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The Ordinary Terrors of Survival: Alice Munro and the Canadian Gothic

Katrin Berndt

- 1 To discuss a Canadian writer in the context of a literary style that evokes the presumed aesthetics of medieval Europe is anything but an obvious choice. The Canadian maple tree with its bright yellow, or red-orange, leaves is not the sort of plant usually associated with a gloomy Gothic landscape. Although early Anglophone Canadian writers adopted aesthetic categories of Romanticism, such as the sublime and the picturesque, to appeal to a predominantly British audience, the past five decades of postmodern Canadian literature have seen the successful invention and establishment of genuine literary features and artistic characteristics. Today, distinguishing qualities of Canadian writing are motifs such as regionalism and ethnicity, and the emphasis on Canada's transcultural national identity. The significant influence of both women writers and feminist criticism is likewise striking. After all, Anglophone Canadian prose appears to be concerned with pragmatic, mundane issues rather than with Gothic "tales of the macabre and the supernatural" (Thomas 1994: 131) that intend to "chill the spine and curdle the blood" (Cuddon 1998: 356). Moreover, the label 'Gothic' recalls rather eerie settings such as medieval castles, feudal abbeys, and haunted graveyards – all of them steeped in a decidedly European imagery – as well as eighteenth-century British writers like Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe. Their Gothic stories are usually populated by frequently endangered heroines and bloodthirsty villains, by wise women and dark, saturnine lovers. Neither of these peculiar characters seems likely to inhabit a present-day Canadian narrative. Before I begin to elaborate on the topic of my paper, I will therefore briefly outline major features of Gothic fiction, in order to identify those elements which may be located in Canadian texts as well.
- 2 Gothic writing, which evolved as a branch of Romanticism in the late eighteenth century as a response to the cultivation of reason in the Enlightenment, addresses metaphysical and preternatural aspects of life. It relates to the darker side of human

existence, encompassing insanity, fear, cruelty, violence and sexuality. In the nineteenth century, writers like Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and Thomas Hardy used Gothic elements to challenge the Victorian preoccupation with utilitarianism and the civilizing progress. They exploited Gothic themes of mystery, suspense, and domestic abuse in their fiction in order to raise ethical questions about the human potential for violence.

- 3 Across the Atlantic, a similar tradition emerged in the United States. The short stories of writers like Edgar Allan Poe and Washington Irving exhibited Gothic-folklorist patterns (Sucur 2007: 4) such as supernatural tendencies, insanity, and domestic terrors. Poe's tales especially relied upon the grotesque, and also "aligned [...] themselves with the idea of the Gothic upon each reading, with their ambiguities and 'undercurrent[s] of meaning' (Poe's own phrase)" (Sucur 2007: 5). In the twentieth century, the legacy of the US American Civil War inspired yet another sub-genre of Gothic writing, the so-called 'Southern Gothic' associated with authors like William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers, and Eudora Welty. Concerned with the impoverished society of the defeated US American South, their fiction relies on grotesque characters and situations to analyse such cultural attributes as self-righteousness and racial bigotry. According to Tennessee Williams, the Southern Gothic style is informed by an "emotional and romantic nature" that expresses the "underlying dreadfulness in modern experience" (Tischler 1961: 301-302).
- 4 There seems to be a striking discrepancy between Williams' understanding of the Gothic and 'the macabre tales to chill the spine' written in the eighteenth century. However, this seeming contrast only highlights the astonishing variety of Gothic literature, which is, ultimately, driven by ideas rather than relying on the repeated use of certain literary themes or stylistic devices. The Canadian critic Slobodan Sucur defines "intellectual tantalization" as the "only real constant" in Gothic writing, more so than fear itself. While he concedes that "the nature of the Gothic [indeed] pivots on fear, [it is] the idea that fear is possible" which inspires a Gothic poetics. Marshall Brown suggests that Gothic literature "owes most of its intricacies to the limits of Kantian thought, the limits of ideas that Immanuel Kant was carefully aware of, unsure of what lies beyond" (Sucur 2007a: 1).
- 5 If the Gothic is indeed concerned with the exploration of the fears which enlightened, rational understanding fails to comprehend, rather than with spooky medieval castles, its relevance for a Canadian poetics becomes apparent. After all, Canadian authors have addressed such anxieties as the fear of the unknown, and the terror that a natural surrounding perceived as hostile induced in European settlers. In her path-breaking study on Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood even suggests the use of the "multi-faceted and adaptable idea" (Atwood 1972: 32) of survival as the central symbol for Canada. 'Staying alive' is one of the major themes of Canadian writing, often rendered as persistence when confronting a malevolent nature.¹ According to Canadian critic Northrop Frye, the very inception of Canadian poetry is a response to the vast wilderness of the Canadian land, whose "terrors" produced the "garrison mentality" (Frye 1977: 342) of the settlers who dared to challenge "the riddle of the unconscious in nature" (Frye 1977: 355).
- 6 While physical survival tends to be a prominent topic in early Canadian texts, the spiritual survival that concerns subjective terrors or "elements in [a person's] own nature that threaten him from within" (Atwood 1972: 33) has become a motif that has

