



The Emergence of the Short Story Cycle in Canada: Alice Munro's Short Story Cycles as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* and *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose* are two literary works that hardly fit into one single literary category. Critics of all quarters are at one and of the same mind as to the slippery and elusive nature of Alice's art. However, despite being approached by some critics as a collection of short stories, Alice's narrative seems to embody a sub-genre that is particular of the Canadian literary tradition, which is the short story cycle. Also known as the composite or episodic novel, the story collection or the linked stories, this genre could be briefly defined as a sequence of short stories that are linked through a unifying element, like a character, the setting or the story. Characterized, as it is, with its fragmentary nature and its openness, this genre compels its researcher to look into its origins and its implications at the level of content. Few studies have been carried on this genre to provide the necessary grounds for an elaborate research on it. Forrest L. Ingram's work *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* is the first academic work that provides a consistent definition for the short story cycle as a genre. On the other hand, Gerald Lynch's *The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles* examines the sine qua non tension between the parts and the whole of the versatile form of the short story cycle in Canada. With reference to Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* and *The Beggar Maid* as two representatives of the short story cycle, I attempt to examine the inscription of this sub-genre, and map its evolution over the last centuries in Canadian literature.

Keywords: Short story cycle, genre studies, Canadian literature

Introduction

The short story cycle is a versatile genre that you might have come across without realising it. It stands mid-way between the novel and the short story, and is referred to by critics as the composite or episodic novel, the story collection or linked stories. The short story cycle has for primary characteristics a discursive pattern of “self-sufficient and interrelated stories” (Mann 15), a unifying theme or a character, and more importantly the tension between the unit of the story and the whole composition of the cycle.

The critical study of the short story cycle has gained momentum after the release of Forrest L. Ingram's *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* which offers an interesting delimitation of the genre and reveals the sine qua non tension that resides between the separate sections and the whole entity of the cycle. Ingram's study is the outcome of a research on the sub-genre of the short story cycle which argues that the form of the cycle has long preceded the form of the novel. Echoing Ingram, James Nagel notes:

Although there are many complexities in tracing a literary history that crosses genre and nationality boundaries, it is perhaps not too much to say that the central idea of the short story cycle, the linked set of short story narratives with origins in such works as Boccaccio's *The Decameron* and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, antedates the concept of the formal novel. (3)

Ingram's work is the first of its kind to establish a consistent definition of the short story cycle as a genre on its own. The book presents solid theoretical grounds for the study of Munro's cycle of short stories, offering a range of resources and a detailed critical examination of the selected works of Franz Kafka, William Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson. Ingram identifies two main patterns for the short story cycle genre: either reassembled after the writing process like John Updike's *Olinger Stories*, or preconceived to be a sequence of brief tales like James Joyce's *Dubliners* and Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*.

However, given the popularity of this particular form among Canadian writers like Campbell Scott, George Matthew Elliott and Hugh Hood, some critics like Gerald Lynch go so far as to claim that the short story cycle is “distinctly and distinctively a Canadian genre” (xvi). The short story cycle in Canada has acquired a set of common features that distinguish it from cycles in other countries. The common setting, the opening and closing lines and stories, and the predominance of the female voice are among the recurrent themes and shared characteristics that readers and critics may effortlessly identify in Canadian short story cycles.

Under the seemingly ordinary prairie stories of Alice Munro lie complex characters with ambiguous relationships. Since Munro is one of the first and few writers with more than one short story cycle, I chose to analyse her work as representative of the Canadian short story cycle, but also as a unique artefact that is distinguished by a hybrid narrative technique and centred around the notion of fragmentation. For this purpose, I try to discern in this paper first the historical and literary background that inscribes the short story cycle in Canadian literature, and then present a brief study of Alice Munro's short story cycles *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose and Lives of Girls, and Women*. The examination of Munro's narrative design in both cycles will unravel the intertwining of the fragmented structure and the themes evoked in the stories to reflect among other things, the nature of social relationships.

The Inherence of the Short Story Cycle in Canadian Literature

In tracing the roots of the short story in Canadian literature, I have encountered two major issues: the historical background and the theoretical development of the genre. Nevertheless, in order to introduce the overall context of the study, I find it essential to go back as far as the first literary writings. As a matter of fact, the inter-relatedness of the genre of the short story cycle with the Canadian cultural and literary heritage seems to be genuine and compelling.

