Études de stylistique anglaise

8 | 2015

Stylistic Perspectives on Alice Munro's *Dance of the Happy Shades*

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/esa/936>

DOI: 10.4000/esa.936

ISSN: 2650-2623

Publisher

Société de stylistique anglaise

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 March 2015

Number of pages: 217-230

ISBN: 978-2-36442-060-1

ISSN: 2116-1747

Electronic reference

Craig Hamilton, « Style and Blending in 'The Peace of Utrecht' by Alice Munro », *Études de stylistique anglaise* [Online], 8 | 2015, Online since 19 February 2019, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/esa/936> ; DOI : 10.4000/esa.936

Style and Blending in ‘The Peace of Utrecht’ by Alice Munro

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1. Introduction

When Margaret Atwood was once praised for being a great writer, she reportedly deflected the compliment by saying, “You call this writing? Alice Munro! Now *that’s* writing” (*Economist* 2009: para. 7). Munro modestly told *The Montreal Gazette* in 2013, “When I began writing there was a very small community of Canadian writers and little attention was paid by the world. Now Canadian writers are read, admired and respected around the globe” (qtd. in Medley 2013: A2). Munro obviously played a role in that change of affairs. Her talent has been recognized for decades, and no critic today would challenge the claim that Munro is a master of the short story. The long list of awards she has won, including the 2013 Nobel Prize for Literature, demonstrates the respect her work commands. But to understand her development as an artist, it is fitting to read her first collection of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Of particular interest in that volume is the penultimate story, “The Peace of Utrecht,” which my article here will focus on.

In 1950 when Munro was 19, she published her first short story, “The Dimensions of a Shadow,” at the University of Western Ontario (“Profile” 2005: 61). Yet *Dance of the Happy Shades* was published in 1968 when Munro was already 37 years old. Soon after her mother died in early 1959, she began writing “The Peace of Utrecht,” first published in mid-1960 in *The Tamarack Review* (Howells 1998: 14). Eight years later, it reappeared in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. “The Peace of Utrecht” is set c.1960 in the fictional Southwestern Ontario town of Jubilee, some thirty miles east of Inverhuron, a real town on Lake Huron mentioned in the story (1998: 192). In the story, two adult sisters in their early- to mid-

thirties spend several weeks together, in the summer following the death of their invalid mother the previous winter. Maddy, the elder, single and without children, works for the town clerk and lives alone in the family house. Helen, the younger sister, is also the story's narrator; she is married and has lived away in the Toronto area for many years. She has brought her two small children (a girl and a boy) with her for this visit, "on the last lap of a twenty-five-hundred-mile trip" by car (Munro 1998: 196). "The Peace of Utrecht" is an important story for Munro. She once said it was "the first story I absolutely had to write and wasn't writing to see if I could write that kind of story" (qtd. in Howells 1998: 14). Indeed, for Munro the story was "a breakthrough: confronting the fact of her mother freed her into autobiographical fiction (or 'personal stories', as she calls them), into her particular voice and material — though it did not free her from her mother, who remained a fraught presence" (Edemariam 2003: para. 12).

Much of what has been written about "The Peace of Utrecht" discusses its autobiographical content. Munro was the eldest of three children; she had a younger sister (by five years) and a younger brother. Her mother suffered from a severe form of Parkinson's disease from 1943 until her death in 1959; "The Peace of Utrecht" was the first story where Munro wrote about this subject (Thacker 2005: 150). While Munro and her sister did look after their mother, they both eventually left home. The sisters in the story are their mother's primary caregivers; no father is ever mentioned. Caregiving can have long-lasting adverse effects on caregivers, and Munro has explored this theme in other stories too. According to DeFalco, "Throughout her early work, in stories like 'The Peace of Utrecht' [1960], 'The Ottawa Valley' (1974), 'Winter Wind' (1974), 'Spelling' (1978), and 'A Queer Streak' (1986), one finds caregiving roles, young women saddled with the responsibility to care for older family members" (2012: 380). This is the situation both Maddy and Helen were in for several years before Maddy's "ten-years' vigil" alone with the mother (1998: 195). Having to care for their mother seems to have made the sisters love her, and each other, less.

