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"The text, the image and the implicit in Alice Munro's 'Images' and 'Postcard'"

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“The text, the image and the implicit in Alice Munro’s ‘Images’ and ‘Postcard’”

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Il me semble qu’il y a des tableaux dans l’œuvre de Munro et des photographies qui essaient d’aller au delà des mots, vers un indicible de l’intériorité.

Héliane Ventura, *La Casa di Parole–Alice Munro*, April 2007

The two short stories chosen for this critical study of the text and the image are the two stories in the collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* whose titles explicitly refer to a visual genre or form–“Images” and “Postcard”–though other titles in the collection could be considered as images or visual, especially “Red Dress–1946” or “The Shining Houses.” Liliane Louvel has observed that many writers make such references to the visual arts:

Many writers have expressed a nostalgia for their “sister art,” communicating their desire to create a painting-infused work [...]. A mere observation of writers’ discourse on their work or even from within their work reveals a fascination for painting, photography or the image, or a repeated use of vocabulary related to art techniques, practices or history. (Louvel, *Le tiers pictural*, 84, my translation).

Mary Condé, in her inventory and analysis of photographs in Munro’s short stories, has noted how Munro, in a striking self-conscious *excipit* on the writing of the story itself, refers to the visual arts:

Munro herself explicitly compares storytelling and photography within her own fiction. The narrator of “The Ottawa Valley” assesses her achievement at the end of the story, the last in the volume: “Now I look at what I have done and it is like a series of snapshots” (98)

And Munro expresses a sensitivity to the visual in the 1994 *Paris Review* interview:

When I was writing that story I looked in a lot of old newspapers [...] I got very strong images of the town, which I call Walley. I got very strong images from newspaper clippings.

Liliane Louvel’s theoretical studies on the text and the image and more particularly on the possible particular relationship between the short story and the image posit that the “unity of effect” proposed by Poe in his definition of the short story is also characteristic of the visual arts, especially painting and photography:

Is the short story the perfect locus for “the infinite dialogue” between word and image? In terms of instant effect as defined by Poe, as a “detachable” piece entirely grasped as a whole as a painting or a photograph apparently are, it may be so. (2011a, 19)¹

The unity of effect in the short story genre is obtained in part by the respect of classical theatre’s three unities: of space, of time and of action, but also by the condensed style, pleasantly described by Hemingway as being the emerged eighth of an iceberg. This metaphor is particularly tempting to refer to in the case of Alice Munro as she has specialized not only in the condensed emerged eighth, but also in making the submerged seven-eighths a very important part of her oeuvre: secrets, hidden lives, “something I’ve been meaning to tell you” but didn’t. The “politics of silence and the poetics of silence,” as Corinne Bigot puts it,² are at work, and the reader is consistently faced with reading the implicit as well as the explicit in Munro’s stories. In her analysis of Munro’s early fiction, Dahlie Hallvard refers to Munro’s use of the short story form in terms reminiscent of Hemingway’s metaphor:

¹ This is also the basis of a discussion in Louvel’s article “Les voix du voir: illusions d’optique et reflets sonores” in *JSSE* 41, Autumn 2003 in which she refers to Valerie Shaw’s essay *The Short Story, a Critical Introduction* and writings of Henry James on short fiction.

² See her very recent essay entitled *Alice Munro: Les silences de la nouvelle*. See also the *JSSE Special Issue The Implicit in the Short Story in English*, 2003 and *L’implicite dans la nouvelle de langue anglaise*, ed. Laurent Lepaludier, 2005.

