



The Mother-Daughter Dyad in Alice Munro's "The Peace of Utrecht"

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Abstract : *The mother-daughter relationship appears not just peripherally but centrally in a relatively large number of Canadian novels and short stories. In many cultures—the evocation of women’s experience condemns a writer to marginalization but in the case of Canada the portrayal of mother-daughter relationship in fiction seemed to strike a responsive chord in Canadian cultural context. The centrality of the mother-daughter relationship in Alice Munro’s fiction is noticeable right from her 1968 debut short story collection Dance of the Happy Shades. The frequency by which the dyad of an ill mother and a (more or less) caregiving daughter reoccurs throughout her oeuvre makes it appear as if her treatment of the theme bordered on the obsessive. “The Peace of Utrecht” is a first-person narrative, told through the voice and consciousness of an adult woman, by name Helen. The story describes her brief return to the hometown and family which she left behind several years ago, to move ahead and find her destiny in the bigger world, in a less restrained environment. The story is narrated in two parts, set in the present tense of Helen’s visit, although in each part there are complex shifts back and forth in time as the story proceeds inexorably toward its final revelation. The two parts correspond to two sets of problematic relationships: the unresolved mother-daughter relationship and the bond between the siblings. Munro creates a duplicitous world where everyday reality is overlaid by memory and fabricated stories about the past, so at every turn the sisters confront their doubled selves as adults and as the adolescents they were ten years ago.*

KEY WORDS: *Canadian fiction -- mother-daughter relationship -- cultural past -- female identity -- psychological journey – autobiographical -- degenerative illness -- caregiver – desertion -- traumatic experience – ambivalence – reconciliation -- guilt – individuality-- autonomy*

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The problem, the only problem, is my mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to get rid of, her; and it did not work, for she looms too close, just as she always did.

She is heavy as always, she weighs everything down, and yet she is distinct, her edges melt and flow. Which means she has stuck as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same.



Alice Munro, "The Ottawa Valley"

For much of modern Canadian fiction, the mother has been an obsessive figure, as for the narrator of Alice Munro's story. This is true for both English and French Canada, thus establishing something of a Canadian rarity—a truly national phenomena. It is not surprising to learn that many of these writers who have placed the mother at the centre of their work have been women. What is surprising is the fact that these writers, writing about women's experience from an obviously female point of view, have been able to evoke recognition not only in the Canadian readers of both genders but also assume a place of vital importance in their national literature.

The major English-Canadian women writers Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro typically focus on creating female characters in their fiction. In fact a large number of Canadian short stories and novels offer female perspectives on Canadian culture. The various women's movements of the 1960s and 70s encouraged and empowered women to make their voices heard and this led to the emergence of a distinctive Canadian literature. As the Canadian women writers participated in developing a literary tradition, rather than opposing an already established one, they hence occupy an enviable position in the creation of their country's fictional landscape. With a significant space for themselves, they treat women's psychological struggles with intense seriousness and, using a minimum of political rhetoric, try to give these struggles a past and a future.

Consequently, mother-daughter relationship appears not just peripherally but centrally in a relatively large number of Canadian novels and short stories. In many cultures—the evocation of women's experience condemns a writer to marginalization but in the case of Canada the portrayal of mother-daughter relationship in fiction seemed to strike a responsive chord in Canadian cultural context. In the works of some Canadian writers like Jane Rule and Margaret Gibson only isolated and somewhat idiosyncratic aspects of the relationship predominate but in that of Atwood, Laurence and Munro, the struggle between mothers and daughters emerges dynamically through different stages of its development. These latter writers identify the pervasive influence of the mother—as so many men writers have recognized for themselves that of the father—they tend to represent it through the daughter's steadily emerging discovery of her own female identity. Interestingly, this self-discovery very frequently dramatizes the necessity of coming to terms with the past. The underlying principle that makes Canadian fiction particularly significant in studies of female development is, the seriousness with which it treats women's quests and its emphasis on a past that, for women, is bound with the mother. In the works epitomizing mother-daughter relationship, the mother figure is often strongly connected with the past. The mother is, of course, the natural embodiment of a woman's personal past, but in many ways, she is identified with a broader cultural past as well.

