Haunted Families: Gothic Realism in Alice Munro’s *Too Much Happiness*

Supervised by
Prof. Dr. Hilde Staels

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I came to know Alice Munro’s work last year during the course ‘Canadian Literature’ by Professor Hilde Staels. We only had to read one short story, ‘The Love of a Good Woman’, but it appealed to me and I wanted to read more of it. With the release of her new collection of stories in August 2009, the idea came to write a master dissertation on Munro’s use of gothic elements within her realist fiction.

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Elisa Vancoppernolle
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1. Introduction

Alice Munro is considered one of the best short story writers in the world and is responsible for making short-story writing respectable in Canada. Moreover, she has been included in the 2010 Time Magazine’s 100 Most Influential People¹. *Too Much Happiness* (2009) is her seventeenth short story collection, published at the age of seventy-eight and forty years after her first collection appeared.

Throughout the years, Munro’s style and themes have not changed a lot, although in her later work, she tends to focus more on the constraints of old age and loneliness, and the way her narrators tell a story based on memories from their youth. Coral Ann Howells² comments that over the decades, Munro’s “topics have not changed, but her narrative methods have” (Howells 68). Thus, she has gained new perspectives of time and space as her characters have grown older along with Munro herself, reflecting on their personal histories.

In the course of her work, Munro has found inspiration in her own life and region. Therefore, I will start this dissertation with a background of Munro’s life and career. In order to know what it is that makes Munro’s short stories so remarkable, some theoretical background will be provided, such as a short history of the English-Canadian short story, as well as some features of it. Furthermore, although Munro is known for her realistic style, Linda Hutcheon’s account on Canadian postmodernism will prove that Munro’s style is a unique Canadian one, with an unreliable narrative and a gothic undertone. For this reason, Munro’s style is considered as Southern Ontario Gothic.

In the second part of my thesis I will analyze each story of *Too Much Happiness* separately, mainly focusing on its thematic features. Typical for Munro is that she magnifies social issues taken from real life by immersing this reality into dimensions of dream, fantasy and even horror. Will this also be the fact in her latest collection? Will she again focus her stories on strong, female protagonists who are doomed by the cruelties of love and life? And most importantly, what exactly is it that gives Munro’s fiction its Gothic twist?

¹ From *Speakers Corner*, “The Time 100 Most Influential People in the World”: <http://www.speakerscorner.co.uk/file/3e764f419420b604ac8218ad93e0cde/time-magazine-100-most-influential-people-thought-leaders-thinkers-artists.html>
2. Alice Munro

Born as Alice Ann Laidlaw on July 10, 1931, Alice Munro grew up in the reticent Scots-Irish community of Wingham, Ontario, which is situated in the area around Huron County. This region came to be known as Alice Munro country because the majority of her stories are set in this remote region full of the “horror of disclosure”, described by Catherine Sheldrick Ross as “the last place to want to celebrate itself or have its secrets exposed” (21). Since childhood, Munro was fascinated by literature and passionate to become a writer.

However, living in the conservative and puritan Huron County, it was not self-evident that Munro’s aspiration to become a writer came true, because for a woman to have writing ambitions was not positively received. As Munro lets one of her characters say in Lives of Girls and Women: “To be ambitious was to court failure and to risk making a fool of oneself”. Therefore, Munro had to conceal her ambitions which resulted in a “lifelong split between ordinary life and the secret life of the imagination” (Ross 17), a theme that will occur in many of her later stories. Alice Munro was a woman who both wanted to be an artist and to have a husband and children, something which was not commonly accepted in the 1950s. Therefore, she kept her second life as an artist secret, as she puts it in an interview with Barbara Frum in 1973: “I worked out a way of living by pretending to be what people wanted me to be... I wouldn’t tell anyone I was writing” (Ross 19). This idea of a hidden identity appears in many of her stories under different forms, and also the fact that her protagonists are often married women with children who do not let themselves be oppressed by their husbands, but instead choose to live their own lives.

At age twelve, Alice Munro’s mother, a very talented woman, developed an incurable form of Parkinson’s disease. Being the oldest daughter of the family, she was supposed to take care of her mother until she died. Instead, Alice got a scholarship and

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3 Catherine Sheldrick Ross in Alice Munro: A Double Life (1992)
4 Quote used by C. S. Ross in Alice Munro: A Double Life, p. 17
went to university, for which she still feels guilty at times. These complex feelings towards her mother’s illness reappear in different forms in her writing. Catherine Ross mentions themes such as the loss of control associated with death; the desire to control the uncontrollable; the betrayals of language; the humiliation of exposure; the contrast between the self-protective, disguised, watchful character and the exposed, unsuspecting, somehow innocent character; and the shame of the observer who witnesses exposure. Munro has started to see writing as a way of controlling the obsessive memories of her mother, and, according to Ross, “as Alice the writer gets older, the mother in the stories goes from old age and paralysis to youth, until, in ‘Friend of My Youth’, a time is recovered from before her marriage when she is a hopeful young schoolteacher” (41).

In her second year at university, Alice met James Munro, who believed in Alice as a writer and she therefore married him in 1951. In 1953 they had their first daughter, in 1955 a second one was born, but she lived less than two days. Alice and James buried her without a funeral or a tombstone, something which will haunt Alice until the birth of her third daughter in 1957. As a mother, Alice Munro continued to lead a double life, keeping her career as a writer secret from the outside world. Apart from her husband, there was only one man to support Munro’s writing career: Robert Weaver, the person in charge of literary programming for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s national radio network. In 1951, before she was married, he bought broadcast rights for her short story ‘The Strangers’, which she wrote when she was still at university. According to Robert Thacker⁵, Weaver would remain Munro’s primary connection to a literary world during her first hard years as a writer (Kröller 177).

Until 1959, Alice wrote stories about people quite different from herself, avoiding intense personal experience. But when her mother died in 1959 and Alice returned to Wingham, she wrote ‘The Peace of Utrecht’, “a breakthrough in terms of the use of personal material” (Ross 58).

Munro started to write short stories with the intention to teach herself to write novels, but since she had to combine writing with caring for a family, she did not succeed in writing a full length novel. This depressed Alice severely, but her husband kept supporting her and finally she stopped her attempts at writing a novel and continued writing short stories. Although she managed to get her stories published in such magazines as the Canadian Forum, Queen’s Quarterly, Chatelaine, the Tamarack Review, ⁵ In Eva-Marie Kröller, The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature, Cambridge University Press 2004.
and the *Montrealer*, her life as a writer remained difficult since there was no one to publish her stories in book form. This changed in 1968 when her first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, appeared. This collection brought her immediate prestige and respect, and in 1971 she called herself for the first time a ‘writer’ instead of a ‘housewife’. This collection was also representative for the thematic and stylistic characteristics of her stories. The fifteen stories “present a perceptive young narrator’s dawning awareness of the powerful and legendary shapes lying behind ordinary life in Huron County” (Ross 65).

In explaining how she starts to write a story, she says that “when I write a story I want to make a certain kind of structure, and I know the feeling I want to get from being inside that structure. [...] I’ve got to make, I’ve got to build up, a house, a story, to fit around the indescribable ‘feeling’ that is like the soul of the story. [...] Then I start accumulating the material and putting it together” (Ross 65). As a result, Munro’s stories are never linear. The same holds true for the stories in *Too Much Happiness*, as they mostly start in *medias res*, with a very vivid scene, and gradually the surrounding events are revealed to the reader.


Munro’s earliest collections tended to consist of linked stories, all having the same protagonists or theme. However, in her later volumes she prefers unconnected, fragmentary stories, a form which better suits her than the short-story cycle. *Alice Munro: A Double Life* contains part of an interview with Geoff Hancock in which Munro states:

> I like looking at people’s lives over a number of years, without continuity. Like catching them in snapshots. [...] I don’t see that people develop and arrive somewhere. I just see people living in flashes. From time to time. And this is something you do become aware of as you go into middle age. [...] Mostly in my stories I like to look at what people don’t understand. (Ross 86-87)
This is the reason why Munro prefers to write unconnected stories, but it also explains her tendency of using a fragmented narrative within her stories, in which she sometimes skips several years or uses flashbacks.

Her style has not changed a lot over the years. In all her stories, Munro distrusts resolutions and final explanations. Also, a lot of her stories deal with adultery or with characters who tilt into madness for, as Munro explains, these characters lead a double life: “the ordinary life and the hidden life of adventure” (Ross 89). Her style is very realistic, about apparently trivial subjects, but there is always this mysterious, gothic undertone to her stories. Or as Catherine Sheldrick Ross puts it, she presents “ordinary life so that it appears luminous, invested with a kind of magic” (15). Moreover, in contrast to classic realism, we never get to know the real truth, there always remains some mystery, conveyed by means of open endings. Nowadays, Munro is often compared with Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), the great Russian short-story writer. Like Chekhov, Munro is fascinated with the failings of love and work and is obsessed with time and small town settings. As Garan Holcombe puts it: “plot is of secondary importance: all is based on the epiphanic moment, the sudden enlightenment, the concise, subtle, revelatory detail”6.

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6 From “Alice Munro” on Contemporary Writers: <http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth03D29L044112635689>
3. The English-Canadian Short Story

Starting to develop as a national genre in the 1890s, the English-Canadian short story is still a fairly recent literary phenomenon, gradually having gained more popularity. Its most significant model of development was the American short story, which by the end of the nineteenth century with representatives such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, was far more cultivated.

According to Reingard M. Nischik, the two major nineteenth-century contributions to Canadian short fiction were Duncan Campbell Scott's story collection *In the Village of Viger* (1896) and the Canadian animal story. This last one, with its representation of wildlife and the Canadian wilderness, "took Canadian fiction a decisive step further in the direction of realism" (Nischik 5). D.C. Scott's *In the Village of Viger* is mainly a "realistic depiction of character and of complex psychological states in the context of a village community" (Nischik 5), as a result of which I think it can be seen as a predecessor of Munro's fiction.

The 1920s were the start of the modernist short story, and also the start of the short story as we now know it, defined by Misao Dean:

> The fast pace of “modern” life and the demand of readers for intense experiences seemed to suggest a correspondingly short and intense prose form, leading to the conventional and highly formalized generic definition of the short story as a “fragment of life”: a story unified in place, action and time, whose dramatization of a revelatory and emotionally intense moment manages to suggest the outcome of a complete “life story” in a concentrated form. (Nischik 5-6)

However, there was still a general lack of appreciation for Canadian literature at the time and as a result also limited publication facilities, which caused the Canadian short story to have a rather hesitant start. It was only in the 1960s, the so-called Canadian Renaissance, that most writers from the 1920s were able to publish their work in Canada. Thanks to the flourishing print industry, the short story, which is characterized by multiple publications (in magazines, collections and anthologies), was finally able to develop in Canada. According to Reingard M. Nischik, today the short story can be considered to be "the flagship genre of Canadian literature" (1).
In contrast to the American short story, postmodernist short fiction did never bloom in Canada. It rather combined such experimental, deconstructive, and self-referential features with the traditional Canadian interest in realist representation, or as Reingard Nischik puts it: “the Canadian short story is marked by a clear predominance of modernist and neorealist narratives over outright antirealist, postmodernist styles” (19).

Today, the three most regarded and best-known English-Canadian short story writers are female: Margaret Atwood, Mavis Gallant and Alice Munro, of which Munro is the only one to write exclusively short stories. Her success both nationally and internationally has helped to raise the profile of the Canadian short story. Nischik also claims that Munro’s attraction to the short-story format is linked to her particular writing aesthetics, which stresses the “fluidity, incompleteness, variability, and the ultimate inexplicability of human experience” (Nischik 206) through the use of explanatory gaps, the construction of “worlds alongside”, the contrasting of disparate interpretations, juxtaposition of past and present, the constant deferral of fixed meanings, etc.

In brief, the contemporary Canadian short story can be characterized first by its diversity and vitality, since almost every Canadian writer has made a contribution to the short story. Second, by the high number of short-story cycles in Canada, which brings it closer to the novel; and finally, by the significance of the modernist-realist tradition of storytelling.
4. Munro’s postmodernist features

Although Alice Munro is said to write in a realist style, a lot of her stories tend to have postmodern characteristics as well. Realism can be broadly defined as "the faithful representation of reality or verisimilitude," an objective description of life without idealization. Characteristics of realism that can be connected to Munro’s style are a selective representation of reality, sometimes at the expense of a well-made plot; also the fact that characters “appear in their real complexity of temperament and motive; they are in explicable relation to nature, to each other, to their social class, to their own past.”

To conclude, as George Parsons Lathrop puts it: “Realism sets itself at work to consider characters and events which are apparently the most ordinary and uninteresting, in order to extract from these their full value and true meaning. It would apprehend in all particulars the connection between the familiar and the extraordinary, and the seen and unseen of human nature.” Since Alice Munro uses realism in a postmodern context, its conventions are contested.

