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## THE GOTHIC AS ADOLESCENT FANTASY: ALICE MUNRO'S *LIVES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN*

### Abstract

*The Gothic as a means of conveying the sense of the unsayable and invisible yet inherent and organic features of human existence constantly reemerges in Munro's fiction. Lives of Girls and Women is special, however, because there is no other volume in the Munro canon where the analysis of the interrelatedness of Gothic fantasy and female psychology would have such a comprehensive and overarching significance from the point of view of the collection as a whole, i.e., it does develop into a theme on its own. In my analysis I intend to focus on how Del's relationship with men and sexuality in general are influenced by the Gothic patterns of her fantasy, which are rooted in her excessive reading of such novels. Munro, however, also carries out a "re-visionary" study of the genre, to apply Adrienne Rich's term, when, through mapping out Del's budding sense of independence, she systematically undermines the validity of Gothic discourse. In this way, the Gothic, revisioned by Del in her reading and writing practice, gradually comes to sink into artificiality, and finally proves to be inadequate to provide role models for this teenager--autonomous women being commonly absent from Gothic fiction--who becomes aware of the need to overcome the traditional myths of womanhood.*

### Résumé

*Le gothique comme le moyen d'expression des expériences inexprimables et invisibles est présent continuellement dans la prose d'Alice Munro dès le commencement. Dans le volume *Les Destins: Filles et Femmes*, qui est considéré par certains comme recueil de nouvelles et par d'autres comme roman, Munro observe de très près les types de caractère et les modèles de comportement du gothique, notamment ceux de la romance. L'auteur s'intéresse premièrement comment l'ensemble de la fantaisie gothique et de la psychologie féminine peuvent se lier, très concrètement, la connaissance des formules de la romance gothique--qui s'y rapporte--quelle influence peut exercer sur la formation de la personnalité de l'adolescente. L'objet de mes recherches est de savoir comment l'état gothique de Del Jordan influence ses sentiments liés aux hommes et à la sexualité qui est typique dans ce type de romance.*

### 1. Alice Munro and the Gothic mode

In interviews Munro has claimed a fascination with the Gothic already as a child; the most influential book of her early years was Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* which inspired her to write her first novel while still at high school. This book, *Charlotte Muir*, is later described by Munro as "strange and occult, all about love that is stronger than death" (Blodgett 3), that is truly Gothic in nature. In "A Conversation with Alice Munro" John Metcalf asks Munro about her early stories, which he finds excessively

violent and romantic at the same time. Munro's response is in the affirmative: "I was all very sordid. I only became commonplace later on" (54).

At the core of Munro's insight is the recognition that the ordinary always contains the extraordinary, the surface is never coherent without what is under it. Nor is there a clear-cut border between these entities, rather each seems to be a natural extension of the other. Although they may appear as basically different realms, the ordinary and the extraordinary--the experiential and the surreal--are woven together by mostly invisible threads. The exploration of the surreal works in a circular pattern: Munro enters the domain of the extraordinary not with the intention of learning about an "other" world of human existence, but with the aim of obtaining clues and adequate knowledge that will bring her back to the ordinary to see it in its full complexity. Consequently, as Ajay Heble points out, Munro's writing "reveals itself to be maintaining and undoing reality at one and the same time [ . . . ] ordinary objects in Munro's world can, at any moment, become sinister or threatening; they can become charged with possibilities taken from what we might call a potential or absent level of meaning" (4).

To gain access to the extraordinary is not an easy task: it requires mental flexibility, sharp eyes, and the freedom of one's imagination. Munro, especially in the early period of her career, often depicts the extraordinary in terms of the grotesque and the bizarre, thus utilizing the discourse of the Gothic as the means of both conducting this fascinating investigation and presenting her findings. However, the question may arise: how can the Gothic become such an important tool for a writer like Munro, who is generally considered to be more concerned with the faithful mirroring of everyday life than with journeying in nightmarish worlds of obsessive fantasy, a domain generally associated with the Gothic mode. If we study the question more closely, though, we come to see that there is no contradiction here. It seems that the importance of the fantastic as an inherent, organic component of everyday life--a belief central to Munro's *ars poetica*--makes it inevitable for her to explore this often feared, and consequently ignored, territory.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Several critics have already referred to characteristic features of Munro's fiction that can be considered Gothic. E. D. Blodgett remarks on how Munro presents characters with the potential of hidden, unexpectedly erupting dimensions of the self. He also discusses Miss Farris in *Lives of Girls and Women* as a significant--even if parodic--model of costume Gothic heroines. Beverly Rasporich describes Munro's small town Ontario as essentially Gothic in nature. Ajay Heble argues that it is the engagement with the unimaginable and the unreasonable that lies at the core of Munro's fictional world. Magdalene Redekop examines images of dismemberment in *Lives of Girls and Women*. It is Ildiko de Papp Carrington's *Controlling the Uncontrollable: The Fiction of Alice Munro* that contains the most comprehensive analysis of the power of sexuality and the power of death as the most dominant and paradoxically linked forces; the abundance of secrets (which often prove to be a combination of sex and death); the overwhelming violence of several stories; the recurrent metaphors of splitting which depict the outbursts of subterranean forces in characters as indicative of the Gothic in Munro's writing. She also notes the fact that Munro peoples her fiction with ghosts of accidentally killed children and dead mothers who are powerful enough, even in death, to control the life of the living.

