



# Forsaken Objects, Haunted Houses, Female Bodies, and ‘the squalor of tragedy in ordinary life

Corinne Florence Bigot

## ► To cite this version:

Corinne Florence Bigot. Forsaken Objects, Haunted Houses, Female Bodies, and ‘the squalor of tragedy in ordinary life. *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 2015, Alice Munro Writing for Dear Life, 37 (2). hal-01682751

**HAL Id: hal-01682751**

**<https://univ-tlse2.hal.science/hal-01682751>**

Submitted on 12 Jan 2018

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - ShareAlike 4.0 International License

Forsaken Objects, Haunted Houses, Female Bodies, and 'the squalor of tragedy in ordinary life': Reading *Dance of the Happy Shades* with Later Stories

—“Forsaken Objects, Haunted Houses, Female Bodies, and ‘the squalor of tragedy in ordinary life’: *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 37,2, special issue: *Alice Munro: Writing for Dear Life* (spring 2015): 16-23.

#### Abstract:

Small, disregarded or discarded objects and jumble pepper Munro's fiction and this paper aims to consider their functions, more specifically, their connection to story telling and writing, relying on Michel de Certeau's analyses in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Another characteristic of Munro's fiction is the attention paid to female bodies and their flaws, such as lumps, and the paper will also look at how Munro explores semantic variations of words such as “lump” and “pattern,” as she explores connections between body and text.

Munro's interest in what is hidden, silenced, unsuspected and disregarded, is nothing new. As she describes ordinary people's ordinary houses, she foregrounds small, disregarded, if not discarded, objects. They can be found in refuse dumps, in semi empty houses, and family homes. Munro has often claimed she felt the need to mention her characters' surroundings in detail. Yet this should not be mistaken for realism. Analyses of the stories will show that she endows her objects, however unremarkable they may be, with several functions, among which, to act as (sometimes ironic) echoes and commentaries at the level of the diegesis. I will argue that they also reveal Munro's own version of what Michel de Certeau has called “l'invention du quotidien.” His study proposes we see ordinary objects and houses in connection with stories and one's past: ordinary objects, he claims, have “hollow places in which a past sleeps” (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 108) while ordinary places where people live are always haunted “by many different spirits hidden there in silence” (108). De Certeau's analysis and his contention that places are “symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body” (108) are particularly relevant to Munro's fiction. Trivial objects in Munro's fiction evoke Helen's description of the town hall in “The Peace of Utrecht,” they are precisely “so familiar and unexpected” (*Dance* 196). Another characteristic of Munro's fiction is the attention paid to female bodies and their flaws, such as lumps. Munro's stories, as she herself puts it, “do not follow the rules of short stories” (Interview BBC Radio Four) and I will trace connections between the forsaken objects and the flawed bodies that are foregrounded in her fiction and her own art of playing with words and with format, in other words, her art of writing short fiction.

#### Forsaken objects and haunted houses

In her interview with Mariella Frostrup in January 2005, Munro explained that she needed to see every detail of her characters' surroundings. Attention is often explicitly drawn to trivial objects. One needs only to think of the objects that Mr. Malley brings into the narrator's room in “The Office” (*Dance of the Happy Shades*) – the tea-pot, the plant, the waste-paper basket – to realize that Munro uses items and objects to convey her comments on the situation she is depicting. Each object is a singular item, brought in by Mr. Malley, one object at a time, and therefore easy to notice; not only do these objects help the man make his

point, they also signal his intrusion, and enable Munro to map the room as a gendered battlefield, as Catherine Lanone points out (119-20).

Another technique is to use colors and light to draw attention to specific items, for instance, in “Thanks for the Ride,” the “glossy” chesterfield sets off “a Niagara Falls and a To Mother cushion on it” (*Dance* 49). They are essentially *clichéd* working class Canadian, and they are seen through the middle-class narrator’s judgmental eyes, whose prejudices are revealed. One of the best examples of how Munro uses light to draw attention to an object that epitomizes social class is to be found in “The Beggar Maid,” from her 1978 collection, which describes a young college girl’s visit home. As the family are said to eat “directly under the tube of fluorescent light,” the neonlight, like a spotlight, illumines the (new) centerpiece: “a plastic swan, lime green in color, with slits in the wings, in which were stuck folded, colored paper napkins.” (*The Beggar Maid* 89) The plastic swan reveals the family’s poverty, and their attempts at sophistication (the napkins), but more importantly, the close up on the illuminated, lurid plastic swan enables Munro to show Rose’s plight — her double vision. Rose’s home is both familiar and defamiliarized, as Rose becomes aware of her upper middle class fiancé’s judgmental eyes on her family and home, as she sees them “through Patrick’s eyes” (90); she is also able to understand her family’s efforts to look sophisticated and Rose’s ambivalent feelings about her home then gradually become apparent when Patrick dismisses it as a dump (91). Such objects are details are neither simply part of the décor or instance of social realism, they play a central part in Munro’s attempts to convey her characters’ feelings towards their home.