In the story, Helen feels her visit is a failure even though the sisters seem friendly at times, for example, while smoking cigarettes and drinking gin together during the hot and humid summer nights. But according to Dahlie, "For the two sisters ... neither life, nor childhood memories of Jubilee, nor the death of their mother is sufficient to create a bond between them" (1978: 58). This is the sad story Munro tells. While many

critics have discussed the autobiographical nature of “The Peace of Utrecht,” few seem to have discussed its style. As Jeffries and McIntyre (2010: 172) recently stated, “a general question about style may be followed by particular questions about formal features ... or by questions about the kinds of conceptual metaphor, blending or other cognitive aspects of the texts concerned.” In this article I shall therefore explore some formal and cognitive features of Munro’s style in order to shed some light on *how* she tells this unhappy tale.

2. Style

“The Peace of Utrecht” contains two parts. Part I is roughly thirteen pages long and has five subsections. Part II is roughly eight pages long and has two subsections. Although using Roman numerals to divide stories into parts is highly unusual for Munro, according to Zetu, “The two parts correspond to two sets of problematic relationships: the unresolved mother-daughter relationship and the bond between siblings” (2012: 363). That said, the way both parts begin offers strong evidence that this story is like a diary entry. Part I begins with Helen writing, “I have been at home now for three weeks and it has not been a success” (1998: 190), while Part II begins with Helen writing, “I have been to visit Aunt Annie and Auntie Lou” (1998: 202). Helen records conversations she remembers from the recent or the distant past, events during her visit (e.g. by using the present perfect here), and she reflects on what she is writing as she is writing it. For example, after describing Maddy’s odd friendship with Fred, Helen writes: “Now thinking of Fred Powell I admit that my reaction to this – this *situation* as I call it – is far more conventional than I would have expected; it is even absurd. And I do not know what situation it really is” (1998: 193). In the same passage, Helen writes of how Maddy teases Fred: “He allows it. (And this is what frightens me, I know it now; he allows it; *she needs it.*)” (Munro 1998: 193-194). Here and elsewhere, evidence of self-conscious narration suggests that the story is a kind of highly polished diary entry. Munro may be writing for us, but Helen is arguably writing for herself.

Munro’s style here is marked by many other features as well. Syntactic variation is one of them, as we can see in the very opening paragraph:

[1] I have been at home now for three weeks and it has not been a success.
 [2] Maddy and I, though we speak cheerfully of our enjoyment of so long and intimate a visit, will be relieved when it is over. [3] Silence disturbs us.
 [4] We laugh immoderately. [5] I am afraid—very likely we are both afraid—that when the moment comes to say goodbye, unless we are very quick to kiss, and fervently mockingly squeeze each other's shoulders, we will have to look straight into the desert that is between us and acknowledge that we are not merely indifferent; at heart we reject each other, and as for that past we make so much of sharing we do not really share it at all, each of us keeping it jealously to herself, thinking privately that the other has turned alien, and forfeited her claim (1998: 190).

There are 141 words but only 5 sentences in this paragraph, yielding an average sentence length of 28.2 words. However, only sentence [2] comes close to the average length established within this paragraph (24 words vs. 28.2 words). Just as sentences [3] and [4] are surprisingly short (3 words each) within the context of sentences [1] and [2], so too is sentence [5] surprisingly long (95 words) within the context of this paragraph. There is thus *internal deviation* within the opening paragraph, although readers will see that sentence lengths vary throughout the story. As for *external deviation*, while sentences [1] and [2] are not far from the Ellegård norm of 17.8 words per sentence (Leech & Short 2007: 90), sentences [3], [4], and [5] deviate substantially from that Ellegård norm. If variety is the spice of life, Munro's sentence lengths embody that proverb.