In surveying the anthology of Canadian literature, one can immediately notice the abundance of short story writers. On this matter, J. Castell Hopkins delivered a concise yet well documented summary of the first instances of Canadian literature and the marking points of its evolution through his article "Canadian Literature". As Hopkins demonstrates, Canadian literature has seen the light with the historical documentation of the first travelers. Interestingly, not only were the earliest manuscripts and chronicles written by non-Canadians, but they were usually arranged into series and volumes. The interest in geographical narratives had not regressed in the following decades; in fact, it is still considered until this day a prominent theme in Canadian literature. These early writings provided the preliminary shape for what is later going to be the short story cycle.

Looking at these early writings, fictional and non-fictional alike, provides a literary map for the understanding of the belonging of the short story cycle as a genre to the Canadian literary tradition more than any other culture. As a matter of fact, the history of Canada is told through several voices of different origins through numbers of volumes, biographies and other collections of writings. It is no news that the spread of short fiction had risen with the development of the

printing technology and the rapid growth of magazines and journals by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. The important piece of information is, however, that the female voice prevailed over these printed stories. The contributions of Grace Dean MacLeod Rogers, Fanny G. Gwilt, Lucy Maud Montgomery and others have established a definite place for women in Canadian literature and particularly made the short fiction a female craft.

With the wide recognition it gained, the short story developed into a genre with characteristics which go beyond its shortness. In Brander Matthews's words: "The difference between a novel and a short-story is a difference of kind. A true short-story is something other and something more than a mere story which is short. A true short-story differs from the novel chiefly in its essential unity of impression" (15). Bearing this observation in mind, the short story cycle seems not to have lost the characteristic of the short story which is the 'unity of impression' that is delivered at once to the reader. The particular structure of the cycle maintains the qualities of the short form at the level of the effect and the intensity of the story told, offering a multitude of epiphanies.

In the European and the American continent alike, and with the uncertainty about the ambiguous future of humanity, Modernism was born as an aesthetic that reflected upon the immense change that the world was undergoing and which reversed all cultural and artistic conventions. As to short fiction, regardless of the earlier cycles that might have existed before the twentieth century, this form happened to have its first comeback with the Modernist movement (approximately between 1914 and 1940's). Accurate examples of what would later be referred to as the short story cycle are James Joyce's *Dubliners* and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio*. However, prior to both of these canonical works, a publication of a similar kind of narrative appeared in Canada, but it has received less attention from critics: *In the Village of Viger* by Duncan Campbell Scott. The short story cycle was developed by writers like Anderson and Joyce as an expression of the inconsistency within society and ethics in the after-war period. Other writers, nevertheless, felt the need to write cycles to facilitate publications, since there came a time when editors faced difficulties in publishing separate short stories.

On the other hand, critics like Gerald Lynch, argue that the popularity of this form among Canadian writers over writers from any other nation is first a matter of attraction (1). Later, in his book *The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles*, he observes that the constant association of the short story cycle to Canadian literature has something to do with Canadian life and community

that “[t]he small town remains the ruling paradigm” (93). Being convinced that the evolution of Canadian literature is closely influenced by the earlier settlements of migrants and by the geography of the country, I will briefly develop Lynch’s point of view. The provincial Canadian town, with its characteristic traits like flat social interactions, gossip, urban setting and domestic life, represents the pattern that the story embodies. The stories of Munro, Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence, for instance, differ at the level of the stories told and the lens through which society is perceived, but unquestionably meet in the general context and trace a common distinctive background for the Canadian short story.

