Marsalles' living room." (p. 215) There is for them, then, a certain security in the naive parlour world of the music teacher, with her tidily wrapped year end gift-books, Northern Lakes and Rivers, Knowing the Birds, More Tales by Grey Owl, Little Mission Friends and her pictures of tender childish nudity, "Cupid Awake and Cupid Asleep," "After the Bath," "The Little Vigilantes." (p. 216) In fact, these romantic attitudes may even be preferable to the narrator's perspective which is ironically displayed as an ugly new puritanism, a "sophisticated prudery" which interprets tenderness as ridiculous and disgusting. (p. 216)

Yet finally, Munro must reject Miss Marsalles' country. Although the author is still in a sense influenced by the romantic tradition in her idealization of childhood memory and in her posture of exposing the restrictive unnaturalness of social conventions, she prefers not to sentimentalize nature, childhood and primitive responses. Instead she espouses a Darwinian naturalism which may be frightening but which for her is more realistic--especially as it relates to the female identity. The reader senses as well that this attitude has become gradually stronger in the development of her fiction.

One compares, for example, the child on the verge of becoming a girl in "Boys and Girls" in the first volume of stories with the child Helena in "The Executioners" of Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You. In both stories the rural bush environment is not that of the Hudson's Bay Company calendar with its scenes of heroic adventurers and magnificent noble savages, but that of practical living, of skinning foxes, of shooting unproductive horses, of landscapes where "ribbons of dog urine ran down by the shoveled paths." ("The Executioners," p. 142) In the first story, the child who rebels against becoming "only a girl" (p. 127) displays a malevolent intention in dangerously tricking her brother onto a rafter, but finally assumes the sentimental ideal role of sensitive and life-giving female, when she allows the horse, who is about to be shot, to go free. Neither the girl, nor the reader, nor Munro herself knows, at the conclusion of the story, whether this positive romantic gesture is natural or has been bred into her. The second story is much more menacing. Here, children are "deadly innocent" (p. 138), the natural world is one where wolves eat babies (p. 143), and the social one of revenge and murder. The child, Helena, becomes a psychological accomplice of the executioners, Jimmy and Duval, who are responsible for the death of Stump Troy and his son. But if Helena becomes the "bad seed" in her vision of revenge on Howard Troy,

Punishments. I thought of myself

walking on Howard Troy's eyes. Driving spikes into his eyes. The spikes would be on the soles of my shoes, they would be long and sharp. His eyeballs would bulge out, unprotected, as big as overturned basins, and I would walk on them, puncturing, flattening, bloodying, at a calm pace. . . . I would have liked his head torn from his body, flesh pulpy and dripping like watermelon, limbs wrenched away; axes, saws, knives and hammers applied to him. (p. 149)

it is because, as a girl, she is frustrated and powerless to deny his supercilious sexual threats.

In Munro's country innocence is neither inherent nor affordable by those "primitive" females living in unprotected natural conflict with man and animal on the edge of civilization. In "Thanks For the Ride," the narrator, a man, discovers in the home of Lois in "Mission Creek - Gateway to the Bruce," a primitive knowledge that is not part of his decorous world:

I noticed an old woman Some of the smell in the house seemed to come from her. It was the smell of hidden decay, such as there is when some obscure little animal has died under the verandah I thought: my mother, George's mother, they are innocent. Even George, George is innocent. But these others are born sly and sad and knowing.

(Dance of the Happy Shades, p. 51)
Girls and women like Lois in this story, the grandmother in "A Trip To The Coast" from Dance of the Happy Shades, Uncle Benny's child-wife in Lives and Robina of "The Executioners" are not without artifice and pathetic illusions but when, in their various defeats, they respond like trapped animals, they seem to exercise for Munro a base and primal dignity. Their hysterical responses are as insufficient and as immature as those of the maiden aunts and Victorian ladies, but somehow, they are actively satisfying.

Lois "shows those guys" whom she allows to take class and sexual advantage of her, when she calls out abusively, "Thanks for the ride!" (p. 58) The grandmother in "A Trip To The Coast," is not garishly disguised by her clothes or well-turned out as many of the "ladies" are, but what she seems, she is: a monkeyish, malevolent old woman. In her confrontation with death, she dies fearful, but willfully victorious. Madeline of the Flats Road in Lives, with her string of oaths directed at Del and her weapon, a Kotex box, thrown in temper at Charlie Buckle, expresses a crazy, raging power. Similarly, the one-armed Robina in "The Executioners" who slaps Helena into complicity, may be from an adult viewpoint, "absurd, obsessed, not very clean" (p. 154) but she retains a sense of her own authority. She is "a chief." (p. 144) Unlike Helena, who will ironically and predictably grow up to be a civil ser-

vant, or Del Jordan, or for that matter, the prevailing self-conscious voice of Munro's narrators, these women are not complicated by Calvinist guilt or by convoluted mental lives. And it seems that for Munro's modern urban female characters this kind of gesture may be their only active defense. The betrayed wife in "The Spanish Lady" imagines her expression of hatred as that of the wife in God's Little Acre, kicking, screaming and slapping the bare bodies of her husband and her friend. Finally, she is able to release her rage by howling in "amazing protest" and "I put my arm across my open mouth and to stop the pain I bite it, I bite my arm, . . ." (Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You, p. 181)

