

Bad Condition in Alice Munro's Selected Works: A Lacanian Socio-Ethical Psychoanalytic Reading

DOI:10.22098/JPC.2024.12623.1164

Pegah Sheibeh¹; Hossein Moradi^{1*}

1. Department of English Language and Literature, Karaj Branch, Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Iran.
Corresponding Author: moradi.hossein@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper illustrates in Alice Munro's selected works the bad condition in which the characters are trapped as a result of their contextualized mind that is confined to limited interpretation in accordance with the Other's desire, their mental attachment and dependence on Symbolic Order and what it imposes as the only way to think and live. Lacan's concept of Beauty encapsulated in "act[ing] in conformity with one's desires" is thought while reading Munro's writings. It is a socio-ethical reading of Lacan. It was proved that socio-ethical reading in psychoanalysis is quite fruitful; it gives data that shows that its effect goes from individual to society. Lacan's notion of Symbolic Order was theoretically analyzed to prove how ethical psychoanalysis helps characters' awareness. The bad condition illustrates living in a Symbolic Order. The characters found it intolerable since, unlike Lacanian ethics and beauty that help humans to live their lives to the fullest, morality in Symbolic Order works for the desire of the Other. Symbolic Order subjects the characters to a structure of power, the dominant socio-political power that follows the "morality of the master," meaning that it determines society's conventions. Characters have no role in making their life by their own decisions and in conformity with their Real desire. They turn into passive individuals with a victim mentality. Relinquishment of one's desire results in feelings of guilt and regret. Hence, while characters stand out from the social orders, they experience a neutral stance in which they come to awareness; this neutrality illustrates Beauty in Lacan.

Keywords: Beauty, Ethics, Lacan, Sociology, Symbolic Order.

Introduction

From a Lacanian perspective, the subjectivity of humans involves a continuous relation of the three registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. The Imaginary is related to the individual's notion of himself as a person who has a "unique personality" and can live a unique existence. The symbolism is related to the rules of the "social order." The Real, which is privileged by Lacan, "disturbs the reassuring (yet ever-fragile) coherence of our symbolic and imaginary configurations alike." and is not affected by the universal categories of the symbolic law and society that aims at "totality" (3) rather than singularity.

The "subject" comes into existence through symbolic law and prohibition. "Personality" can never entirely transcend the narcissistic fantasies of wholeness, integration, and extraordinariness that buttress the subject's imaginary relationship with the world. "Singularity," in turn, relates to the rebellious energies of the real that elude both symbolic and imaginary closure. It opens to layers of being that exceed all social categories and classifications. If personhood stipulates the kind of person a given individual is (e.g., timid, reserved, outgoing, charismatic), singularity expresses something about the specificity of the subject's basic life orientation on the level of the drives and unconscious desire. (Ruti, 2012, p. 1-2)

That is to say, "personality" is related to the imagination, "Subjectivity" to Symbolic Order, and "singularity" to the Real. (Ruti, 2012, p.1)

Lacan emphasizes the loss of desire in the process of signifying. Lacan explains when a child is separated from their mother, the infant experiences a "loss," a "lack," and a "want-to-be" because of losing the unity he imagines he had with his mother. This "want-to-be" is the "nature of desire." At once, this bond is broken, and desire is generated. From now on, the only thing that the subject desires is to rebuild and fix that splintered oneness. So, the subject has the desire to regain the "lost object" throughout his life (Richardson, 1987, p.298). That is why, according to Lacan, desire is "the metonymy of our being" (Lacan, 1992, p.321); Desire has no object. It constantly goes from one object to another one. "Signifier constantly refers to another in a perpetual deferral of meaning". (Evans, 2006, p. 117) So, a human being's desire is "never-ending"; it is his desire just as long as it is unavailable, and when it is gained, he desires something else. Desire is dependent on demand in order to be articulated. That is to say, the subject articulates his desires through words and signifiers. As a result, Desire is "lacking," "unsatisfied," "impossible," and "misconstrued." (Lacan, 2005, p.154)

Symbolic morality is opposed to Lacanian ethics and asks human beings "not to cede on" (Lacan, 1992, p.315) his desire. Morality in the Symbolic Order works for the desire of the Other. The Other is a "site of hegemonic power"; the Other "worships the master's morality" (Ruti, 2012, p. 151). Symbolic order subjects the individual to the structure of power. What is determined in society as law and conventions is determined by Symbolic Order. The "categorical imperative dictates that you should only do what the mainstream morality of the Other has conditioned you to do" (75); the morality of the Symbolic Order dictates what is good and bad, dictates what is the proper behavior and action in different situations and "By depriving the subject of an agentic relationship to social meaning,

they [the Other's signifiers] annihilate its capacity to mold its future actively" (80); therefore, the subject has no role in making his life by his own decisions while "one of the most effective means to oppose the oppressive ideals of the Other is to devise ideals of one's own" (80). These ideals conform to one's desire.

Munro is one of the best short story writers due to her sharp eyes for social issues. As presented in the chosen fiction from four collections of Alice Munro - "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "The Shining Houses," "An Ounce of Cure," "Boys and Girls" from the collection of *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), "Heirs of the Living Body" from the collection of *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) "The Moons of Jupiter" from the collection of *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), and finally "Floating Bridge," "Comfort," "Post and Beam," "Queenie" from the collection of *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001)- Munro is highly sensitive to social issues and her fictions mostly have social implications. She claims in an interview, "I'm certain my stories do have social and political content, at least in the broadest sense of those terms. Obviously, every human action has some political impulse and social consequence" (Pleuke & Smith, 1995, p. 227). Munro's fictions are complicated stories focused on "social ideology" (May 2003, p.19). Through the characters of her fiction, she meticulously reveals the human condition in a world that is surrounded by society's ridiculous conventions and the Other's suffocating power over the characters' way of life.