One of the most frequent means to draw attention to objects is punctuation, see for instance the dash in “Boys and Girls” which draws attention to the objects that have been discarded, on the other side of the square hole in the middle of the floor, in the room where the children, the little girl and her (younger) brother sleep:

on the other side of the stairwell were the things that nobody had any use for anymore—a soldiery roll of linoleum, standing on end, a wicker baby carriage, a fern basket, china jugs and basins with cracks in them, a picture of the battle of Balaclava, very sad to look at (*Dance* 112)

The dash both sets aside the discarded objects and sets them off. Although they are clearly dismissed as discards since the narrator points out that no-one had any use for them anymore, they have several narrative functions. They echo several themes in the story – the wicker baby carriage may serve to evoke the birth of the brother which upset the family’s relationships since the narrator clearly depicts herself as her father’s favorite child. For the comparison of the roll of linoleum to a soldier and the mention of the painting of a battle emphasize another theme: family relationships between sister and brother are represented as battles. The narrator’s little brother is gaining power over her, threatening to replace her as the father’s helper. Family relationships are generally painted as battles with the narrator resisting her mother and grandmother’s attempts to turn her into a girl.

The linoleum also connects with the other main theme of the story, turning the house into a prison that entraps the narrator, as Catherine Lanone argues: “there is always a sense in Munro in which the roll or square of linoleum may contain its own uncanny double, the space of domesticity may become reversible, home turn into a trap” (75). Later stories by Munro which use discards and wrecks as projections of a character’s unspeakable fears, suggest yet another possibility: as discards, the objects may also serve to reveal the narrator’s fear of being replaced by her brother as her father’s favorite. For in “Floating Bridge,” Jinny, who has cancer, sees wrecks and discards wherever she looks (*Hateship* 67; 70) and eventually, as Héliane Ventura shows, equates herself with a piece of wreckage (“Secret Ort” 262). In “Five

Mis en forme

Mis en forme

Points,” the man who lost his job after an accident at the mine thinks about the discarded machines that have been buried in a dead-end passage in the mine, machines which herald his own demise (*Friend* 47).

The painting that concludes the list of discarded objects in “Boys and Girls” may, however, have yet another function. The painting is not described but its relevance is suggested by the narrator’s comment on its effects on her. It is said to be of The Battle of Balaclava – a reference which means that it depicts the Charge of the Light Brigade, a semisuicidal charge in which over 300 horses were killed. As the high point of the story is the narrator’s rebellion, her opening the gate wide enough for the old female horse to escape, I argue that Munro uses the missing reference to foreshadow the narrator’s self-destructive gesture, a gesture which will move her father to say that she is “only” a girl (*Dance* 108). Doing so, Munro uses and subverts a historical reference with her female protagonist, rewriting history with a little girl as the heroic figure.

As early as Munro’s debut collection, it is possible to trace links between such discarded objects and story telling. In “Boys and Girls,” the objects upstairs serve as the background or setting for the stories the narrator invents and tells herself, imagining an escaped convict hiding behind the linoleum (113). In “The Shining Houses,” the narrator concludes a paragraph that relies heavily on enumeration by the mention of discarded objects that lie on the *back* porch, and are therefore hidden out of sight. The narrator, throughout the paragraph describing garden and house, is emphasizing abundance, in order to assert the right of the house to stand there:

The place had become fixed, impregnable, all its accumulations necessary, until it seemed that even the washtubs, mops, couch springs and stacks of old police magazines on the back porch were there to stay” (*Dance*, 22).

The objects in the porch of Mrs. Fullerton’s house illustrate Michel de Certeau’s observation in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, that “the places that people live in are like the presence of diverse absences” (108), and that ordinary objects in such houses “have *hollow* places in which a past sleeps” (108, italics added). The emphasis on the “accumulations” being “necessary” confirms the absolute value of what is apparently discarded. Mrs Fullerton’s husband had been missing for some time (the tale of his disappearance almost opens the story) so it is possible to imagine that Mr Fullerton was the one who used to read the police magazines; in other words, they might be traces of his presence, or, in de Certeau’s words, the presence of his absence. Furthermore, the last item in the list introduces an ironic twist if one considers the story of this man who left the house, never to come back. As police magazines, they point to the central mystery – no-one knows why Mr. Fullerton left, whether he is alive or dead, or whether he is likely to come back. The tale within the tale is like a gaping hole, through which the man fled. In this story, therefore, Munro manages to create a gap amidst a list that suggests abundance. Considering people’s connections to houses and objects, Michel de Certeau suggests a connection with stories, which Munro’s short stories often illustrate: de Certeau posits that “places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but *like stories* held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state” (108, my italics).