In The Canadian Postmodern (1988), Linda Hutcheon defines postmodern fiction as “art forms that are fundamentally self-reflexive, in other words, [...] literature that is openly aware of the fact that it is written and read as part of a particular culture, having as much to do with the literary past as with the social present” (1). She emphasizes that postmodernism “both sets up and subverts the powers and conventions of art. It uses and abuses them in order to suggest that we question [...] any realist notion of transparent reference” (2). Therefore, postmodern literature is “neither self-sufficiently art nor a simple mirror to or window onto the world outside” (2). In this sense, Munro’s writing is typical of the postmodern paradox in that she uses a realist style, she describes the life of some ordinary characters without idealization, but she subverts the story’s realism by adding gothic elements and by making it impossible to arrive at a final truth. After reading a Munrovian short story, the reader is indeed left with a feeling of suspense because her stories tend to end abruptly, and mysteries remain unresolved.

7 Quote from A Handbook to Literature taken from <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/realism.htm>
Furthermore, Hutcheon argues that Canadian postmodernism is not to be compared with American postmodernism, because both countries do not share a cultural history. However, postmodern writers of every nationality are always in a sense ‘agents provocateurs’, criticizing the culture of which they are a part. Therefore, the postmodernist writer is put into a “marginal or ‘ex-centric’ position with regard to the central or dominant culture” (3). She continues that “since the periphery or the margin might also describe Canada’s perceived position in international terms, perhaps the postmodern ex-centric is very much a part of the identity of the nation” (3). Since the periphery is also the frontier, a place of transgression and possibility, postmodernism also has to do with crossing boundaries. Contemporary Canadian fiction is marked by a postmodern challenge to the boundaries of ‘high art’ genres, because a lot of popular cultural forms infiltrate Canadian fiction today, such as comic books, movies, detective stories, or, as is the case with Munro, the Gothic story.

In English-Canadian literature, a parallel is established between the position of women writers in general and Canadian writers. Both challenge the dominant traditions (either the male or the British/American) and do so by relying on conventions of classic realism. The result is an obsession with character formation and “the difficulty of maintaining ontological security” (Hutcheon 5). Hutcheon emphasizes that “the reason is not that women writers are by nature more conservative and traditionally realist” (5), but because of the fact that you can assume selfhood or ‘subjectivity’ only when you have attained it. Traditionally, subjectivity was defined in terms of rationality, individuality, and power: domains that have been denied women by the dominant culture. Women were relegated to the realms of intuition, the family, and submission. Women writers have a doubled act of ‘inscribing’ and challenging subjectivity, which has been one of the major forces in making postmodernism such a resolutely paradoxical enterprise. Similarly, Canadian novelists must return to their history in order to discover their historical myths, before they can challenge them. American ex-centric writers, such as women and Afro-Americans, have done the same, but Canadian writers first had to deconstruct British social and literary myths such as those of glorious wars or imperialistic exploration in order to redefine their colonial history. “Through the use of parody they have also contested the canonical myths and forms of European and American literatures” (Hutcheon 6), which Munro did with the Künstlerroman in Lives of Girls and Women.
Both in women writing and in Canadian fiction, shared themes of powerlessness, victimization, and alienation can be found. They use parody and irony in order to revise the male or British/American canonical texts of their culture, both ‘high’ and popular, undoing their status and power. Thus, in Hutcheon’s famous words: “Parody is a typical postmodern paradoxical form because it uses and abuses the texts and conventions of the tradition” (8). Postmodern Canadian writers thus “question any naïve notions of both modernist formalism (art is autonomous artifice) and realist transparency (art is a reflection of the world)” (10). According to Hutcheon, this is one articulation of the postmodern paradox.

Alice Munro started writing short stories in the 1950s but became successful only in the 1960s with the publication of Dance of the Happy Shades in 1968. In the 1960s, Canadian fiction not only came of age, but an interest arose for previously silenced ex-centric voices. The protagonists in Munro’s short stories are all defined by differences in class, gender, ethnic group, race, and sexual preference. Thanks to the postmodern interest in the ex-centric, female, gay, and various ethnic voices are inscribed in literary texts. In Canadian writing the two most important new forms to appear “have been those that embody ethnicity and the female” (Hutcheon 18). Hutcheon also considers this postmodern valuing of difference and the diverse in opposition to the uniform and the unified as the reason for a particular Canadian emphasis on regionalism. Canadian fiction is characterized by a concern for the different, the local, the particular, in opposition to the more American model of unification. Alice Munro’s short stories are a perfect example to support this claim: almost all of her stories are set in rural Southern Ontario.
5. Southern Ontario Gothic

One particular subgenre of Canadian Literature is Southern Ontario Gothic, which shares similarities with the American Southern Gothic genre: both analyze and criticize social conditions such as race, gender, religion and politics. The most important representatives of Southern Ontario Gothic are Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Matt Cohen, Marian Engel, Timothy Findley, and Scott Symons. All of them “share a sense of distinct regional, even mythological, place where horror, murder, and bodily violations are not uncommon” [10]. Southern Ontario Gothic is generally written in a strong realistic style, describing the typical small-town Protestant life of the region, and often includes themes of moral hypocrisy. Its characters act against humanity, logic, and morality, and there is often a character suffering from some form of mental illness.

Traditionally, Gothic literature dealt with madness, demons, secrets, live burial, and fear. Usually a heroine, the “damsel in distress”, searched for her true identity in a ruin or a confining architectural space like a dungeon. However, the threat to the female protagonist in the Southern Ontario gothic tradition can come from the wilderness, from “cabin fever”, or from uncommunicative husbands. The Gothic challenges rationality because it often deals with the sudden disruption by supernatural events. In the Canadian wilderness, the supernatural appears in the form of irrational figures such as the Wild Man, the Wild Woman, fool-saints, or wendigos.

The Gothic may also deal with irrational forces challenging civilized institutions such as family secrets and extreme social oppression. This irrationality can take different forms: religious fanaticism, finding dead or terminally ill mothers, the impossibility of dealing with women and their bodies because the female principle is threatening and requires elimination, etc.

The Gothic can also be located in desperate domestic circumstances that produce insanity or criminal action. Madness is an aspect of the bizarreness that underlies much of ‘ordinary’ Southern Ontario experience. Within this Southern Ontario background there is often a failure of communication between family members or social groups which makes it prone to Gothic tales: “In the absence of communication, strange projections and

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psychological grotesqueries spring up and rapidly grow to unmanageable proportions. Malevolent fantasies are the source and sustenance of the Gothic tradition” (Hepburn & Hurley).

In "Native Canadian Gothic Refigured: Reading Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*", Jennifer Andrews uses *Monkey Beach* to show the differences between traditional Gothic fiction and how the Gothic can be used in a contemporary context. She claims that, although Margot Northey\(^\text{11}\) insists that Gothic is a relevant term for Canadian literature, few scholars over the past three decades have used it in their discussions of Canadian fiction, and if they use it, they limit it to a narrow selection of works.

According to Andrews, “most of the devices used in early Gothic novels remained relevant in the twentieth century, including settings in remote times and places, split or tormented heroes/villains, fantasies and dreamscapes, tales within tales, contrasts between urban and rural life, and first person narrators” (2). The contemporary melding of Gothic fantasy and realistic fiction and the increasing awareness of how environment shapes behaviour, as is also the case in Munro’s stories, originates from the Victorian desire to integrate Gothicism within everyday life. In the twentieth century this has resulted in the belief that sources of terror are often part of daily life.

Jennifer Andrews outlines the particularities of the Canadian Gothic, which is marked by regional differences. Canadians are haunted by the wilderness, a haunting which is defined by the “tension between the desire for an orderly, contained culture and the freedom to engage with primitive nature” (3), in other words, a tension between civilization and savagery. The Gothic exposes the darkness of Canada and the mind of its inhabitants. Furthermore, Southern Ontario, being very puritanical and moralistic, provides an ideal setting for English-Canadian Gothic fiction “because of its decaying and destructive social order and the knowledge of various characters that their spirits are being imprisoned and perverted by the very context in which they live” (Andrews 3).

Rosemary Jackson provides a very useful theory of the Gothic as a subgenre of the fantastic\(^\text{12}\). In defining the fantastic, Jackson quotes Robert Irwin: “A fantasy is a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility; it is the narrative result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into ‘fact’ itself” (14). This is exactly what happens in Munro’s short stories. The horrifying things they

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\(^{11}\) Margot Northey is the writer of *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction* (1976).

deal with are always one degree further distanced from regular crimes. For instance, they do not deal with ‘just’ murder, but murder committed by children or a father killing his three children. In this way, as Rosemary Jackson puts it, fantasy “disturbs ‘rules’ of artistic representation and literature’s reproduction of the ‘real’” (14). She continues with exploring the history of modern fantasy. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, Jackson says, modern fantasy can be seen as the direct descendent of the *Menippea*, a traditional literary genre:

> It moved easily in space between this world, an underworld and an upperworld. It conflated past, present and future, and allowed dialogues with the dead. States of hallucination, dream, insanity, eccentric behaviour and speech, personal transformation, extraordinary situations, were the norm. [...] It tells of descents into underworlds of brothels, prisons, orgies, graves: it has no fear of the criminal, erotic, mad, or dead. Many modern fantasies continue this violently transgressive function. (15)

This is also what Southern Ontario Gothic is all about, and, in a less explicit way, the stories of Alice Munro.

Furthermore, Jackson also emphasizes that fantasy in religious times is different from fantasy in a present, secularized world. In religious times, fantasy told of leaps into other realms that transcended the human, it fulfilled a definite, escapist function. Rosemary Jackson calls this a ‘supernatural economy’, where otherness is marvellously different from the human. This ‘marvellous’ fiction is full of angels, devils, heavens, hells, promised lands, and pagan fantasies of elves, dwarves and fairies. In a secularized culture, fantasy does not invent supernatural regions, “but presents a natural world inverted into something strange, something ‘other’. It becomes ‘domesticated’, humanized, turning from transcendental explorations to transcriptions of a human condition” (18). Therefore, desire for otherness is directed towards the absent areas of this world, to something other than the familiar world, instead of being displaced into alternative regions of heaven and hell. In such a ‘natural economy’, otherness “is read as a projection of merely human fears and desires transforming the world through subjective perception” (23). This is a definition of ‘uncanny’ or ‘strange’ fiction, in which “strangeness is an effect produced by the distorted and the distorting mind of the protagonist” (24). Throughout the history of gothic fiction, there is a gradual transition from the marvellous to the
uncanny, a transition towards an internalization of evil and the recognition that fears are generated by the self.

According to Jackson, the topography of the uncanny is characterized by “relatively bleak, empty, indeterminate landscapes, which are less definable as places than as spaces, as white, grey, or shady blanknesses” (42). Often, gothic events are set in remote places, on the countryside or in forests: places far away from civilized cities, places where anything can happen. In relation to topography, optic imagery such as mirrors, glasses, reflections, portraits, eyes, etc. are commonly used devices in the fantastic, since they represent spaces behind the visible, dark areas from which anything can emerge. Mirrors have the power to see things distortedly to affect a transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar. The mirror can also be used to introduce a typical element of the uncanny: that of the double or the Doppelgänger.

According to Jackson, another important aspect of fantastic texts is the disruption of chronological time: “classical unities of space, time and character are threatened with dissolution in fantastic texts” (46). Past, present and future meld together and lose their historical sequence. There is a tension towards an eternal present in which “centuries, years, months, days, hours and minutes appear as arbitrary and insubstantial units which, like Salvador Dali’s dissolving watches, are made flexible and fluid” (47). According to Todorov, this “hesitation on the level of the narrative structure can be read as a displacement of fantasy’s central thematic issue” (48), namely, the uncertainty of what is true and what is not, uncertainty of what is ‘seen’ and ‘known’.

Finally, Jackson subdivides the fantastic into four categories according to theme and myth. First of all, there are the ‘themes of the I’ versus the ‘themes of the not-I’. Fantastic texts with themes of the I, or the self, are constructed around the relationship of the individual to the world. These accounts are unreliable because the senses prove to be deceptive and vision cannot be trusted. Protagonists of such texts are unable to separate ideas from perceptions, or to distinguish differences between world and self. Fantastic texts in this category face with problems of consciousness. On the contrary, themes of the not-I or of the other face with problems generated by the unconscious and by desire. This desire appears in many transgressive forms such as sadism, incest, necrophilia, murder, eroticism, etc. which “make explicit the unconscious desires structuring interrelationship, the interactions of the ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ on a human level” (51). Jackson claims that one of the purposes of the fantastic is to rediscover a unity between self and other.
Second, she subdivides the modern fantastic into two kinds of myths: either the source of otherness is in the self, or the otherness originates in a source external to the self. In the first instance, danger originates out of an extreme application of human will or out of excessive knowledge or rationality, which is for instance the case in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. In the second type, “an external force enters the subject, changes it irreversibly and usually gives to it the power to initiate similar transformations” (57). This is the case in stories about vampires, such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, in which people who have been bitten by a vampire turn into a vampire themselves.
6. Textual Analysis of *Too Much Happiness*

6.1 Child murder in ‘Dimensions’

The story starts with Doree, who calls herself ‘Fleur’ in the present, travelling on a bus to meet ‘him’. We learn that she works as a chambermaid at the Blue Spruce Inn and that she is still fairly young. It is clear that something serious happened to her, but we do not immediately get to know what: “none of the people she worked with knew what had happened” (2). Throughout the story however, several clues are given that help to reveal the traumatic past. For instance, there has been a picture of Doree and her children in the newspaper, there is a woman called Mrs. Sands who “spoke of moving on” and who “blushed at what she heard herself say - “death” - but did not make it worse by apologizing” (3). The reader understands that Mrs. Sands is a psychoanalyst, but this is never mentioned explicitly. During the story, there is a constant shift from the present to the past. These returns to the past happen when Doree visits Mrs. Sands, where she seems to be digging up memories from her past and the reader is able to gradually put the pieces of the puzzle together.