The sections of this essay will discuss the different dimensions of Symbolic Order and its desire. The fact that the characters are stuck in Symbolic Order and they become aware of this fact will be analyzed. This article illustrates the bad condition in which the characters are trapped as a result of their contextualized mind that is confined to limited interpretation, which is in accordance with the Other's desire and because of their mental attachment and dependence on Symbolic Order's values and what it imposes as the only way to think and live.

Methods

This study used the argumentative method through the theoretical, analytical design to discuss Lacan's ideas regarding ethics and Beauty, which are of great importance in order to live life in its full. To develop this argument, Lacan's concept of Beauty in his ethics, which is encapsulated in "act[ing] in conformity with one's desires" (Lacan, 1992, p. 311), is to be thought while reading Munro's short stories. It is a socio-ethical reading of Lacan. It has political and social reverberations. Lacanian ethics represents Lacan as a social critic. The focus of this article is on symbolic order, and it elaborates on the different dimensions of this order among the three orders. Accordingly, the bad conditions in which the characters are stuck due to living in Symbolic Order are analyzed in this article.

Results

These fictions sharply explore social issues. This article illustrates the bad condition in which the characters are trapped as a result of their contextualized mind that is confined to limited interpretation, which is in accordance with the Other's desire and because of their mental attachment and dependence on Symbolic Order's values and what it imposes

as the only way to think and live. While the characters stand out from the social orders, they experience a neutral stance in which they come to awareness; this neutrality illustrates Beauty in Lacan. They come to the awareness that they are stuck in Symbolic Order and find their condition intolerable. Symbolic order tries to shape their life and have them under its control, to make them its “creation,” the creation that follows the Other’s desire instead of its Real desire. It tries to take away their individuality, autonomy and independence through prohibition, ignorance and through designating specific ways of life, imposing its desire as the only possible existing truth and erasing the possibility of other desires and other ways of life except what it defines; it does not give them enough space to decide. Hence, they turn into passive individuals with a victim mentality. Relinquishment of one’s desire results in feelings of guilt and regret.

Table 1. Coding results of this study in Munro’s selected works

Title of the Story	Bad Condition	Outcomes	Awareness
“Walker Brothers Cowboy”	pre-defined roles and rules	take away individuality, be the Other’s creation	not being trapped into what one doesn’t want
	Great Depression, trapped into past	victim mentality, passive dreamer	normalization
	social classification	marginalization, humiliation	inconsistency of Symbolic Order’s values
“The Shining Houses”	the-Other’s benefit	suffocation of the individual’s desire, dependency	community can make mistake
	social conflict between tradition and modernity	Destruction, ugliness	no incompatibility between tradition and modernity
	modern construction	destruction of nature	the Other is not reliable
“An Ounce of Cure”	ignorance	jeopardize the individual’s life	ignorance is dangerous
	meaning-making through media	devastation	symbolic love conduct is meaningless
	advertisement through prohibition	disaster	imposed normalization

	exclusion from society	Passivity, obedience	domination of Symbolic Order's ideologies
"Boys and Girls"	imposed gender role	repetition , one's life is spoiled	the Other decline its uniqueness and autonomy
	penetration of the hegemonic Other's desire into the individual's mind	take away individuality, strengthen the Other's desire	trapped into social roles
"Heirs of the Living Body"	suppression of ambitiousness	stay in safe zone, live the same life forever	there are other possibilities
	social patterns and expectations	destructive	uselessness of the social conventions
"The Moons of Jupiter"	prioritization of social status	distress	the significance of family over one's social status
	distressed life	momentarily distraction	postponement of one's own desire
	immensities of the world	distraction	distance from one's Real desire
"Floating Bridge"	the Other exercises power over one's life	uncompassionate and loveless life	imprisoned, lose individuality
	wear masks	admired by society, imprisons	at service of Symbolic Order, follows the Other's desire
"Comfort"	educational system is at service of the Other	imposed ideas and desires, totality	deceived into thinking that their ideas are important
	social ceremonies and conventions	financial advantages	valorized system
"Post and Beam"	marriage as a social institution	disappointment	social criterions doesn't lead to happy life
	the demanding Other	tiredness, never live for oneself	follow the Other's desire, live for others
	enforcement of feeling of guilt by the Other for acting on One's desire	sacrifice one's own desire, misery	relinquishment of one's own desire results in feeling of guilt and regret
	social position defines individual's value	exclusion from society	unreliability of social position in defining one's value

"Queenie"	society's prescription of a happy good life	catastrophe	the symbolic social factors of a happy life doesn't work
-----------	---	-------------	--

Discussion

1. Predefined Roles; the Other's Creation in "Walker Brothers Cowboy"

Society's hegemonic definition of the way characters should behave and live is pictured in "Walker Brothers Cowboy" (1998). Munro demonstrates how society, through predefined roles and rules for males and females, tries to take away their individuality and have them under its control, to make them its "creation" (Munro, 1998, p. 13). The young narrator complains about the way her mother dresses her when they go shopping. She is supposed to wear prestigious clothes, follow what society defines as "lady" (13) and live in conformity with the social order's expectation in the process of "endless fittings" (10) since the "hegemonic" Symbolic Order (Ruti, 2012, p. 7) has influence over the characters and what they desire. However, unlike her mother, the girl is cautious of not being trapped into what she does not want, even if it is the imposed "unwanted emotion" (Munro, 1998, p.14) because it only results in lifelong "headaches" (13) and does not let her live her life in its full.

