



## Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

55 | Autumn 2010

Special issue: The Short Stories of Alice Munro

---

# “Like the Downflash of a Wing or Knife”: Repression, Sublimation, and the Return of the Repressed in Alice Munro’s “Princess Ida”

Jennifer Murray

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1064>

ISSN: 1969-6108

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2010

ISBN: 0294-0442

ISSN: 0294-04442

### Electronic reference

Jennifer Murray, « “Like the Downflash of a Wing or Knife”: Repression, Sublimation, and the Return of the Repressed in Alice Munro’s “Princess Ida” », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 55 | Autumn 2010, Online since 01 January 2011, connection on 03 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1064>

---

This text was automatically generated on 3 December 2020.

© All rights reserved

---

# "Like the Downflash of a Wing or Knife": Repression, Sublimation, and the Return of the Repressed in Alice Munro's "Princess Ida"

Jennifer Murray

---

- 1 "Princess Ida" is a strangely neglected 'mother' story in Munro criticism. The centrality of the mother figure in an interconnecting web of Munro's stories has been pointed out in recent criticism, notably by Ferri, Heller, and Thacker ("Introduction"). Collectively, these critics address the autobiographical details of Munro's own mother and her progressive descent into the effects of her tardily diagnosed Parkinson's disease; they have noted that the fiction which draws on this source illustrates the attendant needs both to love the mother, and to reject the debased maternal image — "Our Gothic Mother" as she is described by the narrator's sister in "The Peace of Utrecht" (*Dance* 195). They have also pointed towards the ongoing revisions of the mother figure who continues to haunt Munro's tales in collection after collection, just as the narrator in "The Ottawa Valley" predicts: "The problem, the only problem is my mother. [...] she has stuck to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on, and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same" (*Something* 196).
- 2 In this context, the non-recognition in critical studies of "Princess Ida" as a key 'mother figure' story is surprising. This may be due in part to the fact that *Lives of Girls and Women* was published as a novel and its parts were therefore seen as indissociable: Munro, however, acknowledges quite directly that, although her intention was indeed to write a novel, what she actually produced was something different:

I went up to the office and started to write the section called "Princess Ida," which is about my mother. The material about my mother is my central material in life, and it always comes the most readily to me. If I just relax, that's what will come up. So, once I started to write that, I was off. Then I made a big mistake. I tried to make it a regular novel, an ordinary sort of childhood adolescence novel. About March I

saw it wasn't working. It didn't feel right to me, and I thought I would have to abandon it. I was very depressed. Then it came to me that what I had to do was pull it apart and put it in the story form. Then I could handle it. That's when I learned that I was never going to write a real novel because I could not think that way. (McCulloch and Simpson)<sup>1</sup>

- 3 Here, both the centrality of "Princess Ida" as a key 'mother figure' text in Munro's writing, and the non-conformity of *Lives of Girls and Women* to the standard criteria of the novel form are acknowledged. In recent criticism, a general shift toward a more explicit recognition of the book's identity as a "story sequence," or "interlinked stories" (Beer) has taken place.
- 4 Nonetheless, "Princess Ida" has generally been left out of recent discussions of Munro's 'mother figure' stories. Robert Thacker categorizes certain of these as "offer[ing] a type of 'family resemblance' born of their autobiographical provenance" ("Introduction" 14) where the mother figure is concerned. He notes in passing that this figure appears "emotionally if not precisely—in *Lives of Girls and Women* as Ida" ("Introduction" 14), a lapsus whereby part of the character's pen name, Princess Ida, stands in place of her identity as Ada /Addie in the story.<sup>2</sup> Heller and Ferri both point to a series of mother-daughter stories (including "The Peace of Utrecht" (*Dance*), "The Ottawa Valley" (*Something*), "The Progress of Love" (*Progress*), and "Friend of My Youth" (*Friend*)) but do not list "Princess Ida" amongst them.<sup>3</sup> My perspective here will be to consider "Princess Ida" as the first story fully and specifically focused on the mother figure. Momentarily, in the scope of Munro's writing, the figure of the sick, bed-ridden or dead mother present in *Dance of the Happy Shades* is left aside: in "Princess Ida," the mother is restored to a greater complexity, even if, in the final stories of *Lives of Girls and Women* she is relegated to her bed once again ("Baptizing" 253, 263).
- 5 In her book-length study of mother figures in Munro, *Mothers and Other Clowns*, Magdalene Redekop does focus briefly on "Princess Ida," pointing out the echoing interplay of Ida/Ada/Addie/Adelaide/Del and relating these to the Tennysonian intertext, to Faulkner's Addie in *As I Lay Dying*, and to Nabokov's Ada in *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*. What is of more relevance to my argument here is that Redekop qualifies the story as "the uterus out of which is born not one perfect baby or one novel but multiple offspring" and as "the place of origins," a "place that *cannot be seen or represented*" (65, my emphasis). Consequently, Redekop moves on to other stories in *Lives of Girls and Women*.
- 6 While I would agree that "Princess Ida" is a story of origins, I would also argue that the text offers ways to decode the obscurity of its meaning, ways which do not clarify the hypothetical "conscious blind spot" that Redekop posits (65), but which acknowledge the workings of the *unconscious* in the text. There is in "Princess Ida," as in the later, similarly structured story, "The Progress of Love," "a cloud, a poison, that had touched [the] mother's life" (*Progress* 17).<sup>4</sup> This cloud, the mother's burden, takes shape in "Princess Ida" somewhere in the past, a past shaped by economic, cultural and affective poverty, a past which includes sexual abuse, religious fanaticism and patriarchal domination, but also courage, determination and hopes of social advancement. Resentful and triumphant, the voice of Del's mother speaks of repressed pain and sublimated drives, and, in its negations, its excesses, its irony and chosen images, the story enacts the working of the unconscious and its emergence into the discourses of everyday life. By following the narrating daughter's desire to understand her mother, and by also giving our attention to the mother's replies, memories and actions, it is not