Though [Alice Munro] has said that she is “very, very excited by what you might call the surface of life,” the substance of her fiction to date suggests that this excitement must also derive in part from her intuitive feeling that there is something else of significance just below that literal surface. This may be one reason why to date she has been more attracted to the short story than to the novel, though as she has stated in an interview, “I don’t feel that a novel is any step up from a short story.” Nevertheless, that more concentrated fictional form probably allows her to explore in a more imaginative and intense way the intangible aspects of her world: those shadowy and shifting areas between the rational and the irrational, between the familiar, comfortable world and sudden dimensions of terror, and between various facets of uncertainty and illusion. (57)

The hypothesis of this essay is that the dynamics of text, image and the implicit is a part of this “imaginative and intense way” in which “Images” and “Postcard” “explore the intangible aspects of [Munro’s] world” (Hallvard 57). More specifically, this study aims at answering these questions: what are the visual elements or images in the two stories, how do they function, and how do they resonate in relation to the text’s implicit and contribute perhaps to a “poetics of silence?”

Because the titles of these stories are the first site of visual reference, they will be the first object of closer analysis, beginning with their construction. Neither of the titles “Images” or “Postcard” is determined grammatically, a factor of indeterminacy compounded for the first story by the fact that the word “images” does not appear in the diegesis. This extradiegetic title can then be considered as a tool to be used by the reader to interpret the story and as such, sets the reader at a critical distance from it, clearly what Michelle Gadpaille conceives when she says that the title “Images” “suggests a story with an *episodic quality* that will unfold in a *set of stop-action photographs*” (qtd. Condé, 98, my emphasis).

The title of “Postcard” also lacks grammatical determination. The title is not “A Postcard” as in “A Trip to the Coast” or “The Postcard” as in “The Office” or “The Shining Houses,” designating the particular, but at the same time it remains in the singular, as opposed to “Images,” therefore not designating the general either, as would the title “Postcards.” And indeed “a postcard” appears in the diegesis on the very first page of the story. Nevertheless, the abbreviated form of the title, without grammatical determination, significantly evokes, like “Red Dress–1946,” the style of painting titles, making of the title “Postcard” a “pictorial marker” (Louvel, 2008, 190) both in its content and its form: the story is about a pictorial form, just as the story itself is assimilated to a painting. So though the two titles are not constructed in precisely the same

grammatical mode, they both are somewhat atypical in their relation to the diegesis and in programming the reading to follow.

"Images" is the third short story in the collection *Dance of the Happy Shades*. In it, the first person unnamed narrator confides the story of the early spring her mother was bed-ridden and looked after by Mary McQuade, a "big and gloomy" cousin of her father's who had taken care of her dying grandfather the previous summer. It was during that "cold March" that the young narrator and her father ventured out to "look at the traps" set by her father and encountered the terrifying, axe-bearing Joe Phippen along the river. Wary at first, Joe invites the narrator and her father into his primitive dwelling which the narrator discovers for the first time, just as she discovers the story which haunts him and subsequently re-evaluates her image of Mary McQuade.

The tenth story in the collection is "Postcard" and its position in the collection after "Images" creates a resonance which suggests that the postcard can now belong to the series of "images" proposed to the reader of the collection. The young woman protagonist narrating the story recounts what has happened in her life since "yesterday" when she received a Florida postcard from Clare MacQuarrie, a man twelve years older than her whom she hopes to marry but maybe not. Helen Louise, as her "Momma" calls her, learns from her well-informed newspaper-reading friend Alma that Clare is returning from Florida with his new bride, shocking news for Helen in spite of her ambiguous treatment of Clare, both as narrator and protagonist.

As if to confirm their initial reference to the pictorial in their title, both of these stories are indeed "pictorially saturated," to use Louvel's expression (2011a, 20); they contain numerous and striking allusions to the visual arts, some explicit, others implicit. Héliane Ventura has remarkably demonstrated how the pictorial in the incipit of Munro's "Boys and Girls" announces in a very condensed form the story of the young female protagonist that follows.³ The *ekphrasis* of the heroic calendar hung by the kitchen door in the young protagonist's house and depicting "plumed adventurers" and "magnificent savages" in the

³ Héliane Ventura. "L'implicite dans l'*ekphrasis* ou le cryptogramme pictural dans 'Boys and Girls' d'Alice Munro," *L'implicite dans la nouvelle de langue anglaise*, Laurent Lepaludier, Ed, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005, 157-67. The title of the article draws attention to the manner in which image, implicit, and text are articulated in the story.

