

The Fairy-Tale Design and the Heroine's Transition to the Ordinary World: Alice Munroe's "The Red Dress -1946"

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ABSTRACT

Like many of her contemporaries, the fictional works of the Canadian writer Alice Munro can be read as a realistic portrayal of the people from her native Ontario, Canada, describing their set of beliefs, values, dreams, aspirations, fears, and apprehensions. A second way to evaluate this fiction is to approach it from a feminist perspective, shedding light on the question of women's need to be free from the patriarchal rule. The aim of this article, however, is to consider the function of the fairy-tale framework by which Munro's short story "Red Dress - 1946" is constructed. This fairy-tale design is considered a point of departure from which the story's heroine grows mentally and spiritually so that she can get her way into the normal world. In addition to taking a brief look at some of the views offered by Munro's critics of her writings, it also tries to answer such questions as, what function(s) does this form perform to the story to bring about the heroine's development? Aside from where the Bildungsroman and fairy tale genres meet and where they deviate, how far are certain traditional fairy-tale elements, such as structure, themes, characterization, etc. significant in bringing about the heroine's mental as well as emotional growth?

KEY WORDS: fairy tale, heroine, development, pattern, short story

1. INTRODUCTION

Alice Munro (Born 1931) achieved worldwide fame, which came mainly from her winning the Nobel Prize in literature in 2013. This success delighted short-story readers, Canadians, women readers and writers, and feminists who vehemently championed her. She was the first Canadian woman ever to win such a global prize for a work that consists merely of short stories (Schuh, 2021, p. 86). Munro's perspective of being a woman is balanced on considering the advantages as well as the disadvantages. Whereas men, she thought, were undertaking important work to do while she was growing up, women experienced the freedom of reading and telling stories (Buchholtz, 2016, p. 2). However, she is precisely aware of the taboos and prohibitions placed

upon women in Canada, and, as such, the character that she creates is initially a foreigner who is reclaimed to be a Canadian anew (Buchholtz, 2016, p. 5).

As a remarkable contemporary Canadian writer, Munro is interested in Southern Ontario, an area in which she was born and where she spent the majority of her life. Characteristically, a myriad of the town people whom she knew and met in reality reappear in her stories. Among other mediums of expressions that she uses, "the story that will zero in and give you intense, but not connected, moments of experience" (quoted in Kennedy and Gioia, 2005, p. 234) is actually her favorite. She is a prolific writer having published several collections of short fiction, including *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), *The Beggar Maid* (1982), and *Open Secrets* (1994).

For Munro, writing is such an activity that involves a "delicate balance of concealment and revelation" (York, 1988, p. 21). The ordinary details shown in her works derive significantly from what they display to the reader as well as from what they may not expose. Hence, her "fiction is tangibly rooted in the social realism of the rural and small-town world of her own experience, but ... insistently explores what lies beyond the bounds of

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empirical reality" (quoted in Heble, 1994, p. 4). The real and the unreal seem to be the points that really interest her. The fact that the two overlap turns her into a writer whose works carry undertones that may even be far away from the tangible world itself.

Munro makes her readers acknowledge what she calls "nether voices" and thus look beyond the surface of everyday life. On top of that, she moves them from the realm of rational discourse in which reality is stable, comprehensible, and somehow safe to another realm of discourse to draw a distinction between the real, intelligible world, and a world of textuality where all signs have got something to do (Heble, 1994, p. 9), as far as explicating the meaning is concerned.

Much of the criticism of Munro's works has been associated with a realist tradition. This is due to Munro's interest in surface details and to her genuine exploration of a world of social relationships and inner experiences. However, recent critics claim that Munro "has deepened the channel of realism" in her writings (Heble, 1994, p. 3). Munro's style adheres to what Roland Barthes calls "reality effect", and thus, appears to construct a world which the readers are willing to accept as intangible (Heble, 1994, p. 5). No matter how things appear to be unbelievable in her stories, they are able to find for themselves a place in Munro's realistic world.

Munro's early narratives, which are marked by ellipses and by nuances of tense and modality to indicate temporal leaps into the past, utilize the first-person narrator the purpose of which is to shed some light on dominant feelings of guilt, shame, or anger, which past events evoke. Nevertheless, the writer, with her resolution to comprehend these negative feelings and eliminate their causes, appears to remain dissatisfied and troubled. The highest in the hierarchy of narrative levels is called the extradiegetic. When the narrator, however, is a participant character in the story, they become intradiegetic, which is the case of the majority of narrators in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (Duncan, 2011, pp. 15-15). This mode is persistently followed by Munro due to the private nature of her heroines' experiences, which this form best delineates.