informed much of Canadian writing in the past decades. It seems as if some horrors prefer to unleash themselves in small towns rather than in the uncivilized wilderness. One of the writers concerned with surviving self-inflicted terrors in a rural, seemingly civilized surrounding is Alice Munro. Beverly Rasporich relates directly to Gothic notions of fear and the unknown when she explores the small-town settings of Alice Munro's stories (Rasporich 1990: 136), settings whose seemingly intact civilization ought to provide refuge and safety from the terrors of the wilderness, but usually turn out to have contrived genuine horrors of their own. Munro's writing combines the Canadian motif of survival with the concealed ambitions and passions that threaten her characters in a physical as well as metaphysical sense.

- 7 In the context of my discussion, I define the Gothic mode as addressing the indeterminate, obscure, and subconscious spheres of life. It stresses the hidden, ambivalent meanings, expresses fears beyond logic and rational understanding, and reminds its readers that such anxieties may lurk beneath the surface of everyday, ordinary experience. This awareness distinguishes the writing of Alice Munro. Several of her stories portray the Ontario region in Canada with regard to the cruelties and horrors that hide behind the façade of a rigid, Calvinist morality. Consequently, her texts have been labelled as “Southern Ontario Gothic.” In an interview with Graeme Gibson, Munro describes the affinity between rural and small-town existence in the American South and South-Western Ontario as “the mood of suppressed violence in a hard-working and insular rural community” (Cox 2007: 3), in what may well be defined as a Gothic atmosphere. She claims to have been influenced by Southern Gothic writers like Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers, and insists that “the part of the country where I come from is absolutely Gothic” (Gibson 1973: 248).
- 8 Taking Munro's own reference to this Gothic atmosphere as my point of departure, I would like to discuss three of her stories: “The Peace of Utrecht” (1968), “Open Secrets” (1994), and “Runaway” (2005), in order to identify those elements that have earned them the label 'Gothic.' I intend to demonstrate how Munro exploits several Gothic features to explore the “undercurrent of danger and despair” (Kritenbrink 2007: 1) that informs several of her tales about small-town life in Ontario. In addition, I propose that Munro's fascination with the ambivalences in human relationships and her focus on hidden, suppressed desires and destructive dreads are all discernible Gothic strains. They relate to the Gothic obsession with the dark mysteries in subconscious levels of experience. Another manifestation of the Gothic are literary archetypes, such as the persecuted maiden; the all-powerful mother; the dark, romantic lover; and the wise woman, who are all present in Munro's writing, albeit in subversively altered versions.
- 9 “The Peace of Utrecht,” published in Munro's first short story collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), is set in small-town Jubilee, and focuses on domestic battles between the female members of a family. The story is told in retrospect by the narrator Helen, who returns home to visit her older sister Maddy a few months after the death of their mother. Her first impression of her hometown introduces Jubilee as a self-absorbed place unwilling to deal with its darker sides:

I drove up to the main street –a new service station, new stucco front on the Queen's Hotel– and turned into the quiet, decaying side streets where old maids live, and have birdbaths and blue delphiniums in their gardens. The big brick houses that I knew, with their wooden verandas and gaping, dark-screened windows, seemed to me plausible but unreal. (Munro 1968: 266-267)