The Gothic as a means of conveying the sense of the unsayable and invisible yet inherent and organic features of human existence constantly reemerges in Munro's fiction. Early stories like "Walker Brothers Cowboy" in *Dance of the Happy Shades* already exhibit some basic elements of the Gothic such as the transgression in the father's behavior, and the presentation of the past as a psychological domain that can make people mysterious thus impossible to know (to the degree that any sense of closeness between two people--in this case father and daughter--can be nothing but an illusion). The recurring problematics of the mother-daughter relationship described in a somewhat Gothic fashion is also prevalent in *Dance* ("Walker Brothers Cowboy," "Boys and Girls," "The Peace of Utrecht"). Although Munro goes on experimenting with Gothicism as an *artistic device* in later volumes as well (*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You, Who Do You Think You Are?, Friend of My Youth, Open Secrets*), I find that in stories such as "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You," (*Something*) "Royal Beatings," "Privilege," "Half a Grapefruit," "The Beggar Maid," (*Who Do You Think You Are*) "Meneseteung" and "Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass," (*Friend*) the Gothic turns into a significant tool to investigate and express the cryptic nature and manifoldedness of human life. Nevertheless, the Gothic in all the above stories does not appear as the *object* of Munro's analysis, as opposed to *Lives of Girls and Women* where Gothic literature itself, with the role models and behavior patterns it usually offers, serves as a focal point in Munro's study of the anomalies of adolescent girlhood. Also, *Lives* is special in that there is no other volume in the Munro canon where the analysis of the interrelatedness of Gothic fantasy and female psychology would have such a comprehensive and overarching significance from the point of view of the collection *as a whole*, i.e., it does develop into a theme on its own.

In *Lives of Girls and Women* the Gothic functions at two levels: on the one hand, the term "Gothic" implies not so much the traditional paraphernalia of a literary genre but a more general, perhaps even instinctive attraction to what is weird, forbidden and dangerous, and it also emphasizes Munro's awareness that these qualities are fundamental to human existence. On the other hand, the Gothic is also present in a more traditional way, in Del's intense fantasizing which provides a natural outlet for the emotional turmoil of female adolescence through the Gothic imagination. It is easy to see the parallel between the problematic nature of sexuality as experienced during female adolescence and seen in the reactions of Gothic heroines. Del can identify so easily with these heroines because she shares both their fear of vulnerability, leading to asexuality, and their secret wish to be overcome by sexual desire. Del's fascination with the Gothic is also explicitly manifest in her attempt to write a Gothic novel about Jubilee in order to reveal the hidden grotesque subworlds of this seemingly ordinary Ontario town.

*Lives of Girls and Women* is extremely rich in Gothic features. The Gothic actually permeates the whole book: it is present in interpersonal relations between men and women, women and other women, as well as men and other men; it also pervades Del's sensation of the landscape around her and the town of Jubilee. In my analysis I intend to focus on how Del's relationship with men and sexuality in general are influenced by the Gothic patterns of her fantasy, which are rooted in her excessive reading of such novels. Besides describing Del's dependence on the Gothic plot, I will also show how the vision of the Gothic mode is present in Del's intense fantasizing, sustained by conventions of the Gothic romance. Munro, however, also carries out a "re-visionary" study of the genre, to apply Adrienne Rich's term, when, through mapping out Del's budding sense of independence, she systematically undermines the validity of Gothic discourse. In this way, the Gothic, revisioned by Del in her reading

and writing practice, gradually comes to sink into artificiality, and finally proves to be inadequate to provide role models for this teenager--autonomous women being commonly absent from Gothic fiction--who becomes aware of the need to overcome the traditional myths of womanhood.

## 2. Early Gothic fascination: the weirdos of the Flats Road

The Gothic mode, whose world is characterized by the overabundance of the bizarre, macabre, fantastic and arabesque, that is--to apply an umbrella term--the grotesque, perfectly matches the intricate and often unfathomable relationship of the ordinary and the extraordinary that is very much at the center of *Lives*. The grotesque becomes the keyword of Gothic sensibility as it incorporates the tension between the real and the beyond-real--a tension which is always in the focus of the genre. As Wolfgang Kayser argues, the grotesque is not "only something playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one--a world [...] where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid" (21).