In her later stories, Munro is inclined to employ fictionality more than she does in her earlier ones, which rather tend to realism on account of their preoccupation with such issues as cancer and dementia (Blodgett, 2017, p. 272). Those stories become longer and more intricate with the publication of each of her volumes of short stories, a fact of which she herself is quite conscious. When asked by an interviewer to explain this phenomenon, she replies that she is in need of this elaboration: "It's that I see things now, in this way, and there is absolutely no other way I can deal with the material of fiction" (quoted in Duncan, 2011, p. 3). Readers are frequently intrigued by the writer's capacity

to explain things even though the point of view is restricted to that of the main character.

Munro's critics are basically inclined to treat her fiction in terms of consisting of inner and outer realms of experience which are regarded as "a normal, rational world of everyday life and an irrational 'other' world where everything may happen" (Heble, 1994, p. 10). Beverly Rasporich examines the grotesque and hysterical nature of Munro's "other" world which is in contrast with the quiet, nostalgic calm of a fiction that basically depends on the simplicity of observation. B. Pfaus, another critic, argues that all of Munro's short stories propose the author's vision of the existence of two worlds in which the tension between the inherent values of each world, that is, the chaotic natural world as opposed to the world of social conventionality, is irreconcilable (Ibid.). In effect, her fiction calls attention to two worlds in a state of discrepancy, in other words, the visible and the invisible worlds coexist next to the each other and they sometimes overlap. This fact, in turn, renders such a fiction be of multi-layered interpretations.

In her study of Alice Munro's short stories, Rebekka Schuh (2021, pp. 96-105) tries to read them from a different perspective for the purpose of investigating how far the concept of aesthetic illusion is useful in shedding light on intra-textual responses to letters. The distance, as the critic assumes, may not necessarily be spatial between the correspondents, but it can be social, occurring when there is a gap separating the social status of the two correspondents. Thus, distance helps in producing fantasies in the readers' minds in more than one way. On the other hand, the power of letters, for Maria Löschnigg, comes from their exclusion of all non-verbal signals that are usually associated with a face-to-face encounter, and therefore, they create a tremendous opportunity for imaginary constructions. What Schuh calls the aspect of liminality is used in this respect for connecting letters to women's experiences. Thus, "epistolary illusion," accordingly, is reached through the reading of letters (2021, p. 90).

Ajay Heble (1994), from another point of view, studies Munro's fictional works in terms of their examining language in two different but complementary strands. In other words, language is studied both as a form of representation and as a system with limited signs. Paradigmatic discourse, as Heble argues, "serves as a reminder of the unresolvable gap between all writing and the reality which that writing attempts to represent" (p. 5). Such a discourse allows the reader to imagine possible links between a number of phenomena and to take into account how reality might be represented differently if something were to be replaced for what it is in reality. In this way, her fiction "attempts

to force us to reconsider the metaphysical category of reality in textual terms" (Heble, 1994, p. 7).

To sum up, Munro's fiction is an interesting attempt by a writer trying to elucidate meanings by means of amalgamating the legible with what might look as intelligible. She achieves success on account of the variety of meanings which her stories engender in the readers' minds.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper utilizes analysis of Alice Munro's text as a main method to discuss her short story "Red Dress – 1946" as a fairy tale with updated traditions. In other words, the qualitative method followed in this article is meant to describe, analyze, and draw conclusions based on facts from inside the text itself plus from other secondary sources, like essays, books, newspaper articles, etc. In fact, Munro is revealed more through her texts, or as E. D. Blodgett (2017, p. 272) emphasizes: "the only adequate summary of the text is the text itself." Such a method, as it were, generates more meanings and grants additional value to the given literary work. Since the primary source used here is the text of Munro's short story, the application of the psychoanalytic approach of literary analysis seems convenient and useful in measuring the heroine's gradual transition from immaturity and naivety to maturity and self-knowledge.