so much a fruitful uterus that one returns to, but a hard core of hurt which produces effects which can indeed be seen and represented.

- 7 As narrator of her mother's story, Del's voice is split between the child's naïve perspective and the more reflective remembering point of view of the adult, along the lines developed by Thacker: "a commingling of the remembered event, vividly described so as to lend immediacy to it, and [a] detached understanding of it, an understanding that is detached because of the time which has passed" ("Clear Jelly" 45). Thus, Del, in "Princess Ida," is both the pre-adolescent girl still partially in the thrall of the all-powerful mother of early childhood but nevertheless beginning the process of adolescent self-differentiation, *and* the adult narrator trying to use the perspective of time to re-evaluate both her mother and her own expectations of that mother.
- 8 This intricate weaving of levels of closeness and detachment is present from the start of the story, and coheres around the mother's enthusiasm for selling encyclopedias.<sup>5</sup> The mother's love of knowledge, which "was not chilly to her, no; it was warm and lovely" is shared by the young Del: "I shared my mother's appetite myself, I could not help it. I loved the volumes of the encyclopedia, their weight (of mystery, of beautiful information) as they fell open in my lap," (74); there is something almost sensual in this love of knowledge for Del who wonders "And who could fail to love me, for knowing where Quito was?" (75). It is when she realizes that she is *not* loved for such knowledge, that it is not valued in her, nor in her mother, by the community in which she lives, that Del detaches herself from the open display of her "freak memory" (75) and from the penchant for public display on her mother's part. Yet, in spite of Del's later distancing from her mother's activities, throughout this early period, Del remains in a form of admiring rivalry with her mother: "Over all our expeditions, and homecomings, and the world at large, she exerted this mysterious, appalling authority, and nothing could be done about it, not yet" (77-78). The formulation of this perspective on her mother, with the oedipal rivalry of adolescence anticipated but not yet fully active, speaks of the child's admiration, but with a sophistication belonging to the adult voice.
- 9 Within this realm of female identification, Del feels compelled to verify her mother's conformity to expectations in terms of family love and attachment:
- I said to my mother, "Why didn't you bring that picture in?"  
 "What picture? *What picture?*"  
 "The one over the couch."
- 10 The picture in question is one that Del's mother painted showing "sheep driven along the road by a little girl in a red shawl" (80), and which Del has romanticized into an original creation by an artistic mother in blissful early marriage, believing that the girl in the picture was actually her mother.
- "That one? Do you want that in here?"  
 I didn't really. As often in our conversations I was trying to lead her on, to get the answer, or the revelation, I particularly wanted. I wanted her to say she had left it for my father." (80)
- 11 Here, the narrator speaks of her need to see her mother in a certain light, to make her conform to a model of womanhood, of being, that she, Del, will then be able to take comfort in and identify with. But the answers her mother gives fall short of the child's expectations:
- "I don't want it hanging where people would see," she said. "I'm no artist. I only painted it because I had nothing to do." (81)