When Doree is sixteen, her mother dies from an embolism. At the hospital, Doree meets an older man called Lloyd, and a year later she turns out to be pregnant from him and they marry. After this flashback we return to the conversation between Doree and Mrs. Sands, in which Doree tells her that she has visited Lloyd three times.

In the next flashback Doree already has three children and a first instance of Lloyd’s strange nature is revealed. He gets angry when he hears that Doree stopped breast-feeding their youngest son: “Lloyd squeezed one breast after the other with frantic determination and succeeded in getting a couple of drops of miserable-looking milk out. He called her a liar. They fought. He said that she was a whore like her mother. All those hippies were whores, he said” (7).

After this passage the story switches again to Mrs. Sands’ office, in which we get another clue of what happened in Doree’s past. After she has received a pamphlet with the words “When Your Loss Seems Unbearable…”, Doree seems deeply affected and shocked. The fact that Lloyd is in an institution and that Doree’s children are not mentioned in the present, gives the reader an uncanny presentiment. The next flashback
is the longest one, in which all the horrifying events are revealed. Lloyd has become more tyrannical and when he and Doree have a fight, Doree runs to a friend for comfort. Lloyd overreacts and in an act of jealousy he kills their three children.

As Irwin defines fantasy as “a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility” (Jackson 14), ‘Dimensions’ can definitely be interpreted as a fantasy since the triple child murder is a violation of what is generally accepted - a father does not kill his children. However, normative rules and conventions are even more subverted when Doree almost forgives Lloyd, she still feels connected with him: “the thought that Lloyd, of all people, might be the person she should be with now” (28). In Munro’s short stories, the horrifying events are always one degree further distanced from regular crimes. In this way, as Rosemary Jackson puts it, fantasy “disturbs ‘rules’ of artistic representation and literature’s reproduction of the ‘real’” (14).

In contrast to the fantastic genre in religious times, Alice Munro’s fantasy does not present supernatural regions. As I discussed earlier on, in a secularized culture, fantasy becomes domesticated, humanized, turning to explorations of the human condition instead of transcendental explorations. In Munro’s ‘uncanny’ fiction, strangeness is produced not by something supernatural, but by the distorted mind of the protagonist himself, danger and fear is generated by the self. Thus, the ‘other’ in ‘Dimensions’ is not a supernatural being, but Lloyd. When the story unfolds, Lloyd’s strange and distorted mind becomes more obvious. He appears to be very conservative and hateful towards women, who are to him only useful as the bearers of children. For instance, he does not want Doree to take anti-conception. As a result, she gets her first child at the age of sixteen, rapidly followed by two other babies. Lloyd sees this as an advantage for the children’s health, because their children are very healthy, while Maggie, who got her children when she was older, has two sons suffering from asthma and allergies. Furthermore, Lloyd clearly sees himself as head of the family, as the decision taker. He wants his children to be home-educated because he does not seem willing to share them with other people: “I just happen to think they are my kids, [...] I mean, they are our kids, not the Department of Education’s kids” (9, my italics). Lloyd is a very dominant man, he oppresses Doree but she seems brainwashed by him. Also, he sees Maggie as a threat, probably because he is afraid that she will help Doree to realize that she has to stand up for herself:

After that she was more careful about what she said [to Maggie]. She saw that there were things that she was used to that another person might not
understand. Lloyd had a certain way of looking at things: that was just how he was. [...] Then Doree asked herself why she should care what Maggie might think. Maggie was an outsider, not even somebody Doree felt comfortable with. It was Lloyd said that (sic), and he was right. The truth of things between them, the bond, was not something that anybody else could understand and it was not anybody else’s business. (11-12)

After the murder, the verdict is that Lloyd is insane. Typical of gothic fiction, Lloyd seems to have a ‘good’ and an ‘evil’ side, and evil lurks within himself, it is something which he cannot control, as is the case in Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. This is a typical feature of the modern fantastic, for Rosemary Jackson claims that “over the course of the nineteenth century, fantasies structured around dualism - often variations of the Faust myth - reveal the internal origin of the other. The demonic is not supernatural, but is an aspect of personal and interpersonal life, a manifestation of unconscious desire” (55). As a result, “the easy polarization of good and evil which had operated in tales of supernaturalism and magic ceased to be effective” (56).

‘Dimensions’ is an instance of what Jackson sees as the myth in which the danger, the source of otherness, is hidden inside the self. Lloyd is too rational, he imposes his will in an extreme manner through which a destructive situation is created. He does not take into account the feelings of his wife, he only thinks about the health of his children, and this preoccupation will eventually lead to their death. He overreacts after Doree has bought a tin of spaghetti that was on sale because there was “a very slight dent in it” (17). His rationality becomes paranoiac and he accuses Doree of trying to poison her family. He forbids her to go to Maggie, but she does it anyway. As a result, Lloyd feels obliged to punish her for her disobedience, and he kills their children “to save them the misery of knowing that their mother had walked out on them” (17).

Finally, Jackson’s account on the topography of the fantastic can be applied to ‘Dimensions’ as well. She claims that the represented world of the uncanny is characterized by “relatively bleak, empty, indeterminate landscapes, which are less definable as places than as spaces, as white, grey, or shady blanknesses” (42). Similarly, the horrible events in ‘Dimensions’ also happen in a place distanced from civilization. From some lines in the text the reader can deduce that the couple lives in a secluded house: “He found the Sechelt Peninsula, where he and Doree lived, too full of people these days [...] Soon he and Doree moved across the country to a town they picked from a name
on the map: Mildmay. They didn’t live in town, they rented a place in the country” (4), and some pages further when Doree flees to Maggie she “had walked all the way there in the dark, first along the gravel road that she and Lloyd lived on, and then on the highway” (13).

Jackson also claims that one of the central thematic concerns of the fantastic are “problems of vision”. The fantastic literally means the ‘un-real’, and the un-real is that which is in-visible. Many of the strange worlds of modern fantasy are “spaces behind the visible, behind the image, introducing dark areas from which anything can emerge” (Jackson 43). In this regard, it is important to mention that Maggie is an optometrist, a specialist who examines eyes and treats problems of vision. Moreover, the cruel murder happens out of sight, the murder itself is not described and the bodies of the children are hidden from view by the walls of the house: “He did not move aside to let her up the steps. ‘You can’t go in there,’ he said” (15).

Munro parodically uses and abuses gothic conventions. On the one hand, she depicts Lloyd as a monstrous man, who is unable to control his evil side. On the other hand, however, the heroine is not afraid of this villain. She feels the need to meet him and talk to him, almost to understand him. Of all people, he is the one who helps her to move on with her life. He tells her that he has seen the children in another dimension and that they are happy. This gives Doree again a sort of strength and will to live. In the end, when a young boy is the victim of a traffic accident, his life is saved because of her. She transfers her will to live on to him, and is able to reanimate him.

Alice Munro’s stories are – almost always – centred around a female protagonist. The issues she writes about fit into what Susanne Becker calls neo-gothicism. In Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions she states that “neo-gothicism reflects the feminine dimensions of the ongoing cultural and literary change: after all, gothic horror is domesticated horror, family horror, and addresses precisely these obviously ‘gendered’ problems of everyday life” (Becker 4). ‘Dimensions’ is a perfect illustration to support this definition. It is about a family drama, something that affects only the family. It is not some supernatural monster that has made Doree’s life into a hell, but her own husband. Susanne Becker claims that female gothic “dramatically signifies women’s assigned place of enclosure and constraint; of domestic horror with no escape” because the heroine is often enclosed “not only by the house but moreover by its most marginal part” (Becker 10). The horror Doree has to go through is essentially domestic. She is a prisoner in her
own house, her husband forbids her to have a job, to drive a car, to have friends. The only thing she is allowed to be, is a mother.

In accordance with Kate Ferguson Ellis’s analysis of early gothic novels, Doree can be seen as a modern version of the “madwoman in the attic”. Becker suggests that “Ellis’s reading exposes the idea - and ideology of the home as place of protection that turns into a prison” (18). Thus, domestic horror draws attention both to the horrors of enclosure for a female subject within ‘her place’, and to her desire to leave it. Becker also mentions that “Feminine gothic classics as well as neo-gothic texts [...] foreground the gothic emphasis on the body and emotion - sex, desire, fear, horror, abjection. They also draw attention to the processes of gender construction, of idealised femininity, of the femme fatale” (Becker 20). Munro shows these traditional gender issues by using typical characters such as Lloyd and Doree. Lloyd is the dominant male who is not interested in the opinions of his wife, he only expects her to be beautiful: “Her hair had been long and wavy and brown then, natural in curl and colour, as he liked it, and her face bashful and soft - a reflection less of the way she was than of the way he wanted to see her” (Munro 2) and she has to be a proper mother for their children.

However, Munro emphasises that such a marital situation does not lead to happiness, it can only lead to destruction. The moment that the oppressed wife Doree starts standing up for herself, the situation becomes dramatic for her children. On the other hand, it is shown that a relationship based on equality, in which both parents earn a living, is much stronger, no matter how fragile it might seem on the outside. Maggie and her husband are both optometrists, and she did not have her children as early as Doree because she first wanted her career to flourish. According to Lloyd, this is the reason why she has “unhealthy children”, they have problems with asthma and allergies, for which Doree was very grateful then, “comparing her healthy three” (9). However, Doree’s children are not allowed to live a long life. Therefore, this story is a perfect example of feminist gothic according to Becker:

Early feminist gothic novels use gothic excess radically to expose the limitations - and the constructions - of the real, from which no escape seems possible. In the feminist gothic, horror, the ‘supernatural’, the radical doubt, is closer to home, not the creation of a weird world, but a very specific background composed of aspects of the contemporary and familiar domestic life. (Becker 30,31)
An interesting anecdote is that this story bears some eerie similarities with a real murder committed in April 2008 by Allan Schoenborn who killed his daughter and two sons to take revenge on his wife who wanted to divorce him. This proves that Munro’s fiction is essentially realistic and how much she is able to inhabit the minds of characters that are different from herself. The eerie thing is, however, that the similarities seem to be nothing more than strange coincidences since Munro’s story appeared in the *New Yorker* two years earlier than the actual events. Munro confessed to journalist Bill Richardson that she is impressed by the parallels, but she also noted that violence against children is not so unusual.

As can be read in “An Eerie Short Story Gets Even Eerier” by Cathy Gulli, the triple child murder out of revenge is not the only similarity with the real event. In both cases the children are killed by suffocation, with the eldest ones trying to resist their fathers’ attack. In ‘Dimensions’ we can read that Sasha “had tried to get away. He was the only one with bruises on his throat. The pillow had done for the others” (15). Schoenborn’s eldest, Kaitlynne, also fought back when he stabbed her in the neck, therefore he suffocated her and did the same with the other two. After the two crimes, it is the mothers who discover their dead children, after which both are severely shocked and traumatized. Both men confess the killings but are not found guilty because of mental illness. Doree and Schoenborn's wife are the only people to visit the men in jail, and both men tell their wives to have had visions of their children. Lloyd saw them in another “dimension”, where they were “really happy” and didn’t “seem to have any memory of anything bad” (25). Schoenborn said to have seen sparkles on water in which Kaitlynne appeared, saying she forgave him, so he concluded the boys must have too.

These troubling parallels make Munro’s story appear even more uncanny, as if it was some dark prophecy. At the same time however, it shows how real these gothic events actually are. As Bill Richardson puts it: “‘Dimensions’ allows readers to explore the innards of a tragedy”. Yet Munro takes it one step further by presenting Doree’s confused state of mind in which she decides that the only way to overcome her trauma is by forgiving the murderer of her children and by getting into contact with him, which comes as a shock to the reader.
6.2 Broken marriages in ‘Fiction’

“Beyond the limits of the town into the forest” (32), this is the way Joyce, as a middle-aged woman, describes the typically Munrovian setting of her house some thirty years ago when she was married to Jon. The introduction gives the reader already the impression that Joyce and Jon’s young marriage will not last, because of the threatening way in which Munro describes their house. For instance, when she describes the new hype of “patio doors”, which were usually leftuncurtained and were perhaps “meant not just to look out on but to open directly into the forest darkness, and that they displayed the haven of home so artlessly” (33), the reader gets the impression that this “home” is very fragile.

Joyce and Jon met at high school and despite of their high IQ’s and the high expectations their parents had of their future, they ran off together in their first year at college and got jobs here and there, called hippies by their parents. After a while, wanting more security, Jon learned carpentry and woodworking and Joyce started to teach music in schools. They bought a dilapidated house in Rough River and renovated it themselves. When Jon’s woodworking business was growing more successful, Joyce persuaded Jon to take an apprentice to help him – “at first he hadn’t been willing, but Joyce had talked him into it” (35) – something she will come to regret later on.

