

THE FATALITY OF LOVE IN THE STORY 'TRICKS' BY ALICE MUNRO

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Annotation. Critical readings of Munro's work have been prolific, throughout her writing life, especially in the form of academic articles. Already in the mid 1970s, articles on separate stories began to appear in academic journals. Since the beginning of Munro's career critics have continued to be fascinated and puzzled by her particular twist of realism, but no one has exposed the realism as connected to her exploration of possibility as arising out of fatality, no critic has explored the tension between possibility and fatality that we see at the heart of Munro's writing.

Key words: realism, possibility, fatality, compellation, subjectivity, aesthetic

Introduction. During the course of exploring various selected stories, we shall see that the phenomenon of fatality is central to Munro's fiction. The sense of the fatal is not restricted to texts featuring a drama of destiny. What is fatal occurs in gradations of explicitness and form as these shift with the writer's changing poetic urges and aesthetic options. In all of the variations, the fatal is driven by something that is called compellation, something the characters cannot resist because they are certain it includes them. Different modes of fatality take turns in holding the writer's and the reader's attention. Yet these variations show a core of sameness at the heart of Munro's persistent preoccupation with fatal realities.

Methodology. In Munro's texts, certain characters actualize themselves as tilted to the side of the expected and conventional, and even to the side of subjectivity. As we shall see, much the same can be said of events, objects, actions, perceptions, and feelings, in the stories. Feelings are strangely unemotional at decisive moments, as in "Passion." Love is slanted in a direction away from the lovers absorbed in it, as in "What Is Remembered"; creativity to the side of the artists' powers as in "Material"; narrative outside narrative cohesion, as in "The Love of a Good Woman." Nevertheless, that which is to the side of something else does not make a case for itself as a unit dislodged from that which it is to the side of. It appears as a parallel obeying an intriguing fatality. Such lateral directedness is discussed in terms of compellation. In this study, compellation denotes a force driving what is fatally significant. It is a fatal a priori. In the stories, compellation is anterior to phenomena that are uncharged by the fatal. It appears as flashes or "communiqués" [7., p. 68] that can be distinguished from the temporal flow, but that is not dislodged from it. Within the complicated world of Munro's realism, a space adjacent to the milieu of trite representations stealthily

materializes. [8., p. xii]

The workings of the compellation are not inferred by reader or character, but are immediately and intuitively grasped in a beholding of fatality that corresponds to the immanent recognition of values in the aprioristic sphere of ethical seeing. [5., p. 219] In this sense, the fatal is not a subjective coloration of reality, but a presentation of a world where the fatal might occur.

The sense of the fatal in Munro is related to what Jean Baudrillard calls a fatal strategy: “it is something unaccountable for itself, inescapable, but also indecipherable, an immanent type of fatality. It is something at the heart of the system, at the strategic core of the system, something like its point of inertia, its blind spot” [1., p. 17]. The “blind spot” cannot be known or defined; it has to remain secret. A fatal strategy is expressive of the “ironic deviation of things from the finalities always prescribed by the subject” [1., p. 17].

Results and discussion. The article exposes of the possibility by reviewing fatal mechanisms in Munro’s short stories “Tricks,” a story based on an elusive rapport between the distinct but interpenetrating worlds of theatrical drama and everyday existence. For Robin, the plays she goes to see in the theatre materialize in a sphere of heightened existence that is sharply distinguished from her ordinary life, yet the phenomenal details of her routine existence are given a fatal sheen by what has been perceived in the playhouse. The lustrous synthesis of theatrical and normal reality possesses a fatal glow that does not derive from either of these. Mystical traces left by aesthetic showings have lifted Robin to a new life-plane, one that suddenly opens as a possibility-space. The hours at the theatre ‘filled her with an assurance that the life she was going back to, which seemed so makeshift and unsatisfactory, was only temporary and could easily be put up with. And there was a radiance behind it, behind that life, behind everything, expressed by the sunlight seen through the train windows. The sunlight and long shadows on the summer fields, like the remains of the play in her head.’ [6., p. 239]

The protagonist is aware of a feeling of elect participation. This electness belongs to the plays, to a world where the fate of this or that character is already decided beforehand, prior to the individual performance. There are “remains” of this state of affairs in the ordinary, unaesthetic, extratheatrical world [6., p. 239]. On her way home on the train, Robin savors what she has witnessed. The fixed domain of aesthetic foreordinations furnishes an “assurance” that appears on the hither side of the moving train-windows (i.e. in feeling), but also “behind” them in a faraway world that is somehow transformed into a radiant newness by what has been given [6., p. 239].

When Robin goes to Stratford to see the love tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra, she loses her purse. She finds herself without money and without a train ticket to carry her home. She happens to encounter a man on his everyday walk with his dog. A