3. FAIRY TALES AND CHARACTER GROWTH:

As they are known, fairy tales are narratives established according to certain elements that render them a genre with its own rules and conventions. Being orally transmitted or passed down among generations, they probably evolved, according to Jack Zipes (2012, p. 21), a long time ago from a wide range of short tales that were popular across the world and survived in particular forms (myth, legend, folklore, etc.) under different circumstances and conditions. If they have survived in the present time, they must have witnessed some change in their conventions.

Although some balance between the number of male and female characters in fairy tales is often kept in folk culture, fairy tales seem to be loaded with heroines and female figures. "Snow White", "Cinderella", "Sleeping Beauty", "Rapunzel", "Beauty and the Beast", and "Little Red Riding Hood" are some of the most prominent examples of fairy tales with female protagonists (Jones, 2002, pp. 44-46). There are didactic messages behind writing fairy tales, and those messages are delivered on moral, ethical, as well as social levels. The good is rewarded no matter what and the evil is punished at the end of the story that is most often structured illogically

and unreasonably. This arrangement helps in the growth or development of the story rather than of the character.

Commenting on fairy tales, Bruno Buttrheim declares that those stories mainly "depict in imaginary and symbolic form the essential steps in growing up and achieving an independent existence," turning rather to be tales that represent the process of human growth and development (quoted in Rose, 1983, p. 209).

In the classic tales by Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, for instance, patterns of development vary from boys to girls. As they are always shown to be brave, clever, and resourceful in traditional fairy tales, boys are powerful enough to overcome supernatural creatures like giants or ogres and are very likely to be materially rewarded eventually. Girls, on the other hand, are designed to stay home and do housework. For this reason, they are usually shown to be patient, enduring, and self-sacrificing. Like in "Cinderella," young girls are usually confronted by cruel step-mothers or enchanted by some evil fairies. If they once leave home, it is very likely that they get lost in the woods and never find their way home until rescued by either a good fairy or a kind handsome prince. In the end, they fall in love, get married and achieve permanent happiness (Rose, 1983, pp. 209-210).

In their essay entitled "Toward a Feminist Poetic," Gilbert and Gubar (1983, p. 210) consider "Snow White", as a paradigm of women's development in a patriarchal culture. With their interest centered on the transition to adult womanhood, it is thought that the wicked step-mother replaces the good queen personally and functionally. Their argument stems from an image of the queen sitting and sewing by a window. When she suddenly pricks her finger which starts bleeding, this symbolically proclaims her entrance into the cycle of sexuality. From that moment, she develops no interest in the outside world. Hence, her window turns into a mirror and her passive goodness is replaced by a wicked rage once she realizes the limitations of life set upon her (Ibid.).

Being presented as damageable stereotypes was a feature that characterizes females during the Victorian age. For this reason, women are in need of self-protection, particularly when it comes to unmentionable issues related to sex (Filipczak in Buchholtz, 2016, p. 14). Many of Munro's protagonists, however, are young, naive women or girls, looking for love and respect in environments that deny them the fulfillment of their true selves and, ultimately, lead to the failure of their desires as well as dreams. For example, the narrator of "An Ounce of Cure", a story published in Munro's first collection of short stories, *Dance of Happy Shades*, tells, in the form of confession, the experience of a shy, naïve teenager girl who is propelled to drink because of her

unrequited love for a boy (Goldman, in DeFalco, 2018, pp. 79-80).

In her treatment of female protagonists, Munro is, in some way, a true feminist. In an interview published in 1984, she demonstrates that "I'm a feminist about certain measure that I would support." Yet in her writing, she never considers what she calls "feminist politics", but rather, she is concerned with what goes on in her stories. As a result, she by no means approves of feminism "as an attitude to life which is imposed on [her] by someone else" (Löschnigg, 2016, p. 60).

The fairy-tale style dominates many of Munro's stories in conjunction with adolescent fantasies of some girl characters. It is based on the assumption of women as the weaker sex, a framework which is completely turned throughout the stories that feature young and adult women rejecting this condition of imbalance of power in favor of the male gender. Thus, her heroines pass beyond the traditional passive role of waiting for the brave knight or handsome prince to emerge from nowhere and to rescue them in time of distress; they rather begin to take responsibility for what they do (Löschnigg, 2016, p. 64). After passing through an experience, the woman character in Munro develops an inner feeling that becomes her guiding light towards freedom and self-independence.