The central feminine dilemma in Munro's literature is that of being caught in the grip of past memory and past value systems and thus, of being unable to enact meaningfully the present or reconstruct the future. The security of the old ideal which interprets such a character as the elderly Aunt Madge in "Winter Wind," "she could have been held up as an example, an ideal wife, except that she gave no impression of sacrifice, of resignation, of doing one's duty, such as is looked for in ideals" (Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You, p. 199), is comfortable, because it disallows the risks of coming to know oneself. In the last analysis, however, comfort and order pall. Old Et in "Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You" finally hungers for chaos and the middle-

aged woman in "Tell Me Yes or No," who understands in retrospect that her unquestioning domestic life of the fifties was rooted in the old way, in "a love of limits" (Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You, p. 107), is looking, confusedly, for something else. But with freedom comes the dangers and terrors of chaos--of letting loose and facing our most elemental and undisguised selves. The hopeful fear of the young girl, May, in "A Trip To The Coast," who watches to see if her grandmother's dominant will can be broken by the hypnotist, may be seen as a central informing metaphor in the writer's conception of the female crisis: "If her grandmother capitulated it would be as unsettling an event as an earthquake or flood; it would crack the foundations of her life and set her terrifyingly free." (p. 188) Without order, limits and roles, we are inviting the hazardous and lonely existential quest of self-determination; with them, we have in the past been victimized by masculine control and had our instinctive emotional lives retarded.

Ironically, in her most immediate portrayals of present woman, the "terrifying freedom" has evolved regressively into the same static design of the past. With a melancholic eye, Munro dramatizes characters who have adopted a new set of unnatural rituals and disguises. The mother June in "Memorial" with her sense of social obligation at her son's memorial service is no less bizarre than the old aunts at Uncle

Craig's funeral in Lives. In her desire to fend off chaos by imposing order, June has simply substituted new fashions and ideology for old. Garments of "exotic poverty" (Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You, p. 214) have replaced the carefully constructed dress of the older generation; a mechanical Freudian psychology operates in lieu of the Calvinist code, and the "morality of consumerism" has replaced the old Protestant materialism. (p. 210) Even the knowing older sister Eileen, who welcomes disorder and natural expression, is gravely impaired in her search for the authentic life:

She discovered in herself these days an unattractive finickiness about some things, about clothes, for instance and decoration. A wish to avoid fraud, not to appropriate serious things for trivial uses, not to mock things by making them into fashions. A doomed wish. She herself offended. (p. 211)

Perhaps Munro's most damning portrait of self-mockery is of the career woman, Jeanette in "Marrakesh." As she juxtaposes the old school teacher, the grandmother Dorothy, with her granddaughter, the college professor, Munro indicates an ironic, repetitious pattern of immaturity and posturing. With the wisdom of experience and the older virtue of common sense, Dorothy attempts to unravel the "heiroglyph" (p. 166) of her granddaughter's identity:

Dorothy had seen pictures in magazines of this new type of adult who appeared to have discarded adult-

hood. Jeanette was the first one she had seen close up and in the flesh. It used to be that young boys and girls would try to look like grown up men and women, often with ridiculous results. Now there were grown men and women who tried to look like teenagers, until, presumably, they woke up on the brink of old age. It was a strange thing to see the child already meeting the old woman in Jeanette's face . . . with a change of light or mood or body chemistry this same face showed itself bruised, bluish, sharp, skin more than a little shriveled under the eyes. A great deal had simply been skipped out. (Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You, p. 160)

Jeanette, a thirtyish woman in childish dress, who relates with suppressed hysteria the fiction of Marrakesh is an undeveloped horror equal to Munro's most gothic Victorian child-women. And certainly her masquerade is far more insidious than that of her grandmother's who, puritanical and convention-ridden, at least has a sense of self-preservation.

If Alice Munro, as she seeks to unmask the fraudulent lives of girls and women, fails to determine either what women by nature are, or what they could be, it is because, by her own reckoning, she is not a "problem solver." (8) Moreover, the shifting perspectives of her feminine voice may undermine a logical or consistent philosophy, but in a histor-

ical sense, they are an evocative and instinctive articulation of society in transition, and of women in search of themselves. Neither can a sophisticated reader demand of an artist casual solutions to the question of human identity. As Munro herself realizes, the pursuit of psychological truth and, indeed, the artistic dilemma itself, of imposing a subjective fictional order on objective reality, is fraught with the perils of distortion and deception. One can easily accept her artistic credo, however, which she expresses in the short story, "Winter Wind." While the author may be a master trickster, shaping and altering people and experience to suit her purpose, facts themselves are secondary to the writer's secret insight into human nature, to her belief that "we get messages another way, that we have connections that cannot be investigated but have to be relied on."

In her short stories and her novel, Alice Munro's "connections" convincingly interpret people and "the stories they carry around with them." (Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You, p. 201)

NOTES

1. Hugh Garner, "Foreword," Dance of the Happy Shades (Toronto, 1968), vii.
2. Alice Munro, Dance of the Happy Shades, p. 143.
3. Alice Munro, Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You (Toronto, 1974), p. 25.
4. Alice Munro, Lives of Girls and Women (New York, 1971), p. 48.
5. This is an expression used by Walter Houghton in The Victorian Frame of Mind (New Haven, 1957), p. 352. It refers to the Victorian ideal of woman wherein sexuality and emotions were repressed as motherhood, industry and domesticity were elevated.
6. Alice Munro in Eleven Canadian Novelists, interviewed by Graeme Gibson (Toronto, 1973), p. 258.
7. Northrop Frye in Literary History of Canada, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto, 1965), p. 840.
8. Alice Munro in Eleven Canadian Novelists, p. 242.