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FATHERS AND OTHER CLOWNS: REPRESENTATIONS OF MASCULINITY IN ALICE MUNRO'S *DANCE OF THE HAPPY SHADES*

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This essay is an analysis of selected stories from Alice Munro's first volume of fiction, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) focusing on her representation of masculinity. It investigates the way in which the men in Munro's stories participate in and relate to the discourse of "hegemonic masculinity" and how the stories outline moments of male crisis resulting from this. The essay pays heed to Munro's careful location of her stories in a historical and geographical context, catering to masculinity studies' insistence on the necessity of such contextualization. The present analysis understands itself as complementary to the already existing body of gender-based critical literature which focuses mainly on Munro's rendition of women, suggesting that Munro understands gender as a process and a continual negotiation, and that she de-essentializes received definitions of masculinity and femininity. While concentrating on the depiction of the father figure in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" and "Boys and Girls" and on the parody of the "manly modern" in "The Office," the analysis also includes references to the re-appearance of certain kinds of male characters in Munro's later stories, suggesting that the various embodiments of masculinity in *Dance* can be seen as part of what Robert Thacker calls "Munro's reoccurrences."

Cet article analyse le thème de la représentation de la masculinité dans plusieurs nouvelles du volume *Dance of the Happy Shades* publié par Alice Munro en 1968. Nous nous intéressons à la manière dont les hommes représentés dans ces nouvelles, participent et sont liés au discours « hégémonique de la masculinité » tel que décrit par Connell. Ce faisant nous prendrons en compte la manière dont Munro place précisément ces histoires dans un contexte géographique et historique qui semble définitivement lié à l'inscription de ces discours de la masculinité, dans ce type d'environnement. Cette recherche est le pendant d'une série d'articles sur le sujet des figures féminines et de l'écriture de la féminité dans les nouvelles de Munro, sur lesquelles les chercheurs ont beaucoup glosé.

Magdalene Redekop's study, *Mothers and Other Clowns* (1992), whose title this essay paraphrases, is an excellent and extremely insightful feminist reading of Munro's oeuvre that concentrates on "understanding the danger,"¹ i.e. the (male) threat posed to the female characters in the Canadian writer's stories. Understanding is described as an active search for meaning by the female protagonists made possible by the fact that they are caught in the distancing act of looking at themselves looking (REDEKOP 4), in other words by their self-awareness and self-reflection — especially in situations in which male characters seek to transform them either into objects of the male gaze or into voyeurs of male sexuality (REDEKOP 73). As Redekop argues, the Madonna,

¹ Redekop borrows the phrase "understanding the danger" and the metaphor of reading from Munro's story "Images": "I was trying to understand the danger, to read the signs of invasion" (*Dance* 35).

the harlot, or the doll/puppet are examples of female and feminine posing, upon which both male and female readers are also invited to reflect as do the characters and narrators themselves (30). Redekop persuasively suggests that it is distancing strategies such as gazing back, self-conscious looking, parody and self-mockery (29,76), and the “spectacular” failures of Munro’s texts (34), that save the female protagonists from reification by male characters and submission to patriarchal power. The lack of such skills and strategies, linked with the female characters’ failure to recognize, understand and read the danger, consequently leads to their defeat by patriarchy (REDEKOP 79, 84).

While fully concurring with the valuable insights of a long tradition of feminist critical reading of Munro’s stories, this essay suggests a gendered approach that pays more attention to the representation of masculinity in her first published collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968). The type of reading proposed here is, instead, complementary to the extant body of secondary literature and hopes to enter into a fruitful dialogue with it, suggesting that so far gender-based analyses of Munro’s texts have tended to concentrate on the domination of the male over the female gender and on the female protagonists’ attempts at undermining received notions of gender-based hierarchies. Such analyses have long surpassed essentialist definitions of femininity and acknowledged its heterogeneity, but in so doing they have opposed a plethora of femininities to one masculinity, namely a homogenous and static model of hegemonic masculinity. However, Munro’s approach to gender in general and masculinity in particular is more complex than the existing secondary literature might intimate. Indeed, her characters operate within a heteronormative gender system (with very few exceptions) rooted in a binary power structure, with the power play occurring between men and women. Munro, however, does not reaffirm the fixed binary gender structure but outlines that “masculinity and femininity are stratified in relation to each other as well as intrinsically along the line of difference within” (YEKANI 29). Most importantly, she does not see gender as an isolated condition for defining individual identity, but as part of a web of factors, finely wrought together, which define individual identity. These are both material factors (regional, socio-economic and historical as well as gender- and body-related) on the one hand, while on the other hand there is individual subjectivity, for the masterful depiction of which Munro has earned so much acclaim. It is in this core subjectivity that the most surprising twists in Munro’s characters originate which often lead to more or less radical challenges to social convention. Just as in the case of female figures, in her depiction of male figures, and of the father figure in particular, the author is especially interested in the workings of subjectivity and its role in shaping and

sustaining the character's individuality and integrity. The representation of the father in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" and "Images" are instances of such complex masculinity. Several male characters, though, remain one-sided and exemplify masculine hegemony, as in her story "The Office." Arguably, "Thanks for the Ride" contrasts a representative of each of these categories in the characters George and Dick, whereas "Boys and Girls" stages a negotiation of power relations which, as I would like to suggest, is not as clearly decided as most readings of the story imply.

In analysing selected stories from *Dance*, the present essay follows a decade-long sustained effort in masculinity studies to retrace the social construction and insist on the inner differentiation of the male gender. The analysis is grafted on the concept of hegemonic masculinity coined by Raewyn Connell and concerns its forms and manifestation in the stories "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "Boys and Girls" and "The Office," although references will be made to other stories collected in *Dance* and in later publications by Munro.

Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity" will hopefully prove a productive analytical instrument as it effectively deconstructs monolithic conceptualizations of masculinity and calls into question the existence of a gender continuum. In her groundbreaking study *Masculinities* (1995), Connell defined "hegemonic masculinity" as a strategy for male domination over women (77) and refined the term in a 2005 article co-authored with James W. Messerschmidt to respond to criticism.² Their definition of the term draws attention to the social construction of both the male gender and its power in society, while underlining that masculinity is not a monolithic term as there are multiple, competing masculinities (CONNELL AND MESSERSCHMIDT 846), which "stress the stratification among men" (YEKANI 29). Thus, "hegemonic," "subordinated" and "complicit" (CONNELL AND MESSERSCHMIDT 832) masculinities construct a "hierarchy of masculinities" (846) in which the first is "certainly normative" (832). Connell and Messerschmidt underscore that, as in Gramsci's concept, masculine hegemony also relies on the consent of the subordinate and simultaneously entails a capacity for "change" (846) and "democratizing gender relations" (853). Finally, they underline that hegemonic masculinity is a projection of "widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires" (CONNELL AND MESSERSCHMIDT 838) and that it is rather to be defined at the level of discourse instead of embodiment by real men (YEKANI 16). Elahe

² Because this article represents a concise, updated and revised definition of hegemonic masculinity I will refer to it instead of Connell's *Masculinities* from here on.

Haschemi Yekani notes that positions of hegemony and marginality are not based on a universal continuum of masculinity, but are “relative structural locations ... rather than fixed positions” (YEKANI 30). They depend “very much on the context” (30) and underline the changeability of the meaning of the term “masculinity” which is best used in the plural, “masculinities” (YEKANI 26).

This theoretical contextualization forms the basis for the following analysis of Munro’s representation of masculinity in *Dance*. The analysis starts from several observations that are both rooted in and complementary to the existing bulk of critical readings of Munro’s stories. Firstly, it is striking that the most extensive and memorable portraits of male characters in her writing are those of the father figure described in stories in which the female adult narrator reminisces about events in which her father played an important role. Generally, these stories are mainly, though not exclusively, of two kinds: fictional autobiographies of the narrator-protagonists (such as in *Lives of Girls and Women*, 1974, and *Who Do You Think You Are?*, 1978), and memoirs and stories that Munro herself has declared to be autobiographical (such as the title story of *The Moons of Jupiter* 1982, “Working for a Living” in *The View From Castle Rock* 2006, or “Night” in *Dear Life* 2012). Secondly, it is noticeable that self-distancing moments of recognition such as those which Redekop identifies in Munro’s female characters are seldom afforded to the men in her stories, due mainly to the fact that the narrating voice is almost always identifiable as female. The story “Thanks for the Ride” in *Dance* is an exception to this rule and Munro has followed it up by a similar attempt to change the point of view in her more recent “Pride” (*Dear Life*) as well as several written documents by male characters who narrate in the first person in *The View from Castle Rock*. Thirdly, *Dance of the Happy Shades* can be seen as Munro’s first attempt at sketching a variety of male figures who will resurface in similar forms in later works, examples of what Robert Thacker calls “Munro’s recurrences” (“Mapping” 133), the most prominent of which is the father figure.

In her reading of *Dance* in *Mothers and Other Clowns*, Redekop notes that:

The absence of the mother looms large in the two opening stories³ of this collection, but what is equally noteworthy is the comforting and solid presence of the father. His playful reproductions, his good

³ Redekop refers to “Walker Brothers Cowboy” and “Images,” the first and the third stories of the collection.

manners, and his humility offer an alternative to grandiose quests. Instead of reaffirming the robust, individual male ego, his little acts of compassion and of failed understanding begin “the progress of love.” (49)

This essay takes up this notion of the benign father and relates it to the father figures’ participation in hegemonic masculinity, principally in “Walker Brothers Cowboy” and “Boys and Girls,” two of what Munro terms her “‘real material’ stories” (STRUTHERS 23). The character of the father resurfaces in Munro’s later fiction, as an elusive literary figure who various narrator-protagonists and Munro herself seek to “get rid” of by telling its story. Some of these stories are more obviously autobiographical than others, and some started as fiction and were adapted for memoir, as Thacker observes (THACKER 110-2). Generally, they all share certain features that the present essay subsumes under the manner in which they relate to hegemonic masculinity.

The fathers in Munro’s early fiction seem to embody the same person and be its metonymic representations. Whereas in *Dance* and *Lives*, the father’s physical violence is directed towards animals as part of his business, in *Who* he acquires a punitive quality to which the story “Boys and Girls” points through its “epistemic violence” (SPIVAK 280) against the protagonist. The protagonist of *Who*, Rose, escapes the pain and shame of her battering in “Royal Beatings” by imagining the scene as a royal occasion full of frenzy and heroism. As in “Boys and Girls,” women also participate in the violence against them by requesting it as a disciplining act from the men. Yet the protagonist’s affection for her father is unabated and, as a consequence, in Rose’s eyes, the father merely plays a role in which he feels uncomfortable while beating her. What she cannot escape is the overwhelming feeling of shame inflicted by his violent punishments which is repeatedly invoked in later stories as well. “Fathers” in *View* and the title story of *Dear Life* are cases in point. This violence is a displacement of the fathers’ feelings of helplessness and an indication of the crisis which besets their existence given the economic and social pressures exerted on them. In “Night” (*Dear Life*) and “Working for a Living,” both clearly memoirs, can be read as the “real material” basis for the fictional fathers in Munro’s early work. The father is also often an artist, as in “Walker Brothers Cowboy” and “Royal Beatings” (*Who*), a mediator of the relationship between fiction and reality in “Family Furnishings” (*Hateship, Friendship*) and a writer in “Working for a Living,” thus sharing with his fictional and real daughter the conflict generated by the exigencies of economic and social necessities, on the one hand, and the writing profession, on the other. Finally, in “The Moons of Jupiter,” from the

volume of the same title, having an intimation of his mortality before an operation that would prove fatal, the father expresses his regrets about the way he has led his life: “The trouble was I was always afraid to take chances” (*Moons* 225). The story of his life, however, told in fiction and memoir, proves otherwise. Munro’s loving portraits of the father are complex and inherently contradictory, illustrating the intricacies of an identity caught between subjectivity and the demands of socio-economic reality that limit and dictate their agency.