Memory, de Certeau argues, is “a sort of anti-museum” and “fragments of it come out in legends” (108) – quite strikingly, de Certeau constantly uses words such as “relics,” “debris” and “leftovers” to describe haunted places and legends (107). In many stories by Munro, jumble plays a central role. For instance, “White Dump” is built on the opposition between “calculated jumble” (*The Progress* 276) and the family home as the protagonist remembers it, with its cavelike rooms, and all the unmatched broken objects that she liked

such as “the Scrabble set with the Y and one of the U’s missing [...] the unmatched plates, the cracked saucers” (279). The list shows that Munro, for all her supposed realism, is a “recorder of discontinuities”.<sup>1</sup> Many objects in Munro’s early fiction have cracks in them – for instance, the discarded china in “Boys and Girls”. The gaps and the cracks make sense as they, like the house, conjure up stories held in reserve, that remain to be told. Furthermore, items such as the incomplete scrabble game or the mismatched plates in the family home in “White Dump” are meant to evoke the presence of the absent objects: the missing letters or the plates that have probably been broken. These relics systematically evoke lives that are gone and stories that are only partially known.

A paradoxical tension is often found in Munro between presence and absence and loss and permanence. In Munro’s fiction, discarded objects are always both remainders and “reminders” of people’s lives (Corinne Bigot *Silences* 140-1), or, to use a word from “What Do You Want to Know For?” “remnants”<sup>2</sup> (Munro *The View* 321). For instance faded dresses and a picnic hamper with a silver flask in “Oh, What Avails” are called “reminders” as they evoke the family’s more glorious past that is long gone (*Friend* 183). In the “Peace of Utrecht,” Maddy describes her mother playing with discards: “she spent a lot of time sorting things. All kinds of things. Greeting cards. Buttons and yarn. Sorting them and putting them into little piles” (*Dance* 202). Maddy obviously sees this as evidence of their mother’s state of health (advanced Parkinson’s) and as pathetic attempts to regain control of her life by introducing order. However, they also poignantly evoke her lost social life – visits that used to be made and returned, good dresses she wore when she went out, or even a mother’s normal chores such as sewing clothes for her family. The final item, yarn, is particularly interesting as “yarn” also means a narrative or tale. It is tempting to suppose that Munro is probably suggesting here that stories can be made and told and would often necessarily be stories about what is no more and has been lost.

For Michel de Certeau, “there is no place that is not haunted by different spirits hidden there in silence” (108) and “haunted places are the only ones people can live in” (108), which Munro’s fiction often shows. In “The Shining Houses,” Mrs. Fullerton’s house is haunted by the presence /absence of Mr. Fullerton, and by the story that springs from it. The family home in “Oh, What Avails,” is a haunted house since “there is a smell in the Fordyce house, and it comes from the plaster and wallpaper” (*Friend* 183). Another key house in Munro’s fiction is, of course, the family house that the narrator of “The Progress of Love” revisits as an adult (*The Progress* 25-27). There, she recalls various versions of her family’s stories as she peels at the wallpaper, finding layer after layer of wallpaper (27) – the metafictional intent is quite clear. Munro’s houses *are* like stories held in reserve.

I would like to turn to a more recent story, “Child’s Play,” and the role played by an apparently trivial item of clothing, a bathing cap whose material (rubber) is foregrounded as if to insist on its insignificance. Its real function, however is critical, as its true function is to give the lie to the narrator’s claims. The narrator describes a murder she committed as a child (she and her friend drowned another little girl), drawing attention to the victim’s head and her rubber swimming cap:

she was not intert, but turning in an leisurely way, light as a jellyfish in the water. Charlene and I had our hands on her, on her rubber cap. [...]  
The head of Verna tried to rise up to the surface of the water. Her head was determined to raise, like a dumpling in a stew [...] The rest of her was making misguided feeble movements [...].

<sup>1</sup> I have borrowed the phrase from Joseph Ward’s analysis of Edward Hopper’s paintings (177).

<sup>2</sup> The word describes elements in the landscape.

We might have lost our grip on the rubber head, the rubber cap, were it not for the raised pattern that made it less slippery. I can recall the colour perfectly, the pale insipid blue, but I never deciphered the pattern—a fish, a mermaid, a flower—whose ridges pushed into my palms (*Happiness* 221; 222)

From the moment the cap is mentioned, the narrator is bent on dehumanizing Verna, using appositions turn Verna into her rubber cap. At first there is no verb of action, the phrase “had our hands on her, on her rubber cap” describes the result, as if the hands found themselves there, without any action on the girls' part.