The apprentice, Edie, appears to be a peculiar girl. She is rather quiet but “when she did talk it was forceful” (35), she is a recovering alcoholic and has a nine-year old daughter. However, it is this “short, sturdy young woman” who will damage Joyce and Jon’s marriage and everything they built up. The narrator describes her as having “broad shoulders, thick bangs, tight ponytail, no possibility of a smile” and, moreover, “both arms, her upper chest, and her upper back were decorated with tattoos” (35). In other words, she does not seem to be a threat to Joyce, who has long legs, a slim waist and a long silky braid of dark hair. Until now, Jon and Joyce’s life was described in a rather realist style, as the typical life of a middle-class couple. However, with the sudden appearance of this mysterious girl, who as an evil enchantress seduces Jon, a gothic atmosphere penetrates the story. Jon seems to be bewitched when he suddenly gives up his marriage for this unattractive girl. The narrator also alludes to this when she says: “And he had spent the dark winter months shut up in his workshop, exposed to the confident emanations of Edie. It was comparable to getting sick from bad ventilation” (38). When Joyce warns him
that Edie will drive him crazy if he continues to take her seriously, Jon answers: “Maybe she already has”. Another instance of Jon being bewitched by Edie is when Joyce unsuspectingly asks him if somebody has “slipped you a potion?”. When she says “we will ride this out,” Jon looks at her distantly, even kindly, and says, “there is no ‘we’” (38).

In *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions*, Susanne Becker observes that “Munro’s neo-gothic narrative shows how the expectations of a proper femininity come into being, and how digression from these is coded as ‘monstrous’” (128). Edie is not a common female, and therefore is considered by Joyce as monstrous. She lives in a non-stereotypical female way or as Becker puts it, such “female figures suggest alternative ways of living as a woman. And the Gothicism in their depiction points to the complications of such deviation” (129).

The second part of the story is set in the present, when Joyce is a middle-aged woman and married to Matt. To celebrate his sixty-fifth birthday they are giving a party, at which Joyce meets a girl named Christie O’Dell, of which she had the uncanny feeling that “she had seen that face before” (49). It appears that Christie is a young writer and a couple of days later Joyce buys her first book, *How Are We to Live*. When Joyce discovers that the book is a collection of short stories, this is a disappointment to her because it seems to “diminish the book’s authority, making the author seem like somebody who is just hanging on to the gates of Literature” (49). This shows Munro’s sense of self-deprecating humour, alluding to her own genre and literary critics’ ingrained prejudices against it.

When Joyce at night goes through the table of contents, one particular title catches her eye: ‘*Kindertotenlieder*’. This is a song cycle by Gustav Mahler, and being a music teacher, Joyce immediately feels attracted to this story. However, while reading, it begins to dawn on her that the story is about her own past. Munro presents the story to us partly as a tale within the tale, which is, according to Jennifer Andrews, a device often used in early Gothic novels (2). The story tells of a girl who “lived with her mother in a house between the mountains and the sea” (51) but before that she had lived in a home for foster children. When she lived with her mother she accompanied her every night to the AA meeting. After a while the girl started playing the violin, and she describes her teacher as “a tall woman with brown hair that she wore usually in a long braid down her back. […] She smelled of wood or a stove or trees. […] After the child’s mother went to work for the teacher’s husband she smelled the same way but not quite the same” (52).
Together with Joyce, after reading this passage the reader understands that Christie must have been Edie’s daughter. Although the girl seems to have had a special relationship with Joyce, she almost forgot about the child, as if she repressed all her memories of the girl. It appears that Joyce established a special interest in Edie’s daughter to learn about her former husband and his new girlfriend. Joyce chose the girl to play the leading part at the annual recital, which allowed her to spend more time with the child and to ask her intimate questions about home. Since Christie did not appear in Joyce’s account of her first marriage, it is shown that her interest in the girl was not sincere, something which the girl will understand later on: “what she can know is how little she herself counted for, how her infatuation was manipulated, what a poor little fool she was” (58).

In this story, there are only allusions to gothic incidents, but in reality, nothing seems to take place. First of all there is the mystery surrounding Edie and the way she seduces Jon. Secondly, there is also some mystery in the tale within the tale when Joyce tells Christie she does not need to be scared of the woods. The description of the safe paths and the different sorts of flowers reminds one of Little Red Riding Hood, especially when Joyce interrupts the story by saying: “she can feel the horror coming. The innocent child, the sick and sneaking adult, that seduction. […] The woods, the spring flowers.” (56). However, nothing happens and the story ends with the child observing a last conversation between Joyce and Jon, whereupon Joyce drives away without taking leave of Christie. At first the girl feels disappointed and bitter, but then, to Joyce’s surprise, her feelings change. She recalls the happiness of that period, the music she painfully learned to play, the curious and delightful names of the forest flowers she never got to see: “It almost seemed as if there must be some random and of course unfair thrift in the emotional housekeeping of the world, if the great happiness […] of one person could come out of the great unhappiness of another” (59).

This story points to the fact that fiction can help people to come to new insights and to learn something about themselves. Joyce finally feels the connection she had with this girl, something she did not want to give in to because it was Edie’s child. Unfortunately, she is unable to get in touch again, because when she returns to the bookstore where Christie is signing her book, the girl does not show any sympathy or signs of recognition, much against Joyce’s expectations. It even appears as if she has
nothing to do with the story, “that the story came from – why, she acted as if that was disposed of long before” (61).
6.3 Oppressive behaviour in ‘Wenlock Edge’

This is the story about a girl from the countryside who studies English and Philosophy in London, Ontario, thus reminding us of Munro herself. She is rather naïve and lives more in the world of literature than in the real world. For instance, her mother’s cousin, Ernie Botts, takes her out to dinner every Sunday evening, about which she says: “It seemed to me that this was the sort of thing he would do, because I was a relative – he would not even have to consider whether we were suited to spending time together” (62) and some lines further: “It probably cost more than he could afford, but I did not think of that, having a country girl’s notion that all men who lived in cities, wore a suit every day, and sported such clean fingernails had reached a level of prosperity where indulgences like this were the usual thing”.

In her opinion, students of languages and literature should see the world differently than regular people do. However, in her rooming house live two girls who “worked hard at Modern Languages, but their conversations and preoccupations seemed hardly different from those of girls who might work in banks or offices” (64). As a result, they are a disappointment to her.

One day, the narrator’s house manager tells her that she will have to share her attic room with another girl, Nina, who will stay there from Tuesdays to Fridays. This girl is twenty-two, small, she has beautiful clothes, but in her room she wears nothing else but a light kimono. The narrator is impressed by this beautiful girl, particularly after having heard her life story, which made her feel “like a simpleton” (70).

Nina’s life story started when she was fifteen and got pregnant and decided to marry the father of the child. At that time she still lived with her grandmother in a small town near Chicago. Soon she had a second baby and her husband went to another town for a job, but never returned. She left her children with her grandmother and went to Chicago. At that time she was still called June, but then she met Mr. Purvis in Chicago and he gave her the name Nina. She moved in with him and hoped that her children could also live there, but it turned out that Mr. Purvis despised children. When she got pregnant from him, he wanted her to have an abortion, but she refused and left Mr. Purvis, and tried to raise her baby, Gemma, on her own. However, one Christmas eve when Nina came back from work, Gemma had a high fever and because of all the traffic jam she never made it to the hospital and Gemma died. Nina went back to Mr. Purvis who paid for the
baby's funeral and he took Nina back. After some months, he asked her if she wanted to get an education, which she did, but she wanted to live part of the time the way ordinary students lived, and he allowed that. The only thing she was not supposed to do was go out at night and she had to have a proper lunch and dinner at the college cafeteria. As a result, she is constantly controlled by Mr. Purvis's assistant-spy, who keeps guard in a black car that is parked across the rooming house.

As already mentioned in my discussion of ‘Dimension’, Susanne Becker claims that both feminine gothic classics and neo-gothic texts “foreground the gothic emphasis on the body and emotion – sex, desire, fear, horror, abjection. They also draw attention to the processes of gender construction, of idealised femininity, of the femme fatale” (20). Munro depicts Nina as a stereotypical female, she is only described superficially as a beautiful girl, captured and oppressed by a wealthy old man.

One day, however, Nina claims to have a fever and asks the protagonist to call Mr. Purvis to tell him she wants to stay in the rooming house for the weekend, because “he can’t stand anybody being sick around him” (73). Nina also informs the protagonist that Mr. Purvis will ask her to join him for dinner on Saturday night, and she advises her to do so, because dinner on Saturday nights is always something “special”. So the protagonist agrees, and Mr. Purvis appears to live, not in a stodgy mansion as she expected, but in a modern, flat-roofed house without Christmas lights, “no lights of any kind” (74). The description of the house is somewhat creepy, being dimly lit with pompous furniture, mirrors and rugs. In a windowless room with a bench and hooks around the wall, the protagonist is told to leave her clothes, all her clothes. At first she is perplexed, but because she does not want to be a loser and out of pride she obeys. She then describes how she walks naked to the room of Mr. Purvis, “my eyes avoiding the mirrors” (76). In Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, Rosemary Jackson uses Leo Bersani’s theory to stress that the mirror is a frequent motif in literature, used “as a metaphor for the production of other selves. A mirror produces distance. [...] By presenting images of the self in another space, the mirror provides versions of self transformed into another, become something or someone else. [...] It offers unpredictable (apparently impossible) metamorphoses of self into other” (87-88). Thus, by refusing to look in the mirrors, the protagonist refuses to face her other self, her rational self that would warn her against what she is doing, she refuses to face reality.
When Mr. Purvis asks her to read a poem by A.E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*, from which the protagonist chooses to read 'On Wenlock Edge', she starts to feel much more at ease in the familiar atmosphere of literature and she almost forgets about her nudity: "Familiar words and rhythms called me down. They took me over. Gradually I began to feel more at peace" (80). She deceives herself with assuming that everybody in the world are bare, sad, naked creatures. She starts seeing herself as a liberated fictional figure, without worrying that anything will happen to her: "It had not occurred to me either that the undressing might be a prelude to rape, or to any ceremony but supper. Why had I not thought of such a thing? Why was I not more apprehensive?" (76).

Before the protagonist leaves, Mr. Purvis tells her that he wants to talk to Nina over the phone before he goes to sleep. However, when she returns to her room, Nina is not there. After a few days, the narrator gets a phone call from Nina, asking her to bring all her stuff to Ernie's place without telling anything to Mr. Purvis. The narrator obeys and goes to Ernie's house, where Nina tells her that she never wants to see Mr. Purvis again and that she is in love with Ernie now.

When the narrator returns to the university she notices an advertisement about English Country Poets with, among others, the names of Herrick, Housman and Tennyson. She thinks back to the poems of Housman that she read to Mr. Purvis, and feels overwhelmed by an intense feeling of shame: "A far greater shame it seemed now, than at the time. He had done something to me, after all" (88). She is ashamed now that she exposed herself, she agreed to undress without being forced or persuaded to do it. She agreed because she wanted to prove that she was not just a bookworm but that she could be as daring as Nina. She blames herself, but she also blames Nina because she understands that she must have known it from the start:

Nina would know. She had been too preoccupied with Ernie to say anything that morning, but there would come a time when she would laugh about it. [...] And she might even tease me about it. Her teasing would have in it something like her tickling, something insistent, obscene. Nina and Ernie. In my life from now on. (89)

Afterwards, the narrator says that Nina did not stay with Ernie even for a week. When they have their usual dinner on Sunday evening, Ernie tells her that one day she was gone. He explains that she "couldn't leave her old uncle, she didn't have the heart to run out on him" (91). After this passage the narrator reveals that when she was in the
library working on her essay about Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, she was unable to concentrate on it. Instead, she looked up two addresses in the phone book: Mr. Purvis’s and Ernie’s. Subsequently, she put Ernie’s address into an envelope and sent it to Mr. Purvis.

On his blog, Charles May writes that the fact that the narrator sends Mr. Purvis Ernie’s address is “a tampering with the lives of others as if they were not real, but rather characters in a story that she feels free to manipulate around, as if they were puppets, shadows cast on the wall of Plato’s cave”. During her dinner with Mr. Purvis, she tells him that her favourite philosopher is Plato and that she likes his allegory of the cave. In this allegory, Plato places people who are untutored in the Theory of Forms as prisoners in a cave, only able to look straight ahead at a wall. Behind them burns a fire, and in between the fire and the prisoners are puppeteers who hold up objects which cast shadows on the wall. The prisoners are unable to see the real objects, they only see and hear the shadows and echoes that are cast by objects that they cannot see. As Marc Cohen puts it, “such prisoners would mistake appearance for reality. They would think the things they see on the wall (the shadows) were real; they would know nothing of the real causes of the shadows”.