2. Great Depression; Victim Mentality and Passive Dreamers in "Walker Brothers Cowboy"

The narrator's mother is a victim of the universalized Great Depression. The social order normalized the Great Depression just like specific thoughts, behaviors, desires and actions while rendering others as rejected or even impossible. It is the "performative force of the 'normal' ideological interpellation that compels us to accept our determinate place within the socio-symbolic edifice" (Žižek, 2003, p. 112), so the mother knows the status quo as a universal phenomenon, not a personal one and she has no power to live a different life. The Other desires depress passive dreamers, those who only build a life in their imagination and live in there because people who are trapped in the past and have no love for life will be passive individuals with no action and no desire so that they would be no threat for society and its Symbolic rules. So, society encourages them to embrace the victim mentality, which is a dilemma imposed by social order with "dignity" (Munro, 1998, p.13). The young girl, his father and Nora are aware of the trick of normalization by the political and social powers.

3. Social Classification in "Walker Brothers Cowboy"

One day, when Ben is out with his children selling things, a woman pours a pot containing pee through the window. Being offended, he pretends nothing happens. As shown, Munro "moves toward a character's innermost desires. Those desires [are] very much indicative of "the cruelty of the world" (Thacker, 2011, p.607). Because of the social condition of his life, the Symbolic Order marginalizes him, humiliates him, shows him his position in society and puts him in a distressed moment. Society shows no respect for a peddler as if

he is not a human because he is poor and can be treated no matter how. Nora is another character who is marginalized by social categorization and is isolated by the Other since she does not fit what society defines as value; she is poor and a spinster. Yet Ben, just like Nora, ignores and ridicules social conventions since they are aware not to take seriously a society that rests on such "inconsistent" (Žižek, 2013, p.312) values.

4. Community Can Mistake in "The Shining Houses"

Mrs. Fullerton has been living in an old, unsightly house in Garden Place for fifty years. These surviving houses express savagery and are considered inappropriate by the neighbours who are living in the modern "shining houses" (Munro, 1998, p.29). They believe Mrs. Fullerton's house must be demolished. They do not care that she does not want to destroy the house and goes to a new house because she has some good reasons for herself. They do not care that she has some right to live the life she desires. They only want to get rid of her and her house, no matter how. They only consider their benefits.

They do not listen to any opposing ideas and use them to get what they want and prove their seriousness in their choices by being self-assertive and angry, by admiring each other in a flood of intoxication as if the angrier they are, the more rightful they are, no matter what they say by relying on the fact that they are a community "saying that word as if they found a modern and well-proportioned magic in it, and no possibility anywhere of a mistake" (35) But Mary- one of the neighbours- realizes that the community can make a mistake; community as a product of Symbolic Order is not a trustworthy and consistent structure without any lack and "has not got the final answer" in different situations (Žižek, 1989, p.137). Also, Mrs. Fullerton knows she lives in a society that wants to decide for her and tell her how and where to live, which relinquishes her desire and instead imposes its own desire on her so they cannot tell her what to do.

5. The Social Conflict between Tradition and Modernity in "The Shining Houses"

Munro represents the conflict in society between the traditional world of the past and the new world of modernity, which leads to destruction and ugliness. For Mrs. Fullerton's neighbours, old things are ugly, insignificant and useless. Mary tries to listen to Mrs. Fullerton and the old generation over and over in order to explore new things about life, the things her generation does not know, since she is not sure if life is what she experiences in the modern world. Munro signifies there is no incompatibility between tradition and modernity. "The relations between the traditional and the modern do not necessarily involve displacement, conflict, or exclusiveness... traditional forms may supply support for...change" (Gusfield, 1967, p.351). Tradition is as valuable as modernity. In order to reconstruct their life, the characters do not have to detach from the old things and destroy whatever belongs to the past. Instead, they can reconstruct their life at their best by learning from and connecting the old generation and its history with new possibilities of the modern world, just like Mary.

6. Destruction of Nature in "The Shining Houses"

The constructions destroy nature. It is ridiculous that there are no more green places in a subdivision called Garden Place, and instead, it is filled with shining houses. How artificial is this beauty? The flowerless ugly streets named for flowers, the full ditches

and the lifeless "vivid colours" (Munro, 1998, p.29) of the buildings that replaces the colorful nature get the spirit of the Garden Place and turn it into a boringly calm place. Munro connects the "human exploitation" and "vulnerability" of the landscape with the vulnerability of humans (Omhovère, 2018, p.177). The geometrical assertive pattern of the Garden Place is not as beautiful as it claims, and it shrinks into the raw black mountainside at night, an unpleasant sight. Among this ugliness, the only thing that is still beautiful and conveys life is the smoke blowing from Mrs. Fullerton's chimney. Hence, the other's claim for bringing beauty only leads to wiping out beauty since society only cares about its own benefits, even at the expense of the destruction of nature.

7. Ignorance Provided by Social Order in "An Ounce of Cure"

Society's fanatical attitude towards drinking alcohol turns it into a hidden matter. When it becomes hidden, the person will not have enough information about it, while when the person sees and knows freely, he /she can be aware of its pros and cons. As the girl confesses, "Now here is where my ignorance, my disastrous innocence, comes in" (Munro, 1998, p.81), the girl becomes unwillingly drunk because she never saw how the glasses are filled. This is the result of censorship in society. The dominant power prefers to keep individuals in ignorance, and the families- being affected by its ideologies- follow the Other's desire as it is shown the girl's father drinks beer "outside the house" (77) while if she openly saw how people drink and knew about it, she would not be in such a horrible situation that could even jeopardize her life. After the incident, her mother understands that "ignorance, or innocence," can be quite "dangerous" (77).

8. Symbolic Order's Meaning-Making through Media in "An Ounce of Cure"

A teenage girl is in love with a classmate named Martin. Yet her love is not real love outside Symbolic Order; it is a kind of love developed in a "signifying chain" (Lacan,1992, p.278); it is a sort of love advertised by symbolic order through social media, books and magazines which has merely "nefarious ideological purposes" (Carroll, 2006, p.129) "It was surely seeing Martin as Darcy that did for me; every girl is in love with Darcy" (Munro, 1998, p.78)

On the Other hand, Martin's love is narcissistic (Lacan, 1998, p.6). Martin, learning from social media, only imitates the symbolic love conduct without being really in love with the girl, and she considers it as real love because his behavior is in accordance with what society defines as love. At the same time, a kiss as a symbol of love defined in society is quite meaningless. She assumes this kiss as a symbol of love, and when Martin abandons her for another girl, she shatters. At first, thinking about him was enjoyable, but later, it was torturing, and she realizes that what society defines as love and imposes on people's minds only leads to devastation and heartbreak.