Munro keeps the boundaries fluid, and the criteria for recognizing something as ordinary or fantastic remain a matter of comparison. In this vein the Flats Road where Del lives appears to be a highly surreal world with its idiots and bootleggers if compared with the town of Jubilee that stands for order and normality. The Flats Road, however, comes to be seen as part of the real when related to the world of Uncle Benny, a friend of Del's family, who lives at the end of the Flats Road, on the edge of the wilderness. His is a truly Gothic world where "people could go down in quicksand, be vanquished by ghosts or terrible ordinary cities; luck and wickedness were gigantic and unpredictable; nothing was deserved, anything might happen" (22). Uncle Benny's appearance is also that of a typical Gothic villain's with a "heavy black mustache, fierce eyes, a delicate predatory face" (2). Yet Del sees him as a reliable friend, who, despite his extravaganza, is easier to know than seemingly ordinary people are. It is, in fact, these "ordinary" people, as we will see in the case of Mr. Chamberlain, for example, who prove to be the most dangerous, for they are like icebergs with only a tip above the surface while most of what they are (their dark side) remains invisible. Uncle Benny is more reliable in his extravaganza because what is seen as extraordinary or strange about him is nothing but what we all accommodate to some degree, except that in Benny's case it seems monstrous since it is all on open display.

Del's relationship with Uncle Benny educates her to the darker side of reality introduced by such headlines on his favorite tabloids as FATHER FEEDS TWIN DAUGHTERS TO HOGS or VIRGIN RAPED ON CROSS BY CRAZED MONKS. Bizarre and out-of-the-ordinary as these titles may seem, they are reminders of the darker aspirations and fantasies of the human psyche. Del is so fascinated by the sensation of this world that she "feels bloated and giddy with revelations of evil, of its versatility and grand invention and horrific playfulness" (4). Yet, even on the Flats Road, Uncle Benny's reality remains only peripheral, and on her way home Del has to realize that "the nearer I got to our house the more this vision faded" (4). In this comparison the Flats Road, with its treasury of ghosts and idiots, seems to belong to the realm of the real whereas Uncle Benny's world is swallowed up by the surreal.

However, even Uncle Benny can be overcome by more extravaganza--an indication that there are no definite boundaries to limit surreality: even behind the most

extraordinary and shocking can possibly lie an even more extreme domain. In *Lives* this extreme is introduced by Madeleine, Uncle Benny's wife, whom he found through an advertisement. She storms into the life of the Flats Road, then storms out leaving everyone stunned by her brutal treatment of both Uncle Benny and her own daughter, and by the incivility of her response to any attempt to establish a relationship with her. Although she threatens to crack a stove-lifter over Del's skull, Del is surprisingly fascinated by Madeleine, not so much out of sympathy, but rather out of curiosity for the forbidden and the savage embodied by Madeleine. (Nevertheless Madeleine's total resistance to conformity is anticipatory from Del's point of view, who will soon develop serious crises over conflicting social expectations and her personal aspirations). No matter how dangerous and disturbing this woman is, Del finds something victorious about her: unlike most women Del knows, Madeleine has managed to break out of the socially imposed restrictions of her sex. Breaking with the ideal of domesticity, dependence on men, and passivity, she serves as an early if extreme role model for Del, who will also fight against similar expectations during her adolescence. Although her character is not wholly satisfactory as a possible remedy for Del's problems, Madeleine seems to echo an important heroine type of the Female Gothic, the mad wife, who manages to escape the authority of society represented by her husband, but has to pay the incredible price of insanity for her freedom.

It is the Flats Road that functions as the bridge between the civilization of the town and the wilderness surrounding Uncle Benny's house. Although connected with both, the Flats Road has distinguishing features that map its place somewhere between the two. True, one cannot overlook people like Mitch Plim whose house in Del's imagination "seemed to embody so much that was evil and mysterious that I would never look at it directly" (6), or Sandy Stevenson whose marriage is commonly believed to have been destroyed by the ghost of his wife's first husband. Nevertheless, Del can still find balancing normality in the shade of her home, a closed world "as small and shut up as any boat is on the sea, in the middle of a tide of howling weather" (22). Although fascinated by the surrealism of Uncle Benny's place as well as the Flats Road, as a child she still needs the safety of normality provided by her own home.

As Del is so genuinely responsive to the darker side of life, a daily contact with the eccentrics of the Flats Road proves to be a treasury of experience for her. The accumulation of these outcasts introduces her early to things disapproved of and rejected by the ordinary citizens of Jubilee. When she later has serious problems coming to terms with social regulations, this early childhood milieu will provide both ammunition of strange and lovable characters like Uncle Benny against rigid accommodationism, and also examples that warn Del of possible consequences of deviation from the norm of what can be regarded as the reality principle.

### **3. The vicissitudes of Gothic fantasy: de-jubilee-ed in Jubilee**

Yet the Flats Road is not the only dwelling place of "weird" people. After she moves to Jubilee with her mother, Del comes to realize that the town, which at first sight looks so homogeneous, contains no less layers of the extraordinary than the Flats Road although in countless forms of disguise. As a teenager, Del quickly develops a keen interest in sexuality, the domain often considered to be the darkest and most dangerous; her personal journey from childhood to adulthood circulates primarily around her sexual experiences. The stages of sexual initiation are clarified through Del's relationship with three men: Mr. Chamberlain, a friend of her family; Jerry

Storey, a high school pal; and, most importantly, Garnet French, a man from Jericho Valley with a criminal background.