The psychological journey that appears in a great deal of the Canadian fiction reveals the ambivalence that characterizes the daughter's feelings



about her mother. In her pursuit to achieve autonomy, anger and affection compete with each other so that she suffers from her desired separation, often felt to be a desertion of the mother, while at the same time she resents her childlike dependence. Indeed, whether the mother appears to be malevolent or benign, her representation epitomizes the anger, guilt and affection of the daughter as she tries to accept her own femininity. Such acceptance often necessitates the painful recognition of the transference of power involved in taking the mother's place. As the daughter grows stronger, the mother weakens; the power seems to have been stolen and the triumphant daughter can despair of her own victory. Correspondingly where the mother remains all powerful, the daughter agonizes over her own impotence. Though the struggle is ambivalent the longing for freedom propels action. And the resultant journey illustrates an apparently necessary movement from negation (the effort to cut off from the past), to recognition (an awareness of the conflict between subjection and autonomy) and concludes with reconciliation (the achieved inclusion of the past in the present).

The centrality of the mother-daughter relationship in Alice Munro's fiction is noticeable right from her 1968 debut short story collection *Dance of the Happy Shades*. The frequency by which the dyad of an ill mother and a (more or less) caregiving daughter reoccurs throughout her oeuvre makes it appear as if her treatment of the theme bordered on the obsessive. Magdalene Redekop, in her extensive study dedicated to the image of mother in Munro's fiction suggests that, "the writing daughter's conscious failure to understand and

represent the mother remains at the heart of Munro's aesthetic" (1992: 209). However, Munro does not simply re-write the same story again and again, but rather attempts to negotiate new meanings and to "exorcise" past traumas. The preponderance of mother-daughter nexus in Munro's fiction has a significant biographical antecedent. In 1943, when Munro was twelve years old, her mother, Anne Laidlaw, began exhibiting troubling symptoms that would lead to the diagnosis of Parkinson's disease. Being the eldest daughter, with her nearest sister five years behind, Munro was her mother's primary caregiver, responsible for the domestic chores that her mother could no longer manage, duties that often kept Munro home from school. The impact of this period on Munro's fiction has been considerable and persistent since "the onset of Anne's Parkinson's disease came just as Munro had reached puberty and was realising her vocation as a writer" (2011: 73). The time Munro spent managing the household provided the opportunity to think her thoughts the labour of care produced the simultaneous resentment and empowerment reflected in many of her stories depicting caregiving. Thus the incorporation of painful autobiographical elements makes the image of the mother more prominent in her fiction.

The whole mother-daughter relationship interests me a great deal. It probably obsesses me...because I had a very intense relationship with my own mother. She became ill when I was quite young. The incurable illness of a parent makes a relationship ('s)...stresses more evident... and so her illness and death and the whole tension



between us...was very important... This is just something I keep going back to over and over again (1983:103-4).

The present article deals with the narrative treatment of an obsessive theme in Alice Munro's fiction: the mother-daughter relationship. There are two problematic sets of interrelations: the first one refers to the young daughter's inability to cope with her mother's neurodegenerative disease, the second one concerns the adult daughter, especially her revisiting of traumatic childhood experiences. Drawing on recent developments in psychoanalysis and development psychology this article analyses the way Munro presents family relationships, offering deep insights into her characters' psychological development and discussing the reasons of the adult daughter's apparent failure to come to terms with her past. In this article, I focus primarily on "The Peace of Utrecht" from *Dance of the Happy Shades* which Munro described as her "first real story".

Munro's mother, Anne Laidlaw died of Parkinson's disease in 1959 after several years of illness. Followed by this incident, in the same year "The Peace of Utrecht" was written. "The Peace of Utrecht" was published in the 1960 spring issue of the *Tamarack Review*. In an interview with Metcalf, Munro confesses the fact that "The Peace of Utrecht" was her "first really painful autobiographical story" and also "the first time I wrote a story that tore me up" (1972:58). There are several correspondences between the short story and Munro's personal experiences: her own mother's degenerative illness, her departure from her hometown in Ontario and her return.

"The Peace of Utrecht" is a first-person narrative, told through the voice and consciousness of an adult woman, by name Helen. The story describes her brief return to the hometown and family which she left behind several years ago, to move ahead and find her destiny in the bigger world, in a less restrained environment. In the first draft of the story about the two sisters and their problematic relationship Munro decided to let Ruth, a neighbour and girlhood friend of Helen, tell the story instead of one of the sisters. This attempt was later abandoned for Helen's narrative. Ruth' story presents the town's point of view which would have been more objective than Helen's, but Munro doesn't want objectivity. She wishes to revisit her own past in a fictional way and make sense of a traumatic experience.