Canadian landscape implicitly foregrounds the story's *topos* of stereotypical role-playing, and especially that of "boys" and "girls." The entire story, Ventura posits, comes back repeatedly to and resonates with that initial image.⁴ I argue here that in "Postcard" Munro uses a very similar technique. The incipit of "Postcard" introduces the eponymous object in two pictorial forms, first that of the still life, and then in the form of *ekphrasis*, before confronting the *ekphrasis* with the written message on the back of the postcard.

Liliane Louvel has identified the still life as being one of the pictorial genres used by writers attracted to the visual arts (2011a, 33). The second paragraph of "Postcard" begins as follows, mentioning the postcard for the first time:

It being Wednesday the wickets in the Post Office were closed, but I had my key. I unlocked our box and took out the Jubilee paper, in Momma's name, the phone bill and a postcard I very nearly missed. (128)

The second sentence is constructed on an enumeration and perhaps even a gradatio as the postcard, the final element in the enumeration, is simultaneously the element which most responds to the reader's expectation (created in the title) and the element which was the least visible to the protagonist who "nearly missed" it. This juxtaposition of static elements is precisely the technique of the still life, an aesthetic arrangement of objects, just as the pictorial effect produced by the sentence is of a still life: an open box⁵, the Jubilee paper, the phone bill and a postcard. The reader may well be tempted to entitle this still life *Postcard* and if we consider the remarks made earlier on the title of the story and its proximity to painting titles, we could then consider that the story's (picture) postcard is embedded in a still life called *Postcard*, itself embedded in a story/painting entitled "Postcard"/*Postcard*. This *mise en abyme* is also a pictorial device and one which operates on density, a

⁴ Liliane Louvel writes: "[M]any writers construct their worlds from a seminal image which, by triggering off a reverie, structures the work by representing its aura, a sort of creative horizon." (*The Poetics of the Iconotext*, 17). On the other hand, Mary Condé observes: "[Munro's stories] frequently end on a photographic image which encapsulates, in a self-consciously subjective way, the experience of the story" (99). "Postcard" and "Images" provide examples of each configuration, as we shall see.

⁵ The open box functions simultaneously as object in the still life and as container/frame of the painting.

characteristic of the short story genre, by creating multiple dimensions in a limited space.

But not only does the syntax of the sentence produce a pictorial effect, the still life produced contains in a condensed form the entire short story (just as the post-office box *contains* the three elements). The story centers on a misunderstanding between Helen and Clare: indeed, Helen's mother expresses her surprise when Helen suggests that she and Clare will be married: "Is that what he told you?" (132) and Helen's answer, "It's understood," focuses on the potential for Helen's misunderstanding of the implicit message. The elements of the still life are then ironical in the context of a breakdown in communication for they are all, albeit in one case metonymically, means of communication: a newspaper, a telephone (bill) and a postcard. They ironically and economically foreshadow the events to come. The three elements named also structure the story in its stages of revealing the truth to the protagonist, though in reverse order: the postcard is received (128), the telephone call is made:

I did go back and I heard her [Momma] using the phone, probably calling one of her old cronies about some news in the paper, and then I guess I fell asleep. (136)

and finally the newspaper is shown to Helen, revealing the facts:

[Momma] was holding the paper and she spread it out for me to read. "It's in there," she said, probably not realizing she was whispering. "It's written up in the *Bugle-Herald*." (137)

In her study of "Boys and Girls," Héliane Ventura uses the term "pictorial cryptogram," (157)⁶ a concept which functions well in the analysis of "Postcard": the pictorial, here the still life as I call it, contains within it the secret of the story (Clare's relationship with Margaret Leeson) and it both reveals and conceals the content of the story (Helen's discovery of this). In this context, it is interesting to turn again to the passage quoted above containing the still life:

It being Wednesday the wickets in the Post Office were closed, *but I had my key. I unlocked our box* and took out the Jubilee paper, in Momma's

⁶ A "cryptogram" is "a message or writing in secret letters."

name, the phone bill and a postcard I very nearly missed. (128, my emphasis)

For though the narrator claims she had a key to unlock the box, it eventually becomes clear to the reader that in this case of almost tragic irony she did not have the key to unlock the mysterious cryptogram within the box. On the other hand, though this still life is a pictorial cryptogram, it is simultaneously the pictorial key to the story for the reader. One might even add that the signifier “still life” is also a possible key to the story, for when Clare “did what he did on top of [her]” (145), Helen, though she “never wanted to be a *heartless* person” (135, my emphasis), implies that inertia, both physical and emotional, is her *modus operandi* with Clare, that her sexual *life* with Clare is *still*: silent, motionless, dead. The image resonates here with the implicit and one of the possible interpretations of the implicit is that Helen’s still life determined Clare’s decision to marry another woman.

In the story, once Helen does take the postcard out of the box, she looks carefully at it. Her perception of the picture postcard appears in the text in the form of an *ekphrasis*, the description of a work of art, another pictorial marker in the story:

I looked at the picture on it first and it showed me palm trees, a hot blue sky, the front of a motel with a sign out front in the shape of a big husky blonde creature, lit up with neon I suppose at night. She was saying *Sleep at my place*—that is, a balloon with those words in it came out of her mouth. (128, 129)

In his semiological study entitled “The Best of Both Worlds: Home and Mobility in Motel Postcard Iconography,” Keith A. Sculle identifies such a view of the motel amidst “languid palms” and the “ubiquitous blue sky” as belonging to “pictorial conventions in motel postcards” (37, 30), which implies that Clare is conventionally predictable. But also, this particular picture signifies perhaps that Clare has “the best of both worlds,” as Sculle puts it, the “big husky blonde creature [...] [s]aying *Sleep at my place*” providing during his “mobility” the “hot” intimacy which Helen provided (or not) at “home.” And yet, though the narrator says the picture “showed [her],” it did not *tell* her the full story of Clare’s travels to Florida, something she was always anxious to know. “Tell me about your trip,” the narrator would say when Clare returned from his travels, “and he would say what do you want me to tell?”(129).

Or, "I used to say to Clare, write me a *letter* while you're away, and he would say, what do you want me to write about? So I told him to describe the scenery and the people he met" (129). Ironically, the narrator's own *ekphrasis* is a condensed way of "describing the scenery and the people he met," but it remains elliptical and enigmatic. Additionally, the narrator only "suppose[s]" that the neon sign of the motel is "lit up [...] at night." In other words, she attempts to fill in the blanks left in the picture, to decipher the implicit. Clearly, though the pictorial reveals, it also conceals.

Perhaps hoping to have the blanks of the postcard's picture filled in by the message on the back, Helen "turned it over and read" Clare's message:

I didn't sleep at her place though it was too expensive. Weather could not be better. Mid-seventies. How is the winter treating you in Jubilee? Not bad I hope. Be a good girl. Clare." (129)

Sculle refers to a study by Baeder who considers "the postcard sender's written message as surrogate for traditional documents such as letters and journals" (22) and indeed this message with its truncated sentences is an inferior substitute for a more informative letter. The first sentence of the message both refers to the picture, and in so doing is an instance of dialogue between text and image, and, in its ambivalent agrammatical form which blurs comprehension, is also a proposed mode of communication. The agrammatical absence of the comma which could have been placed either before or after "though" creates confusion, I would suggest intentionally. The dialogue between text and image begins first with the erotic image of the "husky blonde creature" whose implicit is indeterminate: is Clare implying that he has found another lover (an incarnation of the "blonde creature") in this exotic/erotic place or is he implying that this erotic life is one that he would like to share with Helen as she is the recipient of the card and often "sleeps at his place"? The text on the back neither confirms nor contradicts either of the hypotheses about the implicit message. Though he assures Helen that he "didn't sleep at her place," he does not, in this negative construction, say where he did in fact sleep. That the implicit of the text/image of the postcard is open to interpretation is what Helen understands. On the one hand she suspects perhaps that this card signals the end of their relationship as she shows the postcard to her mother saying "Clare sent you a postcard" (130), seeming to admit it lacks any sentimental value. On the other hand, she twice relies on the postcard as proof of Clare's devotion to her after the newspaper has