9. Advertisement through Prohibition; Symbolic Order's Strategy in "An Ounce of Cure"

Consuming alcohol is profitable for the utilitarian society (Jakovljevic et al., 2017, p.1), but the dominant socio-political power always hides its true face. It is hidden that society disapproves of drinking alcohol but, on the other hand, advertises it in movies and books as a remedy in distressed situations; "I thought of hard liquor as something to be taken in extremities, and relied upon for extravagant results, one way or another" said the young girl (Munro, 1998, p.81), so she is affected by what society indirectly imposes on her as

normal behavior in a distressed situation. The Other prefers to show it is prohibited but, in reality, advertises it. As Lacan postulates, "empty desires or mad desires" arise only because something is forbidden, while the real desires arise because of "a good object," "an object of love," the Thing. (Lacan, 2005, p. 243) Society is apparently against consuming alcohol, but in reality, people drink it in secrecy as the father "symbolically" drinks beer "*outside* the house" because that is society's strategy to prevent people from something only in order to make them more eager towards that.

10. Exclusion from Society in "An Ounce of Cure"

The girl is excluded by society; "nobody wants to have anything to do with her" (Munro, 1998, p.88) because of transgressing social norms to know she must always follow the Symbolic Order; otherwise, she would fall into trouble- although she does is the outcome of the advertisement of society. While "falling into some kind of death" (i.e., sustaining a symbolic death, exclusion from the socio-symbolic space)" (Žižek, 2000, p. 263) is necessary in order to free herself from the domination of the Other.

She becomes aware of "the way things happened" (Munro, 1998, p.376); she is trapped into ideologies that exclude her for a childish mistake, which prefers a passive, obedient individual who will not take any action in fear of exclusion and being considered as an outcast. Hence, the whole event teaches her an even more significant lesson that what seems to be a catastrophe (being abandoned by a love that shows no respect to her, does not even love her the way she imagines, and also being excluded by a hegemonic society) is nothing but mere "absurdity" (376), this awareness is what frees her from all that imprisons her whether it is the memory of Martin or the exclusion from society.

11. The Imposed Gender Role in "Boys and Girls"

The young girl feels captivated by the role others give her and her brother, which restricts their behavior and their way of life and leads to "repetition" (Lacan, 2005, p. 81) of the ideologies of the Symbolic Order. By mentioning that a girl is what she had to "become" (Munro, 1998, p.118), Munro emphasizes it is a socially bound process, not something innate- it is not a matter of sex, but she is referring to gender- (Stoller, 1984, p. 9). So "gender awareness" is a "distinctive" characteristic in Munro's stories (Howells, 1998, p.144). Society tries to mold one to become a boy or a girl.

She is a doll in the house (Ibsen, 1879) with limited abilities who cannot ask questions (Munro, 1998, p.118) and make decisions. She realizes she is not supposed to "know" (120) because when she is restricted and ignorant, anyone- society included- can impose whatever it wants on her. She is supposed to follow some predefined behavior without asking any questions, and it is the ultimate desire of the Other: not questioning the Symbolic Order and its consistency. Thus, she questions the social categorization that defines a boy as superior and more suitable for working outside the home since she realizes "there is no big Other" (Žižek, 2013, p. 320) that can judge her actions or behavior. Also, Laird not only does not like his role but is also not good at it. So she realizes the Other's law is not inviolable.

Society does not care if the girl's life is spoiled by doing what she hates instead of doing what she enjoys and is good at. It ignores the uniqueness of each person and their specific desire; it eliminates the "subject's interest" (Lacan, 1992, p.188). In the sense that her autonomy is seized by the Other's heteronomous demand, who is considered as the

Real (Critchley, 2008, p.11), yet she can act autonomously since she is much more complicated than a defined role. She does not want to be under the control of any power and cannot tolerate the imposed gender role anymore.

12. The Penetration of the Hegemonic Other's Desire into the Individual's Mind in "Boys and Girls"

A "feed salesman" not only does not believe a girl can work in a field but also refers to her as "it" (Munro, 1998, p.115), as if she is not an individual at all. Her grandmother repeatedly reminds the young narrator how a girl should behave. Similarly, by putting her in the category society defines - that a girl should work inside the home and a boy outside - her mother denies the girl's individuality. The unknown reason for the mother's insistence on the predefined roles is that she is deceived by the hegemonic Other and is affected by what it prescribes as the only way of life and cannot think otherwise. That is how unknowingly they strengthen the Other's desire.

The penetration of the hegemonic Other's desire into the family institution is even suffering the young girl more, in a way that she "no longer felt safe" (118). Hence, the girl knows her mother is untrustworthy and, besides her kindness, calls her "an enemy" (117). The Other's desire is a polyvalent force that runs through multiple sites in the social network to have the characters under its control. The "societal authority is absorbed into the "conscience" and the unconscious of the individual and works as his desire...he desires what he is supposed to desire" (Marcuse, 1955, p.46). However, the young girl is not negligent of this fact and knows she is trapped in these social roles.

13. Suppression of Ambitiousness by the Other in "Heirs of the Living Body"

This story represents the Other suppresses the characters' ambition, "Ambition was what they were alarmed by, for to be ambitious was to court failure and to risk making a fool of oneself" (Munro, 2009, p.41) and society conveys the idea that nothing in life is worse than being laughed at. Therefore, the characters, in fear of failure and being ridiculed, suppress their desire.