Subordination is another interesting feature of Munro's style here. While sentence [2] could be a simple declarative sentence of 10 words, it gets interrupted and made complicated by a subordinate clause of 14 words. Sentence [2] is also *iconic* since its forms mimics its content. Just as Helen might feel "relieved when it [the visit] is over," the reader may also feel "relieved when it [the sentence] is over." The same is true of sentence [5], where subordinate clauses *defer* explaining clearly what it is that the sisters fear. Indeed, subordinate structures in sentence [5] iconically create distance between the sisters and what they fear.

Careful readers may also notice Munro's intriguing use of the semicolon. This is true in *Dance of the Happy Shades* in general, and in "The Peace of Utrecht" in particular. In his recent study of style in another story by Munro, Toolan also noticed her use of the semicolon in compound sentences (2010: 324). In general, correctly using the semicolon in modern English is a sign of formal syntax and erudition, which is another reason why this story seems like a highly polished diary entry. Munro uses the semicolon so extensively that it is a foregrounded

feature of her style. This can be seen in the first paragraph of part I subsection 2 (1998: 194):

[1] The rhythm of life in Jubilee is primitively seasonal. [2] Deaths occur in the winter; marriages are celebrated in the summer. [3] There is good reason for this; the winters are long and full of hardship and the old and the weak cannot always get through them. [4] Last winter was a catastrophe, such as may be expected every ten or twelve years; you can see how the pavement in the streets is broken up, as if the town had survived a minor bombardment. [5] A death is dealt with then in the middle of great difficulties; there comes time now in the summer to think about it, and talk. [6] I find that people stop me in the street to talk about my mother. [7] I have heard from them about her funeral, what flowers she had and what the weather was like on that day. [8] And now she is dead I no longer feel that when they say the words “your mother” they deal a knowing, cunning blow at my pride. [9] I used to feel that; at those words I felt my whole identity, that pretentious adolescent construction, come tumbling down.

Semicolons, when they are used at all, can separate either items in a list or grammatically independent sentences (Swan 2005: 475). As sentence [2] here shows, the semicolon contrasts two independent clauses. But that is not its function in sentence [3], where what follows the semicolon is a long explanation of what precedes it. In sentence [4], we have a more standard use of the semicolon to separate related yet independent sentences. What follows the semicolon in [4] is evidence for the claim that precedes it in the sentence. In sentence [5], the semicolon is used as it was in sentence [2], for contrastive purposes. (About sentence [7], Helen later says she had “the excuse of a blizzard” (1998: 195) for not attending the funeral.) Sentence [9], however, is similar to sentence [3]; what follows the semicolon in [9] portrays in more depth how Helen used to feel upon hearing “the words ‘your mother’”.

In general, semicolons are very rare. In his study of the Brown Corpus, Meyer found that semicolons were used very rarely (1986), and Cook’s more recent data confirm that finding, showing a tremendous decrease in semicolon usage in the last few centuries (2000). Munro, however, loves semicolons. Five semicolons within eight consecutive sentences is well above the average frequency in modern English, even in fiction. Munro clearly uses semicolons for many reasons, including contrast, explanation, and summarization. Furthermore, she sometimes uses semicolons emphatically, as we see at the end of part I subsection 4: “Maddy; her bright skeptical look; my sister” (1998: 202). Subordination, apposition, and semicolons all give this story’s prose a halting, uncertain, and probing quality.

Apart from Munro's syntactic creativity, her semantic creativity is also noteworthy. According to Berndt, "The pivot of the tale is the 'Gothic mother' of Maddy and Helen – perceived by her daughters as a grotesque and monstrous creature – who has continued to haunt both their house and the town in spite of her death" (2010: para. 11). Berndt is right to mention the house, and Dahlie had noticed much the same thing: "Home, the past, family ties – forces which are conventionally interpreted as positive forces – are here dramatized as disturbing elements" (Dahlie 1978: 58). In the story, Munro uses the words *home* and *house* at least 14 times each. She uses the word *houses* once, and the incredibly rare word, *housewifely*, once as well. But how does Munro negatively depict home? The answer can be found in the co-text.