Even before gaining first-hand experience about sex, Del is already deeply pre-occupied with questions of the flesh and nakedness. However, her earliest experiences are connected with other women rather than with men. The story of her retarded cousin, Mary Agnes, assaulted by four boys who stripped off her clothes, then left Mary Agnes naked in the cold mud, is especially alarming because it embodies in Del's eyes utter human degradation. It is not so much the assault that seems overwhelming but the humiliation of being exposed naked, that is being deprived of the shelter of civilization symbolized by clothes. The violent exposure of nakedness in public throws the person into a world cut off from the ordinary, it renders one so vulnerable because it deprives the individual of his or her sense of human dignity; what remains is the seemingly shameful materiality of the body. Del's fear of exposing her body is also reflected in her hatred of nightgowns "because of the way they twisted around and worked up on you while you slept and also because they left you uncovered between the legs" (120). The sensation of some unfathomable danger in attending nakedness--as if nakedness would have the power to submit her, against her will, to dark, perverse forces that deny her control over her own body--connects Del's concern with the most common apprehension shared by Gothic heroines.

It is no wonder that Del at this point finds everything connected with sexuality, pregnancy, and, consequently, marriage more terrifying than appealing. On contemplating her married Aunt Moira, who suffers from swollen legs and constant sweating vis-à-vis her unmarried Aunts Elspeth and Grace, who are still slender and always smell fresh, the only conclusion she can draw is that the ultimate result of marriage is the disintegration of the female body into some dull, numb pile of flesh. With such an insight gained only on an instinctual level, Del becomes aware of the common danger of sexuality for women as it is exactly the individual's loss of control that may undermine the integrity of the self.

However, soon enough, male nakedness begins to fascinate Del. Although she cannot help studying in detail the body of Michelangelo's David, she also senses the vulnerability of the male genitals commonly considered to be overwhelmingly powerful: "A naked man. His marble thing hanging on him for everybody to look at; like a drooping lily petal" (126). Triggered by the shamelessly direct advances of Mr. Chamberlain, a family friend, Del's general interest in the male body quickly shifts to a more private fantasizing about her own awakening sexuality. Chamberlain's stories about wartime years in Italy where he saw parents selling their daughters to soldiers, and his unbelievably bold acts, such as rubbing Del's breasts and thighs while the family is around, make Del's fantasy run wild. She secretly poses in her mother's transparent gown in front of the mirror, imagining herself to be one of those Italian girls indulging in carnality. As there is no idealization of sexuality here, it is the power of the flesh, the sensation of being "endangered and desired" (121) at the same time--the common paradox of female desire in Gothic novels--that ultimately excites Del. Yet, even at this early stage she diverges from the ideal of the Gothic heroine due to her sudden recognition of her own desire and curiosity, which overcomes her disgust. She quickly comes to see sex as "a flash of insanity, a dreamlike, ruthless, contemptuous breakthrough in a world of decent appearances" (135). This flirtation with the forbidden and the shameful embodied in the figure of the whore, Italian or Canadian, proves to be irresistible for Del because "it was the stage of transition, bridge between what was possible, known and normal behavior, and the magical,

bestial act, that I could not imagine" (127). Being a whore, the priestess of sexuality, means in Del's eyes the possession of some knowledge not available to others. Therefore it is both adolescent fantasy and the urge to acquire *knowledge*, the hallmark of Del's personal aspirations, that make her fascination with the forbidden in the form of sexuality inevitable.

### 3.1. Chamberlain

The first bold step towards real-life experience is taken by Del's acceptance of Mr. Chamberlain's offer to have a ride to the outskirts of the town. She is all excited about the unpredictability of what might happen to her; being deeply involved in her own fantasies, she even forgets about the possible dangers she might encounter. Instead, she is completely carried away with the feeling of being introduced to *the* sexuality of her *imagination*. Mr. Chamberlain appears for her as someone who *knows* and is willing to take her into his good graces by sharing his knowledge with her. Del's excitement is projected onto the countryside that looks "altered by his [Mr. Chamberlain's] presence, his voice overpowering fore-knowledge of the errand we were going on together [...] I saw that the whole nature became debased, maddeningly erotic" (140). Yet Del soon has to realize that Art Chamberlain is not the all-knowing "mentor" she imagined him to be. Instead of coming to experience an act of the forbidden but magical, she is shocked by the vulgar way this man exposes himself to her. His not at all "extra" but rather ordinary penis is not the voluptuous organ she imagined it to be; instead it "looked blunt and stupid [...] raw and [...] ugly-coloured as a wound, it looked to me vulnerable, playful and naive" (141). It is exactly the power, the secret knowledge, and the menacing potential to be dangerous expected by Del that are missing. Although Mr. Chamberlain still entertains the idea of being the man who initiates Del into adult sexuality, she switches, in her utter disappointment, to the role of the spectator of his performance "imposed, fantastically and predictably exaggerated, like an Indian dance" (141). The whole scene appears to her more ridiculous than exciting, even the landscape looks "postcoital, distant and meaningless" (142), not the extatic countryside of extreme Gothic fantasy radiating secrecy and eroticism. The spell is over. Mr. Chamberlain is instantly discredited from Del's fantasy when he turns out to be just another ordinary, petty man who enjoys exposing himself to young girls. He is no longer the hero/villain or the Jekyll and Hyde of Del's fantasy.