Even though the cycle is popular among American writers as well, Canadians have made this genre their own. Recognizing a Canadian short story cycle is as effortless as telling the flag with the red maple leaf. For it is common to be introduced to the Canadian setting with the opening line or within the first page: “It was too true that the city was growing rapidly. As yet its arms were not long enough to embrace the little village of Viger, but before long they would be” (Scott 9); “They lived behind a store in Hanratty, Ontario” (Munro, *The Beggar Maid* 3). Even if it is fictional, the reader could tell that the setting is Canadian. Stephen Leacock opens his cycle *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* with the following lines: “I don’t know whether you know Mariposa. If not, it is of no consequence, for if you know Canada at all, you are probably well acquainted with a dozen towns just like it” (9). Leacock’s statement applies to literature, for I would say that if you read enough Canadian stories at all, you are probably acquainted with the overall setting. Other instances of fictional yet Canadian sounding settings in the opening lines are found in Munro’s and Laurence’s cycles: “We spent days along the Wawanash River, helping Uncle Benny fish” (Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* 3); “That house in Manawaka is the one which, more than any other, I carry with me” (Laurence 11). Opening the cycle with a Canadian setting serves as an announcement of the work’s nationality. The recurrence of the natural and cultural elements associated with Canada, that is the regional aspect of stories, is one of the features that inscribed the short story cycle within Canadian literary tradition.

It is as such that the short story cycle has been growing among Canadian writers with distinctive aesthetic features. In fact, Munro points out the interest in writing about the community in the provinces, saying that “Everybody in the community is on stage for all the other people, . . . There’s a constant awareness of people watching and listening. And—and this may be particularly Canadian—the less you reveal, the more highly thought of you are” (qtd. in Rothstein). Several

Canadian authors have adapted this perspective on society into their stories, either directly addressing the problem or using it as a backdrop for the narrative. Furthermore, Lynch has pointed out another feature that distinguishes a Canadian short story cycle which is the concluding story in it. He notes, "Concluding stories of pure story cycles bring to fulfilment the recurrent patterns, frequently reintroducing many of the preceding stories' major characters and central images, and restating in a refrain-like manner the main thematic concerns" (26). The concluding stories, therefore, do not offer a closure or a denouement to the general story but are rather 'a refrain', reasserting the nature of the cycle but at the same time evoking a likely relaunching of the story. In both of Munro's short story cycles, for instance, the separate stories provide an ending, which stands midway between closure and open-ending.

Having established the background of the evolution of the short story cycle and its defining characteristics, it is now time to turn to assess the validity of considering Munro's books *The Beggar Maid* and *Lives of Girls and Women* as short story cycles, as well as to study the connectedness between the themes and the structure in them.

Alice Munro and the Conception of Her Short Story Cycle

The stories in Munro's collections are ordinary with no surprising events or 'coups de theatre'. They are characterized with a natural, yet discursive flow, reflecting life as it is. Neither a love story nor a quest for success is the central plot of the stories. In fact, Munro has left blurred borderlines between the separate sections so that the reader does not lose grip on the flow of the story. Yet, she kept the separation loose enough for ambiguity and experimentation's sake both in *The Beggar Maid* and in *Lives of Girls and Women*.

Both *The Beggar Maid* and *Lives of Girls and Women* embody theoretical dichotomies like coherence and incoherence, and unity and fragmentation that work in tandem with the thematic issues, like the social stereotypes and the struggle of women to break out of their marginal position in society, to create a hybrid and polyphonic narrative. In fact, in an interview with *Publishers Weekly's* Beverley Slopen, Munro says:

I no longer feel attracted to the well-made novel, ... I want to write the story that will zero in and give you intense, but not connected moments of experience. I guess that's the way I see life. People remake themselves bit by bit and do things they don't understand. The novel has to have a coherence which I don't see any more in the lives around me. (76-77)

Accordingly, Munro confirms that the structure of her work is in effect preconceived and, therefore, the cyclical nature in it has been well thought of and not arbitrary. In addition, the stylistic aesthetics in her narrative—like the narrative tone shifts, the temporal shifts and the multiple narrative perspectives—only emphasize the hybridity of her work, and validate further the identification of her two books as short story cycles.

Hybridity of the Genre: Fragmentation and Narrative Tone Shifts

The structure of the short story cycle is suggestive of incoherence, episodic presentation of the story and fragmentation at the level of narration. Even though Munro mentioned in one of the interviews that “she loses interest when trying to write a novel” (qtd. in Martin 92), the outcome of her choice to write in episodes and the effect of the story produced in vignettes seems to be delivered at its finest. When asked about the nature of these two works, she answered: “I see *Who Do You Think You Are?*¹ definitely as linked stories, and *Lives* as an episodic novel” (qtd. in Martin 75). Before we get to the dissection of the structure and the study of the nature of the cycles, a brief introduction seems to be essential.