Not only is Verna twice turned into the cap, with two appositions, “on her, on her rubber cap” and “the rubber head, the rubber cap,” but the repetition of “rubber” further dehumanizes the girl who is turned into a lifeless, emotionless, insensible, impassible object. The narrator simultaneously evokes Verna's efforts to remain alive (using “rise” and “raise”) and dehumanizes her. The structure “the head of Verna” reads as an effort to place the emphasis on the body part rather than the girl, and Verna then gradually disappears as a person, she becomes “the rubber head” then “it”. In the next sentence, the remarks on the color and pattern of the cap show that she has been turned into the rubber cap, whose color is said to be “insipid,” underscoring the insignificance of the cap, and, so by metonymy, of the head, and of the girl. At the end of the passage, Verna is no more, she is turned into an *object*: “when the rubber object under our palms ceased to have a life of its own” (222). Thus, the narrator's claims that she felt neither regret nor guilt seem to hold true.

Yet the real function of the rubber cap is precisely to reveal that these claims are actually false. As a real object, the rubber swimming cap can leave no permanent trace, but the mention of its raised pattern, pushing into the palms of the narrator turns it into a rubber stamp, branding the murderer, leaving a stigma that evokes stigmata, in other words, the indelible trace of the crime – and guilt. It is no coincidence that the narrator indicates that she never deciphered the pattern. Self-deception is at the core of the narrative. Foregrounding her incapacity to decipher the pattern, she clearly signals that her readers will have to do the deciphering themselves.

Patterns are emblematic of Munro's art as they epitomize what is so “so familiar and unexpected,” to borrow a phrase from “The Peace of Utrecht” (*Dance* 196) as Munro has often exploited the various meanings of the word, as in her debut collection “pattern” is used to refer to sewing patterns that themselves epitomize patterns in relationships. For instance in “Red Dress–1946,” as Lanone has argued (85–86), the mother's dreams of exotic patterns never materialize and she is unable to produce dresses that fit, which is emblematic of her difficult relationship between mother and daughter, suggesting the mother tries to turn her daughter into “her creation,” to borrow a phrase from “Walker Brothers Cowboy” (*Dance* 5). The “pattern of teasing and protest” the narrator's aunts follow foreshadows the “web” that may entrap the narrator and her sister (“The Peace of Utrecht” 203). Munro shifts from the level of the diegesis to a more metafictional dimension when she points to patterns that narrators or protagonists fail to decipher or recognize or, as I will show, patterns that “explode” in “Meneseteung” (*Friend*). In Munro's fiction, patterns can also be a source of endless fascination as well as delusion, as in “Runaway,” the title story of the 2004 collection. Carla, who now lives in a trailer home with a frayed carpet, looks at its patterns, which she sometimes finds hard to see. Munro plays on the intertextual reference – the reference to James's short story is unmistakable – replacing James's image with an actual frayed carpet whose pattern of squiggles seem to multiply endlessly:

it was divided into small brown squares, each with a pattern of darker brown and rust and tan squiggles and shapes. For a long time she thought these were the

same squiggles and shapes [...] then [...] she decided that there were four patterns joined together to make identical larger squares. Sometimes she could pick out the arrangement easily and sometimes she had to work to see it (*Runaway* 8-9)

Since “squiggles” denotes hastily drawn lines or illegible scrawling, the theme of resistance to elucidation is reinforced. Carla’s episodic inability to see the pattern foreshadows the end of the story when she seems to be on the verge of inferring and admitting to herself what her husband has done (he killed their pet goat) and, therefore, the danger she is probably facing. Readers close the story with the conviction that Clark will murder Carla and that she might decide not to do anything about this.

#### Female bodies

Munro’s fiction, as Helen Hoy has it, is a “fiction of admission” and “the uninhibited discussion of bodily realities is but one aspect of a larger narrative strategy of inclusion” (7). As she depicts female bodies Munro often draw attention to hidden and visible flaws such as discharges, warts, varicose veins or unsightly growths. The tension between mother and daughter in “Red Dress–1946” is epitomized by the scene where the mother tries to fix the dress, exposing her bare lumpy legs<sup>3</sup> in the process: “her legs were marked with lumps of blue-green veins” (*Dance* 148) – a sight that provokes feelings of repulsion in the girl who finds her mother’s position both “obscene and shameless” – suggesting that the girl feels the shame herself. The lumps on the mother’s bare legs, or in other words, exposed body, encapsulate the daughter’s shame and humiliation. The narrator is painfully aware that her well-dressed friend Lonnie is watching them, since she tries to take Lonnie’s attention away from her mother’s naked legs. However, the next passage reveals that “the psychological nakedness of personal and social exposure” (Carrington 22) can paradoxically occur when one is dressed: “My head was muffled in velvet, my body *exposed*, in an old cotton school slip. I felt like a great *raw* lump, clumsy and goose-pimpled.” (148, my italics) The girl is not naked, but she feels that the old slip she is wearing exposes her (her social inadequacy and her body) as much as her mother’s naked legs do. Interestingly, psychological and social exposure is conveyed through the image of the “raw lump”, a striking simile that conveys psychological pain through the word “raw” that normally refers to bodily pain. In Munro’s “fiction of admission”, feelings including feelings of shame or complex feeling about home are often conveyed through images involving the body. In “Executioners” the narrator notes that “shame could choke you” (*Something* 143), in “The Beggar Maid,” Rose’s confused feelings for home will be conveyed through the image of a lump. The college girl who has left her small-town home behind, can never forget home: “there was always for Rose the *raw* knowledge of home, an *indigestible* lump” (*The Beggar Maid* 70, my italics). The words “raw” and “lumps” are once more placed in close proximity, suggesting that feelings for home are so painful they might choke the character — Munro plays with the cliché a lump in one’s throat, but places instead the lump inside the body.<sup>4</sup> The feelings can never leave Rose nor can they be processed.