4-FAIRY-TALE PATTERN OF MUNRO'S "RED DRESS - 1946"

Among the fifteen short stories in Munro's first collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), "Red Dress - 1946" is perhaps the least vague and the most straightforward in its statement of meaning. This clarity may be attributed to Munro's utilization of the most traditional characterization, themes, style, setting, and other fictional elements.

According to Kennedy and Gioia (2005), among the wide variety of themes Munro employs in her fiction, the relation between parents and children is sensitively explored (p. p34). Lynch and Robbeson (1999) indicate that Munro's "Red Dress - 1946" is focused on the mother-daughter relation, which is also the case in other Monrovia stories, like "The Peace of Utrecht", "Images", "Lives of Girls and Women", and "Winter Wind" (p. 30). In Munro, this relation is modified in such a way as to take a new direction that puts more emphasis on the daughter's individualism.

"Red dress - 1946" is precisely about a high-school girl, a thirteen-year-old teenager, who narrates her impatience with parents. Incidentally, the mother character is designed to represent the traditional feminine aspect of the household equation, a side which is shown to be ineffective. Additionally, the story features another significant aspect which is so common

in Munro's fiction, that is, "teenagers' discomfort in their own skin and . . . social acceptability or unacceptability within the school social hierarchy, where popularity determines all" (Hooper, 2008, p. 12).

The heroine's mother is that kind of old-fashioned person who is monomaniac, being preoccupied most of her time with making her daughter a dress. Whenever the daughter comes from school, she finds her mother "in the kitchen, surrounded by cut-up red velvet and scraps of tissue-paper pattern" (Munro, 1996, p. 147). Not as "good sewer" as she is, the mother, however, is in love with making things. When she intends to do something, she usually starts with "an inspiration, a brave and dazzling idea", yet she ends in never finding "a pattern to suit her" (Munro, 1996, p. 147) as there are, eventually, no patterns that match her ideas. The daughter, nevertheless, used to wear happily all the dresses made by her mother when she was "unaware of the world's opinion. Now grown wiser, I wished for dresses like those my friend Lonnie had . . ." (Munro, 1996, p. 148). The mother's incapacity for renewal along with her overall impracticality and incompetency fill her daughter with a bitter sense of frustration as well as deprivation. That is why, the two could never come to an understanding with each other. As a matter of fact, the two maintain no viable or feasible communication owing to the gap between them which can in no way be bridged. The two do not see eye to eye on almost anything.

Indeed, the mother seems to lack enough knowledge of life and the world; she is ignorant of social manners and etiquette that qualify her to get along with the social environment in which she lives. Instead of saying to Lonnie "au revoir" for "good night" or "good bye", she says: "au reservoir", which "sounded foolish, desolate coming from her" (Munro, 1996, p. 153). Such lack of knowledge is probably due to her living in isolation. In other words, she knows nothing about the outside world more than what she sees through the window by which she sits most of her time: "She worked at an old treadle machine pushed up against the window to get the light, and also to let her look out . . . to see who went by on the road. There was seldom anybody to see" (Munro, 1996, p. 147). Her limited view of the world imposes on her a strict system by which all under her control should abide by.

As such, the mother not only falls short of responding positively and practically to her daughter's physical and emotional needs, but also becomes, with such theatrical movement as her "getting to her feet with a woeful creaking and sighing" (Munro, 1996, p. 148), a dominant source of her embarrassment, particularly in front of her friend Lonnie:

I was embarrassed by the way my mother crept around me, her knees creaking, her breath coming heavily. She muttered to herself. Around the house she wore no corset or stockings, she wore wedge-heeled shoes and ankle socks; her legs were marked with lumps of blue-green veins. I thought her squatting position shameless, even obscene . . . (Munro, 1996, p. 148)

Added to this is the daughter's feelings of anger and upset caused mainly by her mother's addressing Lonnie in such a way "as if Lonnie were grown up and I were still a child" (Munro, 1996, p. 148). During such formative years in her life, the daughter finds no one to guide her or give her the support that she needs to confront the hardships of life. In characterization, the cruelty and hard-heartedness shown by the step-mother in a fairy tale proper are retained but in the forms of ignorance, indifference, and false pride. Here, the woman bears resemblance to the fairy-tale hags in her inability to see things for what they are.