For instance, if one of the prisoners says “that’s a book”, he thinks that “book” refers to one of the shadows he is looking at. In this way, Plato wants to emphasise that the general terms of our language are actually names of things that we cannot see, things that we can only grasp with the mind, instead of the visible physical objects. In a similar way, the narrator of ‘Wenlock Edge’ cannot see the difference between what is real and what appears to be real, the shadows of her own mind. She is not able to see the difference between reality and fiction. She is a successful writer of essays, as she says herself: “I would go on writing essays and getting A’s because that was what I could do”.

As a result, she is used to deciding about the development of a story and its characters. However, when she understands that Mr. Purvis has manipulated her and that he was able to control her as if she herself was a fictional character, she feels ashamed, particularly because she cannot bear that Nina and Ernie know of her shameful surrender. As a form of revenge, she betrays Nina, she reveals her hiding place to Mr. Purvis, which allows her to control someone else’s life. She removes Nina’s freedom, she manipulates

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her life as if she is merely a fictional character. However, she must be aware of the fact that what she does is wrong, because the story ends with the line: “On their way to deeds they didn’t yet know they had in them” (92). Also, at the beginning of the story she says that she used to call her cousin Ernie “Earnest Bottom”, of which she believed that she “meant no harm, hardly any harm” (62).

The narrator seems to be an innocent student, but in reality she is very cruel and she does not understand what life is really about. She avoids human relationships because she does not want to lose control over things. However, when she has lost control herself, she needs to take revenge by manipulating the life of the people closest to her.
6.4 Rejection and hatred in ‘Deep-Holes’

Deep-Holes is one of the shortest stories in this collection and is essentially about deep-rooted “holes” within a family, such as the unbridgeable gap between the father’s bourgeois values, considered ‘the normal’, and Kent’s life among ‘the low’, the ex-centric, the ‘other’. It starts with Sally, mother of three children, preparing for a picnic. Just as the female protagonist in ‘Dimensions’, Sally is a rather subservient woman: “she protested, but he insisted” (93). Her husband Alex is a geologist, and in the course of the story, it becomes clear that he is a tough, heartless man. The picnic takes place in a rather unusual setting, at a mountainous, rocky place. They go to “Osler Bluff” because Alex wrote an article about this place, and he wants to show it to his family. Before entering the park, there is a board which says: “CAUTION: DEEP-HOLES” (94). Similarly as in the title, there is a hyphen between “deep” and “holes”, for which no particular explanation is given. However, the hyphen does make the reader attentive to these two words: (deep) holes are present throughout the whole story, such as the holes in the rocks, the crater “far beneath her shoes filled with rubble” (104) and the burned hole in Kent’s blanket.

Sally understands that this place is not appropriate for a picnic with young children, but she does not say anything to Alex. Instead, her attention goes to the hyphen on the board: “‘Why the hyphen?’ Sally thought. ‘But who cares?’” (94). She is afraid of telling her opinion to Alex, of objecting to his ideas. When they are walking along a high bluff, she is worried about her sons and she can hardly keep up with their high pace, however, she remains silent:

Sally stumbled along faster than was easy for her, with the diaper bag and the baby Savanna. She couldn’t slow down till she had her sons in sight, saw them trotting along taking sidelong looks into the black chambers, still making exaggerated but discreet noises of horror. She was nearly crying with exhaustion and alarm and some familiar sort of seeping rage. (94)

When finally settled on a blanket for the picnic, Sally starts nursing the six-months old Savanna. According to Alex, she is too old for this and Sally should start giving her the bottle. In fact, it turns out that he “finds the sight distasteful […], he dislikes the whole conjunction of sex and nourishment, his wife’s breast turned into udders” (97). He seems to find his wife important only for sex, and the fact that sex results in having children is for him one big inconvenience. He does not show any particular feelings for his children,
he is not worried at all. He also does not want his sons to see their mother's breasts, because he thinks it excites them too much. He sees his oldest son Kent as a sneak, a trouble-maker and the possessor of a dirty mind.

At one moment, the boys “have to go pee”, to which Alex replies: “Oh for God's sake, go” (97). Again, this shows his carelessness, for he knows how dangerous the place is. Sally does not warn them either, instead, she “clamps her mouth down on the automatic injunction to be careful” (97), for which Alex looks at her with approval. However, suddenly they hear a high cry, Kent has fallen into a crevasse. Alex jumps to his feet and runs towards the boys, he crawls into the hole and lifts Kent up towards his mother, while Sally pulls him to the surface. Munro describes this with a very specific sentence: "Kent would have to be raised up by his father, pulled to the solid shelf of rock by his mother" (98). Eventually, Kent will be “raised up” by his father, since his mother never says anything or hardly ever punishes the children. For instance, before Kent fell into the hole, he drank Sally's glass of champagne. Sally discovered this, but she never told Alex anything about it. Furthermore, it is Sally who will comfort Kent, who will “rock” him and caress him.

After his fall, whereby Kent broke both his legs, he has to stay home from school for half a year. It is Sally who takes care of him and who educates him, and one day she decides to tell him “something she had not told to another soul” (99). However, it is rather disappointing when she reveals that she feels attracted to remote islands, something which is not very peculiar as to keep it secret to other people and to her husband. As with the hyphen, her mind is again troubled with a pointless matter.

However, the fact that Kent has been confronted with his own mortality at a young age changed him. In a way, his fall was the start of the falling apart of his future life. When he was allowed to return to school, he started to change, he seemed old for his age and was especially courteous to his father. He saw his father as his hero, his saviour, which really got on Alex's nerves. Kent saw his father's act of rescuing him as a sign that he loved him, which Alex denies, he “would have rescued anybody” (100). During his first year at university, Kent suddenly disappears and it appears that he experienced a sort of metamorphosis. He writes a letter to his parents in which he tells about his life. He explains that he wants to explore the whole world of inner and outer reality and to accept both the beautiful and the terrible available to mankind, he wants to give up intellectual pridefulness. He also writes that his “near-death experience” has given him an extra
awareness, for which he is forever grateful to his father “who had lifted him back into the world and his mother who had lovingly received him there” (102), he feels as if he was “reborn”.

After this letter, several years pass without a sign of life from Kent. Peter and Savanna go to university, and the relationship between Sally and Alex improves as the years go by. Sally even starts to become interested in geology, and one day she reveals her admiration for remote islands to Alex. He replies positively and tells her that all the information she wants is available on the internet. Somehow, Sally is disappointed and even shocked when she hears this, because it feels as if she lost them, that the islands are in reality not that remote and unknown. That summer, however, Alex dies a sudden death, and in the fall of the same year, there is a great fire in Toronto. Sally gets a phone call from Savanna, claiming that she saw Kent on television helping other people in Toronto. Savanna gets into contact with Kent and a meeting is arranged between Kent and his mother. This is when Sally realizes that Kent has changed a lot: he shares an apartment with other people, and he has hardly any possessions. He calls his room his “sanctum” and he is celibate, although for him it has nothing to do with willpower, he does not see it as an achievement, more as a way of living. Everybody is welcome in their house and they earn money by recycling old stuff such as newspapers and bottles and they also beg on the streets. To complete the metamorphosis, he has changed his name into Jonah, after the biblical figure.

Like his father, Kent has become a selfish person, he only wants to think of himself without taking others into account. He literally says to his mother: “I’m not saying I love you, I don’t use stupid language. Or, I want to save you. You know you can only save yourself. So what is the point? I don’t usually try to get anywhere talking to people. I usually try to avoid personal relationships” (114). His fall between the rocks has turned him into a rock. Unlike his father, he is not interested in any relationships, not even physical ones, since he calls himself a celibate. He tries to justify himself by saving other people, just like his father did when Kent fell into the hole.

Kent’s new way of living can be defined by what Rosemary Jackson calls “undifferentiation” (72). She considers it one of the defining characteristics of fantasy, refusing difference and distinction. It is what Freud sees as the most radical form of the pleasure principle, a drive towards a state of “inorganicism”, “a longing for nirvana, where all tensions are reduced. This condition he termed a state of entropy [...] [which is
opposed to] energy, to the erotic, aggressive drives of any organism” (Jackson 73). Thus, Kent is against everything a common human being longs for: affection, love, possessions, family, etc.

At the end, after Kent has decided to no longer see Sally as his mother: “You don’t mind if I call you Sally? It just comes out easier” (113), she compares him to Jesus, by quoting: “Woman, what have I to do with thee?” (114). She is aware of the fact that even the men who are supposed to be the saviours of the world can be cold and cruel. In Mothers and Other Clowns, Magdalene Redekop remarks that Munro repeatedly establishes “a mocking distance from the very word mother” (8). Only when Kent has stopped calling her ‘mother’, he is able to tell Sally that he does not love her, that he feels nothing. Redekop claims that “to diminish and mock the figure of the mother in this way is to make it possible to deal with the power projected into her” (8). He is powerless as long as he keeps calling her ‘mother’.
6.5 Stories of murder in ‘Free Radicals’

Nita is grieving the sudden death of her eighty-one-year old husband Rich. She herself is twenty years younger and suffers from liver cancer, although this is not clear from the beginning of the story, where only some clues are given. For instance, her friends do not need to worry that she will seek consolation in drinking, because she “was now forbidden to drink at all” (116) and it also appears that she and Rich had already been planning a funeral, “when her diagnosis became final” (117). Thus, against all odds, Rich dies before Nita: “How was I to know he’d steal my thunder” (117). When the story starts, Nita is rather lost and numb, avoiding human contact and thinking about times when Rich was still alive. She then reveals that she was not Rich’s first wife. He was first married to a woman called Bett, but then Rich met the younger Nita who “worked in the Registrar’s Office of the university where he taught Medieval Literature” (119).

The title “Free Radicals” is actually a chemical term, referring to molecules that can easily bind with other cells, whereby they can disrupt their functioning. Free radicals are formed each time the body converts food into energy, but they can also be formed through environmental factors such as pollution, cigarette smoke, radiation and herbicides. Sometimes they can attack DNA-cells to such a great extent that it can lead to cancer and they are also involved in the damage of the liver due to the excessive use of alcohol. Nita has been a free radical by binding herself to Rich, whereby his relationship with Bett could not function anymore. At a later age, she herself was literally the victim of these free radicals, because by drinking red wine every day, they have affected her liver and caused her to have cancer.

Now, Nita is pondering on Rich’s absence, she is thinking of all the rooms where he used to be but not anymore, and where his presence still lingers through all of his stuff that reminds her of him. She is unable to remove his belongings but she realizes that “one of these days she would have to enter. [...] She would have to invade her husband’s dead mind. [...] She would do the cellar first” (120). Also, Nita has been a devoted reader all her life, but now “she couldn’t stick it for even half a page” (121). She has a preference for

fiction, but says that she “hated to hear the word “escape” used about fiction. She might have argued, not just playfully, that it was real life that was the escape” (122).

One hot day, she decides to open the front door to let a breeze blow through the house. However, when doing this, she discovers a man standing before the door who claims that he is supposed to look at her fuse box. Without thinking she lets him in but then she is seized with a feeling of unease: “she went into the kitchen, not able to sit down again until he left the house” (123). When he has left the cellar again, he asks her if she cannot fix him anything to eat. She prepares him scrambled eggs with herbal tea, after which he shows her a photograph and tells her a story. On the picture are his father, his mother, and his mentally and physically disabled sister Madelaine, who is sitting in a wheelchair. He describes how his sister has made his youth impossible, how much he resents her, and how his father has promised him that he would inherit the house after they died. However, one day his father tells him about a deal: he will only inherit the house if he promises to take care of Madelaine as long as she lives. This makes him lose his temper and he decides to take revenge. One Sunday he visits his family at home, he takes a picture of the three of them, he shoots them, and then he takes another picture, which he also shows Nita: “So lookie here. Before and after” (130). After the murder he ran away and walked the railway track until he saw Nita's house and Rich's car, and he saw his opportunity.

At first, Nita was not afraid because she thought nothing worse could happen to her than the cancer she already has. But after his story, she realizes that although she might die within a year, she is not prepared to die now. After pouring him some wine she starts to tell him a story of her own, she says: “I know what it’s like to get rid of somebody who has injured you” (132). In fact, she switches her story with that of Bett, saying that she once poisoned her husband’s lover:

She was the girl my husband was in love with. He was going to leave me and marry her. He had told me. I had done everything for him. He and I were working on this house together, he was everything I had. We had not had any children because he didn’t want them. I learned carpentry and I was frightened to get up on ladders but I did it. He was my whole life. Then he was going to kick me out for this useless whiner who worked in the registrar’s office. The whole life we’d worked for was to go to her. Was that fair? (133)
She killed her by giving her a poisoned tart, made from the veins of rhubarb leaves. By telling this story, by telling fiction, she tries to save her own life. She wants him to believe that they have told a secret to each other. Thus, in contrast to what she said earlier, fiction does provide an escape.

Meanwhile, the intruder has drunk almost all of the wine and he starts acting very nervously. He asks her for the keys of Rich’s car, and the last words he says to her are: “You just remember, a word outta you and there’ll be a word outta me” (136). Later, she is told by a policeman that her car has been stolen and has been in a bad accident. The driver was wanted for a triple murder and was killed instantly. The policeman warns her that she should be more careful because “these days you never know. Never know” (137), the last words of the story.