The image of the lump also illustrates Michel de Certeau’s idea that to those who know them, “places are [...] symbolizations *encysted* in the pain and pleasure of the body (108, italics mine). When the narrator describes the changes in Rose’s feelings after the visit home

<sup>3</sup> See also the mother’s “bare lumpy legs” in “Boys and Girls” (*Dance* 116).

<sup>4</sup> See also “Executioners” and the images of “greasy shame” and “indigestible bad secrets” (*Something* 143)

with Patrick, the image of the lump is implicit. As Patrick dismisses Rose's home as a dump, consoling himself with the thought that Billy and Flo are not her real parents (*The Beggar Maid* 90), Rose is startled to feel that "a layer of loyalty and protectiveness was *hardening* around every memory she had, around the store and the town, the flat, somewhat scrubby, unremarkable countryside" (91). This she opposes to Patrick's *views* of mountains and oceans. He looks at vistas and landscape, but she feels her home as something that is part of her body. The passage also suggests, through the word "hardening," that home and the conflicting feelings it arouses are the foundations of Munro's fiction.

In *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del Jordan's depiction of her Aunt Moira's body draws attention to visible and invisible flaws, including various lumps and growths:

she was a woman I now recognize as a likely sufferer from varicose veins, hemorrhoids, a dropped womb, cysted ovaries, inflammations, discharges, lumps and stones in various places, one of those heavy, cautiously moving, wrecked survivors of the female life, *with stories to tell*. (*Lives* 40, emphasis added)

The depiction is built on the principle of the list or catalogue (as Munro's evocation of objects in a house often is), which enables her to suggest, as Marjorie Garson puts it, that plenitude is depicted as excess (53) since this body has swollen parts that seem to grow out of control and to keep expanding. Marjorie Garson argues that the list reveals the body's vulnerability since it "foretells dissolution as the swollen or overgrown parts turn cancerously against the whole" (53). The paragraph, however, ends on the phrase "with stories to tell," with the structure of the sentence suggesting that the female bodies have stories to tell. While a story such as "Red Dress-1946" emphasizes the narrator's sense of shame with her body, or her mother's body, shame cannot be separated from curiosity, if not fascination, for the body.

In Munro's fiction, women do share stories about the ills they suffer from, as the kitchen scene in "Family Furnishings" suggests: "the aunts would tell about who had a tumor, a septic throat, a bad mess of boils" (*Hateship* 91). Many stories by Munro foreground bodily ills, and among the stories that depict sick women, several have protagonists who have or may have cancer: "Oranges and Apples" (*Friend*), "What Do You Want to Know For?" (which was first published in 1994), "Floating Bridge" (*Hateship*) and "Free Radicals" (*Too Much Happiness*). Such stories, however, are about death and life, as suggested by Del Jordan's allusion to women's "cysted ovaries" (*Lives* 40). As Héliane Ventura points out, the lump in the narrator's body that is given such prominence in "What Do You Want to Know For?" is also one of the means through which Munro reverses fear of death into life, since, in Ventura's words, Munro "overturns deadly signifiers to highlight a signifying chain built around life-enhancing paronomasiae," the quasi-homophony between lump and lamp, and lump and clump ("the Lamp and the Lump," np).

A more recent story, "Free Radicals," whose main protagonist is dying of cancer, offers another example of Munro's representation of sick or ageing bodies and her representation of the relationship between life and death. The phrase "free radicals" would have attracted Munro for its inner contradiction – the fact that by putting these two "positive" words together, a new word denoting something harmful – an atom that can damage a body's healthy cells – can be created. A free radical is dangerous, yet the association of these two words retains something dynamic, which the other meaning of the phrase suggests – an electron that is not magnetically paired up with another electron. Thus, "free radical" can be used to refer to someone who is independent. Both meanings are relevant to the story since Nita has cancer which means that harmful cells are destroying her body, and also finds herself in an unusual position when she is held hostage by a young murderer. She realizes that her cancer actually frees her from danger (*Happiness* 127). Munro has often used clichés