“Walker Brothers Cowboy”: Imagining the Father

Analysing the father figure in any literary text would seem to necessarily require a feminist incursion into the structures of patriarchy, a psychoanalytical approach, or a poststructuralist reference to the symbolic language of power that the father speaks as opposed to the semiotic voice of the mother and daughter. The word “father” itself can no longer be used as a neutral term in the Humanities and might even require capitalization to underline its metonymic significance in connection with power relationships. Without choosing any of these as its main focus in reading the father figure in Munro’s stories, my analysis necessarily relies on all these meanings. Yet its specific concern is with the way in which Munro’s father figures participate in the discourse of “hegemonic masculinity.”

“Walker Brothers Cowboy,” like “Images”, and “Boys and Girls,” stages Munro’s search for the father, who emerges as a combination of the disciplinarian patriarch and the benign father, whose elusive and ambiguous figure will reappear in later volumes. Munro’s father figure generally oscillates between these two positions, depending not only on gender conventions, but also on socio-economic and historical factors. In both *Dance of the Happy Shades* and in later works such as *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* the protagonists’ childhoods stand under the shadow of the economic depression in the 1930s followed by the Second World War. At the same time, their families live in close-knit small-town communities with predefined and static notions of social organization and conventions, in particular in relation to class and gender hierarchies that one might still describe rather tritely as “garrison” communities (FRYE 225). The father figures are expected to fulfil the role of the hegemonic male as provider, punitive father, and economically independent husband, while having to confront the economic crisis, first, and, second, the aftermath of the war, which includes a

major shift in the definition of masculinity and sees the power of the female gender on the rise.

The first story of *Dance*, “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” is a brilliant example of Munro’s ability to negotiate such unstable personal histories and render their tormenting ambiguity. The father featured here, Ben Jordan, is “in the midst of the radical instability of [his] sense of self” (REDEKOP 38). He has already given up his fox-farming business and is now a travelling salesman⁴ for the Walker Brothers. In a “Canadianized” version of the cowboy, Ben Jordan is “obviously bound to the economy of his country” (REDEKOP 38). Formerly an independent, though not very successful businessman who used to employ hired help on the farm and to be able to provide a decent income for his wife and two children, Ben Jordan is now forced to accept an employment situation which is a source of humiliation not only to himself, but also to his family, especially his wife. The job of salesman is an ambivalent one. On the one hand, it contains promises of the American dream: economic and individual independence and prosperity as well as personal freedom and self-fulfilment that are also suggested by the metaphor of being on the road. On the other hand, the actual experience of going from door to door trying to sell objects of dubious quality and utility to people who are themselves without means (as during the economic crisis) deflates the effect of the apparent allurements of the job.

To the little girl, the father seems more at ease with his employment and economic situation than her mother until an experience on the road teaches her otherwise. The girl and her younger brother witness an incident in which their father’s knock on a farm door is followed by an unseen person opening a window and emptying urine from a chamber pot, probably aiming to spill the contents on the salesman’s head. This is a turning point in the girl’s understanding of her father’s job, particularly as he asks the children to keep this incident secret from their mother as “She isn’t liable to see the joke” (*Dance* 10). This humiliation also triggers off an unexpected reaction on the father’s part, probably stemming from an acute sense of self-recognition. He decides not to continue on his tour but to change course and take his children to

⁴ Ben Jordan is professionally related both to Arthur Miller’s Willy Loman (*Death of a Salesman* 1949) and to Margaret Laurence’s Chris, the anti-hero of “Horses of the Night” (*A Bird in the House* 1970). In Munro’s work women also adopt this profession, as shown by the examples of Del’s mother in *Lives* (“Princess Ida”) and of Louisa in “Carried Away” (*Open Secrets* 1996), thus adding another dimension to feminist emancipation and female conquest of male space.

the house of a woman, Nora, who proves to be his former lover before he met his wife.

Ben Jordan's spontaneous visit to Nora is most certainly connected to his wish to restore some of his masculinity and male dignity after the incident at the farm. As a "mock mother" whose "nurturing" Ben needs, who shares his sense of humour and "is open to comedy" (REDEKOP 41), Nora reminds him of a time of happiness and lack of familial obligations, and generally of more carefree times. She accepts her social position while his wife feels that she has "come down in the world" (*Dance* 4) and constantly tries to maintain her pretence of socio-economic superiority.

The protagonist's mother is shown to be complicit in the maintenance of the social and gender status quo by participating in a comedy of self-fashioning as a well-to-do and elegant middle-class housewife that is embarrassing to her daughter: "Even the dirty words chalked on the sidewalk are laughing at us. My mother does not seem to notice" (*Dance* 5). The mother also finds Ben Jordan's new job humiliating and the music he composes about it "not a very funny song" (*Dance* 4). For her, Ben's failure to be the hegemonic man she desires to have for a husband is a source of discontent and permanent frustration while also adding to the pressure on her husband. The daughter, the narrator's young persona, sides with her father as she "yearns to escape the evidence of the cruelty that the mother does to herself in the name of the Father" (REDEKOP 39), i.e., of patriarchal society and hierarchical gender order.