On the one hand, *Lives of Girls and Women* is composed of eight stories that account for the psychological development of the protagonist Del Jordan and recount her adventures with people from different social classes, her relationship with her mother, her engagement and disengagement from religion, her love for art and her sexual awakening. On the other, *The Beggar Maid* is a set of ten stories about Rose, who grows up with her father and stepmother called Flo. As readers, we follow the girl growing up, carrying her thoughts and beliefs from a young schoolgirl to her married life. The stories present flashes of her love affairs, her divorce and her career. Rose undergoes several changes; she moves out from her home, marries Patrick who is a young man from a wealthy class, and experiences a different adventure. Then, she finally returns home as a way to seek and find her identity. Both protagonists, devoid of heroism, are females coming from a rural town and challenging, in some ways, cultural or social constructs. It takes a potential talent to use almost the exact same material and tell two stories with distinct change. In this respect Munro says, “When I went back [to Ontario] and saw it from contemporary, and not nostalgic, eyes, there was a whole lot more I wanted to do with it — and there probably still is” (qtd. in Rothstein).

The contrast between the separate units and the unifying general frame creates a number of dichotomies like, unit and fragments, singularity and plu-

¹ *Who Do You Think You Are?* is the original title of *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose*. The title was changed when the work was published in the United States.

rality, continuity and discontinuity, autonomy and interdependence, truth and illusion. Some short story theorists like Ingram tend to perceive the relationship between the parts and the whole as 'tension', focusing on the bipolarity of the cycle's form, arguing that

Central to the dynamics of the short story cycle is the tension between the one and the many. Every short story displays a double tendency of asserting the individuality of its components on the one hand and of highlighting, on the other, the bonds of unity which make the many into a single whole. (19)

Choosing the term 'tension', actually, connotes critics' reluctance about the consistency and the integrity of the general frame being an amalgamation of different and disparate elements. My interest lies in demonstrating how the binary oppositions mentioned above create a third dimension for the narrative, a space of interaction, a vivid aspect. At this level, the question that ought to be asked is: Where does a narrative structure that is founded on fragments takes its consistency from? The analysis of Munro's cycles should provide a satisfying answer to this.

While the novel is designed as a whole from the moment it was conceived of and written as an integral entity (even though arranged in chapters), the cycle is initially constructed as a sum of segments. The reader of *The Beggar Maid* and *Lives of Girls and Women* are transported into a journey with the protagonists Rose and Del, to witness the development of their characters through the different phases of their lives in a fragmentary journey. The stories within the cycle meet with the short story in a number of features. The titles of the stories in *The Beggar Maid*, for instance, "Royal Beatings", "Half a Grapefruit", "Mischief", "Simon's Luck", "The Flats Road" "Changes and Ceremonies", serve as a metonymy for a particular and sharp moment in the story.

Some general presentations or reviews of Munro's cycles highlight the continuity between the smaller units, and unintentionally emphasize on their unity over their fragmentation. Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, for instance, suggest an alternative name for the cycle which is 'the composite novel'. In their book *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* they develop an observation of the proximity of the cycle to the novel rather than to the short story: "[The] *Composite novel* emphasizes the integrity of the whole, while 'short story cycle' emphasizes the integrity of the parts" (5). Dunn and Morris argue that the former term sums up better the characteristics of the novel in stories and that the one that has been used in the earlier years implies an "inferior generic hierarchy" (5) of the new genre to the novel.

Despite agreeing with Dunn and Morris in the essence of their study, that is the consistency of the connectedness between the units, I still have to maintain the word ‘cycle’ for its relevance to Munro’s narrative style. Using their words, a “cycle” in anyone’s definition implies cyclical motion, a circular path, a return to the beginning, all of which preclude linear development” (Dunn and Morris 5). Katherine J. Mayberry also describes this as a “narrative paradigm [that] is circular, not vertical; fluid, not rigid.” Here, the circular pattern alluded to by Dunn and Morris is not necessarily drawn by going back to the starting point. In the case of Munro’s *The Beggar Maid*, this pattern is formed through a spiral development of events, in the sense that the story of the protagonist Rose is told with a sheer use of flashbacks and flash-forwards. Even though Rose is driven by her ambitions and plans for the future, she proves to be bound to her past and to her hometown every time she undergoes a change.