and phrases the better to force her readers to pause and look at them anew, with wonder. Nita points to the ambiguity of the phrase “free radicals” when she fails to remember whether red wine is supposed to destroy free radicals because they are bad or to build them up, because they are good. Both Nita and the young man deserve to be called free electrons: Nita is a childless widow, and we may argue that the boy’s barbaric act has freed him from entrapment – namely the “deal” his father wanted to force on him (looking after his sick sister for the rest of his or her life), and both turn out to be killers too, at least in Nita’s tale, since she tells the young man that she killed her husband’s first wife. Free radicals, as Ulrica Skagert notes, usually provoke chain reactions (22), which is illustrated by the chain of events that starts with the love affair between a man and a secretary, leading to a divorce and remarriage, and ultimately leads to the intruder’s death, and a radical change in Nita’s vision. “Free Radicals” is one of Munro’s most radical version of a chance encounter that “creates an impairment in the crust of someone’s existence” (Skagert 37), and ultimately introduces renewed interest in life in the midst of death. There is no possibility for Nita’s life to be any different, her cancer has not gone away, but the meeting with the young man who might have killed her has somehow reconfigured her hopeless life into a life she tries to save.

Strikingly, the last sentence of the story which is composed of two isolated words, “Never know” (137), is particularly ambiguous. The words follow and repeat part of the policeman’s last words, “you never know,” suggesting they might be echoes from his lecture – words floating in the protagonist’s mind. They could be an ironic comment on Nita’s part, as she has blatantly lied to the policeman. The narrator might be addressing the readers, reminding them that they have just read a story about an old woman who has tricked a young man by spinning a tale. Or challenging them. In both the *New Yorker* version and in the final version, these last two words stand, if not float, on their own, like two free electrons or radicals, in a story which is characterized by a high number of short and very short sentences with a halting rhythm, suggesting contamination from the body onto the text.

Munro’s attempt to write in and through a language that is grounded in the feminine body has attracted attention, as Smaro Kambourelli’s analysis of *Lives of Girls and Women* shows (32), but “Meneseteung” (from *Friend of My Youth*) is equally remarkable. Its narrator imagines the life of Almeda Roth, a nineteenth-century poetess but concludes the story by admitting “I may have got it wrong” (*Friend* 73). The metafictional dimension of the story is also suggested by the last paragraph but one where the narrator evokes people who might be just like her, people who are “driven to find things out, even *trivial* things” (73, my italics), who go to libraries and cemeteries, “in the hope of making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish” (73). The narrator points to the relevance of trivial things and connections that can be rescued from the rubbish, while disclaiming narrative authority, pointing to what she does not know.

Almeda Roth, the poetess, as she images her, wrote poetry by carefully neglecting and disregarding unsightly scenes in her surroundings: “some things must be *disregarded*. Manure piles, of course, and boggy fields full of high, charred stumps, and great heaps of brush” (61, italics mine). The back of Almeda’s house faces a disreputable street, called Pearl Street, which, as the narrator notes, “is another story” (55) and lies at the edge of a boghole called the Pearl Street Swamp, which is full of refuse (55). Almeda Roth will decide on a radical change after an encounter with a dead-drunk woman there. Although Almeda is awakened by the noise in the street at the back of her house, she does not leave the house. On the next day, she looks out of the window and sees that “[d]own against her fence there is a pale lump pressed—a body.” (64) The body is lying against *her* fence, which is an intimation that her carefully organized and controlled world has been challenged by the quasi intrusion of this body. It seems that there is no getting rid of that lump, that body that has been thrown against the fence and abandoned there. As a “lump pressed,” the body simultaneously evokes

clay and the world of print, since the word “press” can mean a printing press. The image of this woman’s body is the first instance of several connections between women’s bodies and the world of print and stories that “Meneseteung” offers. That body, which a man has touched and abused, intrudes upon the poetess’s world but this intrusion also marks the moment when “the body marked, imprinted by desire enter[s] narrative” (Brooks 25). What is at stake in this story is what Brooks calls the process of imprinting and inscription of the body (22). For after the encounter (Almeda will eventually go down and look at the body in the street), when Almeda experiences the pain and fullness of her lower body” (68), due to her period that is about to start, she notices that the pattern of familiar objects starts to move, flow and alter and “this glowing and swelling begins to suggest words” (69). The inside and outside merge and the “flow of words” (69) is directly connected to “her flow” which then starts (69-70). Almeda Roth then decides to try and write “one great poem that will contain everything,” from the obscene body in the street, to the polished shoe of the man who courts her and the woman’s battered body, to the detail of her blue-black bruise.

