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Alice Munro's *Runaway*: Stories of Women in Dilemma

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Abstract

Alice Ann Munro, a Canadian short story writer and Nobel laureate (2013), is the author of seven books of short stories, including the forthcoming *Open Secrets*, and one novel, *Lives of Girls and Women*. It is her miraculous gift to make her stories as real and unforgettable as our own. In Munro's hands, the people she writes about, women of all ages and circumstances, and their friends, lovers, parents, and children, become as alive and vivid as our own kith and kin. In Alice Munro's superb story collection, *Runaway*, we find stories about women of all ages and circumstances, their lives made palpable by the subtlety and empathy of this incomparable writer. *Runaway* is a book of extraordinary engaging stories about love and emotions and its intriguing loyalty and disloyalty, from the title story about a young woman who is incapable of leaving her husband, to three stories about a woman named Juliet and the emotions that complicate the lustre of her intimate relationships. There are eight short stories in the book. There are the infinite betrayals and surprises of love, between men and women, between friends, between parents and children that are the stuff of all our lives. My attempt in the present paper will be to investigate Munro's inimitable style of storytelling in the present perspective in her delineation of different facets of her female protagonists in her Man Booker International Prize winner story book, *Runaway*.

Keywords: Betrayals, Engaging, Intriguing, Protagonists, Storytelling

Introduction

Alice Ann Munro is a Canadian short story writer who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature on 10 October 2013 cited as a 'master of the contemporary short story'. She is the first Canadian and the 13th woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. Munro's work has been appreciated for revolutionizing and presenting the architecture of short stories, especially in its tendency to oscillate forward and backward in time. Although Alice Munro has made her mark as an expert short story teller, she experimented and started with writing novels. The challenge was her being a mother of young children, she could not get sufficient time to complete a novel. So, she decided to try her hand at writing stories while she learned to write novels. That decision was probably one of the best things that ever happened to the modern short story.

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After Anton Chekhov, Alice Munro in recent times is the only writer who tries for and grabs, in each of her stories, a Gestalt like representation of life. She has a penchant for developing and unleashing moments of epiphany. But most significantly, Munro portrays the peculiarity and loneliness that often accompanies women whose temperament sets them apart from their loved ones and who strive to be free from conventional bondages. Munro's highly acclaimed first collection of stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), won her the Governor General's Award, then Canada's highest literary prize. Her collections have been translated into thirteen languages. Munro was shortlisted for the annual (UK) Booker Prize for Fiction (now the Man Booker Prize) (1980) for *The Beggar Maid*.

Runaway, a Storybook with a Twist

Runaway is a unique book of short stories which has won the Giller Prize, Canada's biggest literary award for fiction. Film adaptations of Munro's short stories have included *Martha, Ruth & Edie* (1988), *Edge of Madness* (2002), *Away from Her* (2006), *Hateship, Loveship* (2013) and *Julieta* (2016). She began to make her reputation with her fifth and sixth books, *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982) and *The Progress of Love* (1986), in which she frequently set aside the traditional writing style of the short story, using flash back technique with a twist, beginning at the end and ending sometimes in the middle. Slowly and gradually she then rose to what Margaret Atwood called international literary sainthood. Externally her work appears to be simple, but her writing has a perfect peculiarity that takes years and many drafts to master the skill. As Cynthia Ozick has said, 'She is our Chekhov and is going to outlast most of her contemporaries.' (2013, web) She gives whole credit to her mother as a great motivator and source, and over the course of eleven collections she has emerged as one of the most honest chroniclers of female sexuality, sharing erotic secrets. As Margaret Atwood observes:

Pushing the sexual boundaries is distinctly thrilling for many a Munro woman; but in order to trespass you have to know exactly where the fence is and Munro's universe is crisscrossed with meticulously defined borders. Hands, chairs, glances - all are part of an intricate inner map strewn with barbed wire and booby traps and secret paths through the shrubbery. (2009, web)

Throughout her heart touching collection, *Runaway*, Alice Munro's understanding of the people about whom she writes makes them as lively as our own neighbors. Here are the stories of betrayals and surprises of love, between men and women, between friends, between parents and children that weave the core fabric of our lives. It is Alice Munro's special gift to make the struggles and triumphs of her characters as vivid and real as our own.