As Del is clearly aware, Symbolic Order conveys that choosing not to take action and put a lid on ambition is not only "wisdom" but also a sort of "self-respect" (41). In fact, by repressing ambitions, the characters merely disrespect themselves and instead respect social rules, which is saying no to everything new and living the same life forever. So ambition is necessary for the reconfiguration of their life, and that is why society does its best to repress their ambition since it does not want them to believe there are other possibilities except the same old things it affirms and transgresses. Society wants them to be under its control in the seemingly safe zone in which there would be no failure and mistake that leads to ridicule. Hence, choosing not to take action on their desire is more respected; it is the other's desire.

14. Destructive Social Patterns and Expectations in "Heirs of the Living Body"

Del does not want to go to Uncle Craig's funeral, and her mother tries to reason it out so she isn't afraid of death and participates in the funeral. Munro's fictions show "stifling social convention and non-rational reaction to it" (Smith, 2009, p.165). Munro pictures characters living in a world of destructive social patterns and expectations that need to be reconfigured. In a world where that funeral is an essential ceremony in which all needs to take part in black (Munro, 2009, p.53), Wearing black when one dies is only a social code

that is to be condemned since one's grief for the loss of a loved one has nothing to do with the color of the clothes worn.

Munro demonstrates how nonsense and useless the social conventions are through the pretentious behavior (41) of the participants in the funeral, who brag about the number of people participating and the number of flowers. (53). They are there for backbiting and eating (54) not for comforting the survivors just like survivors who tries to show the Uncle was so dear by their hospitality.

15. Social Status vs. the Significance of Family in "The Moons of Jupiter"

Munro writes about "Human connections" (Thacker, 1999, p.134). Janet is a successful author with a remarkable social status, but there is a gap between Janet and her father and between her and her daughters. It seems it has been a long time since she visited her father, and she does not have any news about her older daughter, Nicholas, because of some resentment and her busy social life. Irritated because of the competitive atmosphere of society and the fact that Nichola "wanted to be incommunicado for a while" (Munro, 2006, p.210), he is also annoyed by his father's critical view of her life.

Yet, she needs to "sacrifice...her social viability for the sake of a larger cause (Ruti, 2012, p. 5), as conveyed in her father's message: "Fame must be striven for, then apologized for. Getting or not getting it, you will be to blame" (Munro, 2006, p.208). Fame is only a game society busies you with, a game that distracts you from prioritizing your family, caring about them and being with them. Munro demonstrates her social status is not enough to reach peace and calmness. Hence, Janet realizes the significance of family over her social status.

16. Distressed Life: Momentary Distraction in "The Moons of Jupiter"

Janet lives a distressed life; she worries for her daughters, her father, her own unsuccessful marital life, her job, and her social status. Whenever she is in a stressful situation, she tries to find comfort and some momentary distraction through shopping and trying on clothes. However, it turns into an obsession that bothers her even more. So she realizes these are momentary and useless. She realizes she never lived for herself, so she wanted to see somebody who was not related to her and who did not expect anything in particular from her (Munro, 2006, p.212). She is tired of other's expectations. She postpones her desires and does not do what she always wanted to do.

17. Immensities of the World: The Distraction in "The Moons of Jupiter"

When Janet visits the planetarium, it is demonstrated that society desires to fix the individuals' minds on "various knowns and unknowns and horrible immensities" and accordingly distract them from living the life they desire. Instead, they simulate the "awe" because of the horrible immensities of the world they live in. So they forget that Beauty is to recognize their real desire and act in conformity with that, not shivering because of the immensities of the world, because the immensities of the world are enjoyable, not terrifying. Munro signifies that interestingly, "children have a natural immunity, most of them," so they act on their desire since they are immune against the symbolic order of society and its desire. It is a "good thing" (Munro, 2006, p.219) that "should not be tampered with" (220). Accordingly, Munro's works denote that individuals need to be cautious of the distractions provided by society to prevent them from reconfiguration their lives and living a life in conformity with their desires.

18. The Other's Power over One's Life in "Floating Bridge"

Jinny suffers from living a life that turns into a jail and the uncompassionate life Neal gives her. He waits for his wife's death instead of appreciating her being still alive and encouraging her to fight cancer. In addition, he brings Helen home seemingly as a nurse for his wife, but Neal is so busy with Helen that Jinny refuses to tell him the good news about her health. Jinny lives in accordance with the expectation of the social norms from a sick wife, who is wearing the garment of a victim who, in silence, tolerates her husband's flirting with another woman, a loveless life waiting for death. She is the obedient passive observer of a life that is passing.

Neal takes control of Jinny's life and decides for her. He programmed her life. He does not care about her decisions; once Neal and his Young Offenders eat the "gingerbread cake she had just made and intended to serve after a meeting that evening" (Munro, 2001, p.53). This lack of attention to her and her decision makes her so angry that she runs away from home, hoping Neal will worry about her, but he does not. She is "left behind" (Ravitch, 2002, p.170); her husband, society, and its laws are apathetic about her aloofness and her "feelings." A threatening society that warns her that if she searches for freedom and power, she will end up being alone. Moreover, this might be the reason for her sickness in the first place. She knows the Other wants to control every move of the individuals through its ridiculous, inconsistent rules no one follows, just like a bench outside the hospital with the sign "THANK YOU FOR NOT SMOKING" (Munro, 2001, p.61).

19. Wearing Masks Imprisons the Characters in "Floating Bridge"

Jinny points out that Neal wears masks, "When Neal was around other people, even one person other than Jinny, his behavior changed, becoming more animated, enthusiastic, ingratiating" (Munro, 2001, p.55). He is a socially active person, someone who is admired by society. However, in his domestic life, where there is no eye to judge or admire him, he does nothing to preserve his sick wife, and this hypocritical behavior annoys Jinny. The Symbolic Order, through its ideologies, deceives Neal that in order to be admired, he needs to wear a mask outside of society when doing his job, so he turns into an instrument for the maintenance of the utilitarian social order. He is at the service of Symbolic Order and follows the Other's desire enthusiastically because society's affirmation is what satisfies him, and he relies on the Other's affirmation.