- 12 This is the first in a series of questions addressed to the mother in the same desire to find in her a positive affective model. In the subsequent instances, the same negativity which marks the mother's answer here - "don't want," "no," "only," "nothing"—is present, but, since the questions are more direct, the answers are more oblique; the curt reply, "of course" signals the mother's refusal to answer sensitive questions. The first of these occurs in the context of Del's childlike questioning about her mother's relationship to her own mother, and her feelings after her death: "Were you sad? I said hopefully and my mother said yes, of course she was sad. But she did not linger around this scene" (87). Here, we note the rhythm of the formulation, where the mother's direct speech is worked into the narration, leaving no time for further questioning, no time to "linger" and expand or reflect. It is a minimalist answer intended to reassure Del that her mother is not outside the norms of emotional response, and it functions to close down further discussion on the matter.
- 13 Moreover, this curt reply contrasts with the expansive force of the negative anecdotes about her own mother that Del's mother recounts in detail, and which convey to her daughter a sense of gothic origins, an archetypal past located outside of rational time, located in the fairytale temporality of the unconscious where "In the beginning, the very beginning of everything, there was that house" (83), a house, which had "something terrible about it, enclosing evil, like a house where a murder has been committed" (84). If the house represents that place where we live, both psychologically and physically (Corelli), then Del's mother's representation of the house of her childhood speaks of oppression and moral disorder.
- 14 Within that house: the tyrannical father, who would later refuse to allow her to go to high school (87); but more importantly, the mother: "She was a religious fanatic," declares Del's mother, and goes on, "Do you know what she did? I told you what she did? I told you about the money?" She draws a breath to steady herself. "Well. She inherited some money" (85). Del's mother goes on to describe the unpardonable gesture of her mother who uses a small inheritance to buy bibles to give away to the poor, rather than to buy the basic necessities to alleviate the hardship of the family's own poverty. Remembered as unforgivably pious, long-suffering, and unconcerned with the comforts of her family, Del's grandmother lives on in memory as a locus of pain and resentment: "My mother's voice, telling these things, is hard with her certainty of having been cheated, her undiminished feelings of loss and anger" (85). In this context, it is not a matter 'of course' that Del's mother should have felt sad at the death of her own mother.
- 15 Yet a more sensitive issue for Del is her mother's relationship to romance, love, and sexuality. Del tries to trap her mother into affirming that her marriage was a marriage of love. This, in the context of Del's mother having taken a house for rent in town, while the father remains on their rural farm throughout the winter, is a question of some pertinence; yet, Del seems to hope, in spite of the clear independence and even distance between her parents, that there was, in the beginning, some passion, some intimate tenderness and affection. In a form which is only half-questioning, Del says, "But you fell in love with him' I would remind her sternly, anxiously, wanting to get it settled for good. 'You fell in love'" (89). As any other response to this question would require saying more than the mother wishes to reveal to her daughter, she replies, "Well yes of course I did." Here, as above, the lack of punctuation makes of this a rote answer. Del insists,

"Why did you fall in love?"

"Your father was always a gentleman."

Was that all? I was troubled here by a lack of proportion, though it was hard to say what was missing, what was wrong. (89)

- 16 But Del cannot penetrate beyond this deflecting response that her mother offers her.
- 17 However, as narrating instance, the adult Del disseminates suggestions throughout the text that her mother's answer is symptomatic of her rejection of sexuality. In choosing to marry a "gentleman," Del's mother is indirectly pointing out her rejection of those men for whom sexuality is a dominant concern. Amongst these textual insinuations is the reference to a former suitor, a "young man who remained a shadow [...]. For mysterious reasons she was compelled to break her engagement. ('He did not turn out to be the sort of person I had thought he was.')" (89). References to the general rejection of sexuality on the part of Del's mother also punctuate the other stories of the cycle: in "Lives of Girls and Women," she comments on the relationship between her boarder, Fern, and Mr. Chamberlain: "'They enjoy each other's company,' she said. 'They don't bother about any nonsense.'" And the narrating voice of the adult Del comments: "Nonsense meant romance; it meant vulgarity; it meant sex" (162). In this way, the whole question of love and courtship is held together under the label of 'vulgarity' for Del's mother. Why should this be so?
- 18 The rejection of sexual desire is marked as a product of the childhood of Del's mother, notably through sexual torment on the part of her brother. Again, this is stated through hints and allusions, but they are sufficiently clear to understand the force of their effect on her. In her bitter accounts of her youth, Del's mother refers to her detested brother:
- It was the younger brother she hated. What did he do? Her answers were not wholly satisfactory. He was evil, bloated, cruel. A cruel fat boy. He fed firecrackers to cats. He tied up a toad and chopped it to pieces. He drowned my mother's kitten, named Misty, in the cow trough, though he afterwards denied it. Also, he caught my mother and tied her up in the barn and tormented her. Tormented her? He *tortured* her.
- What with? But my mother would never go beyond that—that word, *tortured*, which she spat out like blood. So I was left to imagine her tied up in the barn, as at a stake, while her brother, a fat Indian, yelped and pranced about her. But she had escaped after all, unscalped, unburnt. Nothing really accounted for her darkened face at this point in the story, for her way of saying *tortured*. I had not yet learned to recognize the gloom that overcame her in the vicinity of sex. (86)
- 19 In her writing of this passage, the narrator enacts the unconscious deflecting strategies of her mother's discourse at the same time as she presents the force of the unwelcome memories. The emotional intensity of the mother's hatred of her brother can be felt in the accumulation of adjectives—evil, bloated, cruel (twice), fat—to describe him, as well as in the thrice-italicized verb "*tortured*." Similarly, an accumulation of displaced actions, close to, but differing from, the act inflicted upon the mother, allows her to evoke her anger, without naming its cause specifically: is it not enough that he tortured and killed small helpless animals such as kittens to be convinced of his intrinsic malevolence? Phrases such as "Her answers were *not* wholly satisfactory," "my mother would *never* go beyond that—that word," and "*Nothing* really accounted for her darkened face" (my emphasis) signal through their negations that the central event in the mother's memory cannot be named, leaving the child, Del, with only the limits of