The title story 'Runaway' is about a young girl who thinks to leave her husband but is incapable of doing so. The second story, 'Chance' is about Juliet who falls in love while travelling in a train trip. The third story, 'Soon' is again about Juliet who visits her parents with her child Penelope. The fourth story 'Silence' again deals with the life of Juliet who waits for news from her adult estranged daughter Penelope. The fifth story, 'Passion' deals

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with a lonely small town girl who runs away a loveless relationship with an outsider. The sixth story, 'Trespasses' deals with the story of Lauren, a young girl who meets an older woman, Delphine, who is too interested in her. The seventh story, 'Tricks' deals with Robin, a lonely girl who lives life alone due to her turn of luck. 'Powers', the eighth and final story in the collection, is divided into five parts. The first part comprises the diaries of Nancy, a self-centered young woman convinced that one day she will be someone in particular. The second part shifts into third-person narration and happens several months after the first part. Nancy and Wilf are engaged and preparing for their wedding. Wilf's cousin Ollie is in town to attend the ceremony, and Nancy becomes fascinated by his worldly affectations. The third part leaps forward into the 1960s. Nancy is now an aging woman visiting an American mental hospital. The fourth part moves forward a few more years. Wilf has died from the complications of a stroke, and Nancy takes the opportunity to travel. The fifth part takes place decades later. Nancy has become an elderly woman whose children worry that she is living in the past.

The Title Story, 'Runaway'

'Runaway', the first and title story, deals with the plight of a young woman who refuses a chance to escape a bad marriage. The story first published in the August 11, 2003, issue of *The New Yorker*. It also appeared in Munro's 2004 collection by the same name. Multiple Runaways, Runaway people, animals, and emotions abound in the story. The wife, Carla, is twice a runaway. When she was 18 and college-bound, she ran off to marry her husband, Clark, against her parents' wishes and has been estranged from them since. And now, getting on a bus to Toronto, she runs away a second time, this time from Clark. Carla's beloved white goat, Flora, also appears to be a runaway, having inexplicably disappeared shortly before the start of the story. Clark and Carla's marriage seems to be following a runaway trajectory. Finally, there is Clark's runaway temper, carefully documented early in the story that threatens to become truly dangerous when he goes to Sylvia's house in the night to confront her about encouraging Carla's departure. Munro describes the goat's behavior in ways that mirror Carla's relationship with Clark. She writes:

At first she had been Clark's pet entirely, following him everywhere, dancing for his attention. She was as quick and graceful and provocative as a kitten, and her resemblance to a guile-less girl in love had made them both laugh. But as she grew older she seemed to attach herself to Carla, and in this attachment she was suddenly much wiser, less skittish she seemed capable, instead, of a subdued and ironic sort of humor. (Munro, 2004:9)

When Carla first left home, she behaved much in the starry-eyed manner of the goat. She was filled with giddy delight in her pursuit of a more romantic kind of life with Clark. Munro writes:

While she was running away from him—now—Clark still kept his place in her life. But when she was finished running away, when she just went on, what would

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she put in his place? What else—who else—could ever be so vivid a challenge? (Munro, 2004:34)

Though Clark is clearly presented as a murderous, domineering force, the story also places some of the responsibility for Carla's situation on Carla herself. Consider the way Flora allows Clark to pet her, even though he may have been responsible for her original disappearance and is probably about to kill her. When Sylvia tries to pet her, Flora puts her head down as if to butt. "Goats are unpredictable," Clark tells Sylvia. "They can seem tame but they're not really. Not after they grow up." (40) His words seem to apply to Carla, as well. She has behaved unpredictably, siding with Clark, who was causing her distress. For Sylvia, Carla is a girl who needs guidance and saving, and it is hard for her to imagine that Carla's choice to return to Clark was the choice of an adult woman.