As for *Lives of Girls and Women*, the overall pattern of the cycle takes the shape of a circular movement backwards to a certain point in the past. In fact, by the end of the book, that is in the last story “Epilogue: The Photographer”, Del brings forth her passion about writing which seed had been planted earlier in the first stories. It was Uncle Benny who commanded her to write before asking her to write a letter, a reply for a personal advertisement of a lady in the newspaper: “Can you write?” ... “I don’t care. I just want to see how you do it” (Munro, *Lives*, 14). Moreover, the motif of the cycle resurfaces every now and then in the story in various forms like the annual flooding of the river, or the yearly school operetta, etc.

Now that the relevance of the use of the word “short story cycle” has been justified, the hybridity of this genre ought to be discussed in detail. The juxtaposed stories along with their intricate structure and the shifts they include along with the themes they include are in favour of a hybrid narrative. However, before delving into such elaborate analysis, it is important to delimit the hybridity of the genre. In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Mikhail Bakhtin defines hybridity as follows:

What we are calling a hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical [syntactic] and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two ‘languages’, two semantic and axiological belief systems. We repeat, there is no formal — compositional and syntactic— boundary between these utterances, styles, languages, belief systems; the division of voices and languages takes place within the limits of a single syntactic whole,

often within the limits of a single sentence. (304-305)

Bakhtin actually applies the notion of hybridity in the narrative through the language systems used. He studies the role of juxtaposing different linguistic voices within the text and the effect created when the author uses shifts between several languages, the common and the formal one or between dialogues and monologues for instance. Indeed, hybridity inevitably implies multiplicity of voices or perspectives, and therefore a heterogeneous narrative. Accordingly, linguistic hybridity refers to a set of mixing devices in the text such as weaving prose and poetry frame stories and most importantly, I would add in this study, narrative tone shifts, temporal shifts as well as shifts in narrative perspectives.

The Beggar Maid: Temporal Shifts and Narrative Perspectives

The vivid and easy-flowing sets of stories deliver a stratified narrative. Every layer of this narrative tells a different story from a unique perspective, either via various characters and dialogue, or through the same character but at a different phase or age. The stories *The Beggar Maid* contains shifts in time and narrative perspective that foster not only the fragmentary nature of the cycle but enhance the aspect of hybridity of the text. This technique is more frequent in *The Beggar Maid* than in *Lives of Girls and Women*, due to the use of the external narrator in the former, while in the latter, memories replace time shifts. By way of explanation, it could be said that the narrative shifts fall under two categories: temporal shifts and shifts in the narrative perspective.

Munro's use of the temporal shifts seems to be conventional within the stories when seen as independent unities; however, the effect generated at the general frame of the cycle is doubtless uncommon. Likewise, Uri Margolin notes that "While the forms of temporal shift are few and general, its functions and effects are many, varied, and often context specific" (198). It is no surprise that the narrator shifts back and forth between the time of narration and memories or future events. Yet, the fact that the short stories within the cycle end with a flash-forward to future events establishes almost, and not in the strict meaning of the term, a closure for the micro-texts and consequently a non-closure for the whole. The abundance of this particular narrative technique in *The Beggar Maid* defines the nature of the cycle as an open text; a non-linear narrative with gaps that allow the reader to interpret it from various possible approaches.

Hybridity, at this level, is defined by the multiplicity and the stratification of narrative shifts. The time of narration is considered as a "NOW anchoring