Jinny realizes that even she becomes "more reserved and slightly ironic. Some masquerades were necessary, or just too habitual to be dropped" (Munro, 2001, pp.55-56). Society provokes the idea that wearing a mask is "necessary" and "habitual," and what is odd is that not wearing a mask is being yourself to say what one truly wants to say and do what one truly wants to do. Hence, Munro depicts that the hegemonic society encourages individuals to wear masks and follow the Other's desire; it imprisons them.

20. Educational System is At the Service of the Other in "Comfort"

Lewis is an opinionated biology teacher who focuses on scientific issues and refuses to teach what authorities in society like to advocate, leading to some protests. However, he believes letters were not written by worried parents; they were written by an authority that pursues its benefit and "thinking of the kids" is the biggest lie they could tell (Munro, 2001, p.134). Schools are used by authorities in society and politics to impose their ideas

and gain "public sympathy" (132). They "do not believe in options. Absolutists are what they are. Fascists" (133); they do not believe in different choices or different ideas and believe in "undifferentiated totality" (Sbriglia&Žižek, 2020, p.180) and that is how they repress the individuals' differences and their different choices and decisions and do not allow any reconfiguration to take place in the system.

He is criticized for a sort of "false teaching" that questions the rules of life set by the Symbolic Order and announces it as "decent" (Munro, 2001, p.131). So he told the school's principal, "Make them happy. Fire me" (133) because the exclusion of a person who does not follow their mindsets and goals can smooth the way for imposing their desires. Besides, Munro criticizes the fact that society even attempts to reinforce some beliefs in people's minds by putting signs on the roadside, "signs urging conversion," signs "discourage[ing] abortion," etc.

Lewis believes society deceives people by "*Tell[ing] 'em All What They'd Like to Hear!*" (141) Society just deceives them into thinking that they and their ideas are important; it gives them enough space to jolly, be refreshed and continue life under their control imagining they are respected and valued. In reality, people are "disregarded" (134) by Symbolic Order since it follows the "morality of the master" that is "created for the virtues of the master and linked to the order of powers" (Lacan, 1992, p. 315) and does not care about people at all, in absolutist society there is no tolerance for different opinions, different choices and reconfiguration of opinions and choices.

21. The Condemnation of Social Ceremonies and Conventions in "Comfort"

Lewis disparages the ceremonies; he hates "ceremony of any sort" (Munro, 2001, p. 120) and wants "cremation" (138) since ceremonies are merely business. They are social events, advertised by society because of the financial advantages "like any other work that should be paid for" (138); thus, Lewis disparages any ceremony- memorial ceremony included. He warns Nina that the powers in society intend to ensure their "consistency or completeness" (Shepherdson, 1995, p. 448); they are capable of deceiving you into thinking that something is a necessity and must be done and valorized while other things are unimportant and need to be ignored in order to fulfill their desire which has benefit for them not desires of individuals.

He does not care about the social belief that the husband needs to be taller than his wife, and he marries a girl who is taller than him. Nina is also dissatisfied with this social criterion. Munro represents how nonsense the social conventions are, and both Lewis and Nina, recognizing this reality, do not value this nonsense.

22. Marriage as a Social Institution in "Post and Beam"

Lorna marries Brendan, a wealthy professor. However, Lorna does not live a happy life. She soon realizes that although her marriage is in accordance with what society defines as a happy life, Brendan's social position, academic knowledge, and wealth do not result in a happy marriage: "It is hard labor just to recognize sadness and disappointment when you are living a life that is meant to be happy but just isn't" (Ahmed, 2010, p.75). In other words, her life turns out to be quite disappointing since Brendan, though he seems outstanding in society, does not treat her well at all.

Brendan always scolds her and expects her to do all the house chores. There is a lack of communication between Lorna and Brendan. Even Brendan decides who can visit

them. He belittles her and her family and is sarcastic. Through Brendan's stupid behavior, Munro represents one's social position, which does not mean he has intellect and wisdom, and it is not an acceptable criterion for marriage. He lacks the most basic understanding any person should have. His behavior is far from the "worthwhile human contact" (Munro, 2001, p.188) she experiences with Lionel, that's why she is about to fall for Lionel if he shows some interest. Munro, in this fiction, shows marriage as a social institution, which is inconsistent because it is only a contract that has no value when there is no love and no hearty commitment; that is why Lorna is not afraid to violate this commitment.

23. Tired of the Demanding Other in "Post and Beam"

Lorna is tired. She is tired of following others' desires- society, her husband, her children- and she needs privacy, a space where she can act on her desire instead of being at the service of others. She wants to be far from the demanding society. So before they go to the wedding party, Lorna and Polly, with the children, go to the beach. Getting away from a life in which her desires are quite relinquished and living some hours for herself is so refreshing.

She can't tolerate the pressure of this routine life. She needs to live a life in which no one "wanted a thing from her," so she goes to Lionel's apartment in search of "a moment's peace" (Munro, 2001, p.212). She realizes that she needs to get out of the vicious circle of a routine that is quite predictable; she can still live her life in its full by following her desires instead of following others' desires and accepting them as fate.

24. Enforcement of Feeling of Guilt by the Other for Acting on One's Desire in "Post and Beam"

Polly, Lorna's older cousin, stayed in the small town against her will because the family needed her. Polly supposes she would feel guilty if she left the small town and all its troubles, and it is her responsibility to sacrifice the life she desires for the sake of the small town's benefit. While it is the responsibility of the social symbolic order to provide comfort for the people of the town, and in order to evade this responsibility, it advocates that one feels guilty for following her desire instead of being in service of society. Munro spotlights dispensing with one's desire and "radical self-sacrifice" for the sake of others that are admired as ethical by the Symbolic Order is not ethical at all (Žižek, 2013, p. 329) and only makes "a mound of misery, one solid accusation" (Munro, 2001, p.203) out of Polly. So, though Polly realizes sacrificing her desire for the sake of others is her biggest mistake and is aware of her miserable condition, she starts accusing Lorna in order to create a feeling of guilt in her- the same thing the Other does with her. She complains that Lorna does not feel guilty about the decision she made to leave the small town and get married, regardless of the problems the family has.