The Next Three Stories, 'Chance', 'Soon' and 'Silence':

Three of the next stories 'Chance', 'Soon', and 'Silence' are about a single character named Juliet Henderson. In 'Chance', the second story Juliet decides to pursue Eric, a man she has met briefly only once. Is this a haphazard adventure, she tells Eric about her studies in Greek and Latin, "I love all that stuff. I really do" (71). Later, she thinks of her love of the classical languages as her "treasure" (83). She chooses a man whose reading includes only National Geographic and Popular Mechanics (82). At the end of the story Juliet's situation and her feelings are rightly expressed:

She can tell by his voice that he is claiming her. She stands up, quite numb, and sees that he is older, heavier, more impetuous than she has remembered. He advances on her and she feels herself ransacked from top to bottom, flooded with relief, assaulted by happiness. How astonishing this is. How close to dismay. (85)

In the third story 'Soon' when Juliet finds the print of Chagall's *I and the Village* and buys it for her parents, she tells Christa, "It makes me think of their life...I don't know why, but it does" (88). The significance of this painting as a gift and that Juliet later finds it hidden away in their attic, Juliet comes to understand about her parents' marriage. Sara tells Juliet, "When it gets really bad for me—when it gets so bad I—you know what I think then? I think, all right, I think—Soon. Soon I'll see Juliet" (124). Juliet refuses to acknowledge this statement from her dying mother. The final paragraph of the story is so effective in conveying the moment's cold emotion. Juliet comes across a chatty letter she had written to Eric the summer she visited her parents (124). In it she finds "the preserved and disconcerting voice of some past fabricated self" (125).

In the fourth and Juliet's third story 'Silence' like Carla in 'Runaway', Juliet seems to take pride in her choice of an unconventional life. Penelope punishes her mother for denying her the comfortable, conventional life she experiences with her friend Heather's family (144). Juliet shares with Penelope, just after Eric's death, tales of their arguments and his infidelity and describes the burning of his body on the beach (149). Juliet says something during this time that is, for Penelope, unforgivable. To some extent the story repeats the pattern of

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‘Soon’ and Juliet’s rejection of her own mother. What Juliet could not see about herself becomes clear to the reader. She handles the suffering inflicted upon her by Penelope and the diminishment of her life as she ages. The story ‘Silence’ ends: “She keeps on hoping for a word from Penelope, but not in any strenuous way. She hopes as people who know better hope for undeserved blessings, spontaneous remissions, things of that sort.” (158)

The Fifth Story, ‘Passion’

In ‘Passion’, a country girl working at a resort hotel emerges into the larger world and discovers in a single moment of stunning insight the limits and lies of that mysterious emotion, passion. Passion has several meanings in this story, it’s different for each character. This fifth story opens with Grace’s return forty years later to find the Traverses’ house on the lake, which is the site of “old confusions or obligations” (161). When Mrs. Travers talks about Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina with Grace, she says her sympathies shifted from Kitty, to Anna, to Dolly, “I suppose that’s just how your sympathies change as you get older. Passion gets pushed behind the washtubs” (172). “The ease with which (Grace) offered herself” to Maury is “a deliberate offering which he could not understand and which did not fit in at all with his notions of her” (173). Later, Grace realizes it would have been “a treachery to herself” to think of marrying Maury (190). When she spends time with Neil her perspective changes.

The Sixth Story, ‘Trespases’:

In the sixth story, ‘Trespases’ Harry tells Lauren about Eileen’s first child and the circumstances of that child’s death when she unknowingly picks up the box containing the first child’s ashes (203-04). Lauren, as Delphine points out, is “a kid that is not short of information” (220). Harry and Eileen decide to make a ceremony of scattering the first child’s ashes. Harry’s words, “This is Lauren . . . and we say good-bye to her and commit her to the snow” (233-34). The effect of the story’s final paragraph about Lauren’s reaction to the burrs clinging to her pajamas is quite penetrating.