If “Meneseteung” brings together body and text, with the flow of words and the flow of blood, “Differently” (also from *Friend of My Youth*) suggests the same connection, albeit from the opposite perspective. The main protagonist has taken a creative writing class and written a story, but is criticized by the (male) instructor for having put “too many things” in her story (216). The instructor likes her second attempt but she does not so she makes “a long list of all the things that ha[s] been left out and hand[s] it in as an appendix to the story” (216). The word “appendix” serves to reinforce the connection between text and body. The passage, which opens the story, also sheds light on the title – “Differently” may also refer to a desire to write stories differently from other writers. It indirectly echoes back to the lumps that proliferate in other stories, challenging the perfect shape of the classic short story – Del’s catalogue of growths concludes, one recalls, with the phrase “with stories to tell,” suggesting that growths and lumps would be central to these stories as well as suggesting that female bodies have stories to tell. It is no coincidence that in “Meneseteung,” which emphasizes the connection between bodies and writing, patterns, when the main protagonist looks at them, “seem ready to move, flow and alter, or possibly to explode” (*Friend* 69). In her interview with Mariella Frostrup, Munro explained that her stories did not “follow the rules of short stories” as they had “an awful lot of stuff that, by strict standards, are unnecessary in them”. Interestingly – or ironically? – she then went on to cite the carpet in Carla’s trailer in “Runaway.” (BBC Radio 4, January 2005).

Conclusion: the squalor of tragedy in ordinary life

The refuse heap and the back street are central places in “Meneseteung,” which Dermot McCarthy underscores when he argues that the encounter in Pearl Street “leads Almeda to a breakthrough [...] because the marginal world of Pearl Street, with its apogee of exclusion, the swamp [...] is not periphery but alternate centre” (14). It is no coincidence that the swamp is said to be “another story.” The swamp turned back street that used to be disregarded is now at the centre, just as “the flat, somewhat scrubby, *unremarkable* countryside” (Munro *The Beggar Maid* 91) is now described by protected by the layer of loyalty that hardens around the house and the landscape when Rose remembers them, so that they, too, are the foundations of Munro’s fiction. Munro has repeatedly used stories from home and foregrounded reflections on what it means to use home as material – memories, people, and stories. The story that best epitomizes this is probably “Family Furnishings” (*Hateship*), a story about a woman who becomes a writer. The story shows that the narrator as a writer-to-be needs to leave home to become who she wants to be, but also shows the need to return to it.

As she is about to get married and leave her region, then narrator happens to pay her cousin a visit. The cousin reminds her of what happened to her own mother (she died when an oil lamp exploded in her hands), or rather she proposes to tell the narrator the story. It is a well-known, often-told family story, which the narrator hates. She is relieved that her fiancé will be spared the story (he has not come with her):

A good thing that he didn't have to hear about Alfrida's mother, on top of finding out about my mother and my family's relative or maybe considerable poverty. He admired opera and Laurence Oliver's *Hamlet*, but he had no time for tragedy—for the squalor of tragedy—in ordinary life (*Hateship* 110)

Interestingly, the mother's illness, Parkinson's, poverty and tragedies that strike ordinary people are associated, probably reflecting the fiancé's views. The fiancé in "Family Furnishings" is said to have "no time" for such aspects of life: he dislikes hearing about them, and has literally no time for them (he did not take the time to accompany her on this visit). As the reference to the opera and *Hamlet* indicates, the passage in "Family Furnishings" is about defining literary material, which the narrator makes clear as she explains she is planning to become a writer. With the dashes, the phrase "the squalor of tragedy in ordinary life" is both set aside and set off. Munro is clearly being ironical, all the more so as the fiancé is said to admire not Shakespeare's *Hamlet* but a celluloid version. The phrase that is set off by the pair of dashes reads as a comment on Munro's choice of topics too — squalid tragedies such as the many deaths that Flo tells Patrick about in "The Beggar Maid," the (accidental?) death of the little boy in "The Time of Death," or the death of Lois's father's in "Thanks for the Ride" (which the narrator, a middle-class boy seems very reluctant to listen to). At first sight, it seems to read as an ironic comment on Munro's own choice of material, as if "Family Furnishings" "looked back" on Munro's writing and choice of material. Yet there is no irony, rather, "Family Furnishings" is explicitly concerned about what material a writer can use.

First, the narrator seems to somehow share her fiancé's doubts. So far, the family story has been a story that she could not stand listening to, as her mother and her aunts told it: the narrator's feeling that her mother and her aunt's voices were "obscene" (*Hateship* 110) is conveyed by a striking image that conjures up the body: "their voices were like worms slithering in my insides." (110) Alfrida, however, will tell her story and as the narrator listens to her, one sentence catches her attention: "And the minute I heard it, something happened. It was as if a trap had snapped shut, to hold these words in my head" (112). The moment is epiphanic, it is the moment when she understands how the sort of stories and real life tragedies her fiancé despises can provide her with *her* material, as the repetition of the pronoun "me" shows: "I only knew how they jolted me and released me, right away, to breathe a different kind of air available only to myself" (112). "Family Furnishings" clearly suggests that the narrator has to find her own voice by claiming these stories as her material and incorporating them in her own writings (Bigot *CES* 31). The exploding lamp may have killed the cousin, but it offers the would-be writer a moment of clarity when she sees that one can become a writer using material from home, which, as the rest of the story points out, is no easy thing: "there was a danger whenever I was on home ground. It was the danger of seeing my life through other eyes than my own" (Munro 114).