her young imagination, to conjure up stereotypical enemies and child's play scenes of torture.

- 20 Unconscious metonymy of meaning is at work in this conjuring: to make sense of her mother's incomplete narrative and of her "darkened face," the notion of 'darkness' associated with the mother's expression and the passive stance indicated by the use of the past participle are displaced onto a scenario where her mother may have been burnt, "as at a stake." This scenario, helped along through a fantasized image of the brother as "a fat Indian, [who] yelped and pranced about her" is simultaneously evoked and found wanting through the signifier "unburnt"; the narrator, as a child, can find no satisfactory explanation for her mother's somber countenance. Only later, as an adult, can she re-interpret her mother's silence; only later, once she has, in fact, "learned to recognize the gloom that overcame her [mother] in the vicinity of sex," can she fill in the unsaid of her mother's intense emotions. In this last phrase, the enigma of the mother's repressed anger is largely clarified, the metonymic chain can be followed through from "tied up," to "tormented," to "tortured," and finally to "the vicinity of sex."<sup>6</sup>
- 21 The childhood background of Del's mother as a time of affective misery, with its emblematic unmentionable act of her brother, is reinforced by the textual markers presenting Del's grandmother as also having an unhappy relationship to sexuality. Indeed, Del's grandmother is remembered as a 'broken' woman: "bent back, narrow shouldered in some gray or tan sweater over a dirty kimono or housedress, the back of the head with the thin hair pulled tight from the middle parting, the scalp unhealthily white. It was white as marble, white as soap" (84). This first image of Del's grandmother shows her submissiveness—"bent back"—, her lack of attention to her appearance—"gray, tan, dirty" clothes—; it emphasizes her loss of hair through the signifier "scalp," a signifier that picks up on the earlier "unscalped" attributed to Del's mother, and which, unlike 'skin' is associated with death, as is the whiteness of the scalp which is compared to marble, evoking the cold death of the tombstone, while the word "soap" suggests the cleanliness, and, of course, 'godliness' which is her compensation for suffering. She is remembered "on her knees, bent down on the bed, praying," or, at other times "is discovered flat on her back and weeping—for reasons my mother does not go into—with a damp cloth pressed to her forehead" (84-85). The central object in both remembrances is the bed, the symbol of marital sexuality, and the grandmother is seen either praying by it or crying on it.<sup>7</sup> We have already come to understand that the narrator, in saying "for reasons my mother does not go into," is encoding the notion of unspeakable sexuality into her own mother's discourse.
- 22 The general inability of Del's mother to see sexuality as a dynamic, productive, enriching, positive aspect of women's lives is therefore rooted in specific biographical details which are traceable in the text, even in the enigmatic forms in which the narrator distills them. We note that both Del's mother and her grandmother are marked by discourses of repression in relation to sexuality and we are led to see that for both of them, the sex drive becomes diverted towards other aims, or, in other words, is sublimated.
- 23 Both Del's mother and her maternal grandmother are 'fanatics,' in the sense that they pour the greater part of their psychical energy into one specified area: in the case of the grandmother, religion receives this expenditure of energy, whereas for the mother,

education and knowledge are the chosen fields of libidinal investment. Freud defines the way in which valued cultural aims may take the place of sexual objects:

Sublimation is a process that concerns object-libido [the energy directed towards an object] and consists in the instinct's directing itself towards an aim other than, and remote from, that of sexual satisfactions; in this process the accent falls upon deflection from sexuality. ("On Narcissism" 88)