The fact is, we do not know what really happened. Did the man drink too much wine and was that the reason for his nervousness and the subsequent accident, or did she poison him? When the man has just left, she sees a book called *A Celebration of Familiar Fruits and Vegetables. Hearty and Elegant Dishes and Fresh Surprises*, written by Bett Underhill. She admits that she has learned a few things from Bett’s cooking, “such as the poisonous aspects of certain familiar and generally benign plants” (136). Thus, Nita may have poisoned the man with her herbal tea, which would explain his sudden strange behaviour: he knocked over the chair he’d been sitting on, he is very clumsy in taking the car keys, and he has difficulties with starting the car: “he was so jumpy, he’d do everything wrong” (136). In her story, she reverses her own relationship with Rich because shortly after their marriage she became embarrassed of what she has done to Bett, “embarrassed to think how readily she had played the younger woman, the happy home wrecker, the lissome, laughing, tripping ingénue” (119). Like the protagonist in ‘Wenlock Edge’, Nita is an admirer of literature and she uses fiction to manipulate her own life and that of others.
6.6 Mutilation and rejection in ‘Face’

In ‘Face’, Munro again lets an adult character look back upon an event from his past, an event which has strongly marked his further life. However, in contrast to most of her other stories, the protagonist of ‘Face’ is male. It is the story of a man who was born with a big purple birthmark on the right side of his face, for which his father immediately rejected him. He grows up with the polarity of his mother’s extreme devotion to him and his father’s resentment. His mother educated him at home until he was nine years old, whereupon she sent him to school. Against the reader’s expectations, this was not so disastrous since the boy was already used to “that climate of ill temper and ferocity and disgust” (142) at home, so that he did not have a remarkably bad time at school. He continues with telling how he became an actor in dramas on national radio, and afterwards a popular radio host. Overall, he seems satisfied with the life he led.

A couple of years after his mother’s death, he is planning to sell the house, and while walking through the garden, memories of his childhood pop up. A couple of decades ago, there was another building on their property. It was called Bell’s Cottage and rented to a woman named Sharon Suttles, who lived there with her daughter Nancy when the protagonist was between five and eight years old. Being the only child he saw in those days, they became best friends: “it does seem to me now that we played together all our waking hours” (149).

However, this was all just a prelude to what he calls the “Great Drama” (142) of his life, the event the whole story is about. One day, when he and Nancy are playing in the cellar, they find several tins of paint. Nancy wants to surprise him and when she turns around, her face “was generously smeared all over with red paint” (152). The protagonist, who due to his mother almost forgot about his birthmark, was so shocked that he ran away crying. Nancy however did not intend to hurt him, “she sounded very excited and I thought she was taunting me, but in fact her voice was bursting with satisfaction, as if this was what she had been aiming for her whole life” (153).

The fact is, the protagonist’s mother had hung all the mirrors in the house too high for him to be able to look into them. As a result, he believed his “birthmark to be a soft brown colour, like the fur of a mouse”, so what Nancy did was very painful to him, but in reality, she acted as a sort of mirror, confronting himself with who he truly is. However,
when his mother sees what has happened, she is furious and she orders Nancy and her mother to leave immediately:

I just want to tell your cruel child she will never be welcome in our house again. She is a cruel, spiteful child to mock my little boy for what he cannot help. You have never taught her anything, any manners, she did not even know enough to thank me when I took her with us to the beach, doesn’t even know how to say please and thank you, no wonder with a mother flaunting around in her wrapper—. (154)

Two days later, the cottage where Nancy and her mother had been living was empty, at first the protagonist missed her, but then he was sent to school and Nancy became nothing more but a vague memory.

Years later, after his father’s funeral, his mother comes to him with the words: “There is something I think you ought to know” (156). She tells him how Nancy, whom he only vaguely remembers by now, had sliced into her right cheek with a razor blade shortly after they moved to their new apartment. This shows what deep feelings the girl had for him, although he does not seem to be impressed by her act, saying that plastic surgery can do miracles and that she would get over it eventually.

Again, a few years pass when one day the protagonist is stung in the eye by a wasp. He goes to the hospital where he has to stay for the night, blindfolded. A girl enters his room and reads him some poems. Although it is not clear who this girl is, she reminds the reader and the protagonist of Nancy, for instance when she says that she sometimes reads people “a story from when they were children” (159). She ends with some lines from a poem the protagonist does not immediately recognize, as a result of which she seems disappointed. However, then the protagonist awakens and it all appears to be a dream, to which he wants to go back and “have her lay her face on mine. Her cheek, on mine” (161).

As a result, it is not until the final pages of the story that we find out how much this childhood event has affected the protagonist. It seems to have been something he repressed for all those years, continuing to exist only in his dreams. Only when he is obliged to keep his eyes shut and look into his inner self, the girl pops up again. Some months later he finds the poem by coincidence, when he was clearing up the old house. It
was written on a piece of brownish paper in a handwriting he did not recognize. The author of the poem was written underneath it: Walter de la Mare\textsuperscript{16}.

De la Mare (1873-1953) was a British poet and novelist, who wrote both for children and adults. His favourite themes being childhood, death, dreams, and commonplace objects and events, it is no coincidence that Munro chose a poem of his. Petri Liukkonen claims that de la Mare wrote “with a touch of mystery and often with an undercurrent of melancholy. His novels have been reprinted many times in horror collections because of their sense of wonder, and also hidden malevolence. However, de la Mare did not have the morbid atmosphere of Poe, but his dreamlike visions had many similarities to Blake”\textsuperscript{17}. This description reminds us of Munro’s own writing style, where mystery is never far away.

Furthermore, de la Mare “privileged childhood as a time of unique vision uncontaminated by adult perceptions”\textsuperscript{18}. This describes perfectly the way Nancy sees the birthmark of her friend. She experiences it as something beautiful, something to be envious about, while the adults see it as a form of mutilation, they perceive him as the “other”. The protagonist’s mother pretends that she does not mind, but in reality she wants to deny the stain. She tries as hard as she can to let her son forget about his birthmark. She tries to protect him but in a way she takes away his identity as well by preventing him to look in mirrors. Instead of saying that what Nancy did was not that bad, she overreacts because she cannot stand Nancy’s mother, whom she suspects to be her husband’s mistress. As a result, she takes away her son’s playmate, the only person who truly appreciated him and who even admired his stain.

At first sight, he seems unharmed by the whole event and is able to move on with his life. Only on the last page Munro reveals the great impact the event, the “Great Drama”, had on his life. After reading the poem, of which the protagonist does not remember where it came from, although he recognized it as if he had “buried the words in a deep cubbyhole of [his] mind” (161), he realizes that he waited so long to sell the house because “something happened here” (162). The poem is uncanny in the sense that it reveals a very important event from the protagonist’s past which he had repressed over the years. Because, as Freud mentions in his essay on the uncanny, something new and

\textsuperscript{16} The title of the poem is not mentioned in the story. However, after a search on the internet I found out that it is entitled “Away”, which is a nice summary of what remains of Nancy.
\textsuperscript{17} From Petri Liukkonen, “Walter de la Mare”, Books and Writers: <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/delamare.htm>
\textsuperscript{18} From “Walter de la Mare on The Poetry Archive: <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=7067>
unfamiliar becomes uncanny only when in reality, it is “nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (4).
6.7 Disease in ‘Some Women’

‘Some Women’ is again a story about an older, nameless narrator, looking back on an event from her youth. She recalls a job she had when she was thirteen, during the summer holidays. She had to look after a man with leukaemia, Young Mr. Crozier, who lived in the house of his mother, Old Mrs. Crozier, together with his wife, Young Mrs. Crozier (Sylvia). Sylvia taught summer school at a college forty miles away, and the narrator’s job was to take care of Mr. Crozier on days when his wife was not at home. Typically Munrovian is that Sylvia is stigmatized by the rest of the town because “she had got an education” and “she could have stayed home and looked after him now, as promised in the marriage ceremony, instead of going out to teach” (167).

Old Mrs. Crozier was a rather grumpy and authoritarian woman, creating a cold and threatening atmosphere in the house. In fact, she was Mr. Crozier’s stepmother. She walked with a cane, she dyed her hair black as tar and always put on a thick coat of red lipstick, in this way, the narrator represents her as the stereotypical image we have of a witch or the evil stepmother. It seems that she cared about nobody, not even her stepson, whom she experienced as a burden. Later on in the story it becomes clear that she resented Sylvia, her intellectual daughter-in-law, most of all. She seemed to cheer somewhat up with the arrival of a tanned, attractive young woman called Roxanne, who appeared to be her masseuse. The narrator describes how she passed by once a week, visiting Mr. Crozier each time after the massage. The child is aware of the special bond that arose between Roxanne and Mrs. Crozier, each with the intention of contesting Sylvia. Especially morbid is that they seemed to be trying to steal the dying Mr. Crozier away from Sylvia. The narrator describes how Roxanne teased him and caressed him which she did not understand because of the way he looked:

I thought this flirtatious prattle insulting. Mr. Crozier looked terrible. A tall man whose ribs had shown like those of somebody fresh from a famine when she sponged him, whose head was bald and whose skin looked as if it had the texture of a plucked chicken’s, his neck corded like an old man’s. Whenever I had waited on him in any way I had avoided looking at him. And this was not really because he was sick and ugly. It was because he was dying. […] I was aware of an atmosphere of death in the house. (173)
The reason for the narrator to look back upon this moment of her life, is because even as a child she was aware of the fact that what was going on was not right, it exceeded all the limits of normality: a young attractive woman who wants admiration from a dying man, and the mother of that man who wants to ruin his marriage.

Thus, Munro again draws attention to the processes of gender construction. Roxanne is what the conservative population of Southern Ontario considers as the ideal woman where the emphasis lies on looks and emotions rather than on intelligence. Susanne Becker claims that “Munro’s neo-gothic narrative shows how the expectations of a proper femininity come into being, and how digression from these is coded as ‘monstrous’” (128). Sylvia is seen as a monstrous woman for not quitting her job and taking care of her husband full-time. Becker continues that “these female figures suggest alternative ways of living as a woman, and the Gothicism in their depiction points to the complications of such deviation” (129).

On the final day of Sylvia’s summer class, Old Mrs. Crozier and Roxanne seem to be up to something, because they know that soon Sylvia will be home every day: “Seeing it’s the last day we’ve got before—”, “Last day before she parks her butt here permanently, yeah, I know. Doesn’t help me breaking out like a spotted hyena” (180). Mrs. Crozier continues by saying: “No chance of having anything special with her around. You’ll see. You won’t be able to even get to see him with her around” (180). However, that final day, Mr. Crozier must have been aware of something as well. When the narrator enters his room, he is wide awake and asks her to do him a favour. She should take the key of his room, lock it, hide it without telling his mother or Roxanne where it is, and returning it only to his wife. This symbol of the locked door can be related to what Rosemary Jackson calls one of the central thematic concerns of the fantastic: problems of vision. It will always remain a mystery to the protagonist and to the reader what exactly happened behind the closed door, if anything happened at all, because “that which is not seen, that which is not said, is not ‘known’ and it remains as a threat, as a dark area from which any object or figure can enter at any time” (Jackson 49).

In *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions*, Becker writes that Munro once linked reading and writing a story to entering a house. In this way, a story is compared to a structured house, “with the connectedness of enclosing spaces, with separation from the outside, and strong emotions on the inside: the image recalls gothic texture and its domestic horror, its plot of abjection and its affective form. Munro’s fiction self-
consciously rewrites that complicated structure of the gothic house with its uncanny centre” (Becker 114-115). This story is a nice instance to illustrate this idea of a structured house, with the uncanny centre being the sick Mr. Crozier’s room, surrounded by the stairs, the kitchen and the sunroom, where Mrs. Crozier gets her massages. The story switches between these rooms, which are reflected upon from a distant past, but the strong emotions that once lived inside this house remain in the memory of the narrator.

This story wonderfully shows Munro’s skill in describing a child’s understanding of an adult’s life: “I understood pretty well the winning and losing that had taken place, between Sylvia and Roxanne, but it was strange to think of the almost obliterated prize, Mr. Crozier” (187). It is strange to think that at a fairly old age she still remembers this seemingly trivial period of her life. She understands that “the carnality at death’s door – or the true love, for that matter – were things I had to shake off like shivers down my spine” (187). Now being old, she reflects more upon mortality and the fact that she was confronted with it at a very young age. The child seemed to have been more aware than anybody else of the atmosphere of death in the house.
6.8 Cold-blooded murder in ‘Child’s Play’

This is one of the most haunting stories in Munro’s collection, and, although Canadian, it has been included in *The Best American Mystery Stories 2008*, edited by George Pelecanos. Like the other stories, ‘Child’s Play’ starts *in medias res*, with the words: “I suppose there was talk in our house, afterwards” (188). The narrator, Marlene, is reflecting upon an incident from her childhood, yet which incident precisely is not revealed until the last page. She recalls a summer camp she did when she was around the age of nine, where she had a friend called Charlene. Marlene and Charlene came to be seen as twins at that camp, as a result of which the two girls grew close and told one another everything about themselves. One day, Marlene tells Charlene about a mentally disabled girl who lives nearby her, Verna. Marlene has an aversion to her from the very first day she saw her, explaining that she “hated her as some people hate snakes or caterpillars or mice or slugs. For no decent reason. Not for any certain harm she could do but for the way she could disturb your innards and make you sick of your life” (200).