Ben Jordan's strategies of evasion include his work-related song-making and performances in front of his wife and children. Because he knows that his wife despises his job as a travelling salesman, Ben tries to amuse her by parodying his encounters with his customers. His performances are full of humour and self-irony, and they feature him in charge of the mercurial negotiation although his wife sees through their mockery and exaggeration and declares the dialogues inaccurate. To Ben, Nora, not his wife, is the desired "audience" for his comedy (REDEKOP 40) while the mother dismisses his comic self-parody with the words "He doesn't say that really, does he?" (*Dance* 8-9). Ben's songs are narratives of everyday occurrences on his trips and they represent his way of processing his experiences by turning them into entertainment and ordering their content into the regular form of verse and music. Also, his acting and song-making attest to artistic qualities incongruent with both the violence of his former fox-farming business and with the humiliation and banality of his present job. I suggest that the story actually finally divests Ben Jordan of his

clownesque persona. It first creates a crescendo of self-parody that reaches its climax when Ben tells Nora about the chamber pot incident, prefacing his story with the imperative "Picture me there" (*Dance* 15). The chamber pot incident can be seen as the point in the story at which Ben abandons all strategies of self-fashioning as a jolly travelling salesman and content father and husband. These are all discredited as mere performances, or, in Redekop's words, "illusions about autonomous identity, exposing the reality that we make ourselves up out of an assortment of conventions" (41). However, in addition to contemporary definitions of identity as performance, which she dramatizes in her stories as playful self-stagings of her characters (e.g., Rose, Flo and Ralph Gillespie in *Who*), Munro frequently intimates that individual subjectivity goes beyond the surface of performance as she reveals the unsuspected depth and complexity of human identity, instantiated by the complex father figures of the stories discussed here.

Ben Jordan's life at the time of the story is beset with economic hardships which are an assault upon his status as a hegemonic male. As he can hardly provide for his family, and, even worse, he has made them witness to his humiliation, Ben undergoes a moment of crisis in which he cannot fathom in which direction to go in order to regain self-confidence. The children are alarmed by the signs of his crisis, such as leaving his "territory," changing his course and driving at high speed (*Dance* 10). He chooses to travel back into his past, into a territory that confirms his masculinity at least in the role of the fiancé. The expectations of this role are, obviously, quite different to those ones set by his duties as a father and husband, and they are easier to fulfil. However, this is also an only partly satisfactory experience, because it is a reminder of the fact that he failed as a fiancé, too. He actually abandoned Nora, disappointing her expectations of him as a man by his failure to propose marriage, possibly on account of their different religions. In this encounter, too, he fails to rise to her expectations as he refuses to accept her repeated invitation to dance with him.

Very importantly, in the closely-knit society of small-town Ontario, in this case Tuppertown on Lake Huron, so often depicted in Munro's stories, there are a set of conventions and expectations that he is supposed to fulfil and which he prefers to evade. Thus, whereas the protagonist has to accompany her mother to town and suffer a series of humiliations through her mother's pretences, the father takes her on a different route that leads to the margins of the town. Here he feels comfortable among the people they meet as he rather prefers to associate with those who, like him, are faced with economic hardship and an outsider position in society, such as the beggar for whom he rolls a cigarette,

while also lighting one for himself (*Dance* 2-3). On such occasions the female protagonist shares a sense of community with her father that is very different from the tormenting effect of her mother's affectation upon her. This feeling is best expressed through the secrets she and her father share. Both in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" and in "Images" the father asks for certain things to be kept hidden from the mother. After the visit to Nora, the protagonist knows instinctively "that there are things not to be mentioned" although her father does not utter his request for secrecy (*Dance* 17-8). This secrecy is ambiguous because it is both a form of solidarity with the father, but also a mere postponement of the danger or threat inherent in the subject matter of the secret connected with trespassing, sexuality and violence. At the same time, it is a secrecy that ends when the daughter enters adolescence and is severed from her father, as the story "Boys and Girls" illustrates.

"Boys and Girls" : "Maybe" a Story of Male Domination

Feminist critics like Héliane Ventura, Marlene Goldmann, and Reingard M. Nischik have contributed penetrating readings of the story "Boys and Girls" in which they elucidate the actual formation of the gender divide at an early age as illustrated by Munro based on a pair of siblings: the unnamed female narrator-protagonist and her younger brother with the telling name Laird (VENTURA 82; NISCHIK, "(Un)Doing" 214). Ventura and Goldmann are especially sensitive to the role of space in the configuration of the hierarchy of gender roles⁵ and they also connect female subordination with colonial domination based on the symbolism of the two calendars that frame the kitchen door in the protagonist's parental home (VENTURA 85; GOLDMANN n.p.).

Goldmann's strong reading of the story offers a perspective on the father figure, which needs further attention. Her critique of patriarchy is grafted mainly, though not solely, on the father figure whom she sees as complicit in male hegemony, if not hegemonic himself, and she regards the mother and daughter as victims of patriarchy. However, Munro's story offers a more differentiated view of the parents which becomes obvious if one distinguishes more carefully between the protagonist and the narrator, which Goldmann only does in her "final note" (n.p.). Thus, the mature narrator does not share the young protagonist's view of her relationship with her parents entirely. On the one

⁵ Ventura speaks of "a highly structured and polarized topography" (80) of gender constructed along the axes of inside/outside and upstairs/downstairs. For Goldmann, who takes a Marxist-feminist critical position, the story illustrates "how the division of space facilitates two seemingly disparate systems of production: farming and the construction of gendered adults" (n.p.).

hand, she justifies her father's actions by economic necessity, while on the other she becomes more understanding towards her mother's situation in later years. In my reading, I rather follow Ventura's remark that the story only "seems" to be essentializing gender roles (80) as it underscores that both the mother and the father are equally subordinated to them (85). In this way, it is not only the mother who is limited to and constrained by the realm of the home and whose appearance in the barn is incongruous to the protagonist (*Dance* 116). To the same extent, the father shares "the farmer's lot" (VENTURA 85) as Laird will do, too, so that their masculinity is less a privilege than a similar enchainment like that of the girls and women in the story.