- 24 Freud further remarks on the way this process can attenuate the suffering produced by the "instinctual impulses": "The task here is that of shifting the instinctual aims in such a way that they cannot come up against frustration from the external world. In this, sublimation of the instincts lends its assistance" (*Civilization* 16). In fact, even beyond the avoidance of frustration or suffering, sublimation allows for the obtaining of pleasure by another means: "Sublimation is nonetheless satisfaction of the drive, without repression" (Lacan 165). Thus, with religion, love can be invested, without restriction, in a universal object ; by giving one's love "to all men alike" the religious believer may "avoid the uncertainties and disappointments of genital love by turning away from its sexual aims" (Freud, *Civilization* 39).
- 25 Religion is indeed viewed as the affective centre of Del's grandmother's life, as witnessed by her spending the family's windfall inheritance on bibles, by the image of her praying by the bed, and later in the story, by an anecdote offered by Del's Uncle Bill who remembers their mother directing her children's attention to the transformation of a chrysalis into a butterfly, emphasizing the symbolic importance of it happening on Easter day. Aside from this last example, all of the details relating to this intensely Christian woman are filtered through the resentment of Del's mother: thinking back to the inscription on the emblematic bibles—Blessed are the poor in spirit—she snorts: "What is so remarkable about being poor in spirit?" (85); concerning her enforced enrolment in bible distribution, she notes: "One thing, it cured me of religion for life" (85).
- 26 "Cured" of religion, finding no enjoyment in the contemplation or the anticipation of sexuality, Del's mother is nonetheless subject to the "constant force" of the drive: "The first thing Freud says about the drive is, if I may put it this way, that it has no day or night, no spring or autumn, no rise and fall" (Lacan 165). For Del's mother, knowledge, learning, education and cultural pursuits—the "finer and higher" directions of sublimation for Freud—become the objects of her drive. From the opening line of the story—"Now my mother was selling encyclopedias" (72) to her triumphant battle to go to high school, in spite of her father's refusal (87-88), through the intertextual reference to Tennyson in her choice of pen name, her writing of letters to the paper, and her joining the "Great Books discussion group" (82), the story tells us unconditionally that Ada is in love with knowledge:
- Pure comfort even at this stage of her life to know where the location of the Celebes Sea and the Pitti Palace, to get the wives of Henry VIII in order, and be informed about the social system of ants, the methods of sacrificial butchery used by the Aztecs, the plumbing in Knossos. She could get carried away, telling about such things. (74)
- 27 The narrator develops the portrait of her knowledge-hungry mother in ways which verge on the absurd, emphasizing how her excessiveness makes her an outsider in their community. As we have seen, Del understands this pleasure of the intellect, but refuses to give it exclusivity.

- 28 The crux of the story, linking repression, sublimation and trying to make one's peace with who one has become, comes in the last section of the story, with the return of the repressed in the form of an unexpected visit from the hated brother, now a tall, heavy, American: "mournful, proud, sagging" (91), accompanied by an improbable *femme fatale*, his young wife named Nile. His status as an intruder, as someone who oversteps his rights, is signaled in the description of his approach. The narrator remembers herself as a child, outdoors: "I saw a big car come nosing along between the snowbanks almost silently, like an impudent fish." Here, Munro's use of simile works effectively, transforming the car moving slowly through the 'liquid' world of snow into the phallic shape of the fish, insolent and unquestioning in its pushy advance. The transformation of "Bill" into an American,<sup>8</sup> underlines this sense of territorial expansion of the strong over the weak.
- 29 For Del's mother, symbolically, or unconsciously, this is the visit of the torturer to his victim, the return of the past source of her still active anger into her present, the signifier of her signified: that of a robbed innocence, of a thwarted path in her development. Interestingly, Freud notes that the repressed behaves like an unwelcome guest attempting to cross the threshold into consciousness: "I must set a permanent guard over the door which I have forbidden this guest to enter, since he would otherwise burst it open" ("Repression" 152-53). Through his 'fish-like' unannounced approach, Bill has gained his way into his sister's home.
- 30 In her typical style of deflection and affirmation of negatives, Del's mother hails her unwelcome visitor, putting the social form of greeting over a thinly disguised rejection: "Well, Bill. You don't believe in advance notice, do you? Never mind, we're happy to see you.' She said this with some severity, as if arguing a point" (92). The visit is a study in misrecognition, where Bill<sup>9</sup> attempts to share with his sister memories of a childhood that he cherishes, with their mother as the saintly centre of a shining past: "[...] we had a simple life and hard work and fresh air and a good spiritual example in our momma. She died young, Addie. She died in pain." Resentful of what she sees as an attempt to embellish the past, Del's mother will not concede a thing: "Under anesthetic," my mother said. "So strictly speaking I hope she did not die in pain" (97).
- 31 There will be no moment of reconciliation between brother and sister.<sup>10</sup> If the brother has forgotten, or forgiven himself, his sister's resentment remains intact, and non-negotiable. Del asks her: "Do you still hate him?" and her mother is forced into her third instance of a negatively connoted affirmation: "'Of course I don't hate him,' said my mother quickly and with reserve" (101). Of the three instances of "Of course" which we have seen, this one most transparently allows its contradictory force to speak out: the affirmative 'of course' comes up against a negative. It is not followed up by any more affirmative statement of affect.
- 32 Del's mother is thus faced with a dilemma when, on departing, her brother tells her that he has cancer, that he is dying, and that he is going to leave her three hundred dollars in his will. This 'gift' (perhaps an unconscious form of reparation) from the brother she hated reactivates both her resentment towards him, and the previous hurt related to her own mother's (mis)use of her inheritance. She tries to evacuate this hurt through irony, replying to Del's question "What are you going to spend it on?" by saying, "I could always send away for a box of Bibles" (101). Freud comments on the use of jokes and irony in lifting repression, but adds, "as a rule, the repression is only temporarily lifted and is promptly reinstated" ("Repression" 150).