The story is narrated in two parts, graphically marked by the use of the roman numerals, which is extremely rare in Munro's fiction. Both parts are set in the present tense of Helen's visit, although in each part there are complex shifts back and forth in time as the story proceeds inexorably toward its final revelation. In the view of E. D. Blodgett, the reader "must follow the narrator, surrendering to the narrative unfolding, perceiving that discovery is a relative process, each insight modified by a new one" (1988:23). The two parts correspond to two sets of problematic relationships: the unresolved mother-daughter relationship and the bond between the siblings. Munro creates a duplicitous world where everyday reality is overlaid by memory and fabricated stories about the past, so at every turn the sisters confront their doubled selves as adults and as the adolescents they were ten years ago. This story is Munro's first



narrative representation of what Luce Irigaray calls as “a highly explosive nucleus of emotions”, mother-daughter relationship which she refigures in different versions throughout her writing career.

In this story, Helen is both the girl who was once at home and the woman who is watching that girl. This peculiar doubleness makes it possible to explore the issue of identity without collapsing inward into the claustrophobic centre of the story. Two sisters who grew up together sharing more or less the same childhood experience meet after a long period of time. Helen, narrator and protagonist, shortly after her mother's death, comes back to her hometown with her two children for a three-week visit with her older, unmarried sister Maddy, who still continues to live in the family home. During their childhood both Helen and Maddy had to take care of their mother who was suffering from a degenerative disease, probably Parkinson's. Helen to her part left her mother in declining health to get married and lead a free life while Maddy stayed behind and continued to be her mother's caregiver. Munro sets the tone from the beginning, anticipating the atmosphere of repressed guilt, shame, distressing emotions, secret thoughts, hypocrisy and helplessness that dominate the entire story. The relationship between the two sisters is problematic as it conceals a latent conflict and an apparently impossible sincere reconciliation. The opening lines of the story reveal Helen's disappointment and estrangement from her sister: “I've been at home now for three weeks and it has not been a success. Maddy and I, though we speak cheerfully of our enjoyment of so long and intimate

a visit, will be relieved when it is over. Silence disturbs us” (1968: 190).

Helen begins by opening wounds and asserting her separate pain. She embarks, through memory, on a voyage of self-discovery, moving steadily toward a searing recognition. She realises that she has deserted both her sister—far more importantly—her diseased mother to their respective fates. By examining herself, Helen is gauging her own responsibility, and her own interdependence and independence. Helen's narration is evidence to Munro's reliance on the evocative effects of memory. The story's narrative order is not chronological as it begins with Helen's acknowledgement of the rift between herself and her sister. Instead, its movement depends upon a dialectic relationship between Helen's memory and her perception of her present situation, and is directed by her looming awareness of her dead mother. The mother acts like a wedge between the sisters, a function emphasized by Helen's nostalgic reminiscence of the fullness of their childhood relationship, juxtaposed against the emptiness of their present situation. Helen speaks of their shared childhood in “the dim world of continuing disaster, of home” but does not explain this disaster. With Maddy's warning to Helen, “No exorcising here”, we understand that it was truly disastrous. Even here Helen doesn't specify who or what must be exorcised. Instead, she describes the memories of their childhood that she and Maddy share with Fred Powell, whom she guesses to be Maddy's lover. With these stories, the sisters try to safely wrap their unhappy childhood memories “in a kind of mental cellophane” to entertain their listener (193).



In order to analyse the mother-daughter relation we need to examine the way the maternal illness affected the daughter's childhood and adult experiences. Both Helen and Maddy had different responses to maternal illness as they strived to deal with their new role, that of their mother's caregiver. We can observe here two different discourses imposed by the pressures of cultural norms: that of mothers as primary 'attachment figures' who are supposed to look after their children, protect and provide 'good enough mothering' (1953:90), and that of the daughters as primary caregivers who are expected to look after aged and sick parents. The two discourses are similar to a certain extent since they mutually stem from cultural stereotypes about motherhood and daughterhood. Mothers are supposed to sacrifice their individuality and subjectivity in order to be recognised as good mothers. The same condition implies for caregiving daughters who are trapped in a similar binary between the positions of good and bad daughter. Accepting the caregiving position makes her a good daughter, opting for a non-caregiving position turns her into a bad daughter.