- 10 The narrator notices the difference between the functional main street, represented by the service station and the reconstructed façade of the hotel, and the dilapidation that hides behind the surface. The side streets appear to have been neglected, and are depicted as lacking the ability to regenerate, for they are inhabited by old, barren maids. The gloomy houses convey a sense of “psychic foreboding” (Rasporich 1990: 135) that illustrates how Helen's return to Jubilee is an ambivalent experience for the narrator, who had left the town ten years ago in order to establish a life, and a family, of her own. Upon re-entering her hometown, she is confronted with a feeling of menace that is to haunt the whole story. The realistic text is suffused with glimpses of a darker subtext that seem to allude to the “underlying dreadfulness of modern experience” which Tennessee Williams defined as a main theme of the Gothic.
- 11 However, it is not only the somewhat bleak setting that characterizes the story as Southern Ontario Gothic. 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. The absent mother is another traditional Gothic motif (Howells 1998: 21), which Munro uses to relate to the horrors of domestic life. In the reality of the story, the mother –whose first name is never revealed– suffered from a degenerative illness and needed intensive care. This obligation had turned her daughters into their mother's keepers, until Helen got married and moved to Vancouver. She left Maddy in charge of their mother because she wanted to escape, and to construct herself an adult identity (Howells 1998: 20). She has become a mother herself – and yet, when she re-enters the house where her mother used to live, the familiarity of the place threatens to overcome her. She recalls the sound of her mother's “ruined voice” asking the same questions over and over again. Helen remembers how the sisters lived in dread of her cries and demands, which were
- undisguised, oh shamefully undisguised and raw and supplicating [...] A cry repeated so often, and [...] so uselessly, that Maddy and I recognized it only as one of those household sounds which 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*. It might be that we had to perform some of the trivial and unpleasant services endlessly required, or that we had to supply five minutes' expediently cheerful conversation, so remorselessly casual that never for a moment was there a recognition of the real state of affairs, never a glint of pity to open the way for one of her long debilitating sieges of tears. (Munro 1968: 269)
- 12 Helen's memories are informed by the conflict between the daughters' sense of duty towards their mother, and their actual helplessness when confronted with a parent for whom they were forced to perform “the most frightful parodies of love, in which she tried, through her creaking throat, to plead for kisses in coy pitiable childish tones” (Munro 1968: 270). The sisters perceive their mother's needs as indecent, because she has, due to her illness, lost all restraint. The once all-powerful mother remains omnipotent in her claims, which seem to know no bounds. In fact, to Maddy and Helen, it seems as if she shamelessly demands what they cannot give. They consequently withdraw their emotional engagement, and withhold what their mother so desperately craves: love and affection. The sisters manage to maintain a disinterested, pleasant attitude, but actually recoil from their mother's increasingly wretched condition. Both yearn to escape the burden of their mother's illness. In order to evade the humiliation, the anger, impatience and disgust, Maddy and Helen begin to perceive their mother as

a grotesque being, neither “intelligible” nor “quite human,” that leads a “dim vegetable life.” Time and again, however, the mother has brief periods of recovery in which her true self resurfaces. During these interludes, she desperately tries to live as intensely as possible. These interruptions are described as mere parodies of normal life that only make it harder for the sisters to cope with the eventually deteriorating condition of their mother.

- 13 After her death, the mother's looming presence continues to contaminate the life of the sisters, who are imprisoned by their feelings of guilt, pain and shame. The plot of the story “hovers around the emblematic Gothic fear that what is dead and buried may not be dead at all but may come back to haunt the living” (Howells 1998: 20). All of the sisters' attempts to get rid of their memories are doomed to failure. Their mother may be dead, but she is not absent. Towards the end of the story, Helen learns that her mother tried to escape as well, an undertaking that was likewise bound to fail. Maddy had tricked her into a hospital for a check-up, but actually left her to stay where she would no longer have to care for the mother. When the mother tries to run away, she is caught and brought back to her room, where she is henceforth restrained to her bed. Whether Maddy had expected the hospital stay to accelerate her mother's death, as it eventually does, remains unclear. However, her refusal to take her mother back home with her once she is in the hospital is a last betrayal of the daughters, who are aware that “the resources of love we had were not enough, the demand on us was too great; we were only children when the disease took hold of her” (Munro 1968: 270). But for all their rational attempts at explanation and justification, the sisters remain trapped in their guilty conscience. From a pragmatic point of view, the daughters have fulfilled their duty: they struggled hard to keep their mother as civilized, controlled, as tamed as possible. Yet from a more instinctive, humane perspective, their incapability to love the grotesque mother was a most tragic, visceral failure. In true Gothic mode, the degeneration of the mother highlights the gap between civilized surface and the primeval fears of human nature.
- 14 The obvious discrepancy between a rational approach and the lingering impact of disturbing impulses also seems to have inspired the title of the story. It refers to the Treaty of Utrecht, which in 1713 concluded what the British historian John Robert Seeley called the “most businesslike of all our wars” (Kinder 1995: 269). Britain defeated France and forced it to cede almost all of its North American territories, including Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and the Hudson Bay Colonies. The treaty established Britain as the major imperial power, not least because it included an agreement with Spain that granted Britain a monopoly over the slave trade with Spanish America. It also marked the end of French explorations in North America, and stopped the commercial skirmishes over trade monopolies and ownership of land. However, it did nothing to ease the tension between French- and English-speaking communities, which continued to affect relations between the settlers.
- 15 I believe that the title of the story alludes to the historical truce to show how bitterness that had been nourished for years prevails over pragmatic considerations. While the treaty temporarily ended the official fighting, an undercurrent of mistrust and tension continued to shape the lives of the settlers. In a similar way, neither Helen's escape from Jubilee, nor Maddy's decision to put her mother in a hospital, gave the sisters the peace of mind they desired. I would even go so far as to suggest that the economic,