The mother herself often enjoys indulging in some moments of self-pity, reflecting on how she had no one to make her a dress for school when she was her daughter's age, or how she would face the hard task of finding a job to cover her high-school expenses. Such stories "which had once interested me", as the daughter demonstrates, "began to seem melodramatic, irrelevant, and tiresome" (Munro, 1996, p. 149).

Bloom (2009, p. 5) claims that the daughter, as a reaction to her predominant feelings of anxiety and of inferiority augmented partly by her mother's treatment of her and partly by her weakness in such courses at school as Science, Business Practice, and English, is not motivated to go to the high school Christmas dance for which her mother is busy making her a dress. She, in fact, rejects the role of a "dressmaker's dummy." During fittings, she feels humiliated and degraded by the exposure of her body):

'Stand still,' [the mother] said, hauling the pinned and basted dress over my head. 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. I wished I was like Lonnie, light-boned, pale and thin; she had been a Blue Baby. (Munro, 1996, p. 148)

The female body, according to Murphy (2009, p. 48), is not only threatened by rape and childbirth, but also by fear of humiliation and exposure. Obsession with blood and stories woven around it often haunt the daughter even in class:

When I was asked a question in class, any simple little question at all, my voice was apt to come out squeaky, or else hoarse and trembling. When I had to go to the blackboard, I was sure—even at a time of the month when this could not be true—that I had blood on my skirt. My hands became slippery with sweat when they

were required to work the blackboard compass. (Munro, 1996, pp. 149-150)

The heroine's rejection to attend the dance party, then, is not without a cause for she has every reason to believe that being at the party will further degrade her, especially in front of Lonnie. However, she is too weak to say "no" to her mother, and this premature self-awareness is behind her current incapacity to make crucial decisions regarding her future. To avoid attending it, instead, she considers taking certain measures that may provide her with logical excuses. One of these is "falling off my bicycle and spraining my ankle" by riding "along the hard-frozen, deeply-rutted country roads" (Munro, 1996, p. 151). When that fails, she thinks of exposing her supposedly weak "throat and bronchial tubes" (Munro, 1996, p. 151) to the cold, snowy weather, yet that does not work, either.

On the very day of the dance, the heroine sits in the kitchen reading Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), wishing she was there. For the moment, maturity for her becomes a burden, a hateful thing that causes her some sharp pain on account of which she becomes motivated to long "to be back safe behind the boundaries of childhood" (Munro, 1996, p. 151). By inwardly rejecting the party, she is less a misanthrope than a person using self-protective measures meant to vindicate what remains of her shattered personality.

Generally, numerous girl characters in Munro are fascinated with female decorativeness (Löschnigg, 2016, p. 63), the matter which is expressed by the heroine who wishes to get "the protection of all possible female rituals" (Munro, 1996, p. 151), as she prepares to go to her first dance. This obsession finds expression in the girls' behaviors and manners during the dance party. But shortly before the dance starts, the heroine, along with a few girls, "look as if they "were, if not invisible, inanimate." Influenced by her constant search for herself, she heartily desires to belong to those successful girls in the dance who, leaning on male sleeves, look "bored, aloof, and beautiful" and who, when dancing gets started, "moved out languidly, smiling at each other as if they had been asked to take part in a half-forgotten childish game" (Munro, 1996, p. 153).

But unlike the other girls who are noticed by boys during the dance, the heroine, in her attractive red dress, is ignored. Utterly shocked, she finds it quite outrageous to be thus treated, that is why her heart sinks deep within her. In the same way, she finds no reason why she, with her alluring red dress and hair done in "steel curlers" (Munro, 1996, p. 151), is not being chosen by any boy for dance whereas less attractive girls prove luckier than her in this respect. In the meantime, she expresses her eagerness to receive some of the boys'

attention in order to reduce some of the sharp pain inside her:

Fat girls, girls with pimples, a poor girl who didn't own a good dress and had to wear a skirt and sweater to the dance; they were claimed, they danced away. Why take them and not me? Why everybody else and not me? I have a red velvet dress, I did my hair in curlers, I used a deodorant and put on cologne. Pray, I thought. I couldn't close my eyes but I said over and over again in my mind, please, me, please. (Munro, 1996, p. 155)

This shocking realization leaves her puzzled and momentarily unable to settle on what to do to get herself out of such an embarrassment. The climax of the story is reached precisely in the scene where the heroine enters a state of emotional crisis during the party:

My eyebrows were drawn together with tension, I must look scared and ugly. I took a deep breath and tried to loosen my face. I smiled. But I felt absurd, smiling at no one. And I observed that girls on the dance floor, popular girls, were not smiling; many of them had sleepy, sulky faces and never smiled at all. (Munro, 1996, pp. 154-55)

Therefore, she becomes bitterly aware and quite certain that she, after all, is going to be left by boys no matter what she does or how she looks like, and the reason is that there is something wrong with her:

There was something mysterious the matter with me, something that could not be put right like bad breath or overlooked like pimples, and everybody knew it, and I knew it; I had known it all along. But I had not known it for sure, I had hoped to be mistaken. Certainty rose inside me like sickness. (Munro, 1996, p. 155)

The red dress itself - after which the story takes its title - looks spectacular on the heroine, proving to be "princess style, very tight in the midriff" and showing, "with mature authority under the childish frills of the collar" (Munro, 1996, p. 152) much of her feminine beauty. Yet, such elegance is always underrated compared with that of Lonnie whose "stylish dress and smooth hair made me look a little like a golliwog, stuffed into red velvet, wide-eyed, wild-haired, with a suggestion of delirium" (Munro, 1996, p. 152). Apparently, each of the narrator and Lonnie has chosen an inappropriate dress for the other to wear for the dance (Carscallen, 1993, p. 119). In other words, the narrator's red dress would have characteristically been more fit for Lonnie in the same way as the blue would have been for the heroine.

However, the heroine, when with Lonnie, frequently finds relief and part of her lost identity. Apart from doing their school homework, both seek refuge in "passing on and discussing of sexual information", making, at the same time, "a pact to tell each other everything" (Munro, 1996, p. 149). This cheers the heroine up a little. Nevertheless, she, in sharp contrast

with Lonnie and the other girls, lacks what makes her acceptable in the social world. Having already started her life as a "Blue Baby", Lonnie is a wonder of social acceptability. Armed by her tact, conformity, and social skills (she is gifted for hairdressing, among other things), she, unlike the heroine with her red dress, goes confidently to the dance in blue. Apparently, since Lonnie is the same age as the heroine and does share with her some fundamental characteristics like love of independence, she is her alter-ego in the Freudian psychoanalysis.

While the heroine is doubtful of herself and of her full chances to get noticed by a guy, an athletic hero, Mason Williams, suddenly picks her up as a dancing partner. Instantly, she still wonders whether the boy, "coming reluctantly towards me" (Munro, 1996, p. 153), really wants to dance with her. Sounding the same feeling as shown by Cinderella once chosen by the prince to dance with him, the heroine gets even more skeptical: "To have to dance with a nonentity like me was as offensive to him as having to memorize Shakespeare. I felt this as keenly as he did, and imagined that he was exchanging looks of dismay with his friends" (Munro, 1996, pp. 153-54). In Munro's fiction, there are neither princess nor royal figures to dominate the scene although the atmosphere may somehow suggest the effect of social and class differences on the behavior of the girls who join the dance.

When the heroine is soon discarded by Williams after a short dance, she accepts this as a matter of fact. Not until the last part of the story does she recognize the weight of being unpopular among the girls on the shape of her personality. It is only then that she realizes a strong need to be invisible to preserve some of her left self-respect: "one of those would have danced with me courteously and patronizingly and left me feeling no better off. Still, I hoped not many people had seen. I hated people seeing" (Munro, 1996, p. 154). Temporarily, she, for the sake of self-protection, hides in a cubicle in the washroom, not desiring to see or be seen by anybody. Particularly, she is afraid of being publicly revealed or scorned for her lack of "social adjustment" (Munro, 1996, p. 154). When she is actually in trouble during the dance, she tries to flee the world of sexuality, which she could not enter, to the world of normality (Carscallen, 1993, pp. 392-93). It is coincidence, a crucial fairy-tale element, that brings into the scene the very person (Mary Fortune) who will be responsible for the heroine's character growth or development.