In the very first sentence of the story, Helen writes that her visit "home ... has not been a success" (1998: 190), thus equating *home* with failure. When she first arrives for the visit, she describes a *house* that is empty and notes that "[t]he red brick of which the house is built looked hard and hot in the sun" (1998: 197). Helen later explains how she felt returning to Jubilee for visits when she was in college, when she "exchanged the whole holiday world of school, of friends and, later on, of love, for the dim world of continuing disaster, of home" (1998: 191). She confesses that they intentionally kept their ailing mother "at home, away from that sad notoriety" of town (1998: 195), but their home was no safe haven. Helen later says "that discouraging house" is all Maddy has left in Jubilee (1998: 195), and she also calls it "that house of stone" (1998: 199), with the deictic distance of the demonstrative (*that*) adding to the awful impression.

What is more, when Helen writes of the past and caring for her mother in part I, the word *house* occurs more frequently than does the word *home*. Compared to the word *house*, *home* has what linguist Bill Louw would call a more positive "semantic prosody" (2008: 9). But that word is seldom used in this part of the story. Additionally, in part II subsection 1, when Helen later contrasts the apparent calm of her aunts' home in her youth with "the comparative anarchy, the threatened melodrama, of our house at home" (1998: 204), we see that Maddy and Helen's *house* and *home* have overwhelmingly negative connotations. In short, the co-text of the words *house* and *home* tells us that these words live in a sad neighbourhood in this story.

Finally, as Dahlie sensed (1978: 59), Munro's decision to use the phrasal verb *deal with* is also noteworthy here. In part I subsection 3,

Helen remembers her mother's plea for help, "A cry repeated so often, and, things being as they were, so uselessly, that Maddy and I recognized it as only one of those household sounds that must be dealt with, so that worse may not follow. *You go and deal with Mother*, we would say to each other, or *I'll be out in a minute, I have to deal with Mother*" (1998: 198). In modern English usage, *deal with* is most often used in negative contexts about problems. We *deal with* issues to sort them out; we do not usually *deal with* loved ones. But when Helen shortly thereafter writes of "our dealings with her" (1998: 199), this choice of phrase also shows how the daughters dehumanize their mother.

3. Cognition

Roughly half way through the story, in part I subsection 4, Helen finds an old notebook in which she sees written, in her own handwriting, "The Peace of Utrecht, 1713, brought an end to the War of the Spanish Succession" (1998: 201). This has "a strong effect" on Helen, triggering memories of high school and adolescence. Yet the reference to The Peace of Utrecht is even more significant than that, and the reason has to do with conceptual blending. Conceptual blending is a theory of cognition first presented in depth by Fauconnier and Turner (2002), and blending in narrative has been studied in detail recently (see Schneider & Hartner 2012). Munro's explicit reference to The Peace of Utrecht is clearly intentional. It is also meaningful for it evokes a conceptual blend.

Many readers may know little about the War of the Spanish Succession. According to the *New Standard Encyclopedia* (1970: S-488; U-166), in 1690s Europe people wondered who would succeed Charles II, Spain's childless king. Just before his death in 1700, Charles willed his throne to Philip of Anjou, grandson of Louis XIV. But Leopold I of Austria objected, and instead wanted his second son, Archduke Charles, to become Spain's king. Both Louis XIV and Leopold I were grandsons of Philip III of Spain, and both were married to sisters of Charles II; both also knew that the uniting of either Spain and France (Philip), or Spain and Austria (the Archduke) under one crown would destabilize Europe's balance of power. In the event, Philip of Anjou was indeed crowned King of Spain, but war followed.. Spain and France fought against an alliance that eventually included Portugal, Savoy, Austria, Prussia, Holland, and Great Britain. Battles were fought in Europe, Canada, and America from