The fact that the narrator sees Verna as an evil, snakelike person can be explained with a quote from Rosemary Jackson:

> The concept of evil, which is usually attached to the other, is relative, transforming with shifts in cultural fears and values. Any social structure tends to exclude as ‘evil’ anything radically different from itself or which threatens it with destruction, and this conceptualization, this naming of difference as evil, is a significant ideological gesture. [...] Anyone speaking in an unfamiliar language or acting in unfamiliar ways, anyone whose origins are unknown or who has extraordinary powers, tends to be set apart as other, as evil. Strangeness precedes the naming of it as evil: the other is defined as evil precisely because of his/her difference and a possible power to disturb the familiar and the known. (53)

Verna has done nothing to enrage the narrator, but she acts somewhat strangely, for instance she “could stay in one place longer than anybody I ever knew, staring at just one thing” (197). Also, her origins are unknown, “she appeared in the summer before I was to start school” (194). The narrator is aware of the fact that her hatred is unfounded, she repeatedly justifies herself, for instance by saying: “Children of course are monstrously
conventional, repelled at once by whatever is off-centre, out of whack, unmanageable” (195).

One day, when a group of “Specials” arrives at the camp, Verna turns out to be with them and soon, Marlene and Charlene take pleasure in spying on Verna and to observe how repulsive and monstrous she is. On the final day of camp, the children are allowed to have one last swim. The reader has the impression that something must have happened, but the narrator does not yet reveal what it is. The camp atmosphere starts to be filled with menace. For instance, Marlene talks about “an air of growing restlessness and inattention [...] [which] seemed to have begun with the arrival of the Specials” (204). Also, the weather changed, “the clouds darkened” and “there was in the air what some people called the smell of a storm” (205). However, this flashback ends with Charlene pointing out to Marlene that Verna is swimming towards them and afterwards, the story switches to the present.

Marlene says that she did not keep up with Charlene, she once received a letter from her, which she ignored. However, recently she received another letter from Charlene’s husband, writing that she has an advanced stage of lung cancer and that she would like to see her old “childhood buddy” again, because “it may be that childhood memories mean the most” (212). When Marlene visits her at the hospital some weeks later, Charlene is asleep, but she has left a note:

*Marlene. I am writing this in case I get too far gone to speak. Please do what I ask you. Please go to Guelph and go to the cathedral and ask for Father Hofstrader. Our Lady of Perpetual Help Cathedral. It is so big you don’t need the name. Father Hofstrader. He will know what to do. This I cannot ask C. and do not want him ever to know. Father H. knows and I have asked him and he says it is possible to help me. Marlene please do this bless you. Nothing about you.* (214)

Marlene intends to ignore Charlene again and to just throw the letter away. However, unconsciously she only throws away the envelope, while the letter is still in her pocket. The next moment, she finds herself in her car driving to Guelph. It is her unconscious that leads her there, against her own will it leads her back to her past. Father Hofstrader appears to be on vacation, therefore Marlene needs to convince another priest that Charlene really needs Father Hofstrader because “perhaps it’s something special” (220, my italics).
After the visit to the church, Marlene is unable to do anything. Sitting in her car, the past comes to the surface again, and suddenly the narrative returns to the final day of summer camp. It is then revealed that in all the turmoil of parents arriving and children getting out of the water, Marlene and Charlene drowned Verna after the attack of a big wave coming from a motor boat.

There was a tumult of screaming and shouting all around, and this increased as the lesser waves arrived and people who had somehow missed the first attack pretended to be knocked over by the second. Verna’s head did not break the surface, though now she was not inert, but turning in a leisurely way, light as a jellyfish in the water. Charlene and I had our hands on her, on her rubber cap. (221)

And some lines further:

Charlene and I kept our eyes on each other, rather than looking down at what our hands were doing. Her eyes were wide and gleeful, as I suppose mine were too. I don’t think we felt wicked, triumphing in our wickedness. More as if we were doing just what was – amazingly – demanded of us, as if this was the absolute high point, the culmination, in our lives, of our being ourselves. (222)

She and Charlene already left before anybody discovered Verna’s body. They both made a silent agreement not to keep up with each other, in order not to be reminded of their terrible act.

The fact that Marlene and Charlene came to be seen as twins at the camp is no coincidence. In Gordon Slethaug’s study on the double, twins are seen as “the most ancient and pervasive version of the double” (8). Traditionally, the double exposed “an uncontrollable and unpleasurable side of the individual often concealed behind the façade of cohesive selfhood and social and literary convention” (19). Thus, Charlene is Marlene’s double, she is her unconscious which she tries to ignore. Slethaug also uses Carl Jung’s theory of the shadow, which argues that the shadow, or the double, is the unconscious, “the unseemly, antisocial, emotional, and spontaneous side of the personality” (16), which has been “subjugated by the rationally governed, orderly, and socially acceptable ego” (16). It is by being in the company of the spontaneous Charlene that Marlene was able to kill Verna. After the camp, she repressed the facts and Charlene as well, and she became an anthropologist. However, years later Charlene sends Marlene a letter after having read
her article entitled *Idiots and Idols*, about the attitude of people in various cultures toward people who are mentally or physically unique. This proves that Marlene is still haunted by the past which she so eagerly tries to forget. Charlene on the other hand wants to talk after all these years of silence, she wants somebody with whom she can share her secret, she wants to deal with it before dying.

As Roberta Rood notices in her review of *Too Much Happiness*\(^1^9\), the murder in ‘Child’s Play’ reminds one of Edgar Allan Poe’s gothic short story ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ (1843)\(^2^0\), wherein the narrator tells the reader how he murdered an old man for no other reason than for his “vulture eye” which he truly hated:

> It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain, but, once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture -- a pale blue eye with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me my blood ran cold, and so by degrees, very gradually, I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever.

Thus, similar to Marlene, this narrator cannot give a decent reason for his hatred and why he eventually killed the man. Also the way of killing is similar: Verna is ducked under water until her arms and legs stopped moving, the old man is smothered under his own bed until his heart stops beating, or as Poe’s narrator describes it:

> In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. But for many minutes the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead.

Although not so much in the same way, in the end Marlene’s senses take over and lead her to the church, where she experiences a sort of epiphany by which she is able to tell what happened on the final day of the camp.

\(^1^9\) Roberta Rood, “Alice Munro, Genius of the Short Form, Does it Again With *Too Much Happiness*” on Books to the Ceiling: <http://robertarood.wordpress.com/2010/01/01/alice-munro-genius-of-the-short-form-does-it-again-with-too-much-happiness/>

\(^2^0\) The following quotes from “The Tell-Tale Heart” are taken from The Online Literature Library on <http://www.literature.org/authors/poe-edgar-allan/tell-tale-heart.html>
6.9 Epiphanies in ‘Wood’

Like ‘Face’, this story also has a male protagonist, Roy, who is an upholsterer and refinisher of furniture. Little happens in this story, because the actual story has to be read between the lines. Roy is married to Lea and has a great passion, even an obsession, for wood cutting: “He can lie awake nights thinking of a splendid beech he wants to get at, wondering if it will prove satisfactory as it looks or has some tricks up its sleeve” (231).

The previous winter Lea caught a flu and bronchitis that lasted for several weeks, as a result of which “her strength had taken a slump that she could not recover from” (227). As a result she lost her energy, her wit and her rounded, jolly figure, which Roy regrets. However, instead of spending more time with his wife and doing things together in order to reenergize her, he goes more often to the bush, it seems some sort of escape to him. The description of Roy’s occupations in the wood is very extensive and at times even theoretical, for instance there is an enumeration of the various kinds of trees: ironwood, cherry trees, apple trees, ash, maple trees, beech trees and oaks, of which the last ones are described beautifully:

Oak trees always look like trees in storybooks, as if, in all the stories that begin “Once upon a time in the woods,” the woods were full of oak trees. Their dark, shiny, elaborately indented leaves contribute to this look, but they seem just as legendary when the leaves are off and you can see so well the thick corky bark with its grey-black colour and intricate surface, and the devilish curling and curving of the branches. (229)

In this way, Munro counters the low genre conventions of for instance the fairytale, which is often set in the woods. In fairytales, the woods are an “unhomely” place, where the heroine often finds herself in a situation of danger. However, Roy is male, and the woods are for him the only place where he really feels at home. He thinks he knows all its tricks and that it cannot harm him. Moreover, in ‘Native Canadian Gothic Refigured: Reading Eden Robinson’s Monkey Beach’, Jennifer Andrews observes that one of the particularities of the Canadian Gothic is the tension between civilization and savagery, a tension between “the desire for an orderly, contained culture and the freedom to engage with primitive nature” (3). Thus, as many Canadians, Roy is haunted by the wilderness and he often feels the need to run away from the orderly, cultural life of his wife.
One day, he runs into the old roamer Percy Marshall who claims that the bush he is currently cutting trees in, is soon going under contract of a big firm that is going to clear the wood with bulldozers. Impressed by this news, Roy does not even consider the fact that Percy may have misunderstood what he heard at the beer parlour, and the next day he goes off to the bush with his axe and chainsaw to cut as many trees as possible.

Plunged deep in thought of what is going to happen with what he considers to be his bush, “the most ordinary and yet the most unbelievable thing” (238) happens to Roy. He twists his foot and falls, which causes the axe handle to hit him hard on the knee of his twisted leg. His ankle appears to be broken and he understands that “in order to get back to the truck he’s going to have to abandon his axe and chainsaw and get down on his hands and knees and crawl” (239). After a while, his shame and disbelief of what happened disappear, and he accepts the situation. He stops thinking about his axe and his chainsaw but instead thinks about his wife, consoling himself that “worse things happen” (240).

Being in a lower position to the ground, he starts to see the world differently. He also thinks about Diane, Lea’s niece, whom he seems to worship a lot, since his thoughts often go to her in the course of the story. First of all, he saw Diane as a possible successor of his profession, but this stopped when “she got married – suddenly, at the age of seventeen” (224) and her husband did not think that working with wood was a suitable profession for a woman. He also mentions that he hates the River Inn, a resort hotel, because “when Diane had applied for a job there, as a waitress, they had turned her down, saying that she was overweight” (235). When Diane asks him to use his truck, he immediately changes his plans for her and he even thinks of filling it up with gas.

In Roman mythology, Diana is the goddess of the hunt and of the woods, which would explain Roy’s fascination with the girl Diane. However, Diana is also known for her chastity, and when Diane marries, this may come as a disappointment to Roy. When he is crawling through the woods, he experiences a sort of epiphany. He understands that the woods are not so homely and safe as he thought, he thinks of Diane again, but now he concludes that “her life is her life, there is not much use worrying about it, and he thinks of his wife” (240). When he finally arrives at his truck, his wife is there, she has got her vitality back and looks as if nothing ever happened. She came to the bush because she had had an insight which restored her energy and she wanted to tell Roy about it immediately. She realized that what Percy had told Roy was not true, he had just “heard some talk but
not about some strangers getting a licence to log the bush. What he heard was all about Roy himself” (243).

As a result, Roy and Lea both had a sort of epiphany at the same time which caused them to awaken from the dream world they were trapped in. Although he should be happy with the fact that his wife acts normal again, at the same time he feels that there is something more, “some loss fogging up this gain, some loss he’d be ashamed to admit to, if he had the energy” (244). He understands that with regaining his wife, he has lost his safe place in the bush, he no longer feels a part of it:

He notices something about the bush that he thinks he has missed those other times. How tangled up in itself it is, how dense and secret. It’s not a matter of one tree after another, it’s all the trees together, aiding and abetting each other and weaving into one thing. A transformation, behind your back. (245)

A new word pops up in his head, another name for the bush which he has never used before: forest, “The Deserted Forest”.

6.10 Sexism in ‘Too Much Happiness’

Unlike the other stories in this collection, the title story is not set in Huron County, but on the European continent. "On the first day of January, in the year 1891, a small woman and a large man are walking in the Old Cemetery, in Genoa", these are the first words of the story. The woman will turn out to be Sophia Kovalevsky, "not only a great mathematician, but also a writer and advocate of women's rights in the nineteenth century". Based on *Little Sparrow: A Portrait of Sophia Kovalevsky* (1983), Munro has rewritten the last days of Sophia’s life, at a time when she finally seemed to have achieved some happiness both on a professional and personal level: she has won the Bordin Prize, has overcome the deaths of her sister and husband, and she is about to remarry. However, written in a typically Munrovian style, from the very first pages the reader is confronted with a gloomy and threatening atmosphere: “One of us will die this year. […] Because we have gone walking in a graveyard on the first day of the New Year” (247). Some pages further, “a black cat obliquely crosses their path” (253), which makes the reader even more alert to a bad ending. Throughout the story, the reader is given clues that Sophia's mental and physical health is failing rapidly.