utilitarian dimension of the treaty, which was stressed by Seeley, implies an entirely selfish motive behind the sisters' actions.

- 16 A deep discomfort of unresolved anxieties informs both the setting and the relationships of the characters, who are trapped in their realization that decisions made to achieve a resolution cannot be relied upon to actually put a stop to a haunting mother and a guilty conscience. The Gothic mother is both the source of the dread, and a symbol for the suppressed levels of experience. Maddy and Helen are both accomplices in her death. According to Coral Ann Howells, “The Peace of Utrecht” is “the story of a failed exorcism, [...] a Gothic tale which figures primitive female fears – nothing less than fears of matricide” (Howells 1998: 23). The story ends with Maddy wondering why she is incapable of going away from Jubilee (Munro 1968: 284), the Gothic site where her failure will continue to torment her, and where “No peace is made” (Howells 1998: 23).
- 17 “The Peace of Utrecht” features such Gothic elements as a bleak setting, an archetypal Gothic mother, unresolved conflicts, and concealed desires. Last but not least, it relates to the human potential for violence. The latter characteristic is also alluded to in “Open Secrets,” which is set in Carstairs in the 1960s, and revolves around the disappearance of a teenage girl and the question of whether a crime has been committed or not. The girl, Heather Bell, gets lost while she was on a hike with the C.G.I.T. – the Canadian Girls in Training. Because of their group leader's stubborn insistence that she simply played a trick on them all and would return soon enough, a day passes until a proper search is organized. But Heather cannot be found, nor can any sign of what has happened to her. Has she eloped with an unknown man, or was she kidnapped, or murdered? The town is briefly unsettled by the case, but soon decides to invest its energy in the re-establishment of the status quo rather than in solving the mystery. In spite of being the possible victim of a crime, the girl is dismissed as “new in town,” her mother as being “away on the weekend herself” (Munro 1995: 131) and as “[e]ither divorced or never married in the first place” (Munro 1995: 136) – in short, the town's talk subtly intimates that Heather was 'different' and therefore a likely candidate to venture an ill-considered, foolish action such as running away with a man. The story's progress consequently continues to communicate the priorities of the town's people: After revealing how they portray Heather as being 'strange,' that is, as not being a local, it narrates the reactions and speculations of individual community members. An eventual solution to the mystery is never offered – a final comment only implies that Maureen, the main character, might have observed something relevant but failed to realize its importance: “an open secret, something not startling until you think of trying to tell it” (Munro 1995: 160).
- 18 The story derives its uneasy, and somewhat unpleasant, quality from the people's actual indifference to Heather's fate, and from their eagerness to blame the victim for whatever has happened. According to Ailsa Cox, “Open Secrets” is “less concerned with the fate of Heather Bell than with the subjective impact of her disappearance, both on the community and, especially, on Maureen” (Cox 2004: 62). In fact, Maureen's contemplations on the event suggest that she has, in true Gothic fashion, suppressed her lust for living in a social structure that is built on women's willingness to maintain the idea that marriage guarantees them ultimate fulfilment.
- 19 The story paints a dull, unappealing picture of the life of adult women, which is rendered as a stark contrast to the saucy and rebellious attitudes of girlhood. Adult

women are described as somewhat grotesque figures, whose unattractive looks correspond to the insipidity of their lives. Maureen's cousin Frances is depicted as “a dumpling sort of woman with gray hair like brambles all over her head, and a plain, impudent face” (Munro 1995: 133), while Mary Johnstone, the leader of the C.G.I.T. hike, has “had polio and nearly died of it, at the age of thirteen or fourteen. She was left with short legs, a short, thick body, crooked shoulders, and a slightly twisted neck, which kept her big head a little tilted to one side” (Munro 1995: 133). The absence of feminine beauty is further emphasized in the description of Maureen's neighbour Marian, who “was a woman without one visible advantage. She had a heavy face, a droop to the cheeks – she reminded Maureen of some sort of dog. Not necessarily an ugly dog. Not an ugly face, really” (Munro 1995: 143). Only Maureen is conceded a certain attractiveness, although Frances is quick to remark that she “was getting broad in the beam and her hair did not suit her piled and sprayed like an upside-down mixing bowl” (Munro 1995: 132-133). The thickset bodies of the women, their clipped or otherwise fixed hair – all of these superficial attributes highlight how they seek to embody a rigid morality rather than, for instance, (tempting) suggestions. The women in the story have eliminated their playfulness; to serve as pillars of their community, they have become immobile.