Nischik ("(Un-)Doing" 214) quotes Munro's statement that "Boys and Girls" originated from an impulse to "show something" (MUNRO, "Commentary" 185). Interestingly, the quotation is truncated in Nischik's analysis of the story and excludes the referent for which "something" stands: "to show what happens to girls and women, then found I had to write about something that happens to boys too" (MUNRO, "Commentary" 185). Critics usually concentrate on the first part of what Munro wanted to show, namely the social construction of femininity and the subordination of the female gender, as Nischik's own focus on the narrator-protagonist and "her ongoing socialization into received gender patterns" ("(Un-)Doing" 210) demonstrates. However, Munro pays balanced heed to both genders in her story, illustrating the process through which gender ascription occurs at an early age and "calling into question a strictly essentializing view of gender hierarchies," as Nischik also concedes at the end of her essay ("(Un-)Doing" 216). Accordingly, Munro mentions in her commentary that the story illustrates a privileged freedom enjoyed by the girl but not by the boy:

To be accepted, to be fully male, he cannot criticize, he must sometimes participate in, whatever bloodstained practices his society believes necessary to itself; that, or become a revolutionary. (...) If the boy wants into his father's world, he must learn to take part in this. It is the girl, already half shut-out, becoming mutinous, confused, critical, who is permitted the gesture of refusal. She is permitted it because she is "only a girl". (MUNRO, "Commentary" 186)

This passage, like the story itself, is, on a larger scale, a comment on the limitations of hegemonic masculinity. While it affords men the privilege of power, it also entails the renunciation of certain freedoms at the cost of which power is maintained. Playing peeping Tom on the men and observing their

male activities from a distance, the girl is granted the privilege of the powerless, namely that of voicing opposition.

Through the female narrative voice the reader is basically bound to pay more attention to the girl's story of gender formation. This story, however, bears traces of gender construction that can be analysed under the concept of "female masculinity" coined by Judith Halberstam. It is Halberstam's contention that dominant definitions of masculinity are linked exclusively to the (white) male body and thus both exclude divergent masculinities and sanction only bodies that are clearly "readable" as either male or female (23). However, since masculinity is not intrinsically connected to biological bodies, but is clearly a cultural production, it also manifests itself in female bodies, creating a non-readable gendered body that is subject to punitive and disciplining reactions by society, as her chapter "The Bathroom Problem" powerfully illustrates. Halberstam refers to the tomboy as an example of how the adolescent female body is regulated and is forced to accept a female identity (6). Thus, while the little girl's play at masculinity is condoned and she may join in boys' activities, i.e., she is allowed to be a tomboy, as soon as she becomes an adolescent and her sex and gender consequently begin to matter to society, she is expected to fully embrace the female gender.

"Boys and Girls" fictionalizes precisely this process for the protagonist. Once proud to help her father out on the farm as his "new hired man" (116) and to take an active part in his outdoor work which "was ritualistically important" (117), she later enters the realm of femininity which she formerly rejected with vehemence. She is now told that "Girls don't slam doors like that" and that "Girls keep their knees together when they sit down" or that some things are "none of girls' business" (119). These lessons do not come from the men, but they are taught by the women of the family, who thus become complicit in male hegemony and help perpetuate the static gender roles.

As Munro writes, "In this story the family is economically dependent on the systematic killing of animals" ("Commentary" 186). In response, Goldmann is very sensitive to the protagonist's apparently "neutral" point of view on violence and to the entrapment of (human and animal) females in "Boys and Girls." Nonetheless, the violence is rooted in a desperate struggle for survival and thus renders masculinity if not weak, at least vulnerable. The protagonist aptly exploits this vulnerability when she entices her brother to join her in spying on the men while they shoot horses. In this way, she both undermines her father's authority and introduces Laird to the male world awaiting him,

which he then joins voluntarily by pursuing and catching the horse Flora together with his father and Henry. To a large extent, the masculinity the men embody is a weak one because its power is based on violence, physical and epistemic, against animals and the protagonist. At the same time, the young girl now has a secret that she no longer shares with her father, as in “Walker Brothers Cowboy” and “Images,” but one that confers her power over him since by watching him secretly she impinges upon forbidden male territory. Because the mechanism of gender segregation is so innocuous, the protagonist herself comes to agree in the end that her existence is ostensibly inconsequential because, as her father says, “She’s only a girl”: “I didn’t protest that, even in my heart. Maybe it was true” (*Dance* 127). The father’s words can be categorised as “epistemic violence” (SPIVAK 280) against women, but the protagonist’s final sentence contains more than female resignation. As Nischik contends, “there is some hope presented at the end of the story by the modal adverb ‘maybe’” (“(Un-)Doing” 213), but her remark only refers to hope for the girl.

It is not easy to overlook the fact that the story ends with a sentence that both asserts and questions the power of gender: “Maybe it was true.” A narratological analysis of these words might bring to light its multiple layers of meaning. On the one hand, the narrator’s attitude towards her father does not coincide with that of her younger self, the female protagonist. The temporal and moral distance created here allows both the narrator and the reader a reflective position in relation to the narrated events. All three, the protagonist, the narrator, and the reader are actually readers of a gender-inscribed text whose signs they decode in different ways. Yet the last sentence of the story seems to bring together all three readers. “Maybe it was true” is both free indirect discourse rendering the protagonist’s thoughts, and narrative comment indicating a sceptical distance suggesting that the father might have been wrong as well. At the same time, it could also be the reader’s comment, shared with the (implied) author that the father-daughter relationship can also be read against the gender script. Thus, the fact that the daughter now writes about how she and her brother became gendered persons indicates an overturn of the power balance because it is a female and feminist voice that speaks to us.