The idea of subworlds described by William James in *Principles of Psychology* proves applicable to this seminal experience in Del's life. According to James, a subworld is an entity that has "its own special and separate style of existence"; furthermore, "each world, *whilst it is attended to*, is real after its own fashion; only the reality lapses with the attention" (qtd. in Goffman 291, 293). As long as Del sustains the image of Mr. Chamberlain as a dramatic and exciting lover, he inhabits this subworld of her imagination. However, when he fails to live up to the expectations of his role, and Del consequently loses interest, this subworld disappears from one moment to the other. It is important to note that the creator of a subworld, in this case Del, has omnipotent power over recreating or discrediting it. If we relate this idea to the episode with Mr. Chamberlain, we come to realize that even at this early stage of maturation Del already has substantial control over incidents of her life, not over what happens to her but over how she reacts to these incidents, no matter what others, especially men, may think. The ultimate discovery is that Del's life, just like everyone else's, is made up of all possible subworlds: her relationship with her friend Naomi or with her mother, her sexual fantasies, and her brilliance at school are all layers of the multiple realities of her life that function relatively independently of one another.

### 3.2. Jerry

Not being beautiful or boringly kind but having a “weird” interest in reading and learning for which she is discarded from the circle of ordinary girls, Del comes to enjoy the special status of the intellectual, a shameful perversion in the eyes of Jubilee people, that she shares with Jerry Storey, another such outcast. Although intellectual curiosity is incompatible with a small-town mentality and thus often results in isolation, it also provides Del with an amount of freedom not available to ordinary girls who are bound by internalized conventions. The basis of Del’s friendship with Jerry, then, is both their mutual fascination with learning and knowing, as well as their excommunication. Yet, in spite of their similar status, their relationship is undermined by the traditional discourse of the sexes present mostly in Jerry’s thinly disguised sense of authority based on his belief in women’s biologically determined inferiority—a conviction that the whole town of Jubilee cherishes. His critical words are long stuck in Del’s mind: “What I possessed, he told me frankly [ . . . ] was a first-rate memory, a not unusual feminine gift for language, fairly weak reasoning powers, and almost no capacity for abstract thought” (163). Jerry, who assumes the power of superior knowledge, always “looks ahead to prodigious catastrophe. Soon, too” (165). Meanwhile, Del responds with “conventional horror, tentative female reasonableness, which would excite him into greater opposition” (165). It is ironic that even this micro community of two has to be layered along notions of gender. Soon Del comes to see that there is at least as huge a gap between Jerry’s world and her own as the one distinguishing theirs from that of the other students’. While she describes Jerry as one who is “in touch with the *real* world, he knew how they had split the atom” (165; emphasis added), she also claims, with a hint of shame, that “the only world I was in touch with was the one I had made, with the aid of some books, to be peculiar and nourishing to myself” (165). Although it takes her some time, Del finally realizes that Jerry’s sterile and unfriendly world of precision, which she compares to a circus tent, is no more valuable, or more real for that matter, than the one of her own creation.

In contrast with Del’s rich fantasy, the sexual experience offered by this relationship seems to be far from satisfactory. Although they make some futile attempts to practice rituals of love, they fail to succeed in anything revelatory: “our bodies fell against each other not unwillingly but joylessly, like sacks of wet sand. Our mouths opened into each other, as we have read and heard they might, but stayed cold, our tongues rough, mere lumps of unlucky flesh” (168). Jerry, perhaps out of some unconscious sense of inadequacy, detests the instinctual nature of sexuality because for him it represents both vulnerability and a lack of mental control. In this way the only occasion of excitement for Del is their “experiment” when Jerry asks her to remove all her clothes so that he can see, from a distance, a naked woman. Although Del can associate this experience with her secret desire of showing off her body to somebody, the whole situation is still strikingly similar to the earlier episode with Mr. Chamberlain: the ultimate solitude of man and woman in sexuality lies at the core of both cases.

### 3.3. Garnet

The man who turns out to be the most instrumental in Del’s development is Garnet French, a character diametrically opposed to Jerry Storey. With Garnet, Del experiences a new reality of “something not far from what [ . . . ] animals must see, the world without names” (184). Their accidental meeting at a church revival is narrated by Del as if it were quoted from a good old Gothic novel with a young innocent virgin

in church being stared at by a stranger whose undisguised interest is annoying and irresistible at the same time. With his "bony face" and "deep eye sockets, long slightly hollowed cheeks, a grave unconsciously arrogant expression" (175) Garnet matches perfectly the image of the Byronic hero of Del's secretly cherished dreams. Del finds herself powerless against the spell of the situation--the common reaction of a true Gothic heroine. Garnet's villainous complexion, his face reflecting "all possibilities of fierceness and sweetness, pride and submissiveness, violence, self-containment" (178) is in full symbolic accord with the not less Gothic locale of his house, another detail that foreshadows the Gothic plot of their relationship.