1701 to 1713. Peace negotiations between diplomats started in Utrecht in January 1712 and ended only in April 1713. Philip of Anjou, a Bourbon, was confirmed as King of Spain, but now had to stay independent of France, his 'senior sponsor'. Meanwhile, France and Spain had to concede to the alliance many territories and trade rights in Europe and the New World. The political, military, and economical implications of The Peace of Utrecht were thus highly significant. How does all this relate to Munro's story? In other words, how does the blend work? As in most blends, according to the model developed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002), we combine information from at least four mental spaces. The two main *input spaces* are the historical Utrecht c.1713 and the fictional Jubilee of the story, c.1960. To fully interpret Munro's story in some detail is to run a conceptual blend based on these two distinct spaces. Each input space contains the specific information relevant to it. Abstract features that the stories have in common comprise the blend's *generic space*. In that generic space, we have an event (death), an inheritor, a challenger, their sponsors or allies, a goal, and the means to obtain that goal.

Asymmetrical relations and selective projection are common in blending. Some elements in one input space have no counterparts in the other, and still others are not useful for the blend. The generic space provides *roles* that we fill with *values* from the input spaces. That is how we can see similarities between the two stories. For example, just as Charles II died, the sisters' mother has died. Just as Philip of Anjou inherited the Spanish throne, despite objections from the alliance, occupying the old house is exactly what Maddy does. The sisters once dreamed of "much bigger things than Jubilee" (1998: 192), but Maddy has stayed put. Just as the French king and Austrian emperor both sponsored heirs to the Spanish throne, Helen and Maddy have their supporters. Aunt Annie openly prefers Helen to Maddy (1998: 205), and both Aunt Annie and Auntie Lou fear Maddy because she refused to bring her mother home from the hospital before she died. While Helen's own family and the two aunts might be her allies, Maddy's allies would include her friends at the party at the lakefront cottage, women from Jubilee who "seemed to be widowed, single, separated or divorced" (1998: 191). There is also Fred. Maddy says he "is her only real friend," but Helen is not sure (1998: 134). Moreover, just as France and Austria coveted the Spanish Empire, both Helen and Maddy want the same thing, as we see in the story's opening paragraph: "[...] as for that past we make so much of

sharing we do not really share it at all, each of us keeping it jealously to herself, thinking privately that the other has turned alien, and forfeited her claim" (1998: 190). What the sisters want is not a throne or empire; it is their past.

But there may be more to inherit in Jubilee than just the past. At the end of the story when Maddy accidentally drops a big cut-glass bowl, Helen notices that "her hands had begun to shake" (1998: 210). Zetu argues that the shattered bowl symbolizes Maddy's true self (2012: 368), but Maddy's trembling hands might be an early sign of "the Shaking Palsy" their mother had (1998: 200). Maddy might therefore be more similar to her mother than Helen is; in fact, Helen even rejects inheriting her mother's mended clothes when Aunt Annie offers them to her (1998: 205). Ironically, since Fred's "wife is an invalid" (1998: 193), Maddy might never become his spouse, a mother, or an invalid. In contrast, Helen has two children of her own who will also inherit whatever she has one day. This may make her "claim" more legitimate in the long term.

To continue, the conflict between Maddy and Helen is like the conflict between Philip of Anjou and Charles of Austria: Philip and Maddy seem to have something that Charles and Helen want. Neither Charles nor Helen is the eldest, they are challengers, although Philip and Charles are not brothers. Maddy and Helen are their mother's daughters, but the Spanish king had no children. While a war with many battles took place in the early 18th century to try to settle the dispute, in "The Peace of Utrecht" we have a story "about a woman returning home after her mother's death from a Parkinson's-like disease and guiltily, defiantly facing the sister who stayed..." (Edemariam 2003: para. 12). Munro called her story "The Peace of Utrecht" rather than "The War of Spanish Succession," but why?