In fact, hegemonic masculinity in the story is shown to have several weaknesses. First, it entails a potential for espionage and escape that the female protagonist exploits in her secretive observation of male activity from which she is excluded and in her attempt to liberate the horse Flora. Second, it is itself a constricting structure in which male figures are trapped, as Laird is when he

joins his father and his hired man in their race to catch Flora. By accepting him into their male circle, they also force him to adopt a certain masculine role defined by force, power and violence.

“The Office”: Caricaturing Masculinity

“The Office” is without doubt, a story grafted upon several gender-political claims that are part of the feminist movement in full sway in the late 1960s. At such a time of feminist and female self-affirmation some of the reactions to Munro’s winning of the Governor General’s Award for *Dance of the Happy Shades*, though appreciative of the book’s literary merits, seem rather awkward and outmoded. In the newspapers, *Dance* was hailed as a huge success for a “city mother,” a “shy housewife” with three daughters [who] helps her husband run a bookstore in Victoria,” and an “Oakville Man’s Wife” (quoted in THACKER, *Writing* 196-7). There is an unavoidable feeling that such assignation of female subordination clashes devastatingly with the actual content of the stories. These, albeit few and selected, voices from the press read like an attempt at preserving a certain male hegemony that comes under duress through the feminist movement’s attack on it. They might be regarded as indicators of a “crisis” of male hegemony as described by Yekani in her book *The Privilege of Crisis*. First, the crisis narrative points towards a universalizing and homogenizing concept of male hegemony and a continuum of masculinity to which the term “crisis” is linked (YEKANI 12; 15). Second, the term “crisis” entails revisionist, or “re-privileging” (YEKANI 12) efforts and claims. In order to disrupt this narrative of crisis in masculinity it is necessary, among other things, to historically and geographically contextualize the discussion of masculinity (cf. KIMMEL, HEARN AND CONNELL 6). Thus, while the father figure to whom I referred earlier struggles with changes of received notions of masculinity in the aftermath of economic crisis and WWII, the self-understanding of the male character in “The Office” is challenged by the arrival of the second wave of feminism. The story is based on an autobiographical incident and “is about something that happened to [Munro] in 1960 or 1961, in Vancouver” (“On Writing” 192). In my reading of “The Office,” the story is both a feminist comment pitted against male domination, as literary critics have rightly observed, and concomitantly a critical intervention in the definition of masculinity. To the same extent to which it makes its feminist claims regarding female emancipation, it also showcases the weaknesses and fissures of the concept of masculinity itself. The antagonist figure of the narrator, her landlord Mr Malley, serves to put on display the necessary shifts in the understanding of masculine superiority that he both takes for granted and sees threatened by the

arrival of a woman writer who affirms her independence from a traditional ascription of gender roles.

Regarding its representation of masculinity, the story can be labelled a “comedy of gender.” It undermines assumptions of masculine hegemony while at the same time being a comic and twisted illustration of the workings of hegemony. It shows that hegemony relies on the dominated subject’s consent to it as a necessary condition and this very consent harbours a potential for revolt and change. The protagonist rents an office space with the purpose of writing in it undisturbed by her family and chores but her landlord soon becomes a nuisance through his presents, patronizing manner, and several irksome interventions.

In a much-quoted interview with J.R. (Tim) Struthers, Munro describes her story as “personal material – that’s about my most autobiographical story, and yet it isn’t on a very deep level” (23). The lack of depth mainly concerns Mr Malley’s character which is deficient in complexity, inner life, or a real development (RIMMON-KENAN 41-2) and is thus easily summed up in his portrayal in “The Office.” In this story it is not the protagonist’s husband who becomes the target of feminist critique although his typically masculine role in the household prompts the protagonist to rent a room of her own to write in: “A house is all right for a man to work in. He brings his work into the house, a place is cleared for it; . . . So a house is not the same for a woman. . . . She *is* the house; there is no separation possible” (*Dance* 60). Her minimal financial independence enables her to afford to rent spatial freedom, but this is encumbered by the looming presence of her landlord, Mr Malley, who desires to keep his tenant in check by forcing her to accept the female role into which he casts her. He uses so-called soft power by offering to furnish the room with furniture from his late mother’s estate and making her presents such as a potted plant or a teapot. He hopes to transform “an awfully uncomfortable place for a lady” (*Dance* 64) into the kind of domestic paradise that the protagonist has decided to escape temporarily: “I brooded with satisfaction on the bareness of my walls, the cheap dignity of my essential furnishings, the remarkable lack of things to dust, wash or polish” (*Dance* 64).