Although Garnet, whose name Del does not even know at the revival, mysteriously disappears from the church, she cannot stop thinking about him, enjoying the security of fantasizing about something that cannot come true. When Garnet reappears one day and offers Del a ride, she feels "dizzy", excited and disturbed at one and the same time: she describes the situation as "expected, yet un hoped for" (178), sensing that the intrusion of reality into her fantasy world might lead to disappointment.

When Garnet introduces Del into adult sexuality, she feels truly infatuated since, for the first time, she finds that real-life experience is able to live up to the expectations of her fantasy world. So she gives loose rein to the "floating feeling [...] of being languid and protected and at the same time possessing unlimited power" (181), the female power of being desired by a man. The early wish for a fate of being "endangered and desired" (121) that failed to work out with Mr. Chamberlain is now fulfilled. Although the repetition of this revelatory experience makes it a solid part of her life, she all along has problems with integrating the subworld she shares with Garnet into the other realities of her life. Instead, every time they meet, Del feels as if on a journey to the underworld "where there was perfect security" (181), security not as a result of compatibility, rather because of the lack of complicated rules to fathom. As a perfect embodiment of the stereotypical experience of all Gothic heroines, Del feels safe in Garnet's world: he is overwhelmingly powerful after all, and there is no need for her to shoulder responsibility for anything. She enjoys the sense of security that springs from passivity, of offering herself to a more dominant other in order to be taken care of in all matters--in the best Gothic female fashion.

The distance between their worlds is also emphasized by the fact that while Del lives in Jubilee, Garnet is from Jericho Valley, a place whose inhabitants are commonly believed to be "moronic and potentially criminal. Their I.Q. never breaks a hundred. They have cross-eyes, clubfeet [...]. It's the inbreeding that does it. Fathers sleep with daughters. Grandfathers sleep with granddaughters. Brothers sleep with sisters" (174). The Valley appears as if the headlines of Uncle Benny's newspapers have come true in all their disturbing perversity. Even the house owned by Garnet's family looks sinister and other-worldly, "with big trees around so close you could not get a look at it as a whole house" (184).

The figure of Garnet French turns out to be even more truly Gothic when Del visits his family. There she discovers a list of his former girlfriends carved on a beam of the porch with a big X after each name. When Garnet refuses to explain the meaning of the X, we again recognize the common Gothic plot of villainous aspirations to guard the power of knowing while casting others into ignorance. Garnet's stubborn defense of his authority, wielded to force Del into an acceptance of things as they are, brings the kindred tale of Bluebeard to mind. Del is now entrapped in the maze of Garnet's domain where she has access to certain "chambers" while entrance is denied to others.

The power game between these archetypal two, the one who knows and the one who wants to know, becomes even more sinister when Garnet finally adds Del's name to the list; instead of an X he carves stars around her name, and, drawing a line underneath, indicates that he has decided to add no more names to the list.

This decision, made without Del's consent, will reemerge in its full ambiguity at the climax of the story when Garnet tries "to baptize" her, foreshadowing an end that would possibly echo the Bluebeard story, i.e., the captor imposing his rules on the captive maiden even at the price of destroying her. The whole scene opens as a happy game between the two as they splash in the lake after making love, but things soon turn serious with Garnet repeatedly bobbing Del underwater against her will and so "gradually with the struggle, laughing stopped, and the wide, determined, painful grims on [ . . . ] [their] faces hardened" (197). "Baptizing," the title of the story as well as the name of "the game" they play, is obviously used in a strongly figurative sense, both Del and Garnet are intensely aware that what they are engaged in is an undisguised manifestation of the power game between man and woman. Through the ritual of "baptizing" Garnet attempts, not at all kindly, to initiate Del into "normal" womanhood, that is into accepting her dependence on him. He desperately tries to pull down the barrier between the reality of their relationship and Del's own, finally sensing that whatever experience they share, it can never be more than a subworld of Del's existence. The fact that Del can walk to him through this imaginary wall any time, whereas for him the wall is relentlessly solid, depriving him of the possibility to reach over, further infuriates him because it forces him to realize his own helplessness--a circumstance totally unacceptable for him. Del, however, is determined to fight with all her strength against Garnet's attempts to bend her to conform to his rules. By rejecting victimization by male aggression, she discredits the conclusion of the Bluebeard story.