But marrying Brendan is a decision tingled by feelings of triumph as well as guilt. She feels guilty because of the poor conditions of her family. She also feels guilty about Polly, which is why she imagines Polly might commit suicide, and it is her fault if it happens, so she tries to bargain something in order to prevent the event. It is still the Symbolic Order's strategy to convey the idea that not only should she feel guilty for following her desires, but also something horrible will happen because she follows her

desire, and in order to prevent that inauspiciousness she should sacrifice something she likes, "Herself? Her looks? Her health?" (210). Hence, society imposes the belief that Lorna and Polly need to sacrifice their desire for the sake of others-society included-otherwise, they should feel guilty. Munro demonstrates surrendering to fate, to the Other's desire and not reconfiguring their life based on their desire is "stupidity," "melodrama," and "guilt" (208); that is to say, "the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire" (Lacan, 1992, p.319), the person feels guilty and regretful if she relinquishes her desire and sacrifices it for others.

25. Unreliability of Social Position in Defining Individual's Value in "Post and Beam"

Lionel is a prodigy in math, which would have had a great position in society if he had not "suffered some sort of breakdown." When Lionel leaves the math department, his life completely changes; he becomes so "lonely" (Munro, 2001, p.187). Society does not value a prodigy as long as he does not have benefits for it anymore, so society easily excludes him. When he knows Lorna, they talk for hours, and Lionel gives her the poems he writes because he only needs to communicate.

Lionel follows the Symbolic Order's desire; society prefers no one talk about the problems because when the problems are mentioned, search for and hope for solutions comes up, and the individual in search for solutions transgress the symbolic social rules and conventions and won't be under its control anymore since now he hopes for another way of life, a life in accordance with his desire. While society prefers "a shallow and tiresome hopefulness" (193), that is to say, the individual is just hopeful and doesn't take any action to find a solution and "merrily" (193) endure the challenging situation in the hope that one day everything will be better. However, this "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011, p.174) needs to be ruptured. Living a good life in its full should not be bound to and limited to Lionel's social position; it is related to acting on his desire.

26. Society's Prescription of a Happy Good Life in "Queenie"

Queenie elopes with Mr. Vorguilla in the hope of a better and probably wealthier life that is in accordance with "empty desires or mad desires" (Lacan, 2005, p. 243), but it turns into a "catastrophe" (Munro, 2001, p.246) Mr. Vorguilla turns out to be a controlling husband who literally tortures her. She doesn't say some words because he doesn't like it. The tiny happiness of the Christmas party doesn't last long when he accuses her of giving the gingerbread cake to Andrew. He was even about to "hit" her, and then he gave her a silent treatment. Queenie comes to the awareness that the symbolic social factors of a happy life- wealth and proper social position- don't work in a loveless marriage; the wealth can be lost, and one's proper social position doesn't guarantee one's goodness or proper behavior- as depicted in the way Mr. Vorguilla treats Queenie.

Conclusion

In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "The Shining Houses," "An Ounce of Cure," "Boys and Girls," "Heirs of the Living Body," "The Moons of Jupiter," "Floating Bridge," "Comfort," "Post and Beam" and "Queenie," Munro sharply explores the social issues. This article illustrates the bad condition in which the characters are trapped as a result of

their contextualized mind that is confined to limited interpretation, which is in accordance with the Other's desire and because of their mental attachment and dependence on Symbolic Order's values and what it imposes as the only way to think and live. While the characters stand out from the social orders, they experience a neutral stance in which they come to awareness; this neutrality illustrates Beauty in Lacan. They come to the awareness that they are stuck in Symbolic Order and find their condition intolerable. Symbolic Order tries to take away their individuality, autonomy and independence through prohibition, ignorance, predefined social and gender roles and rules for males and females and through designating specific ways of life. It tries to impose its own desire as the only possible existing truth and erase the possibility of other desires and other ways of life except what it defines; it does not give them enough space to decide. It tries to shape their life and have them under its control, to make them its "creation," the creation that follows the Other's desire instead of its Real desire.

Munro's characters feel imprisoned in a life where the Other or others exercise power over them since their Real desires and what they truly want are not important to anybody. They are fed up with living a loveless life in which nobody cares about their feelings. They are fed up with the demanding Other since they can never live for themselves and in accordance with their own desire. They turn into passive individuals with a victim mentality, regret and feelings of guilt. The Other desires an ignorant, passive individual who embraces the victim mentality because they will be passive individuals with no action and no desire so that they would be no threat to society and its Symbolic rules. The social order, through normalizing certain thoughts, behaviors, desires, events and actions, represents the status quo as a universal phenomenon, not a personal one in which the characters have no power to make other choices except the pre-determined choices. The Other defines values and tries to normalize them, yet the criteria that society valorizes are criticized in this article. Munro questions social institutions such as marriage and social ceremonies and conventions. She believes they are nonsense, destructive, and, in some cases, turn into business. Also, the predefined social conditions of being valuable and happy are argued, and the unreliability of social position in defining one's value is signified; the characters do not need society's affirmation to be considered valuable human beings. Yet, in Symbolic Order, the characters, in order to be admired by society, need to wear masks instead of being who they indeed are and doing what they want to do. It is emphasized that the community can make mistakes since the laws of the society are not inviolable. Munro's characters are marginalized because of the arbitrary social classification; a society that rests on such ridiculous, inconsistent values, ideals and classifications is not trustworthy at all. There is a social conflict between tradition and modernity, and the modernity that society supports leads to the destruction of nature, but it is advertised because of its financial benefits. Yet, there is no incompatibility between tradition and modernity. The danger of ignorance and censorship provided by the utilitarian social order is also pictured. Besides, it is society's strategy to prevent people from something only in order to make them more eager towards that.