point” (Margolin 196)², which is the reference point to all the temporal narrative deviations. These shifts are sometimes clearly identifiable starting with expressions like “Years later, many years later...” (Munro, *The Beggar Maid* 22), “So long after...” (Munro, *The Beggar Maid* 39) or “When Simon was fourteen...” (Munro, *The Beggar Maid* 164). However, most of the time Munro’s narrative displacements—in the scope of time—are unannounced, blurring the boundaries between the moment of utterance and the moment of the event. Whether they consist of flashbacks or flash-forwards, time shifts are a prominent motif in Munro’s cycles and particularly in *The Beggar Maid* and, as shown, they vary in their length and the effect produced. Remarkably, short narrative shifts in *The Beggar Maid* are employed as a transitional device between scenes and actions. There is usually a move forward in time by the end of each story making the ending look like a rushed closure projecting a number of future events. In a general manner, these endings consist of resolutions for side characters that are not mentioned again at any point outside the ‘micro-text’ or short-story, which create several narrative lines at the level of the ‘macro-text’ or the whole. This narrative strategy has established a layered aspect in the cycle as the reader gets to explore several experiences and life stories within the same book, which qualifies *The Beggar Maid* as a hybrid text.

Lives of Girls and Women: Narrative Tone shifts

The hybridity of the text is achieved differently in *Lives of Girls and Women cycle*. In fact, same as in *The Beggar Maid*, a simple reading of this cycle would reveal an ample presence of ‘stylistic forms’ like the embedded letters (16, 188), the chain letter (182, 188) the newspaper headlines (arranged horizontally in capital letters in a spaced-out block) (15), the religious chants in pages (64, 110, 182, 231, 233), Biblical passages (171) or folk songs. The narrative tone shifts are the key characteristic of the *Lives of Girls and Women cycle*. To state it simply, each of the eight stories in this cycle is defined by a different mood or what I have referred to as tone, which could be comic, tragic, lyric or dramatic. With Uncle Benny’s story, the narrative acquires a dramatic tone. In fact, Uncle Benny—who is not the narrator’s uncle or anyone else’s—through a newspaper advertisement gets himself a wife, Madeleine, who turns out to be “mentally deranged” and in the words of Del’s mother’s, “She’s come to live in the right place though. She’ll fit in fine on the Flats Road” (Munro, *Lives* 20). With this statement, Ada highlights the eccentricity and the strangeness of the town. Indeed, the closure of this section

²The “NOW anchoring point” does not imply the present tense but it means the ‘actual’ time of narration whether it is the present or the past like it is the case in both of Munro’s cycles.

is almost a theatrical one as it portrays characters as fictional personas in a play:

After a while we would all just laugh, remembering Madeleine going down the road in her red jacket, with her legs like scissors, flinging abuse over her shoulder at Uncle Benny trailing after, with her child. We laughed to think of how she carried on, and what she did to Irene Pollox and Charlie Buckle. Uncle Benny could have made up the beatings... Madeleine herself was like something he might have made up. We remembered her like a story, and having nothing else to give we gave her our strange, belated, heartless applause. "Madeleine! That madwoman!" (Munro, *Lives* 32)

Such an ending offers not only a closure to this micro-text but also summarizes the dramatic overtone that is marked by the theatrical plot structure of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement.

The next story titled "Heirs of the Living Body" is dominated by a tragic tone. This section opens with the presentation of Del's Uncle Craig and her two maiden aunts: Elspeth and Grace. Craig's main concern in life is writing the history of the Wawanash county. The two aunts are content with their daily domestic tasks and their favourite part of the day is storytelling time. The third story of *Lives of Girls and Women* is entitled "Princess Ida" as a reference to Del's mother, Addie, and is mostly characterized by a sense of drama. The title also makes explicit reference to Tennyson's poem "The Princess". The dramatic aspect of this story lies in the focus on Ada as the central character, unfolding layers of her psyche through stories of her relationship with her mother and then with her brothers, together with relatively long monologues resembling soliloquies. Unlike the previous stories, this story has a less consistent closure that could be explained with the open structure of the plot and the minor events in it. This 'open' structure, nevertheless, consists of a reminder that the micro-text in the cycle stays hanging in-between open-endedness and closure.

The fourth story in the cycle is "Age of Faith", which follows Del's spiritual journey into religion and out of it. It is one of the shortest stories of *Lives cycle* and detains a tragic timbre overall. After a rise and fall in Del's interest in religion, and after exhausting her efforts to convince her brother Owen of the existence of a God, he ended up believing what she tried hard to teach him. However, by that time, she had already quit believing. Del confesses, "I saw with dismay the unavoidable collision coming, of religion and life" (Munro, *Lives* 127). Owen's breakdown by the end of the story delivers a strong emotional scene, almost cathartic, and thus a tragic tone.