- 33 The text enacts this lifting of repression and its reinstatement in a densely poetic moment. The scene takes place in the kitchen, where Del and her mother are cooking, talking and working at a crossword puzzle. Sounds of Fern, the boarder and friend, and of Owen, Del's brother, coming into the house have been mentioned. When Del's mother makes her ironic comment about sending away for bibles, we read:
- Just before Fern came in one door and Owen came in the other, there was something in the room like the downflash of a wing or knife, a sense of hurt so strong, but quick and isolated, vanishing. (101)
- 34 In the instant at which irony allows a temporary release from the constant effort of repression, there is something like a "downflash," a word which suggests movement, light, and speed, almost an effect of lightning. This simile is remodeled through the extension of "a wing or knife." Associated with "downflash," these signifiers offer both the image of a bird in movement, taking off or landing, and the metallic movement of a knife being stabbed downwards. The associations opened up here are those of flight from pain, and, at the same time, of hurt and symbolic castration, so that the image condenses the possibilities of escape and of reactivated pain and hurt to the self. Taking into account the fact that other images of birds in flight in the story cycle, such as "Alarm in my mother's voice was like the flap of rising wings" ("Lives of Girls and Women" 167) signify distress for Del's mother, it would seem that the positive connotation of 'wing' is overwhelmed by signifieds of distress, pain and being cut to the quick: the intrusion into consciousness of the mother's hurt is consequently painful—"a sense of hurt so strong"—and the lifting of repression is therefore "quick and isolated, vanishing."<sup>11</sup>
- 35 Framing this pain, the almost stage-like setting furnishes compensatory elements to provide symbolic consolation for the mother; she is in the kitchen in the company of her daughter, with doors about to open on either side, like arms, or again, wings, opening to embrace her, as her friend and her son enter. Here, Del's mother is not merely the victim of her desolate past; she is also the affective centre of her present. As the story closes, Del's mother is looking for the name of an Egyptian god with four letters to fill in a crossword puzzle: when Del suggests "Isis," putting a goddess in place of the missing god, it may be seen as a symbolic gift to her mother, reinstating her as the all-powerful mother, "the priestess" of her early childhood when Del had supposed her "powerful, a ruler" (89). The mother unconsciously recognizes this gift in an emotionally paradoxical formulation: "Isis is a goddess, I'm surprised at you" (101). Firstly, she reaffirms her mastery in the domain of knowledge by correcting her daughter's error, but this reaffirmation may also be seen as an expression of disappointment—"surprised at you." At the same time, through the italicization of 'you,' it is the mark of the mother's implicit confidence in her daughter's intellectual potential and of her persistent belief that her daughter will, in the domain of knowledge at least, continue to take her as a role model.
- 36 Del's position as witness to her mother's moment of hurt, her role in the narrating of this moment, and the subsequent scene of sharing between them, temporarily place the budding mother-daughter conflicts under truce. It is a moment of compromise in which the daughter tries to see her mother, not only as her mother, but as a woman with a personal, sometimes painful history of her own. Having explored the emotional heritage of her maternal line, Del will begin exploring her own paths and negotiating her own libidinal investments. The story cycle does not align the daughter with the

turning away from sexual pleasure that characterizes both mother and grandmother, but rather, develops constantly renegotiated positions between sexual exploration and artistic sublimation for its central figure, Del.