Moreover, the Symbolic Order's meaning-making through media is spotlighted. It is also indicated that the educational system is in accordance with the Other's desire, so it tries to reinforce some belief in the characters' minds and mold their life. It's illustrated because

of the penetration of the hegemonic Other's desire into the characters' minds; they are deceived by the hegemonic Other and are affected by what it prescribes as the only way of life. While it is proved that following the Other's desire only leads to disappointment and devastation, Munro's fiction prominently notices that the Other does its best to prevent the characters from acting on their desire; therefore, on the one hand, it suppresses ambitiousness and highly esteem sacrificing their desire and on the other hand, it conveys feelings of guilt and ominous as the result of acting in conformity with their desire. Moreover, the characters are excluded by society for disregarding social conventions. In her works, Munro designates the significance and priority of family, despite all different opinions and resentments, to one's social status and social life. Munro demonstrates that the characters' social status is not enough to reach peace and calmness and highlights the significance of family in their life. Munro represents the characters' attempt to find some momentary distractions in order to be relieved from distressed moments that are useless. Munro's works denote the character's need to be cautious of the distractions provided by society to prevent them from living the life they desire. Accordingly, the bad conditions that surround the characters as a result of their contextualized mind and mental attachment and dependence on Symbolic Order lead to passivity, victim mentality, regret and feelings of guilt.

Disclosure Statements

This article illustrates the bad condition in which the characters are trapped and represents they come to awareness that they stuck in Symbolic Order and live a life based on the Other's desire.

ORCID

0009-0001-8769-1793

References

- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke UP.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke UP.
- Carroll, N. (2006). Art, narrative, and moral understanding. In J. Levinson(Ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 126-160
- Critchley, S. (2008). *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. London, New York: Verso.
- Evans, Dylan. (2006). *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Gusfield, J. R. (1967). Tradition and Modernity: Misplaced Polarities in the Study of Social Change. *American Journal of Sociology*. 72(4), 351-362.
- Howells, C. A. (1998). *Contemporary world writers. Alice Munro*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press.
- Ibsen, H. (1879) *A Doll's House*. (William Archer, Trans.).

- Jakovljevic, M., Varavikova, E., Walter, H., Wascher, A., Pejic, A.V., & Lesch, O.M. (2017). Alcohol Beverage Household Expenditure, Taxation and Government Revenues in Broader European WHO Region. *Frontiers in pharmacology* 8.303. Doi: 10.3389/fphar.2017.00303
- Lacan, J. (1998). *Encore, Book XX*. (Bruce Fink, Trans.), New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- (1992). *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*. (Jacques-Allain Miller Ed.), (Dennis Porter, Trans.) London: Tavistock/Routledge.
- (2005). *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*. (Jacques-Allain Miller Ed.), (Alan Sheridan, Trans.) London and New York: W. W. Norton and Company.
- Marcuse, H. (1955). *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- May, C. E., (2003). Why Does Alice Munro Write Short Stories?. *Wascana Review* 38(1), 16-28
- Munro, A. (1998). *Dance of the Happy Shades*. New York: Vintage.
- (2001). *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*. Canada: Douglas Gibson.
- (2009). *Lives of Girls and Women*. Canada: Penguin Canada.
- (2006). *The Moons of Jupiter*. Canada: Penguin.
- Omhovère, C. (2018). Gravel and Grief: Alice Munro's Vulnerable Landscapes. In Amelia DeFalco & Lorraine York (Eds.) *Ethics and Affects in the Fiction of Alice Munro*, Switzerland: Palgrave Mcmillan. 177-194. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90644-7>
- Pleuke, B. & Smith, R. (1995). A National Treasure: An Interview with Alice Munro. *Meanjin* 54(2), 222-32.
- Ravitch, M. (2002). Fiction in Review. *Yale Review*, 90(4), 160-70.
- Richardson, William J. (1987). "Ethics and Desire." *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 47 (4), 296-301. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-1624-6_25
- Ruti, M. (2012). *The Singularity of Being: Lacan and the Immortal Within*. Esther Rashkin & Peter L. Rudnytsky (Eds.), New York: Fordham UP.
- Sbriglia, R. & Žižek, S. (2020). *Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan, and the Future of Materialism*. U.S.A: Northwestern UP.
- Shepherdson, C. (1995). *Adaequatio Sexualis: Is There a Measure of Sexual Difference?* In Babette. E. Babich (Ed.), *From Phenomenology to Thought, Errancy, and Desire: Essays in Honor of William J. Richardson, S.J.*, New York: Springer. 445-471. Doi: 10.1007/978-94-017-1624-6_28
- Smith, R. (2009). Rewriting the Frontier: Wilderness and Social Code in the Fiction of Alice Munro. In Harold Bloom (Ed.) *Alice Munro*, New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism. 153-166.
- Stoller, R. J. (1984). *Sex and gender: the development of masculinity and femininity*. London: Karnac Books.

Thacker, R. (2011). *Alice Munro Writing Her Lives: A Biography*. Toronto: Emblem.

----- (1999). Mapping Munro: Reading the "Clues". In Gerald Lynch & Angela Arnold Robberson (Eds.), *Dominant Impressions: Essays on the Canadian Short Story*. Canada: University of Ottawa Press. 127-136.

Žižek, S. (2013). *Interrogating the Real*. Rex Butler & Scott Stephens (Eds.), London: Bloomsbury.

----- (2003). *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

----- (1989). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.

----- (2000) *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London, New York: Verso.