The Seventh Story, ‘Tricks’

‘Tricks’ the seventh story, is based on the Shakespearean plots that involve twins, mistaken identities, and precise symmetry. Such tricks of plot, Robin thinks, are supposed to be a means to an end, “The pranks are forgiven, true love or something like it is rekindled, and those who were fooled have the good grace not to complain” (268). While not all of Munro’s characters inspire great affection, more often they seem distant and self-absorbed, but there are exceptions. In ‘Tricks’, an immigrant clockmaker and his dog, Juno, turn up at the moment a young woman, Robin, loses her purse. She is obliged to accept the clockmaker’s charity even though it involves following him back to his shop. Munro is a master of slow revelation in the story. She plants cues that signal both danger and desire. Without losing a beat, she transports us decades later to the perspective of a much older Robin, reflecting on her unexpected resourcefulness and a startling disclosure.

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The Eighth Story, 'Powers'

'Powers' the eighth and the last story opens with Nancy's diary and her first person voice to reflect Munro's intimate narrative form. It is the longest and most fractured of the stories. Its first section is part of Nancy's diary for the spring of 1927 and it ends sometime in the early seventies. It is a little masterpiece of impersonation, an uncanny inhabiting of the mind of a meddling, egotistical girl and of a distinct historical period. According to Ollie, Nancy is "not outstanding in any way, except perhaps in being spoiled, saucy, and egotistical"; as a girl she was "truly, naturally reckless and full of some pure conviction that she led a charmed life" (285, 287). Like several other stories in this collection, 'Powers' takes place in at least two time periods. The effect of this dual immersion in the early and late stages of the characters' lives is quite eventful and evident. The story ends, very subtly, and very mysteriously, with a dream. The sweep of the thing, the revealing portrayal of the unexpected life, the interlocking strangeness and ordinariness, the unravelling narrative of Nancy's own consciousness, together make an indelible impression.

Conclusion

In Munro's fictional world, where every life is marked and decided by accidents and the unforeseen, this prophetic power has an especial interest. Most of these stories involve young women who act upon a strong desire for emotional or romantic fulfillment or for escape from a stifling life. Some of the stories in *Runaway* involve an older woman who is looking back at a determining moment in her youth. The stories imply that life is inherently unstable and unknowable. Writer Alan Hollinghurst has observed:

Munro's stories have always felt exceptionally capacious; they have the scope of novels, though without any awkward sense of speeding up or boiling down. It's almost impossible to describe their unforced exactness, their unrushed economy (2005).

Almost all the stories in her book contain turns, twists and jumps in time, from a few months to 40 years; in two of them an intense episode in a young woman's life is remembered decades later, with humour and astonishment. The effect in each case is of a life revealed, not a life explained, and certainly not a life explained away. Mythological imagery is woven throughout the stories, a sacrificial goat, Orion and Cassiopeia in the night sky, a gift of a white heifer, a mother mourning her daughter's disappearance, a fateful storm at sea, a funeral pyre, tricksters and virgins, and an oracle. This use of imagery creates an ethereal atmosphere in the course of these stories.

Munro's small town life in Huron County, Ontario, Canada, finds its way into the settings of most of her stories. In one interview, she points out that all people are extraordinary, especially in their own lives and minds. Her simple and un-flowery prose, her penchant for reaching the truth of a matter, and her ability to drag the reader into that small town life as though they belong there, show us over and over that even the tiniest, simplest parts of life, emotion, and belief are portrayed. Because of Munro's intuitive grasp of the

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complexities of human subjectivity specially women and her ability to articulate subtleties and ambiguities, her fiction shares similar expressions and insights in Jaques Lacan's elaborative interpretation. They are both concerned with bringing the obscure undercurrents of the female psyche to light.

Throughout *Runaway*, Munro details difficult life passages involving separations and homecomings, dislocation and the eternal movement of individuals on buses, ferries, trailers, automobiles and trains specially pertaining to women of growing age. In interviews, Munro recalls stories of events in her life that influenced her and that she pinpoints as catalysts for her career which is well reflected in all the stories through their women protagonists. Munro has a genius for evoking the particular and peculiar atmosphere of relationships, their unspoken pressures and expectations.

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