The man in the cemetery is Maxsim Maxsimovich Kovalevsky, her lover and a distant cousin of her deceased husband. Sophia feels very happy these days because of what she calls her “two triumphs – her paper ready for its last polishing and anonymous submission, her lover growling but cheerful, eagerly returned from his banishment and giving every indication, as she thought, that he intended to make her the woman of his life” (249). However, it is important to pay attention to the words “as she thought” in this quote, for this marriage is probably only some romantic fantasy of Sophia's. The narrator gives several clues that Maxsim has rejected her, suggesting that she should not visit him but instead join her students and friends in Sweden, and most importantly, her little daughter. When Sophia received the Bordin Prize, Maxsim had “felt himself ignored” (49), not being able to bear the idea that his wife would be more successful than he. Thus, Munro emphasises the difficulties an intelligent woman with a career would have in those days to find a man, although Sophia once had a proposal from a German, but she refused, suspecting him of “wanting a hausfrau” (252). In his letter, Maxsim alludes to Sophia’s

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faulty motherhood and he finishes with the lines “If I loved you I would have written differently” (250). At first, Sophia is devastated by this news, but then she decides to “swallow her pride” (251) and to ignore his rejection, planning to visit him in the summer, when her lectures are over. She keeps deceiving herself by saying that they are going to marry in spring.

After her trip to Nice to see Maxsim, she takes the train to Paris to visit her dead sister’s husband Jaclard and her nephew Urey. Afterwards, she travels further to Berlin to visit her old teacher Weierstrass. During these travels, Sophia falls asleep and dreams of her past. Through these flashbacks, we basically get to know Kovalevsky’s entire life, although the reader has to fit the pieces together to arrive at a coherent whole. First, she dreams about her sister Aniuta, a beautiful girl fighting for women’s rights, who fell in love with the French radical Jaclard. During the French-Prussian war, Jaclard is imprisoned as a Communard in Versailles, but is then released by Sophia’s husband Vladimir, who did not spare himself any trouble to get him free.

After her visit to Jaclard, she is back in the station where she is aware of her throat that gets sorer and sorer. Waiting for her train, she dozes again, and when awakened by the noise of the incoming train, she sees a man that looks just like Maxsim: “Of course it could not be Maxsim. What could he be doing in Paris? What train or appointment could he be hurrying toward? Her heart had begun to beat unpleasantly as she climbed aboard her train and found her seat by a window” (265). She decides that it was just a hallucination, so again, she does not want to face reality because she desperately hangs on to her finally achieved happiness. For instance, some pages earlier the narrator says: “She must not think – she must not think that this is a roundabout way of saying he wished they would not marry in the spring. She has already written to Julia, saying it is to be happiness after all. Happiness after all. Happiness” (253).

In her next dream, she returns to the day when she won the Bordin Prize, and all the celebrations and congratulations she received. Despite all this, “they had closed their doors when it came to giving her a job. They would no more think of that than of employing a learned chimpanzee” (266). Then her thoughts go to how she first met her mentor, professor Karl Weierstrass, and to how much effort it took her to convince him of her mathematical qualities. Afterwards, however, he admitted that she was the student he had always been waiting for. She also reveals that because she was not allowed by her father to go abroad to study mathematics, she married Vladimir Kovalevsky, but it was a
so-called “White Marriage”: they did not marry “for the universally accepted reasons but were bound by their secret vow” (274) never to live together and never to consummate their marriage. She explains that “young women who wanted to study abroad were compelled to go through with this deception because no Russian woman who was unmarried could leave her country without her parents’ consent” (274).

Although it was a marriage without love, some years later Sophia eventually falls for Vladimir, and she moves in with him and they have a little daughter. It is in these years that Sophia turns back on mathematics and starts writing fiction, enjoying a “celebration of life itself” (283). She finally feels like a normal woman and she learns that “life can be perfectly satisfying without major achievements” (283). However, things start to go wrong when Vladimir stops teaching and has a shady job, where he is influenced by his employer in his idea about women, saying that “they are congenitally backwards and self-centred and if they get hold of any idea, any decent idea to devote themselves to, they become hysterical and ruin it with their self-importance” (284). It is then that Sophia goes back to Weierstrass. In the meantime, Vladimir gets in serious financial problems and he ultimately commits suicide, which comes as a shock to Sophia. It is Weierstrass who helps her earn money, and thanks to him, Sophia will be allowed to become the first female mathematics professor at the University of Stockholm.

After her visit to Berlin, she decides to go back to Stockholm via Copenhagen. On the train, she meets a friendly doctor, who recognizes her as “the female professor” (280). Having already a “presentiment” (302) of her bad health, he tells her that she should not travel via Copenhagen, because there is a smallpox epidemic, but the authorities keep it quiet to avoid any panic. She promises she will take another way, and when they part, he gives her a small tablet, which will give her a little rest if she would find the journey tedious. Thus, Sophia changes her tickets, as a result of which she has to continue her journey in much less comfortable circumstances. She has to take alternately the train and the boat, both of which are not well heated, and Sophia’s sore throat is deteriorating. When she finally arrives in Stockholm, she is terminally ill, although she herself is not aware of it.

At first, she is in a strangely cheerful but at the same time melancholy mood. Late at night, she wanders through the snowy streets of Stockholm, unable to feel the cold. She feels an “enchantment in her mind and body that she had never been aware of before” (300) and to her the city looks like a city in a fairytale. On her deathbed, she talks
confusedly, and calls the Danish doctor “my husband” (301). Two days later she dies of pneumonia, her last words being “Too much happiness”.

Although this story – with a historical protagonist and set in Europe – is different from many of Munro’s other stories in this volume, it also has a lot of similarities. There is the typical struggle of an intellectual woman to achieve success and happiness. Like many of Munro’s other protagonists, Sophia is a stubborn and romantic woman who both wants a career and a family. In Roger Cooke’s biography of Kovalevsky, we can read that after she had won the Bordin Prize, “The strain of preparing a long and difficult manuscript for the competition and revising it for publication were so great that she experienced a terrible depression immediately after the award ceremony, one that took her some time to recover from” (13). Munro does not really emphasise this depression, but she does make clear that Sophia is having some mental problems in that she suffers from delusions about a marriage that will never take place. As in all her stories, the coming drama can be felt from the first pages on. In her memoir, Anne Carlotta Leffler, with whom Sophia worked together in writing plays, wrote the following beautiful lines that summarize the problem that many of Munro’s female protagonists in this collection are faced with:

As her mind craved absolute truth, absolute light, so her heart craved absolute love - a completeness which human life does not yield, and which her own character in particular rendered impossible. It was this discord that consumed her. If we start from her own belief in a fundamental connection between all phenomena of life, we see that she was bound to die, not because some strong and destructive microbes had settled in her lungs, or because the chances of her life had not brought her the happiness she desired, but because the necessary organic connection between her inward and outward life was missing; because there was no harmony between her thought and her feeling, her temperament and her character.

At a time when most women were still assigned a place in the house and the kitchen, Sophia Kovalevsky tried to escape from this stereotype. According to Susanne Becker, this is what feminine Gothic is about, it is “domestic horror with no escape” (10).
7. Conclusion

In contrast to Misao Dean’s definition of the short story\textsuperscript{22}, who characterizes it as a “fragment of life”, a story “unified in place, action and time” (Nischik 5), Munro’s stories are known for the way they can tell a whole lifetime in only a few pages, constantly switching between past and present, inside and outside. The majority of the characters in \textit{Too Much Happiness} have reached middle age or even old age, and Munro tells their history using flashbacks or dreams. Their seemingly small-town lives full of dullness and prejudice was once disrupted by a mysterious, sometimes cruel event at a young age, which affects their further life. It is not exactly the event itself which Munro emphasises, but the effects it has on her protagonists, since in almost all of the stories, the event is revealed only at the end of the story.

As the title suggests, all the stories have to do with some delicate happiness. The border between happiness and unhappiness can lie so close that it is easy to cross. In ‘Dimensions’, Doree finds happiness in her great unhappiness. No matter how much she talks to specialists and psychologists, she can only overcome her trauma by forgiving Lloyd, by being with him. After Lloyd has told her that heaven exists and that he has seen the children in another dimension, Doree starts to feel different:

\begin{quote}
For almost two years she had not taken any notice of the things that generally made people happy, such as nice weather or flowers in bloom or the smell of a bakery. She still did not have that spontaneous sense of happiness, exactly, but she had a reminder of what it was like. It had nothing to do with the weather or flowers. It was the idea that the children were in what he called their Dimension that came sneaking up on her in this way, and for the first time brought a light feeling to her, not pain. (27)
\end{quote}

Or, as a quote from ‘Fiction’ so lovingly concludes: “It almost seemed as if there must be some random and of course unfair thrift in the emotional housekeeping of the world, if the great happiness […] of one person could come out of the great unhappiness of another” (59). This is also the case in ‘Wenlock Edge’, where the protagonist finds happiness in stealing Nina’s freedom and her happiness.

\textsuperscript{22} In Reingard M. Nischik, \textit{The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations} (2007)
Munro’s use of Gothicism lies in the fact that she writes in a realistic style about typical small-town protestant life, most often situated in Southern Ontario, in which she analyzes and criticizes social conditions especially concerned with gender boundaries. Her characters act against humanity, logic, and morality, sometimes even suffering from some form of mental illness. Especially the characters from ‘Dimension’, ‘Free Radicals’ and ‘Child’s Play’ act in such a way, being able to kill people that are very close to them, in two of the cases even family. In ‘Dimensions’, Doree tells that “some of the women she worked with could tell stories to make your hair curl” (1), which is exactly Munro’s trademark.

According to Jennifer Andrews, typical devices of the Gothic novel are settings in remote places, which is the case in almost all of the stories; split or tormented heroes such as in ‘Dimensions’ and ‘Child’s Play’; fantasies and dreamscapes, such as in ‘Too Much Happiness’ and ‘Wenlock Edge’. Apart from that it is also characterized by contrasts between urban and rural life, first person narrators, which are characterized for their unreliability, such as in ‘Child’s Play’; and finally tales within tales, which is the case in ‘Fiction’. In Munro’s uncanny fiction, “strangeness is an effect produced by the distorted and the distorting mind of the protagonist” (Jackson 24). In the majority of the stories, it is the character’s inner strangeness that is the essential element for mystery. In ‘Wood’ for example, Roy’s excessive attraction to trees makes the reader feel uncomfortable, while in reality nothing gruesome happens. Also in ‘Some Women’, there is Roxanne’s morbid attraction to the terminally ill Mr. Crozier, something by which the protagonist was so impressed that she is still haunted by it decades later.

Another important aspect of the Gothic is, according to Rosemary Jackson, the disruption of chronological time as a result of which past, present and future meld together and lose their historical sequence, thus tending towards an eternal present. Munro’s fiction is in a great way characterized by this feature, constantly switching between the past and the present. In ‘Too Much Happiness’ for example, the reader is dragged into Sophia’s past through her dreams. Also in ‘Dimensions’, ‘Fiction’ and ‘Child’s Play’, the story constantly switches between past and present, and often a return to the past is caused by an object or thought in the present which reminds of the past. According to Todorov, this “hesitation on the level of the narrative structure can be read as a displacement of fantasy’s central thematic issue” (Jackson 48), namely, the uncertainty of what is true and what is not, uncertainty of what is ‘seen’ and ‘known’. In a lot of the
stories, the reader is left with such a feeling of uncertainty, and to reconstruct what really happened, it is often necessary to impose one's own interpretation of the facts. In this collection, the endings are always somewhat mysterious and often end with a short sentence. For example, nothing is more mysterious than the craters on the moon, and 'Too Much Happiness' ends with the words: “Sophia's name has been given to a crater on the moon” (303). Furthermore, 'Free Radicals', ends with the words “Never know” (137), which more than ever emphasises the uncertainty of the events throughout the whole story. In a similar way, 'Face' ends with “You think that would have changed things? The answer is of course, and for a while, and never” (163), which again shows that the reader is left to his own interpretation of the story. Finally, 'Some Women' ends with “I grew up, and old” (187), the central theme of all the stories in this collection.

Since the majority of her characters are female, Munro's gothic is essentially female gothic, in which “the familiar domesticity of 'woman's place' becomes radically unheimlich" (Becker 24) by means of an excess of everyday experiences, as Susanne Becker puts it. Munro's characters are trapped in their narrow worlds of male dominance, as is the case in 'Dimensions', 'Deep-Holes' and 'Too Much Happiness'. Sometimes, they try to escape this narrowness by becoming independent, by taking a job, or by falling in love with a married man. Moreover, a lot of the stories in this volume deal with manipulative power games and the breakdown of nuclear families. Both in 'Fiction' and 'Deep-Holes', the family falls apart by the dominant character of the father who imposes his will on the whole family. Also in 'Wenlock Edge' and 'Free Radicals' the protagonist manipulates and controls another character resulting in his or her downfall. Magdalene Redekop also mentions that in Munro's fiction, “familiar, domestic actions are elevated to serve as a powerful means of resistance. Rejecting the defamiliarizing techniques common to many contemporary writers, Munro opts instead for a domestication so radical that we move through the homely to the unheimlich or uncanny" (Redekop 12).
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