The narrator claims a family story, and the stories that circulate in her kitchen about her aunt's and other people's bodies: digestions, kidneys, tumors, scpetic throats, and boils (91). However, as the title of the story suggests, the narrator also claims her parents' *books* as her family heritage, books that had been relegated inside the bookcase but were, to the little girl, "like presences in the house just as the trees outside the windows were not plants but

presences rooted in the ground.” (101)<sup>5</sup> Quite strikingly, she brings together books and trees rooted in the ground, suggesting that her surroundings, her home ground, are part of her heritage. As the narrator indicates that these books, among which she cites *The Mill of the Floss* or Scott’s *Heart of Midlothian*, still bore her mother’s maiden name in her “beautiful lost handwriting” (101), she shows that they are her own “family furnishings” as much as the family story is. Ultimately, the story aims to show that there can be no separation between “the classics” and tragedies in ordinary people’s lives, her stories are rooted in world literature as well as family stories.

Corinne BIGOT  
Université Paris Ouest Nanterre CREA EA 370

### Works Cited

- BIGOT, Corinne. “‘And Another Surfaced’: Re-Emerging Voices, Stories and Secrets in Alice Munro’s ‘Family Furnishings’” *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*. Vol 31.1 (2008): 28-35.
- BIGOT, Corinne. *Alice Munro. les silences de la nouvelle*, Rennes: PUR, 2014.
- BIGOT, Corinne & Catherine LANONE. *Sunlight and Shadows, Past and Present. Alice Munro’s Dance of the Happys Shades*. Paris: PUF, 2014.
- BROOKS, Peter. *Body Work*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.
- CARRINGTON, Ildikó de Papp. *Controlling the Uncontrollable*. Deklb: Northern Illinois U P, 1989.
- DE CERTEAU, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. S. Rendall, 1984. U of California P, 2011 (*L’invention du quotidien* (1980) Paris: Gallimard 1990).
- GARSON, Marjorie. “I would try to make lists: The Catalogue in *Lives of Girls and Women*.” *Canadian Literature*, 150 (Aut 1996): 45-63.
- HOY, Helen. “Alice Munro: ‘Unforgettable, Indigestible Messages.’” *Journal of Canadian Studies* Vol. 26.1 (Spring 1991): 5-21.
- KAMBOURELI, Smaro. “The Body as Audience and Performance in the Writing of Alice Munro.” *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*. Eds. Smaro KAMBOURELI & Shirley NEWMAN. Edmonton: Longspoon/ NeWest, 1986. 31-8.
- MCCARTHY, Dermot. “The Woman Out Back: Alice Munro’s ‘Meneseung.’” *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 19.1 (1994): 1-19. [S.l.], Jan. 1994. ISSN 1718-7850. Available at: <<http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/8191>>. Date accessed: 11 Sep. 2014.
- MILLER, Judith. “An Inner Bell that Rings: The Craft of Alice Munro.” *The Antigoneish Review* 115 (1999): 157-76.
- MUNRO, Alice. *Dance of the Happy Shades*. 1968. London: Vintage, 2000.
- . *Lives of Girls and Women*. 1971. London: Penguin, 1982.
- . *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*. 1974. New York: Vintage, 2004.
- . *The Beggar Maid (Who Do You Think You Are?)* 1978. New York: Vintage, 1991.
- . *The Moons of Jupiter*. 1982. London: Penguin, 1985.
- . *The Progress of Love*. 1985. London: Vintage, 1996.
- . *Friend of My Youth*. 1991. London: Vintage, 1996.
- . *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2001.
- . *Runaway*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2004.
- . Interview with Mariella Frostrup. Open Book, BBC Radio Four. January 16 2005. <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/openbook/openbook\\_20050116.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/openbook/openbook_20050116.shtml)>
- . *The View from Castle Rock*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> The echo with de Certeau is striking.

---. *Too Much Happiness*. London: Chatto and Windus, 2009.

SKAGERT, Ulrica. *Possibility-Space and its Imaginative Variations in Alice Munro's Short Stories*. U of Stockholm, 2008.

VENTURA, Héliane. "Alice Munro's Secret Ort". *Open Letter* 11-9, 12-1. Fall Winter (2003-2004): 255-66.

-- "“What Do You Want to Know For?": The Lump and the Lamp, the Cyst and the Crypt, the Tomb and the Womb or Alice Munro's Foundational Ambivalence". *Border Crossing: Alice Munro's Transatlantic and Intersemiotic Narratives*, The U of Edinburgh P, Publication Pending.

WARD Joseph, *American Silences: The Realism of James Agee, Walker Evans and Edward*