- 37 "Princess Ida" is only one in a long series of attempts by Munro to negotiate her relationship to the dead mother: only one, and not the first: this mother already haunts the stories of *Dance of the Happy Shades* before *Lives of Girls and Women*, and she will reappear regularly in the author's work in "scenes that pop up anytime, like lantern slides, against the cluttered fabric of the present" ("Princess Ida" 83), sometimes in disguise, as a semi-wicked (step)mother, complicit in a beating ("Royal Beatings," *Who Do You Think You Are*, and again in "Fathers," *View*), sometimes in dreams of forgiveness ("Friend of My Youth," *Friend*), occasionally as a sideline moral commentator ("The Wilds of Morris Township," *View*), or celebrated as a triumphant saleswoman, a "lady...whose offerings added a unique distinction" ("Working for a Living" 152-53, *View*). Nevertheless, "Princess Ida" stands as the first to give the mother her due, to see her as complex woman with a past and emotional density of her own; within this story, she is seen not *only* as a source of pain, embarrassment, and guilt for the daughter, but also as a woman of will, courage, tenacity, and resilience; a woman who did the best she could with who she was and who her history could allow her to be. It is one of the ironies of Munro criticism that the oedipal dissatisfaction of the daughter figure, not entirely evacuated in her adult perspective, should have influenced critical readings of "Princess Ida" so strongly that they, in turn, have reinforced the repression of that knot of pain that Del's narrative identifies.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beer, Janet, "Short Fiction with Attitude: The Lives of Boys and Men in the *Lives of Girls and Women*." *Yearbook of English Studies*. 2001. FindArticles.com. Online.  
 [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\_hb351/is\_2001\_Annual/ai\_n28890335/] (December 27, 2009)
- Blodgett, E. D., *Alice Munro*. Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1988.
- Corelli, Richard J., "Dreams and Symbols." Online. [http://www.stanford.edu/~corelli/dreams.html] (December 12, 2009)
- Ferri, Laura, "Mothers and Other Secrets." *Open Letter*; 11.9/12.1 (2004): 137-50.
- Fowler, Rowena, "The Art of Alice Munro: *The Beggar Maid* and *Lives of Girls and Women*." *Critique* 25.4 (1984), 189-98. Online. [http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=98941965] (July 18, 2008)
- Freud, Sigmund, *Civilisation and its Discontents* [1929], ed. James Strachey, trans. Joan Rivière, London, Hogarth Press, 1973.
- . "On Narcissism: An Introduction" [1914], *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Angela Richards, trans. James Strachey, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984, 59-97.

- . "Repression." 1915. *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Angela Richards, trans. James Strachey, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984, 145-58.
- Heller, Deborah, "Getting Loose: Women and Narration in Alice Munro's *Friend of My Youth*", Thacker, *The Rest of the Story*, 60-80.
- Lacan, Jacques, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* [1973], ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, London, Penguin, 1977.
- MacDonald, Rae McCarthy, "Structure and Detail in *Lives of Girls and Women*," *SCL*, 3 (1978). Online. [[http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/SCL/bin/get.cgi?directory=vol3\\_2/&filename=Macdonald.htm](http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/SCL/bin/get.cgi?directory=vol3_2/&filename=Macdonald.htm)] (December 23, 2009)
- MacKendrick, Louis K., ed. *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*, Toronto, ECW Press, 1983.
- Martin, W. R., "Chapter 4: Lives of Girls and Women." *Paradox and Parallel*, Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 1987, 58-76.
- McCulloch, Jeanne, and Mona Simpson, "Alice Munro: The Art of Fiction No. 137." *The Paris Review Interviews*, 131 (Summer 1994). Online. [<http://www.parisreview.com/viewinterview.php/prmMID/1791>] (December 28, 2009)
- Munro, Alice, *Dance of the Happy Shades*. 1974. London, Vintage, 2000.
- . *Friend of My Youth*. Toronto, Penguin, 1990.
- . *Lives of Girls and Women*. 1971, New York, Vintage, 2001.
- . *The Progress of Love*, Toronto, Penguin, 1986.
- . *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You*, Winnipeg, Signet, 1975.
- . *The View From Castle Rock*, London, Vintage, 2007.
- Rasporich, Beverly, *Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro*, Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 1990.
- Redekop, Magdalene, *Mothers and Other Clowns: the Stories of Alice Munro*, London, Routledge, 1992.
- Struthers, J. M. (Tim), "The Real Material: An Interview with Alice Munro", MacKendrick 5-36.
- Thacker, Robert, "'Clear Jelly': Alice Munro's Narrative Dialectics", MacKendrick 37-60.
- . "Introduction: Alice Munro, Writing 'Home': 'Seeing This Trickle in Time'", Thacker, *The Rest of the Story*, 1-20.
- , ed. *The Rest of the Story: Critical Essays on Alice Munro*. Toronto, ECW Press, 1999.