finally objectively provided the information about Clare's travels: "A quiet ceremony in Coral Gables, Florida, uniting in marriage Clare Alexander MacQuarrie [...] and Mrs. Margaret Thora Leeson" (137):

"I just today got a postcard from him as Momma well knows." (136)

"I just had a postcard from him. Momma—" (137)

If the plot in "Postcard" develops from a compact initial image, "Images", I will argue, accumulates the eponymous images throughout the story which lead to a final revelatory moment. Indeed, an initiation story is a story of revelation, therefore the visual is inherent in the initiation story and so not surprisingly present in this one. As mentioned previously, the word "images" does not appear in the diegesis of the short story, an absence which generates a multitude of questions. What constitutes an image in the text? Whose images are they? How are they formed? What is their function? Do they evolve? As Ajay Heble has pointed out, critics often interpret this story as dealing with the narrator's confrontation with death as she meets Joe Phippen (30). Not an uncommon plight for young protagonists of initiation stories and the case for example in Hemingway's "Indian Camp" or McGahern's "Korea," the narrator's confrontation with death in "Images" is nevertheless only a part of her initiatory experience, for as we shall see, she will also come to better understand images.

Stylistic devices of imagery are used abundantly in the first pages of the story by the young narrator/protagonist to qualify Mary McQuade or immediate surroundings associated with her. Stylistic devices of condensation are more frequently used in modernist short stories than devices of expansion or repetition. The short-story theorist Suzanne Ferguson identifies simile and metaphor as devices used by modernist writers or "impressionists" in their "attention to stylistic economy" (21). Essentially, they show rather than tell:

Mary McQuade [...] was *the other island in the room*, and she sat mostly not moving where *the fan, as if it was tired, stirred the air like soup*. (30, my emphasis)

I could look up and see that emptiness, the stained corners, and feel, without knowing what it was, just what everybody else in the house must have felt—under the sweating heat the fact of death-contained, *that little lump of magic ice*. And Mary McQuade waiting in her starched white dress, big and gloomy *as an iceberg herself*, implacable, waiting and breathing. I held her responsible. (31, my emphasis)

Out in the daylight [...Mary] turned out to be freckled all over [...] *as if she was sprinkled with oatmeal* (31, my emphasis)

[Mary] was always waiting for [my father], some joke *swelling her up like a bullfrog* (34, my emphasis)

The noticeable accumulation of vivid and often amusing metaphors and similes in these passages attests to the narrator's perception of the world in images.

The initiatory journey the narrator takes is instigated by her father's invitation: "Do you want to *come* with me and *look* at the traps?" (35, my emphasis), a binary construction which very economically summarizes the initiatory story genre by pointing to its stages: a journey ("come") and a revelation ("look"). At the end of the journey, the day is summarized by Mary McQuade in a similar economical binary construction: "all she's *been* and *seen*" (43, my emphasis), the difference in Mary's remark being that it draws attention to the multiple visual experiences of the protagonist, which result in "her eyes dropping out of her head."