- 20 In contrast to them, Heather Bell (seems to have) ventured an unexpected move. She disappears at an age that marks the turning point of her leaving adolescence behind in order to enter maturity. Therefore, her disappearance makes Maureen wonder whether the girl did not simply take the chance to escape provincial life. Maureen gives in to reminiscences of her own days in the C.G.I.T., recalling how she and the other girls, while on a hike, used to stay up all night to misbehave:

The girls played cards, they told jokes, they smoked cigarettes, and around midnight began the great games of Truth or Dare. Some Dares were: take off your pajama top and show your boobs; eat a cigarette butt; swallow dirt; stick your head in the water pail and try to count to a hundred; go and pee in front of Miss Johnstone's tent. Questions requiring Truth were: Do you hate your mother? Father? Sister? Brother? How many peckers have you seen and whose were they? Have you ever lied? Stolen? Touched anything dead? (Munro 1994: 139)

- 21 The list of Dares reads extra-disgusting, while the Truths seem to represent a wilful challenge to some of the Ten Commandments. In fact, the girls' games mockingly parody the mottos of the C.G.I.T., which require them to “Cherish Health, Seek Truth, Know God, and Serve Others.” The girls openly disregard concerns about their health when they smoke “too many cigarettes” (Munro 1994: 139), and the Truths they seek are suggested by their playful disobedience to the Christian values of their organisation. “God” is entirely absent from the story; and the fourth motto, “Serve Others,” announces the girls' prospective roles in their families, and their community.
- 22 Maureen's recollections tend to romanticize her time at the C.G.I.T., not because of the questionable pleasures described above, but because she, as a girl, had been so different from the person she has become:
- She remembered how noisy she had been then. A shrieker, a dare-taker. Just before she hit high-school, a giddiness either genuine or faked or half-and-half became available to her. Soon it vanished, her bold body vanished inside this ample one, and she became a studious, shy girl, a blusher. She developed the qualities her husband would see and value when hiring and proposing. (Munro 1994: 139)

23 While Maureen melancholically remembers her girlhood confidence, her longing for a change is further illustrated when she describes the trees she sees down by the river as “unruly” and as forming “hidden paths [...] where animals went, and lone humans sometimes, becoming different from what they were outside, charged with different responsibilities, certainties, intentions. She could imagine vanishing” (Munro 1994: 139-140). Maureen's thoughts imply both her loneliness and her inclination to try a different life. In this way, Heather's disappearance becomes symbolic for the rebellious girl Maureen had once been. Like Heather, this younger, independent self got lost. Therefore, Maureen wants the younger woman to have run away, to have opposed what small town life held in store for her:

I dare you to run away. Was it possible? There are times when girls are inspired, when they want the risks to go on and on. They want to be heroines, regardless. They want to take a joke beyond where anybody has ever taken it before. To be careless, dauntless, to create havoc – that was the lost hope of girls. (Munro 1994: 139)

24 The Gothic atmosphere that informs “Open Secrets” is remarkable because it illustrates how a literary style can be used to both conceal and highlight strong passions. The melancholy of the story remains, like the mystery at the heart of the plot, unresolved. Stronger sensations, hidden desires, are implied in the characters' observations, in their gestures and looks, but they are never actually verbalized – and, thus, neither consciously perceived nor acted upon. If Heather had indeed become the victim of a crime, her perpetrator would have been the only person who has failed to restrict him- or herself. But all of these probabilities are swallowed by the bleak, mundane character of the town. The inability to communicate is highlighted in another grotesque feature: all of the three men who play a major role in the story have impaired speech. A stroke has slurred the speech of Maureen's husband; the only verbal contribution of Mr. Slater, Marian's husband, is to say “please and thank you as often as possible” (Munro 1994: 144); and Mr. Siddicup, whom Marian suspects to be involved in Heather's disappearance, has stopped speaking altogether after a laryngectomy. The guttural sounds and inarticulate expressions of the men mirror the distorted images of the women. Munro's fiction often oscillates between emotional intimacy and detachment; in “Open Secrets,” however, the characters appear to be completely estranged from one another, and incapable of bridging the distance. Munro seems to mock her readers' expectations when she turns a story that began as a mystery into a delineation of a scenery that is devoid of any suspense. It is, instead, a representation of the ‘underlying dreadfulness’ stated by Tennessee Williams. The possible crime that briefly disturbed it eventually serves to enhance the impression of dull stagnation.