possibility opens up akin to a fated love. Robin's misfortune seems to turn into her lucky fate, into a course of events that she has somehow been vaguely expecting. The general configuration of matters seems to shift away from misfortune. When it becomes apparent that the gentleman will be of assistance to Robin, and perhaps even more than that, she does "not even feel surprised" [6., p. 242]. Her readiness to reconcile herself with contingency presents itself as a fatal turn. The event of meeting the man who helps her seems to be decided by fate. Almost preternaturally, the stranger shares certain emotions that are taken to be rare—such as an adult's ability to find train journeys to be mystical in quality. He views this sensation "as being quite natural and necessary" [6., p. 243]. Love's destiny is before Robin as an untroubled but somehow enigmatic trajectory. "She was not worried. Afterwards she wondered about that" [6., p. 243]. Having spent the evening together, they kiss good-bye at the station and decide to test fate by meeting in the same way exactly a year later. As a sign to confirm the pact's realization, Robin will make sure to put on the same green dress that she is currently wearing. The encounter has been the emergence of something enthrallingly inscrutable. "How had this happened, or not happened? She did not know" [6., p. 248]. Despite the general sense of chance, what is accidental does not seem to be reducible to coincidence. Fate's potential is enigmatic, out of the individual's control, yet at the same time perfectly unquestionable. "Now of necessity she and this man walked fairly close to each other and if they met someone their arms might brush together" [6., pp. 249–250]. Life has not simply taken a turn where romance makes the slightest touch thrilling, for what gently brushes Robin's heart is the sense of what makes a story compelling, namely the sustained impression of the inevitability of another world. "This talk felt more and more like an agreed-upon subterfuge, like a conventional screen for what was becoming more inevitable all the time, more necessary between them" [6., pp. 250–251]. The fateful certainty that something has happened, "that something has changed" [6., p. 253], makes Robin feel "chosen to be connected" to a "strange part of the world" [6., p. 254]. The circumstance that the man is a foreigner gives Robin reason to study obscure maps and history books. Facts and details are suddenly infused with an intense significance and a realness that highlight Robin's existence. "She had something now to carry around with her all the time. She was aware of a shine on herself, on her body, on her voice and all her doings. It made her walk differently and smile for no reason and treat the patients with uncommon tenderness" [6., p. 255]. The substantiation of the fatal forces somehow invites the characters to believe that they can negotiate destiny.

Having externalized the inner workings of fate to the superstitiously reductive concept of the obligatory green dress, Robin loses heart when she discovers that it is not ready at the cleaners for the occasion of the crucial meeting. Temporarily devastated by her externalistic faith in material identity, she is forced to put on a

different green robe. All the year while she has been waiting for this moment of reunion, she has “felt as if she had been chosen to be connected to that strange part of the world, chosen for a different sort of fate. Those were the words she used to herself. Fate. Lover. Not boyfriend. Lover” [6., pp. 254–255]. But as she puts on a different green robe, fate slips from her in a confusion worthy of a Shakespearian comedy. Not knowing that the man she thinks she recognizes is her “lover’s” twin brother, she interprets his hostility as punishment for wearing the wrong dress. A door is slammed in her face. The man was obviously not what he had pretended to be. “And she stood there, frozen, as if there was a possibility still that this might be a joke, a game” [6., p. 259]. The change that Robin expects her life to go through is dashed into nothingness. Left is “a piece of folly,” a set of “dreary virginal dreams,” a fabrication of “silly plans” [6., p. 260].

The story then skips many years, and when we meet Robin again, she is a middle-aged spinster. She now works in a psychiatric ward. Her existence has been traversed by an intriguing alteration somehow not entirely disconnected from her adventures in Stratford. “Sometime after she came back from Stratford, not having seen *As You Like It*, she had begun to be drawn to this work. Something—though not what she was expecting—had changed her life” [6., p. 265]. If there is a pattern or meaning in her existence, it is not a classical destiny but a deranged one, resembling her patients and their bizarre fantasies. The insane inmate who believes himself to be the discoverer of DNA inadvertently furnishes a fitting image of the principle of fatal rupture governing the protagonist’s life. Robin “always loves the part of the story where he describes how the spiral unzips and the two strands float apart. He shows her how, with such grace, such appreciative hands. Each strand setting out on its appointed journey to double itself according to its own instructions” [6., p. 266]. Here doubling is not a perpetual deferral in some deconstruction of truth. Instead, truth itself arrives in its complete presence—but as the duplication of existence produced by the compellation that “unzips” the natural order. In nature, DNA takes itself apart to constitute more of itself; but in the text, the compellation tears the possibility-space away from plot order of tragedy or comedy in order to leave the character gazing at a clearing that she cannot belong to. Although Robin will never belong to the clearing, having once upon a time mistaken the man who slammed a door in her face for his twin brother (the man she loved), she can fully enjoy its truth. It is the clearing’s possibility that is its reality and marvel, not the personal benefit that is derivable from its actualization.

Even now she can yearn for her chance. She is not going to spare a moment’s gratitude for the trick that has been played. But she’ll come round to being grateful for the discovery of it. That, at least—the discovery which leaves everything whole, right up to the moment of frivolous intervention. Leaves you outraged, but warmed from a distance, clear of shame. [6., pp. 268–269]

Even though a real door was closed, the possibility of love's fatality, precisely as possibility, takes on a vastness of feeling. It might seem tragic, but its revelation as a completed romance that might have come true is absolutely treasured. As classical tragedy ends in the recognition of destiny, this story embodies fate as possibility. The moment of being allowed to discern an intricate pattern of existence as a fatal clearing, hidden behind contingency's system of incongruous irregularities is itself a source of lasting hope. Such a sense of promise runs through the text as a factor that does not necessarily have to intersect with regular life.

Conclusion. When we try to comprehend the deepening layers of the meaning of so many of Munro's stories, the fascination for the unfathomable patterns and secretly lurking forces of life has priority over personal misery. Munro's stories are character-based, or as Jonathan Franzen exclaims in praise of her fiction: her "subject is people. People people people" [2., p. ii]. Protagonists are not headed for destiny, but vice versa. In amorous affairs, fate is not a matter of lovers finally finding each other and fitting together, but of seemingly insignificant life-factors establishing fatal courses that allow existences to intersect. Such factors often come to givenness as traits of a personality or of behavior, but are not reducible to these. Munro's fatality is not Thomas Hardy's looming inescapable determinism, nor is it the hopeless arbitrariness of Albert Camus. Instead, it appears as an inescapable or undeniable possibility that sets the characters free.

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