Liliane Louvel suggests that "strong images" in short stories are "short cuts to reach meaning more quickly and more efficiently" (2011a, 25). The strong images in "Images" are the series of images which strike both the protagonist and the reader, leading both to an epiphanic moment of "meaning." Michelle Gadpaille, as mentioned previously, noted that the title "Images" "suggests a story with an episodic quality that will unfold in a set of stop-action photographs." In what appears to be an objective correlative of this series of images, the narrator recounts: "My mother crocheted squares for an afghan, in all shades of purple" (33). An objective correlative is another device of economy, used to show rather than tell, leaving the implied message for the reader to decipher, here, that "squares [...] in all shades" are diverse images meant to be brought together to form a coherent whole, a textual "afghan," a "unity of effect."⁷ It is also interesting to note that in the free association which follows this sentence in the story, the narrator equates the afghan squares with stories, reinforcing the hypothesis that squares/images contain and condense content to tell:

⁷ Though in her article "A Comparative Essay on the Sociology of Literature: Alice Munro's Unconsummated Relationships" Silvia Albertazzi interestingly remarks "[I]n an almost Eliot-like way, Munro substitutes the description of experience with its image, its objective correlative" (44), she does not illustrate or expand on this idea.

[The squares] fell among the bedclothes and she did not care. Once they were finished *she forgot about them. She had forgotten all her stories* which were about Princes in the Tower and a queen getting her head chopped off while a little dog was hiding under her dress and another queen sucking poison out of her husband's wound. (33, my emphasis)

Returning to the father's invitation—"Do you want to come with me and look at the traps?"—, which is the starting point of the accumulation of initiatory images, we can notice that this invitation is in fact metonymically euphemistic, for though the father invites his daughter to "look at the traps," he is well aware that she will see not only the traps but the dead animals caught in them. And she does:

At first I saw [the muskrat] waving at the edge of the water, like something tropical, a dark fern. My father drew it up and the hairs ceased waving, clung together, the fern became a tail with the body of the rat attached to it, sleek and dripping. Its teeth were bared, its eyes wet on top, dead and dull beneath, glinted like washed pebbles. (36)

The pictorial markers in the passage are numerous. The narrator "saw" the muskrat, the father "drew it up" to isolate it as if framing it, the hairs "ceased waving" as if to fix the image, and stylistic devices of imagery are used: "waving [...] like something tropical, a dark fern" and "its eyes [...] glinted like washed pebbles." The father draws attention to the muskrat as pictorial when he says "This is a big old king rat. *Look at his tail!*" (36, my emphasis), as does the narrator: "He put the rat's body in a dark sack which he carried slung over his shoulder, like a pedlar in a picture." She explicitly associates this first initiatory image with death: "I did not understand [how the trap worked] or care. I only wanted but did not dare, to touch the stiff, soaked body, a fact of death" (36).

A second striking image the narrator encounters on her journey is that of the ominous Joe Phippen and especially the axe he carries. Unlike the muskrat's, this image is not one the father had planned for his daughter to encounter, which is no doubt why the axe is not to be mentioned at home on their return. Joe appears to the narrator initially in a rather long passage which could be considered filmic as the narrator first "see[s] his head and the upper part of his body", then "the rest of him" and finally "what he carried in his hand, gleaming where the sun caught it—a little axe, or hatchet" (37). The structure of both the passage and the final sentence draws attention to the axe by delaying its appearance. The

axe will then be further isolated as a strong image in Joe's cellar which the narrator discovers as she descends the steps and walks through the door:

It was not completely dark. There were the old cellar windows, letting in a little grimy light. The man lit a coal-oil lamp, though, and set it on the table. (40)

The text simultaneously (so economically) identifies this place as a locus of initiation and fixes this scene as a vivid image. The contrast between light and dark marks this place as one in which the character will become enlightened. At the same time, the dark rustic interior with a table, a coal-oil lamp and a single figure as its focal point is reminiscent of a 17th-century painting whose chiaroscuro effect is obtained by candlelight, an overall pictorial effect which heightens the intensity of the moment. Then with no transition the hatchet enters the painting as the focal point:

But I was wary, sitting on the dirty couch, pretending not to look at anything. [...Joe] sat by the table, and there the hatchet lay. (40)

Though the narrator "pretend[s] not to look at anything," the thematization of the hatchet in the syntax of the sentence makes it the focal point of the "painting," marking it as the object of her mesmerized gaze. Earlier "gleaming where the sun caught it," the hatchet is now illuminated by the "coal-oil lamp." The Silases "chop [...] trees and pull [...] down fences," Joe Phippen "chops down at the table, splitting the rotten oilcloth," no doubt reminders to the narrator of the queen in her mother's story "getting her head chopped off." These death threats, metonymically crystallized in the image of the hatchet, along with the image of the dead muskrat, eventually lead the narrator to her epiphanic moment at the end of the story as Mary bends over her: "I did not for some time realize that I was no longer afraid of her" (43).