25 The human potential for violence alluded to in both “The Peace of Utrecht” and “Open Secrets” is further pronounced in the Gothic character of Munro's story “Runaway,” which also investigates hidden desires and not-so-hidden domestic terrors. “Runaway” exploits Gothic archetypes in a subversive way, and it likewise features a rather eerie, supernatural encounter. The story was first published in 2004, in Alice Munro's identically titled short story collection. On the surface, the story narrates a young woman's failed attempt to break free from a troubled marriage with the help of an older, more sophisticated female friend. Upon closer examination, however, Carla's – the young woman's – return to her husband suggests a correlation between submission and security. Her homecoming may limit her autonomy, but it also provides her with the reassuring feeling that there is something, and someone, to care about. The

comfort of a familiar unhappiness prevails over the vague temptation of freedom – or so it seems. Munro's dense and concise narration suggests a number of different explanations for Carla's eventual decision to stay with her husband.

26 I suggest reading the three main characters as ironically subverted versions of Gothic stock characters. Carla, the young wife, Clark, her husband, and Sylvia, the older friend, are representations of such archetypes as the damsel in distress, the dark lover, and the wise woman, respectively. All three characters are entangled in a triangle of suppressed desires and contested power relations.

27 At the beginning of the story, Carla is introduced as a person who enjoys “the rhythm of her regular chores” (Munro 2006: 5). She takes pleasure in the knowledge that she has a set occupation, and attends to her routine of tasks. These tasks include cleaning the little horse barn of their trailer park home, and caring for the tourists who come for a horse ride. Carla's third obligation serves to describe the character of her husband Clark, because

Clark had fights not just with the people he owed money to. His friendliness, compelling at first, could suddenly turn sour. There were places he would not go into, where he always made Carla go, because of some row. [...]

“You flare up,” said Carla.

“That's what men do.” (Munro 2006: 6)

28 Clark's ill-natured demeanour defines Carla's crucial function in their relationship. Her emotional composure and quiet compliance form the counterbalance to Clark's irritable, unpleasant, and self-absorbed personality. Deeply ironic, the stability she contributes to their living is precisely the defining feature of the middle-class existence she fled when she married Clark, a surly, taciturn riding teacher whom her stepfather called a “loser [...]. One of those drifters” (Munro 2006: 28-29). Her parents' disapproval positively boosted Carla's perception of Clark as a dark, romantic rebel. He represented a challenge which appealed to teenage Carla's longing for heightened sensation. She dropped her plans to become a veterinarian and instead agreed to establish their own riding school with Clark, somewhere in the country, to lead a more “authentic life” (Munro 2006: 33). Now, after living for several years in a trailer park, she has come to realize that the romantic excitement she had felt “was probably just sex” (Munro 2006: 28). Clark turned out not to be the “gypsy rover” (Munro 2006: 28) Carla had fantasized about; his menacing attitude and his casual cruelties frighten her:

“I am not going to let you off the hook, Carla.” [...]

“Just don't be mad at me,” she said.

“I'm not mad. I hate when you're like this, that's all.”

“I'm like this because you're mad.”

“Don't tell me what I am. You're choking me. Start supper.” (Munro 2006: 11)

29 Clark's speech patterns illustrate that his dominant position in their relationship springs from his complete disregard for Carla's uneasiness. Clark cannot endure defiance from anybody. In their conversations, he tries to outwit rather than communicate with Carla, forcing her to submit to his regime of domestic terror. Carla has developed means to “deflect” (Munro 2006: 14) his manipulations rather than arguing her point. She also tends to avoid direct confrontation. Her reluctance to win one of their verbal contests results from her sensing that such a defeat would impair what is left of his romantic appeal; it would also, however, further provoke his brutality.