As an officer of the Girls' Athletic Society and is also in charge of organizing things in the party, Mary Fortune, or "the great misfit of the story" (Carscallen, 1993, p. 110), declares to the heroine that the only reason she is at the party is her responsibility for decorations. "I'm not boy-crazy" (Munro, 1996, p. 157), she once tells

the heroine. Instead of chasing boys, for which she scorns the majority of girls from their school, she'd rather try something on her own like tobacco-picking. Those "boy-crazy girls", she asserts, do nothing except "get up on the ladders and fool around with boys. They don't care if it ever gets decorated. It's just an excuse. That's the only aim they have in life, fooling around with boys. As far as I'm concerned, they're idiots" (Munro, 1996, p. 157). Running after boys is the same reason why Lonnie is "probably not going to be my [the heroine's] friend anymore, not as much as before anyway. She was what Mary would call boy-crazy" (Munro, 1996, p. 158). Obviously, the sense of taking responsibility sets Mary apart from the majority of the irresponsible girls at the school.

Mary serves Munro's purpose of emphasizing women's need for an identity of their own away from the male dominance on the one hand and their incessant need for staying together being of the same gender. As a girl, Mary wants nothing but "female company", according to Carscallen (1993, p. 523). In the story under discussion, the narrator feels grateful for Mary's "attention, her company and her cigarette" (Munro, 1996, p. 157). Truly, she, while listening to Mary talking about her desire for independence, "felt the acute phase of my unhappiness passing. Here was someone who had suffered the same defeat as I had—I saw that—but she was full of energy and self respect" (Munro, 1996, pp. 157-58). Through her text, the writer is intent on representing the gradual moral and intellectual growth that is taking place inside the heroine.

Part of the falling action of the story's plot is the heroine's meeting with Mary Fortune by accident. In such a type of narratives in which character formation is under discussion, an incident may probably alter someone's life entirely. Indeed, Mary is, symbolically, the heroine's fortune for the moment, and the effect of such an encounter with her on the young heroine's personality is fundamentally remarkable:

I found that I was not so frightened, now that I had made up my mind to leave the dance behind. I was not waiting for anybody to choose me. I had my own plans. I did not have to smile or make signs for luck. It did not matter to me. I was on my way to have a hot chocolate, with my friend. (Munro, 1996, p. 158)

The main action of this part of the story is set in the school building and the gymnasium. This setting has the element of suspense which Munro retrieves from the traditional fairy and folk tales. The washroom to which the heroine makes her retreat during the dance, for example, is part of a whole complex of rooms beyond which lies "a dark closet full of mops and pails," leading still to "another door" that "opened into darkness" (Munro, 1996, p. 156). Characteristically, such a setting with a "complex within a complex", a partition, a flight

of stairs, and a closet on the next floor beyond the janitor's room (Carscallen, 1993, p. 181) is instrumental in helping readers imagine everything that could happen there. This is reminiscent of fairy-tale style of holding reader's attention and setting their imagination free to discover what is in store for the heroine and the other principal characters.

Incidentally, the two girls sitting on the stairs start smoking, looking unafraid, which can function as a sign of their entrance into adolescence. Although this style of building provides hints of sexuality in the heroine's relation to Mary, it simply suggests that "an encounter in the more privier parts of a building can always be associated with sexual union if one wants. And in any case, it is union: we reach a kind of consummation on underworld terms when we have failed to do so on those of a higher world" (Carscallen, 1993, p. 182). Yet, a significant sign of the development in the heroine's character is referred to textually by Munro:

But what was really going on in the school was not Business Practice and Science and English, there was something else that gave life its urgency and brightness. That old building, with its rockwalled clammy basements and black cloakrooms and pictures of dead royalties and lost explorers, was full of the tension and excitement of sexual competition, and in this, in spite of daydreams of vast successes, I had premonitions of total defeat. Something had to happen, to keep me from that dance. (Munro, 1996, pp. 150-151)