## NOTES

1. This statement from an interview in 1994 is coherent with Munro's earlier remarks (1983): "'Princess Ida' was the first. It was going to be a short story. Then I saw it was going to work into a novel, and then I went on and on writing what I thought was a novel. Then I saw that wasn't working. So I went back and picked out of that novel 'Princess Ida' in its original form..." (Struthers 24-25).
2. The mother is referred to as Ada but once in "Princess Ida," pityingly, by the aunts: "Poor Ada" (73), and as Addie only by her brother, Bill. Del, hearing her uncle use this name, reflects: "No one ever called my mother Addie any more. It made her sound different—rounder, dowdier,

simpler" (92). For Del, she is simply "my mother," and I will follow this narrating choice throughout this paper.

3. Earlier critics who *have* focused on this story have generally labeled Del's mother as "a pathetic and eccentric misfit" (MacDonald), or have blown her image somewhat out of proportion: "Like the Egyptian deity Isis...the mother is the essence of mysterious, powerful female first beginnings as well as a model of intellectual womanhood" (Rasporich 46).

4. "The Progress of Love" can, in fact, be shown to be a reconfiguring of "Princess Ida," with a similar emotional grievance passed down along the maternal line and with many of the structuring elements of this story present in condensed or displaced form in its later reworked version.

5. Indeed, the overarching perspective of the adult Del frames the story of her mother between two seasons of "going on the road" to sell encyclopedias (72, 101). The mocking criticism of Del's aunts, who embody the values of the larger community, therefore echoes in the background of the whole story.

6. There is an interesting instance of disavowal in relation to this passage on the part of E.D. Blodgett, who affirms that "the only clue the reader has of [the brother] comes midway in a recollection of him as a cruel, fat boy who tortures cats, it is implied, in a sexual fashion," (45-46). The reference to sexuality has been noted, but its connection to Del's mother has been effaced through displacement onto the cat. This leaves Blodgett in the peculiar position of noting that this anecdote is "briefly sandwiched into the story of Del's grandmother's death and it appears to possess no particular function" (46).

7. In the story "Baptizing," which comes later in *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del's mother is portrayed in a manner which is reminiscent of the grandmother: when Del comes in after meeting her lover in the late evening, "there would be my mother sitting up in bed, the light shining right through her hair to her tender scalp, her cup of tea gone cold on the table beside the bed [...]—and she would read to me out of the university catalogues which she had sent away for" (253). Linked to her own mother by her place in the bed, the visibility of her scalp, and the coldness of the tea by her bed, Del's mother is nonetheless given the adjectives "tender," "shining," and is shown to be preoccupied with her daughter's future and with her hopes for her achievement of "finer and higher" aims.

8. The monetary connotation of the American dollar bill/Bill will also be activated as the uncle buys his welcome into the home by purchasing all the sweets and treats from the local store. Del, initially pleased, comments: "But I saw now that too much really might be too much" (95).

9. In an image built on the phallic symbol of the snake, Del tries in vain to find traces of the former 'tormentor' of her mother, but cannot detect the "cruel fat boy" in this newly discovered uncle: "He was gone, smothered, like a little spotted snake, once venomous and sportive, buried in a bag of meal" (98-99).

10. Critics who have not perceived the psychological underpinnings of Del's mother's resentment towards her brother tend to give value to the latter as being more open to the wonder of life, (Blodgett, 46) and the former as "lack[ing] altogether a sense of mystery and the capacity for religious experience" (Martin 65).

11. Fowler's comments (190) that this image of the downflash represents Del's sarcastic reevaluation of her mother; this position does not seem tenable when the scene is viewed in context.

---

## ABSTRACTS

Depuis une dizaine d'années, la recherche sur l'œuvre d'Alice Munro a su mettre en évidence l'importance de la relation mère-fille dans les nouvelles de cette auteure ; l'image de la mère, constamment revue et retouchée par une fille narratrice, y est récurrente. Dans ce contexte, "Princess Ida" (*Lives of Girls and Women*) est une nouvelle clef, trop longuement négligée par ce courant critique. Narrée à la première personne, "Princess Ida" invoque l'enfance et les influences familiales de la mère, à partir de la perspective de la fille, Del, qui doit également négocier sa propre relation œdipienne à sa mère. Cet article met en évidence le passé matrilinéaire inscrit dans cette nouvelle, en s'attachant aux marqueurs textuels de répression et de résistance et aux éléments langagiers liés à la répression sexuelle, la sublimation et le retour du refoulé.

## AUTHORS

### JENNIFER MURRAY

Jennifer Murray is an associate professor at the University of Franche-Comté. Her teaching and research interests focus on Canadian literature and on writers from the American South. Her forthcoming publications include a study of Margaret Atwood's short story collection, *Dancing Girls*; an article entitled "Honte et humiliation: reconfigurations d'une écriture de soi chez Alice Munro," and an analysis of recent criticism on Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.