- 30 Sylvia, the third person to enter the scene, is a middle-aged and emancipated college teacher who had hired Carla as a help during the long illness of her late husband. Her education and social status seem to depict her as superior to Carla, as someone Carla might consult when she is in trouble. Yet, Sylvia has developed a crush on the younger woman, who reminds her of “certain girls she had known in high school – those who were bright but never too bright, easy athletes but not strenuously competitive, buoyant but not rambunctious. Naturally happy” (Munro 2006: 18). Sylvia despises Clark, and when Carla breaks down in front of her, crying about her miserable marriage, she offers help. She arranges a bus trip and temporary accommodation for Carla in Toronto. Yet Sylvia's readiness to help the young woman derives from her being appalled at Carla's noisy fit rather than from an earnest desire to end Carla's obvious unhappiness: “Sylvia could not help feeling how, with every moment of this show of misery, the girl made herself more ordinary, more like one of those soggy students in her [...] office” (Munro 2006: 22).
- 31 It is indeed a show that Sylvia witnesses, for Carla's despair actually results from Clark's plans to blackmail Sylvia. In order to excite some passionate response from her husband, Carla had invented a bedtime story about how Sylvia's late husband had molested her – a narrative to stimulate Clark's and Carla's more intimate moments. Clark, however, has decided to use the story in order to gain some material profit as well. He forces his wife to visit Sylvia, where he wants her to repeat the tale. He expects Sylvia to pay a large sum to hush up the alleged harassment. Far from really wanting to leave her husband, but unable to reveal the truth, Carla breaks down in front of Sylvia in order to escape from the imminent danger of being revealed to be a liar.
- 32 In her review of the story, Angie Krittenbrink recognizes Carla and Sylvia as stock characters of Alice Munro: the young woman unnecessarily dependent on love, and the older, more intellectual woman who has her own emotional burden to deal with (Krittenbrink 2007: 1). These characters are rather sarcastic adaptations of the Gothic archetypes of the damsel in distress, and the wise woman, respectively. As far as Clark is concerned, his literary function encompasses features of both dark lover and villain: Carla has envisaged her husband as romantic lover, while Sylvia sees him as a villain who abuses his wife. Munro is darkly ironic again, when she constructs him as a jerk who lacks the capacity for either.
- 33 In “Runaway,” Munro resorts to Gothic elements in a story otherwise composed in a realistic narrative mode. Her subversive rendering of Gothic stereotypes, as well as the presence of an imminent danger that suffuses the narration, contribute to an uncanny, foreboding atmosphere. Gothic elements are employed as direct references to a fear that informs the characters' actions. Moreover, Munro uses Gothic features to show both that her characters rely on creative inventions, and that these imaginations are fictitious. Gothic references stress the narrative capability of the characters, as well as the fictional nature of their conceptions. Munro's adaptation of elements of a literary genre which is, after all, obsessed with a decidedly artificial and exaggerated representation of hidden fears and suppressed desires can be read as an allusion to a metafictional connection between imagination and reality. Here, Munro extends the focal point of every short story, the question of “What is it that happened?” in order to ask 'What do you believe has happened? And has it really happened, or has it been merely an idea in one of the character's imagination?'

- 34 “Runaway” is very much concerned with the gap between reality and the characters' imaginative inventions. Throughout the story, reality, gradually revealed by a heterodiegetic narrator, is compared with the characters' embellished versions both of one another, and of their lives. All three characters depend on fictitious, romantic improvements of their simple routine, but romance is presented as a striking contrast to realism in Munro's stories. Sylvia and Carla struggle to overcome what critic Coral Ann Howells has called “the untranslatability of romantic fantasy” (Howells 1998: 18). Ultimately, they both fail. While Clark's somewhat plain idea of an extra attraction is extra money, Carla and Sylvia use fiction to add a certain glamour to their ordinary existence. Carla's invented incident of molestation is not quintessentially different from Sylvia's artificial image that draws Carla as a 'naturally happy' girl. The key to understanding their actions is the recognition that neither wants her fiction to become disclosed for what it is. Therefore, Sylvia is eager to get rid of the weeping Carla. Being confronted with the young woman's ostentatious misery threatens to destroy her vision of Carla's allegedly careless vivacity. Likewise, Carla's departure to Toronto is a flight from the unexpected results of her manipulations much rather than an attempt to take life into her own hands.
- 35 Therefore, the Gothic references highlight the breach between the characters' fantasies and the reality of the story. This is sometimes rather funny, for example when Carla recalls that in high school, “[s]he had been one of those dorky girls” (Munro 2006: 27) rather than the 'naturally happy' teenager of Sylvia's fancy. Likewise, there is a lot of amusement to be derived from the idea that Carla imagines her husband as a dark, romantic lover. Last but not least, Sylvia's response when confronted with the weeping Carla ironically deconstructs the image of the wise woman: Sylvia's independence of mind and her feminist ideals may have been positive assets in her own life, but these achievements become questionable when Sylvia uses them as a pretext to get rid of the desperate Carla. At this moment, the defeated, tragic dimension of the Gothic becomes apparent, because in spite of her flights of fancy, Carla does need help. Up to this point, she has relied on her creative conceptions to sustain herself, but because of Clark's plans to blackmail Sylvia, reality and fiction threaten to become confused.
- 36 While the ironic adaptations of literary archetypes allude to Gothic semiotics only in a subtle way, the climactic scene in “Runaway” represents an obvious reference to the supernatural, one of the distinguishing features of the Gothic genre. After Carla's return, Clark visits Sylvia in the middle of the night to confront her with the news. He also demands that she stops interfering with his life. Clark attempts to intimidate Sylvia with his physical presence, and seems to succeed when, at the height of tension, a Gothic challenge renders his threatening attitude preposterous:

Not far from the house was a wide shallow patch of land that often filled up with night fog at this time of year. The fog was there tonight, had been there all this while. But now at one point there was a change. The fog had thickened, taken on a separate shape, transformed itself into something spiky and radiant. First a live dandelion ball, tumbling forward, then condensing itself into an unearthly sort of animal, pure white, hell-bent, something like a giant unicorn, rushing at them. [...] Then the vision exploded. Out of the fog, and out of the magnifying light – now seen to be that of a car travelling along this back road, probably in search of a place to park – out of this appeared a white goat. A little dancing white goat, hardly bigger than a sheepdog. [...]

“It's your goat,” said Sylvia. “Isn't it your goat?” (Munro 2006: 39)

- 37 The reappearance of Clark and Carla's petgoat Flora, which had run away from them in a symbolic reference to Carla's own attempt at escape, is described in terms of a mystical apparition. The scene has a particularly Gothic atmosphere, created not only by the white light and the fog, but also by the anticipation of violence that Clark's threatening behaviour had suggested. Both Clark and Sylvia, however, are frightened until they realize that it is only Flora that has come back. For a moment, they share an awkward feeling of wonder, which resolves the tension between them.
- 38 At the end of the story, Munro offers yet another subtext, which casts doubts upon the notions and conclusions suggested so far. A few days after her own return, Carla learns incidentally that Flora had come back as well. The reader is left to assume that Clark had killed the goat on his way home, an act which he seems to have concealed from his wife. Reviewer Marion Arnott suggests that Carla does not want to know, that she decides not to see the truth about her husband's brutality (Arnott 2007: 1). I believe, however, that Clark killed the animal because it startled him in a moment when he was threatening Sylvia, and thus ridiculed his self-assured and menacing attitude; in short, it destroyed his fiction. Carla interprets his act of violence as one of the passionate responses from her husband that she so yearns for. To read his brutality as an act of jealousy is, within Carla's fiction of Clark, entirely credible. Therefore, his killing of the she-goat reconciles her to his intimidating demeanour, and helps her to regain the narrative authority required to fictionally improve her husband. Carla indulges in the belief that Clark's passion for her provoked him to shed blood. It is deeply ironic, again, that the sacrificial animal which is used to idolize their bond is – a scapegoat.
- 39 To sum up, “Runaway” derives its Gothic character from the story's subversive adaptation of Gothic archetypes, from the characters' suppressed and fictionalized desires, and from the human potential for violence as embodied by Clark. And there is another Gothic quality that links up directly with a prominent theme of Canadian literature: I am talking, of course, about the motive of survival. In Alice Munro's stories, the topos of 'survival' combines the Gothic idea that 'fear is possible' with the 'underlying dreadfulness in modern experience' once highlighted by Tennessee Williams. “The Peace of Utrecht,” “Open Secrets,” and “Runaway” all address the mundane, ordinary terror that is lurking behind the civilized façade of small towns. The garrison itself has become a dangerous place that threatens not the physical survival of Munro's characters, but their mental stability. In order to survive, they will have to transgress the limits of Kantian thought – to confront the mysteries of “what lies beyond.”

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Margot Northey's reading of early Francophone and Anglophone Canadian texts, *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction*, and Margaret Atwood's study *Strange Things. The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article présente une analyse de trois nouvelles – « The Peace of Utrecht » (1968), « Open Secrets » (1994) et « Runaway » (2005) – pour mettre en lumière la dimension gothique de l'œuvre de Munro sous l'angle de la description de l'ambivalence des rapports humains et de la création d'archétypes littéraires que l'on retrouve sous une forme plus ou moins modifiée ou subversive.

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