There can be only one winner in this game. Del recognizes her unwillingness to adapt to other people's expectations, and she already knew this deep in her heart although she often felt uneasy about it. Throughout their relationship she kept the world of sensation she shared with Garnet and other subworlds of her life carefully apart, in an attempt to attain some kind of balance between them. Now she is shocked to discern that Garnet was unaware of this: "I was too amazed to be angry, I forgot to be frightened, it seemed to me impossible that he should not understand that all the powers I granted him were in play, that he himself was--in play, that I meant to keep him sewed in his golden lover's skin forever" (197-98).

Although Del is distinctively shaped by Gothic fantasy and its matching gender stereotypes, there is an instant reversal of the traditional Gothic plot here. It is the heroine who--as opposed to the passive female of Gothic conventions--turns out to be in charge for the simple reason that both the fear and the attraction she feels for the villain are sustained by her own unconscious wishes and colorful imagination, *not* by the very character of the villain. Garnet is only an ordinary boy if deprived of the rich garments of Del's Gothic fantasy and he ultimately proves his powerlessness in his inability to comprehend the rules of this game. What also follows from the reversal of roles is that it is Garnet who now appears to be the victim--a victim of the common male myth that regards sexuality as a means of mastering the woman, who is considered incapable of resisting male charm and power and allegedly wants to be overcome by domineering male sexuality. Del, on the other hand, sees things differently, coming to understand that sexuality is about surrender, though not "the woman's to the man but the person's to the body" (181-82). It is her own desire to

indulge in the “clear and warm and irresistibly moving water” (181-82) of instincts uncontrolled by the mind that is at the core of female sexuality and, thus, at least in Del’s eyes, sex itself becomes a highly individual and independent act.

With this insight, the revision of the Gothic plot has come full circle, Del now possessing the egoism, that is the power traditionally associated with the Gothic villain, which ensures independence. The Garnet experience embodies the most important first crack in Del’s attachment to the Gothic. Her further discovery of the unsatisfactory nature of the mode for her own aspirations, namely the huge gap between her personality and the restrictive roles offered by the Gothic, will mark the next major step in her development into an authentic person.

#### 4. Contiguity and discreditation: vision, re-vision, and revision of the Gothic

What makes Del different from other women she knows in Jubilee is not so much her rejection of the traditional myth of sexual roles, for she does enjoy journeying into the most traditional sphere of those myths, the Gothic, but rather her ability to distinguish her fantasies from other layers of her identity. Yet, Del never becomes totally independent of these fantasies and, although most of the time she can indulge in them as *fantasies*, as Coral Ann Howells points out, her desire “to be ravished and transformed is always contending with her double recognition of her independent self” (83). Del’s discovery of her actual self as the real source of power disproves the old plot of woman’s transformation through sex. The person who can save the heroine is not the hero, who will marry her, but the heroine herself if she is brave enough to confront the internalized and comforting dream of being rescued by another.

Yet, Del’s story of coming to terms with her own uncertainties, desires and aims is contiguous with the Gothic plot at several points. Like her fellow heroines, she has to go through the circular plot primarily associated with the Female Gothic: she descends into the underworld of abuse and sexuality, risks the total disintegration of the self, then returns in a kind of revival to her own life by recognizing her actual self as opposed to her ideal (Gothic) self. The Gothic plot usually ends with the handing over of the biggest prize the heroine can hope for: the marriage to the hero, her rescuer. While Del shares the common terrors of the Gothic, “the fear of terrible separateness and the fear of unity with some terrible Other” (DeLamotte 22-23)--most prevalent in her sexual adventures--she also undermines the Gothic discourse in several ways.

Most importantly the role of the Gothic heroine exists for Del only as one of the subworlds of her life. Although her men may be blind to this fact, the notion of female submissiveness in which she occasionally absorbs herself is only a “make-believe,” to apply Erving Goffman’s term. Goffman defines “make-believe” as “an activity that participants treat as an avowed, ostensible *imitation* [ . . . ] a pastime or entertainment” (48; emphasis added). While true Gothic heroines are trapped in their miserable circumstances and are primarily dependent on the help of the hero, Del is a free agent in shaping events, she is relatively free to step out of a situation whenever she wishes.

*Lives* does indeed have women like Miss Farris and Marion Sherriff, who have the distinguishing features of a Gothic heroine. Though Del may enjoy sharing some of the sensations of their lives through her imagination, what essentially distinguishes them from her is that they prove to depend too much on the help of men and thus fail to develop an autonomous self. They cannot find their place in the world because they are disconnected from their actual self. What they are trapped in is their Gothic vision, a

Gothic ideal self they thrive to be: the dream of the ever-waiting powerless heroine who, with no hero to relieve her in sight, finally perishes. And while both Miss Farris's and Marion Sherriff's lives are concluded by their drowning in the Wawanash River, Del survives Garnet's attempt "to baptize" her in the water, deciding not to give in to his will. In other words, when she rejects Garnet's offer to marry her, the prize every Gothic heroine dreams of, and opts for the autonomy of the self instead--a goal generally belonging to men--Del again discredits the plot of her favorite mode.