Not only does Mr Malley have a clear idea about what a woman’s room should look like, but he has also decorated a room of his own in a very masculine way. The room in the Malleys’ apartment shown by Mrs Malley to the protagonist is “evidently a combination of living room and office” and bears the traces of a male hand in its entire set-up: model ships are omnipresent, “‘masculine’

ornaments” dominate the room, diplomas hang on the walls, and two dogs “dressed in masculine and feminine clothing” announce in a photo that they are ““Old Friends”” (*Dance* 62). This very detailed and visual description of the interior of the room is completed by its central piece:

But the room was really dominated by a portrait, with its own light and a gilded frame; it was of a good-looking, fair-haired man in middle age, sitting behind a desk, wearing a business suit and looking pre-eminently prosperous, rosy and agreeable. Here again, it is probably hindsight on my part that points out that in the portrait there is evidently also some uneasiness, some lack of faith the man has in this role, a tendency he has to spread himself too bountifully and insistently, which for all anyone knows may lead to disaster. (*Dance* 62-3)

Both the room and the photo are aspects of Mr Malley’s self-presentation as a hegemonic male, deflated by his actual behaviour, which W.R. Martin depicts as “an engagingly outrageous spectacle, bordering on the farcical” (54). He wears the insignia of male power, the business suit. He emanates an aura of success and places himself at the centre of authority and hegemony by choosing to have his picture taken while seated at his desk. The description of both the room and of the portrait with its “gilded frame” that “dominate[s]” it is fraught with a semiotics of power that hardly requires comment. But the reader’s suspicion is raised by the narrator’s additional observation concerning the “uneasiness” of the portrayed man. This observation might be the result of ulterior considerations (*Dance* 62), but the narrator allows the reader to also read the portrait proleptically, very much in the manner of the portraits that the fictional photographer in Del’s black fable takes in the last story of *Lives*, “Epilogue: The Photographer.” While in *Lives* the shot photos predict the subjects’ futures in an “unusual, even frightening” manner by showing them as “they had aged twenty or thirty years” (*Lives* 242-3), the effect of Mr Malley’s portrait is more subtle. Behind his self-reliance and affirmation of hegemonic masculinity, there is a sense of threat posed by the very certitude expressed in his pose. There is a total lack of self-introspection and a complete focus on exterior effect that hints at potential “disaster.” In actual fact, when the protagonist meets him she finds him much changed:

Ten years, maybe fifteen, had greatly softened, spread and defeated the man in the picture. His hips and thighs had now a startling accumulation of fat, causing him to move with a sigh, a cushiony settling of flesh, a ponderous matriarchal discomfort. His hair and eyes had faded, his

features blurred, and the affable, predatory expression had collapsed into one of troubling humility and chronic mistrust. I did not look at him. (*Dance* 63-4)

In the final picture of Mr. Malley, that the narrator imagines to complete the story, we see him helplessly cleaning the bathroom after unjustly blaming her for vandalizing it: “Mr. Malley with his rags and brushes and a pail of soapy water, scrubbing in his clumsy way, his deliberately clumsy way, at the toilet walls, stooping with difficulty, breathing sorrowfully” (75) in disbelief at his encounter with the narrator. In this final caricature pictured in her mind, Munro announces the overturn of the power balance between the genders, as Nischik also notes, calling Malley, in parodic mode, “a ‘madman in the bathroom’” (“Multiple Challenges” 47).

These three images of Mr Malley, typical of Munro’s much invoked snapshot technique of writing, show a gradual but dramatic decline in his appearance, masculinity, and effect on others. He changes from a hegemonic man to a “mock matriarch” (REDEKOP 49) with accumulations of fat around his hips and finally into a cleaning lady, metamorphosing into his wife whom we encounter in this role at the beginning of the story. While she still bears signs of her former feminine attractiveness (*Dance* 62), he is completely emasculated in this final image and reduced to an object of ridicule for the female writer he once patronized.

It is not the only instance in which Mr Malley is presented as feminized. Ironically, he wants to demonstrate his male power by playing the role of muse to the writer in a comic inversion of a classical trope. To extend the comedy, he offers the story of another man, a chiropractor, his former tenant before the narrator. Although Mr Malley intimates that he disapproved of the chiropractor and his womanizing practices carried out in the office, the fact that he deems this story to be apt material for the narrator’s fiction shows more than a deprecation of a woman writer’s talents that most critics identify in this episode. In their readings, this episode demonstrates Malley’s belief that sexual looseness and romance are suitable topics for fiction, as Munro’s text suggests itself (*Dance* 67). However, one can also read this part of the story as an attempt to assert hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, Malley thinks that his own life and that of the chiropractor, i.e. men’s lives, might be an inspiration for literature. Even more, the story of the chiropractor is an affirmation of masculinity and sexual power, especially since it includes the humiliation of one of his female visitors whom he locks out of the room. Mr Malley’s attitude

towards his former tenant is one of amused and admiring outrage and it is yet another irony of the text that he expects the narrator to share it. It is also ironic and indicative of a change in society that Mr Malley is bound to find alarming that such a paragon of masculinity as the chiropractor should be succeeded by the female narrator as a tenant. Finally, Mr Malley becomes the narrator's subject after all, yet not as a hegemonic male as he would have wished, but as his own feeble epigone, divested of his entire authority and power and stooping to clean a bathroom.

Another victory of the female over the male voice is signalled in the fact that it is the woman writer who takes down the story of the decline of hegemonic masculinity metonymically represented by Mr Malley. Basically by writing him down, "she gets 'rid of him' on a symbolic level" (NISCHIK, "Multiple Challenges" 48) and presents his attempts at preserving his self-image as a powerful and influential man as weak and desperate. As in "Boys and Girls," the female narrator is nameless in the story but that is far from intimating that her position is weak on that account. The last two sentences of the story illustrate the power balance between the two characters in terms of the outcome of their encounter. While Mr Malley is caught in the posture of a "clumsy" cleaning man troubled by the events and "arranging in his mind the bizarre but somehow never quite satisfactory narrative of yet another betrayal of trust," the narrator finds a satisfactory way of processing her experience: "While I arrange words, and think it is my right to be rid of him" (74). This last sentence contains a typical Munroian metafictional trope that applies to one of the roles of fiction, namely that of transforming reality into a text that supersedes and annihilates its extratextual referent. "Getting rid" of Mr Malley is such a way of processing reality in art. W.R. Martin regards Malley's portrait as "unfinished" (54) and Magdalene Redekop suggests that "The story ... is about the failure of a story. There is too much left over" (50).