While the heroine is instantly heading towards Mary Fortune's "territory", a boy named Raymond Bolting selects her for a dance, drawing her thus "into the ordinary world" (Munro, 1996, p. 160), where she recognizes her duty of locating happiness within herself. The story, in this vein, is "about a Christmas dance and a girl's entry into the world of sexuality" (Carscallen, 1993, p. 420). Thus, the heroine, while dancing with Bolting afterwards, experiences a far better feeling than the one she had in her earlier dance with Williams, which makes her happy beyond expression: "My legs had forgotten to tremble and my hands to sweat. I was dancing with a boy who had asked me. Nobody told him to, he didn't have to, he just asked me" (Munro, 1996, pp. 158-59). Character growth in a story like that requires the presence of multidimensionality that allows the protagonist's personality to develop. A Bildungsroman or a coming-of-age story involves the central character's transition or movement from one state to another under the effect of an experience that is often shaping and refining in its quality. In many of Jane Austen's novels, such as *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), or *Emma* (1815), the heroines become able at the end of the novels to find their true selves and achieve maturity through shaping

experiences. This is also seen clearly in Munro's "Red Dress - 1946", particularly in the heroine's final acquisition of the ability that enables her not only to recognize her shortcomings and personality defects, such as excessive shyness, docility, and naivety, but also to seek their satisfactory solutions by refining them.

As the heroine finally becomes one of the chosen (symbolized by Bolting's kiss), she is brought back to normality, a thing which Carscallen calls "repatriation" (1993, p. 459). Bolting has done her a big favor, in fact; he is, literally, her "rescuer", for he has "brought [her] from Mary Fortune's territory into the ordinary world" (Munro, 1996, p. 160), that is why she relishes every moment with him. Literally, she has no alternatives but to walk with Bolting. The "shabby Kleenex" that she finds in her coat pocket and decides to tear in half and offer to Bolting as he starts sniffing functions symbolically both as her recognition of his favor and as a sign that a strong bond has just been formed between the two from which each would "have something" (Munro, 1996, p. 159). More importantly, she has reached the stage where she can make significant decisions concerning her life which she, by now, is able to shape it the way she desires. Evidently, she has finally found herself and is not in need of anyone anymore. She finally finds out that, with Bolting, "[her] life was possible" (Munro, 1996, p. 160). At this stage of the story, the heroine is aspiring to proving her identity and shaking off all remnants and feelings of inferiority she has been suffering from. Commenting on the story's denouement, Carscallen (1993, p. 157) views it as cynical, for while the narrator gives in to a tempter (Bolting) by accepting his invitation to dance with him, she, coming back later to herself, is portrayed meditating on her success which follows her near failure.

In the end, the heroine "with her sleepy but doggedly expectant face," realizes her "mysterious and oppressive obligation" to herself, that is, "to be happy" (Munro, 1996, p. 160). She is, evidently, determined to become someone else, wiser and more mature, and not a prey to self-abasement for she, for the first time, discovers what it is to be someone. The story's open ending seems Munro's realistic touch on her fairy-tale design, as if to remind that such an ending cannot be achieved unless the teenager girl finds respect, understanding, care that she has been looking for all through the story.

5- CONCLUSION

Alice Munro, as a Modern Canadian writer, might not appear different from other contemporary female writers who, through their writings, call into question woman's dilemma in a world that recurrently refuses to acknowledge her right of freedom and equality with man. Such a feminine issue in Munro, however, is

treated in such a way as to place women between two extremes: either to stay in a traditional world where they submit to some patriarchal dominance or search constantly for themselves in a world of increasingly changing values and beliefs.

As Munro's is a characteristically female-dominant world, woman in her stories attempts to challenge social contradictions and, equipped only by her little knowledge of herself and the world at large, could find her way out into the world where she becomes eligible to behave as normally as other people do. In modern literature, girls with the same condition as Munro's heroine, such as Carrie, the titular heroine of Stephen King's *Carrie* (1973) and Laura in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), end their quest for themselves in complete failure. Munro's "Red Dress - 1946", however, has a brighter ending where the heroine could see the light of independence from all social and gender roles women (girls in particular) are supposed - and even forced - to play.

Nevertheless, the Monrovia heroine of the story, like the one in a traditional fairy tale, remains dominantly weak, and it is only when something or someone from the outside world incidentally interferes that she really begins to acquire some courage and self-confidence. Indeed, Mary Fortune functions as the catalyst that proves instrumental in bringing the heroine out of the confining, domestic world, constructed and mainly guarded, as it were, by the mother.

As the heroine proves to be too weak and naïve to do it on her own, Munro's fairy-tale design becomes a means, a vehicle, by which the heroine's new personality evolves more mature and more capable of understanding the world and interacting properly with it. Finally, it can be asserted that there are clear resemblance and a close relationship between Munro's story and a fairy tale proper in theme, structure, plot, setting, and somehow in characterization.

6. REFERENCES

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