Similarly, Del comes to see how unsatisfactory a model of female identity the Gothic offers in matters of sexuality. Although much of Gothic fiction is obsessed with sex, even to the extent of verging on pornography, it commonly fails to recognize the validity of female physical desire. Sexuality appears as one of the major threats a heroine has to face either in the form of incest, or in the unwanted advances of the villain whose almost inevitable obsession is rape. If the villain succeeds, she loses all she has to offer to the hero because the Gothic heroine's utmost value lies in her virginity. Consequently, most heroines are caught in the vicious circle of being deprived of the power to escape from the villain, while expected to defend their innocence. As we have seen, Munro's re-vision of the Gothic follows this pattern until it becomes a revision of the Gothic and Del does reach the point of self-affirmation and role-denial and decides to break with female powerlessness as a dictate of Gothic conventions. Del also discredits the myth of virginity by acknowledging her own sexual desire. Besides fantasizing, she also finds it natural to practice sexuality which she views as an essential element of adulthood--a notion highly inappropriate for a Gothic heroine.

Del's ambiguous relationship with the Gothic is also evident in her struggle to write her own Gothic novel about Jubilee. After picking the Sherriff family, which is generally known for personal tragedies, she carefully rearranges their environment, even their life, in order to make them suit Gothic conventions: "I moved them out of their house [...] into a house of my own invention, a towered brick house with long narrow windows and a *porte cochère* and a great deal of surrounding shrubbery perversely cut to look like roosters, dogs, and foxes" (203). In fact, she finds the history of the Sherriff family too tragic to be credible, and so she decides to retain both the insane brother who lives in an asylum and the story of the tragic suicide of Marion while omitting the alcoholic older brother for "three tragic destinies were too much even for a book" (204). Against her best efforts however, Del fails to create a true Gothic heroine in Marion (named Caroline in her novel) whose caprice and lust after middle-aged men are highly incompatible with her assumed role. Instead, Del seems to project into this character her own adolescent sexual fantasy of desire, perversity and disgust. If anything, Caroline appears to be a Gothic villainess rather than an innocent heroine: her rampant sexuality makes her "a sacrifice, spread for sex on moldy uncomfortable tombstones, pushed against the cruel bark of trees, her frail body squashed into the mud and hen dirt of barnyards, supporting the killing weight of men" (204-05). Although here is the common Gothic combination of death and love, disgust and desire, the barnyards seem to indicate how the vulgarities of small town life become mixed up in Del's imagination with the exotic setting of the Gothic. The story also overcomes Gothic expectations in the sense that while villainesses usually tend to die a most disgraceful death, Caroline proves to be a survivor, at least until she meets her true villain, the Photographer, who has "black hair parted in the middle [...] a wicked fluid energy about him, a bright un pitying smile" (205), and takes frightening photographs of ordinary people, who, out of fear, do not dare to refuse his service. The inconsistency in Caroline's character is highlighted by the fact that through her love for

the Photographer she suddenly ceases to behave as a villainess; instead she becomes the embodiment of the Gothic heroine who, after discovering that she is abandoned and pregnant, drowns herself in the Wawanash River.

Del piles up all the possible Gothic clichés of mysterious house, the summer of “white, brutal heat” (205), love and death, but eventually finds herself unable to write the novel. Parallel with her increasing self-awareness is Del’s realization of the fake nature of the Gothic plot. The more she tries to copy the traditional story-line of the Gothic, the more artificial her novel seems to become, and this development necessarily disappoints Del, who already knows that what she attempts to do when writing is to unfold the secret subworlds of *reality*. The Gothic plot may prove unsatisfactory for this purpose, nonetheless, Gothic sensibility--its awareness of the grotesque and the weird in the ordinary, and its avoidance of any straightforward consideration of the way things are--does remain essential for Del. Thus she can conclude that, as much as sensibility is concerned, the story “seemed true to me, not real but true, as if I had discovered, not made up, such people and such a story, as if that town was lying close behind the one I walked through every day” (206).

All in all what Munro seems to say with her revisional re-vision of the Gothic vision is that the Gothic turns out to serve an important purpose for adolescent girls by setting free their imagination. However, it is an important precondition of unhindered personality development to break with the restrictive ideals of the genre on entering adulthood. Del does exactly this by rejecting the inherited role models. The case of Madeleine, the mad wife, is a warning that Del must try to achieve independence without sacrificing her mental and emotional integrity. Madness, although revelatory at times, is a dead-end where the prison of patriarchy is exchanged for the prison of insanity. Gothic heroines of asexuality and passivity, just like the villainesses of excessive sexuality, also fail to serve as satisfactory models because these types are exaggerated and alien to real liveable life. We have also seen how Del’s understanding of things, that is Munro’s revisional Gothic narrative, undermines the Gothic plot step by step. And yet, the Gothic sensibility, which uncovers layers of the forbidden and the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary, proves to be a fundamental epistemological tool (take Del and adolescent psychology) and artistic device (for Munro) as regards developing a fuller sense of the nature of human existence.

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