Almost till the end of the story, Maddy remained tied to her mother by means of an invisible umbilical cord. According to psychologists this kind of relationship is always dangerous. Nancy Chodorow in her work *Reproduction of Mothering* argues that in the case of daughters there is less social pressure to differentiate from their mothers than on sons, who are expected to differentiate from their fathers. A mother-daughter relationship is characterized by less clearly defined boundaries than the father-son relationship. Consequently,

greater effort is required of adolescent girls to achieve separateness and autonomy. Discussing Chodorow's theory about mother-daughter dyad, Christina Wieland states that "incomplete separation is also the source of women's ambivalence towards their mothers; because of the way the daughter feels strongly connected to her mother, yet also strives to be independent from her" (2002:107). Girls have a tendency to take up their mother's pain and depression and also experience intense guilt if they try to assert their individuality and autonomy. Maddy seems to be caught in this mother-child dyad from which she is unable to escape even after her mother's death. On the other hand, Helen who ran away and tried to escape the pressure also continues to feel guilty for having done so.

In the second section of Part I, Helen explains that her mother died the preceding winter after a prolonged illness but that she did not return home for her funeral. Upon entering Maddy's empty house with her two children, Helen sees herself in a mirror that reflects a face quite different from the smooth-faced young girl who left that house for marriage and motherhood. She remembers the panic and disorder that lay behind that deceptively smooth surface. Now, she realises the significance of the altered surface as that of a tensed, watchful young mother who watches not only her children but also herself. She feels as if she is trapped in a haunted space, overpowered by once familiar rooms and objects. Her own carefully constructed adult identity begins to wither as she senses herself becoming all at once not only a mother and sister but also a daughter who stands still in the hall instinctively awaiting the sound of



her mother's "ruined voice" calling out to her—a desperate cry for help. This is followed by a brief flashback which explores a double humiliation: the terrible humiliation of the flesh, caused by the mother's strange, deteriorating disease and the adolescent humiliation of her two daughters, caused by their inevitable condition to cope with their sick mother. In the words of Helen:

While she (mother) demanded our love in every way she knew, without shame or sense, as a child will. And how could we have loved her, I say desperately to myself, the resources of love we had were not enough, the demand on us was too great (199).

In this story we witness a reversal of roles which has long-term effects on the girls' personalities as from now on they are the ones who have to do the mothering. Until the moment Helen left home, the sisters used to form a partnership "reversing the power relationship between generations" (2004: 22). The daughters were forced to adopt the position of caregiver for which they were not psychologically ready. Both Helen and Maddy took care of their mother during the first few years of her illness. However, at one point, Helen realised that the only way to assert her individuality is to assume the non-caregiving position. Hence, she went away to college, got married and started her own family. Superficially, it seems as if Helen finally attained her independence as an individual, but she is still a prisoner of the binary good daughter-bad daughter. She continues to feel guilty because she deserted her sick mother, placed the burden on her sister's shoulders and, ultimately, became a bad

daughter. Nevertheless, she gained the necessary psychological distance which allowed her to move past denial towards self-assertion. For instance, Helen declares that she had had a number of distressing experiences in childhood and that these experiences affected her adult personality: "Is it possible that children growing up as we did lose the ability to believe in—to be at home in—any ordinary and peaceful reality?" (191). Moreover, Helen appears to be able to refer back to her past without being resentful; speaking about her dead mother, she says: "I no longer feel that when they say the words 'your mother' they deal a knowing, cunning blow at my pride. I used to feel that; at those words I felt my whole identity, that pretentious adolescent construction, come crumbling down" (194).

On the contrary, Maddy, partly because she did not distance herself from her mother, does not have the courage to address her childhood pain and suffering: "No exorcising here, says Maddy in her thin, bright voice" (191). Maddy uses 'suppression', a psychological process, in order to accept the reality of her life. She strongly wants to forget the time when she was forced to become her mother's "mother" and provide love, nurturing, warmth, security, when in fact it was she who needed all these things in that phase of life. More so, she was compelled to face stronger pressure because "society encourages [women] to carry [their] mothers with [them] in every breath, every decision, every success, and every failure" (2004: 11). It is evident that Maddy could not and did not escape this pressure. Toward the end of the story she realises the burden of these expectations which made her a prisoner in her own house. She is not in a position to leave



the house and lead a new life even after the object of her dependency (her mother) is gone.