The fifth story of *Lives of Girls and Women* cycle "Changes and Ceremonies"

has a particular mood as it represents a tragicomic story. This episode of Del Jordan's life is predominantly marked by the change that occurs between boys and girls as they grow up. Events in this story are simple and the tone is mostly comic. However, by the end of this story the narrator moves forward in time three years later where tragedy strikes in the mysterious death of Miss Farris. In the closing lines of the story, an analogy can be drawn between the several facets of Miss Farris and the different moods in the narrative like the comic and the tragic:

Miss Farris in her velvet skating costume, her jaunty fur hat bobbing among the skaters, always marking her out, Miss Farris con brio, Miss Farris painting faces in the Council Chambers, Miss Farris floating face down, unprotesting, in the Wawanash river, six days before she was found. Though there is no plausible way of hanging those pictures together—if the last one is true then must it not alter the others?—they are going to have to stay together now. (Munro, *Lives* 156)

By way of elucidating the suggested analogy, I would like to note that Miss Farris's 'pictures' stand as a synecdoche for the book's different moods. As stated in this excerpt, the authenticity of the sad and tragic moments does not cancel the credibility of the joyful and comic scenes; they co-exist to create a polyphonic discourse at the micro level. In Bakhtin's words, "In an intentional novelistic hybrid—the important activity is not only . . . the mixing of linguistic forms—the markers of two languages and styles as it is the collision between differing points of views on the world that are embedded in these forms" (360). This idea confirms further the dialogism produced by the stratified narrative perspectives or tone shifts, whether through dialogue, reported speech or the mixture of stylistic devices such as letters, songs or religious and literary extracts. Munro's cycles, which take the form of a collage at the visible level, unfold a multiplicity of voices and hence a hybrid narrative par excellence.

"Lives of Girls and Women" is the sixth story in the cycle and the concentration of Del's sexual awakening reaches its peak in this circle of the cycle: "Naomi and I held almost daily discussions on the subject of sex" (Munro, *Lives* 162). This story's main tone is erotic and the story goes into the several fantasies of the protagonist and her best friend. Then, "Baptizing" is the longest story in the cycle and it is at some point characterized by a lyrical tone. This story represents the bridge between the state of girlhood and womanhood of the protagonist Del. The last story, "Epilogue: The Photographer", is surprisingly not dominated by any of the previous narrative tones. "Epilogue" is in fact dissociable from the rest of the stories in the cycle as it approaches a completely different theme with a

rather more mature tone. It epitomizes the intellectual growth of the adult female artist and illustrates how the fragments of her identity formation journey keep resonating through her art of storytelling.

Munro's arrangement of her protagonist's life vignettes is by no means random, but meticulously designed to keep the tension between "the one and the many" alive (Ingram 19). Throughout *The Beggar Maid* and *Lives of Girls and Women*, Munro has playfully been shifting between different moods, such as between the comic and the dramatic, the tragicomic and the erotic, or the lyric and the tragic. Despite the complexity of this literary technique requiring high skilfulness and understanding of the nuances and subtleties of language and storytelling, Munro seems to be effortlessly mastering the art of this young genre. She has set the example in delivering a multidimensional and a hybrid narrative through short stories of "unglamorous lives" (Fiamengo and Lynch 3) based on the setting of small Canadian towns.

The evolution of written literature in Canada has spontaneously led to the birth of the genre of the short story cycle. This genre has gained recognition among readers for its readability and success among writers for its versatility. With the abundance of the written short story cycles, common themes and elements were noted, namely the natural setting and the small town paradigm. Munro has asserted that her choice of the genre of the short story cycle stems from her conviction that no other genre succeeds at generating the same 'tension' among readers (Martin 92). In fact, the Munrovan cycles represent the arena where her female protagonists fight in different ways to carve their identities amidst a typically Canadian provincial setting infused with dichotomies such as gender roles, silence and dialogue, privacy and public life. While the episodic form of the short story cycle proves to be reminiscent of the distinct phases of identity formation, the cyclical markers in the short story cycle continuously draw the reader to the essential pattern of life, of a multitude of beginnings and endings.

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