However, I would like to make a distinction here between the different ways in which Munro employs the concept of "getting rid" of reality in fiction. "The Office," unlike other stories that contain this trope, concentrates on a one-dimensional character about whom the narrator repeatedly states that she does not intend to pay much heed to him: "Never mind the Malleys" (63-64); her emotions towards him are anger, annoyance, and shock, but not genuine interest. On the other hand, in the fictional autobiographies featuring the protagonist's mother, the narrator struggles with the fact that she cannot write her mother's story in such a way that she would not haunt her any longer. In "The Ottawa Valley" the narrator struggles with "the only problem" that she

cannot “get rid” of, that of her mother in her story because “she looms too close” (*Something* 246; emphasis original). Such qualms also trouble the narrator of “The Peace of Utrecht” who realizes that her mother’s “picture is still not complete” (*Dance* 200). Similarly, Del in *Lives* wonders at the fact that the mystery of Marion Sherriff is not solved in the black fable she writes, in which she creates a gothic suicidal alter ego for Marion, Caroline: “Such questions persist, in spite of novels. It is a shock, when you have dealt so cunningly, powerfully, with reality, to come back and find it still there” (*Lives* 247). In *Dance*, the stories that seek to capture the figure of the father also end on an indecisive note, revealing him surrounded by mystery and unsolved questions, even in stories whose meaning appears so obvious as in “Boys and Girls” which ends with a sentence containing the word “maybe.” It is my assumption that Munro consciously applies the concept of “getting rid” of a character by writing in two different ways, depending on her subject matter. Thus, characters like George in “Thanks for the Ride” or Mr Malley in “The Office” are easily explained and fictionalized as they lack the complexity of other male (and female) figures. For this second category of characters Munro needs to adopt several different approaches in various short stories, creating a multiplicity of textual fathers (and mothers) through whom she can only presume to tackle the intricacies of their subjectivity without ever being able to translate it into the exhaustive portraits for which she strives.

Conclusion

Janet Beer remarks that male characters in *Lives of Girls and Women* are caught unawares at a time of crisis when women begin to push them towards the margins and they tragically fail to realize that their moment of hegemony has disappeared (126). Historically this would be the time between the economic depression and the Second World War and its aftermath which also concerns most of the stories in *Dance*. Momentous historical changes occasion “alterations in the balance of power between the sexes” and the “dislocation of socially accepted structures of authority” (BEER 126). It is her contention that the “lives of boys and men” are consequently relegated to an “irrelevant hinterland” (128) and to a “deadening provinciality ... white male identity being predicated on waste, violence, and lack of ambition” (132). This radically feminist view of the male characters in *Lives* registers an important moment of crisis in masculinity and also obliterates finer distinctions between the different kinds of male characters that Munro works out very carefully. Her first volume of fiction, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, envisions plural versions of masculinity and investigates the participation of both men and women in the creation and

perpetuation of gender hierarchies. Moreover, in the depiction of complex characters, such as that of the father, she does not see gender as the sole determining factor of one's identity. On the contrary, her concept of gender is subtly attuned to material conditions of existence and, most importantly, to individual subjectivity. Her stories fictionalize the crisis of male hegemony at various times in history, the 1930s-1940s in small-town Ontario, and the 1960s in an urban Canadian environment, disproving the existence of a continuum of privileged masculinity and interrogating men's and women's participation in hegemonic gender structures.

As Yekani contends, the narrative of the "crisis in masculinity" needs to be questioned and dismantled. Still, if "crisis" in the field of identity politics is understood as a historically and geographically marked moment that produces a radical disruption in identity categories and challenges the individual's self-definition in relation to those categories, then one can definitely speak of a resulting individual crisis. The male characters in Munro's stories analysed here relate to a specific ideal of and desire for (hegemonic) masculinity in relation to which they define themselves. On the one hand, the survival trope (RAMSAY xvi) dominates the understanding of the father figure in the stories set in the context of the economic crisis and WWII in small-town Ontario. Christopher Dummitt establishes that these two historical events brought about a "gender uncertainty and ambiguity" (4) in Canada, including an "increased womanly independence" which resulted in a "desire, immediately after the war, that everything should return to normal" (4). The post-war years thus witnessed the emergence of a "manly modern" which "seemed to provide a convincing and up-to-date justification for a gender system under attack" (DUMMITT 5). In words that resonate with Yekani's analysis of the so-called "crisis in masculinity," Dummitt remarks that "In the post-war years, the idea of a threatened manhood was part of a process of consolidating some men's social power. ... Far from being a reflection of a reality in which men and ideas of masculinity were endangered, the discourse on threatened manhood represented one response to a cultural process of re-establishing men's authority" (20-1).

The portrait of Mr. Malley that dominates the family living room probably stems from the 1950s, the era of the establishment of the manly modern in Canada, and his attitudes are a direct result of the processes described by Dummitt in his study. Ten years after the portrait was taken, masculinity feels itself under assault by a new discourse, feminism, and Munro depicts Mr Malley's helpless reaction to it. Unlike in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" and "Boys and Girls," a modernized version of male (soft) power is parodied in

“The Office” where hegemonic masculinity is orchestrated from a desk by a man wearing a suit who seeks to re-affirm his authority in his confrontation with second-wave feminism in a Canadian city in the 1960s. By using irony and parody as artistic modes of expression, Munro escapes the trap of installing a discourse of a crisis in masculinity. On the other hand, the fact that the protagonist cannot be bothered to actually look one final time in the direction of Mr Malley, but prefers to invent a fictional last image of him as a puzzled cleaning lady instead, can be considered, in Redekop’s words quoted before, one of Munro’s “failures” that are “so self-conscious and so spectacular” that they are just as liberating (34).

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