Helen's haunting memories introduce a sequence of prison metaphors describing her mother's life. In "Working for a Living," Munro speaks of her mother as "walled in by increasing paralysis..." (37). Here in this story, Helen describes her mother as physically walled in by her "house of stone" and psychologically isolated by her daughters' grimly self-protective roles as 'prison guards' declining her the loving pity for which she yearned and yelled. Being deprived of any emotion, their caregiving used to be pragmatic and efficient but entirely insensitive: "We grew cunning, unflinching in cold solicitude; we took away from her our anger and impatience and disgust, took all emotion away from our dealings with her, as you might take away meat from a prisoner to weaken him, till he died" (199). This harrowing admission has been arrived at slowly, quietly, lethally. When the mother gradually loses her ability to speak, the daughters start acting as her interpreters. The theatricality of this new role humiliated the sisters almost to death or, to put it in Carrington's words they felt as if performing "a vulgar circus act" (1989: 22). They start treating their mother as an inanimate object or as a baby who lacks physical autonomy and the ability to express itself. Helen and Maddy are ashamed both of their mother and of their position of caregivers which is clearly reflected in the way they present their mother's appearance:

Our Gothic mother, with the cold appalling mask of the Shaking Palsy laid across her features, shuffling, weeping, devouring attention wherever she can get it,

eyes dead and burning, fixed inward on herself; this is not all (200).

In order to be recognised as good daughters, they took care of their mother though this situation filled them with shame. Outside the house, they were publicly embarrassed by their mother's symptoms whereas inside, they could not bear the sound of her voice: "the cry for help—undisguised, oh, shamefully undisguised and raw and supplicating" (198). Maddy appears to be the ultimate victim of this dramatic situation, the good daughter who sacrificed herself for her mother by accepting the caregiving position no longer assumed by Helen. The problem is that Maddy's choice is not determined by her selflessness, but rather by her inability to claim her own independence. Maddy suffers from close identification with her mother resulting into, as Nancy Chodorow suggested, a lack of distinctiveness which makes it almost impossible for her to build a reliable autonomous self.

The Part II of the story juxtaposes a situation parallel to that of Helen and her sister. Helen announces that she has been visiting her two old spinster aunts, also sisters, and fears if she and Maddy will resemble their aunts when they grow old, trapped similarly in the web of sisterhood. Helen in one of her visits senses a mild disagreement between the sisters for the first time ever. Aunt Annie despite Aunt Lou's objection shows Helen her dead mother's carefully cleaned and mended clothes and offers some of them to her. When Helen refuses to accept "those brocades and flowered silks," (205) in which her mother disguised her dying body, she realises that she is going against family values: "Things must be used, everything



must be used up, saved and mended and made into something else and used again; clothes were to be worn" (206). Perhaps the clothes served as the introduction to a conversation that Aunt Annie intended to start. She reveals Helen about her mother's frantic, dying escape from the hospital where Maddy had forcibly admitted her under the pretext of a check-up, as she no longer wanted to take care of her. Like a prisoner, wearing only a robe and slippers, she tried to run away in a snowstorm. After she was caught and returned to the hospital, a board was nailed across her bed to prevent further escape. Unable to communicate with the nurses and get out of bed, she led a life worse than imprisonment. In Carrington's opinion, "she was quite literally nailed into her coffin of silence and motionlessness before her death" (1989:188). Surprisingly enough, Helen does not seem to be harrowed by this unexpected discovery.

In the last section of Part II Helen attempts exorcism for Maddy. She urges her sister not to feel guilty for hospitalizing their mother but to leave the past and move ahead in life: "Take your life, Maddy. Take it" (210). Just before accepting this advice Maddy accidentally drops and breaks a pink glass bowl. It is at this point she tears "the mental cellophane" that prevented her from expressing her emotions and from asserting her true self. It is more likely that the bowl symbolizes her true self, the Maddy she had been hiding behind her role of "surrogate mother" (2009:23). For the first time she takes responsibility for the choice she made: "I couldn't go on . . . I wanted my life" (210). Maddy confirms the fact that, unlike Helen, she cannot accept the guilt she feels for refusing the caretaking

position and for putting the mother in the hospital. The last line of the story which follows this incident strikes directly to the heart of not only the sister's situation but also her character: "But why can't I, Helen? Why can't I?" (210). The journey from knowledge of the mother to self knowledge has resulted in this helpless, anguished cry that has no answer. Munro's ending leaves the readers staggered by Maddy's overwhelming self knowledge that she cannot 'begin'. This is an example of failed 'exorcism'. The true poignancy of the story arises from the inability of Maddy to find freedom and take full control of her life. Her personality prohibits her from turning her back on what is tried and true, what is predictable. For Maddy, as for Helen, exorcising the guilty past is not so simple. Maddy took over her mother's pain and depression, and experienced intense guilt when she tried to assert her individuality and autonomy. She continues to remain tied to her mother even after her death. Thus, Maddy is caught in a mother-daughter dyad from which she is incapable to escape.

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