After the War of the Spanish Succession, there was The Peace of Utrecht. The winter when the mother died made Jubilee look like it had gone through a "minor bombardment." As Helen states, "A death is dealt with then in the middle of great difficulties; there comes time now in the summer to think about it, and talk" (1998: 194). It is now summer, but Maddy will not talk; she feels that "nobody speaks the same language" (1998: 209), so talking seems pointless. The Peace of Utrecht was a series of negotiations among diplomats that lasted more than a year, and it took another treaty a year later (in Rastatt) to get Austria to accept the agreement. When Helen arrives in Jubilee and tries to make friendly overtures (1998: 202), Maddy coldly tells her younger sister, "No

exorcising here" (1998: 191, 202). Silence is how Maddy maintains control. Helen reports Maddy's remark indirectly, near the very beginning of the story (1998: 191), before describing events from the near and distant past over the course of ten pages. She then reports Maddy's remark again, this time more fully, and in the context of Helen's overtures (1998: 202). Thus concludes part I.

In part II, Helen pays visits to their two elderly aunts in town, and imagines what she and Maddy will be like when they are old. When she returns after the third visit, there is tension. Maddy senses the aunts complained to Helen about Maddy leaving their mother in the hospital. First, Helen tells Maddy she has nothing to feel guilty about. Then, after Maddy drops the bowl near the end of the story, Helen tells her, "Take your life, Maddy. Take it" and "Go away, don't stay here" (1998: 210). The story ends with Maddy answering, "'But why can't I, Helen? *Why can't I?*'" (1998: 210). The answer is destiny. Maddy cannot leave because her destiny is fixed in stone, just like that of an heir to a throne. In a system of inheritance based on primogeniture, birth rank is destiny. This leads us to the blend's key inference: Helen and Maddy's emotional situation in Canada c.1960 is as *complex* as the political situation in Europe c.1713. Arguably, Munro could not have picked a more convoluted historical event to frame Helen and Maddy's story.

Before concluding, let me say that other scholars have also noticed a blend in "The Peace of Utrecht." Critics such as Heble (1994: 42), Zetu (2012: 368), and Berrett (2013: para. 36) have thought about the connections I have described here, yet they did so without knowing they were working with a conceptual blend. The apparent illusion is not their fault; blending is easy to "do" yet hard to explain. Munro only mentions "The Peace of Utrecht" twice (first in the title, then in the story); she never really refers openly again to that input space. But all spaces are not equal in a blend. Knowing about The Peace of Utrecht helps us understand "The Peace of Utrecht," and that is Munro's point. The connections we make between the history and the story are connections we make in our minds. Munro does not make them for us explicitly, nor does she have to. She can merely use the historical allusion as a means to an end, and count on readers to do the rest and make the inferences. The result is the emergent meaning I have discussed in this section, and it shows just how complicated Maddy and Helen's relationship is.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Munro cleverly combines form and content to probe complex feelings. While we may never be able to answer a question Helen raises in this story – “what will anyone ever know of us?” (1998: 202) – it is possible to learn *how* Munro tells this story. Her syntactic variations and deliberate semantic choices are noteworthy, and as the story’s enigmatic title suggests, understanding the story involves conceptual blending. Of course, in stylistics, analyses must be open to “falsifiability” (Jeffries & McIntyre 2010: 24), and only time will tell if that is true of my brief analysis here. My approach may be eclectic, but that is common in English stylistics. According to Carter (2010: 68), “The methodologies employed to advance the study of style are united by a determination to better account for the processes of meaning construction which are the basis for our understanding and interpretation of texts.... It is, as Toolan (1986) points out, the work of *bricoleurs*, not engineers.” Being a *bricoleur* can be useful in stylistics; it can show us things about Munro’s style we might have otherwise missed.

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