It should be remarked however that this epiphanic statement makes no mention of death, does not establish a cause for the effect obtained (not being afraid) and does not link Mary explicitly to the initiatory images. Indeed, these gaps are sites of the text's implicit. The logical chain of events must be reconstructed by the reader and the content of these gaps appears in this text primarily in the form of images. That she associated Mary with death is apparent in the previously quoted similes, both using ice imagery: "the fact of death-contained, that *little lump of magic ice*. And Mary McQuade waiting in her starched white dress, big and gloomy

as an iceberg herself" (my emphasis). Then, when the narrator sees the dead muskrat, she concludes: "I only wanted but did not dare, to touch the stiff, soaked body, a fact of death." The "fact of death" has now become more real for her, something she wants to touch, and the use of the term in both contexts consolidates the link between Mary, death and the possibility to transcend it. Interestingly, Suzanne Ferguson has identified this modernist text/image/implicit dynamics and names it "metaphoric plot":

[T]here are stories in which the elements of the hypothetical plot are represented at the surface level by *sets of images* or events—often [...] *unrelated to each other*—that are analogous to and substitutes for events in the hypothetical plot; that is, they stand in relation to the theme of the story as the chain of events does in a normal plot, and the *chain of events is left implicit*. These I call "metaphoric" plots." (18, my emphasis)

Just as seeing frightful images has transformed the narrator, those same images will in the end be transformed, and this second transformation is a new stage in her initiation. The narrator has been instructed by her father not to mention the axe and he himself leaves it out of the story of Joe Phippen told to Mary. The pact of secrecy between the two is sealed when "[her] father looked steadily down the table at [her]" (43). The images, which were so striking for the narrator, are now covered with a veil of secrecy, tainted by the unsayable. Indeed, each of the father's answers to the young initiate's questions about Joe was a negation:

"Why did he have an axe? [...]
 "He don't mean any harm with that axe. [...]
 "Who is going to burn him and his bed?"
 "Nobody."
 "Who is the Silases?"
 "Nobody," my father said. Just nobody."

The young initiate has learned that along with knowledge comes the weight of secrecy, of what must remain unsaid. After seeing the images, the young girl "[fell] asleep with [her] eyes open" (41), an apt means to express here the mode of perceiving, to express how memories have been imprinted, blurred by lack of knowledge. Munro draws attention to the young girl's visual memories of childhood and her coming to understand the ways of the adult world: there are things to understand and things which remain obscure, mysteries or secrets, ambiguous implicit which adults (and short-story writers) will not elucidate, those "shadowy and

shifting areas," those "various facets of uncertainty," as Dahlie Hallvard puts it.

In a construction very similar to the still life of "Postcard," "Images" nears its completion:

[Mary] served my father his supper and he told her the story of Joe Phippen, the roofed cellar, the boards across the dirt floor. He left out the axe but not the whisky and the cat.

Once again the enumeration evokes a still life which contains and condenses a story, but significantly, whereas the hatchet abruptly entered the painting earlier, it now exits the painting just as abruptly, leaving a hole in its place. This is perhaps a paradigm of the dynamics between text, image and the implicit in these two stories: a striking pictorial effect is produced (a still life) whose individual visual components each concentrate an event, a story to be told, and one missing element exemplifies the blank or the gap: the painting's blank, the story's blanks that remain silent, that will "never sa[y] a word."

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