Between

The House as Liminal Space in Alice Munro's Female Gothic

Camelia Raghinaru

Abstract

Alice Munro's work is part of a subgenre of the contemporary Gothic known as the Southern Ontario Gothic, which realistically depicts typical small town life in Southern Ontario, particularly in regards to the gender dynamic. Munro's Southern Ontario Gothic draws from the rich tradition of the 18th century British Gothic, which was influenced by public spaces such as cathedrals, monasteries and churches, particularly in their theatricality. In her short stories Alice Munro crafts an architectural space based on the liminal space between the private and the public, where the characters' inner strangeness, uncertainty about what is true or not true, what is 'seen' and 'known,' and the *unheimlich* of the domestic place turned public become key elements. The house turns into a nursing home or a quasi-school room, and the tension between inner/outer spaces engenders human strife. The melodramatic turn of events, almost comedic in its distorted grotesque, comes from the fact that an outsider in some kind of quasi-professional capacity is allowed access into the private space of others.

Keywords

Alice Munro, Southern Ontario Gothic, Liminal spaces, Gothic house, Nursing home.

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The poet Andrew Motion noted that «a house gives shape to a story», and that «the physical limits of a house are a way of imposing structure for good or ill» (Motion quoted in Richardson 2018). In her short stories Alice Munro crafts an architectural space that will «create and confirm character» (Richardson 2018). In this paper I argue that the liminal space between the private and the public shapes the dramatic tension that, in turn, shapes the characters inhabiting these spaces in Munro's fiction. The house turned nursing care or quasi-classroom becomes the space of human strife. As Richardson notes, houses can «suffer the ignominy» of being turned into «schools, rest homes and holiday resorts» (*ibid.*). While this speaks of a literal transformation of a manor home threatened to become derelict and a ruin into a boutique hotel through the savvy of an entrepreneur, in Munro's stories the transformation is temporal and forced by circumstance and a vestigial rootlessness of modernity in small town Ontario.

The interplay between interior and exterior creates much of the drama in the short stories by Alice Munro under discussion below. Whether we inhabit the quasi nursing home space of «The Love of a Good Woman» and «Some Women», or the quasi restaurant/theater/voyeur's peep show in «Wenlock Edge», the melodramatic tone of events, almost comedic in its distorted grotesque, comes from the fact that an outsider is allowed access into the private lives of others, in an interior space that has been temporarily opened up to the outsider's gaze. The liminal threshold between interior domesticity and the outer public gaze is the source of tension in these stories, and the tension is of a psychosexual nature, often combining either old age or sickness, or even a near-deathbed life state with sexual desire, in a way that intensifies the tension between the inner/outer of the architectural space.

Alice Munro is part of a subgenre of the Gothic known as Southern Ontario Gothic, in which she writes realistically about typical small town life in Southern Ontario, particularly when it comes to gender boundaries. Typical devices of the Gothic discussed in this paper have to do with re-

mote settings, split or tormented female protagonists, fantasies and dreamscapes in which «strangeness is an effect produced by the distorted and the distorting mind of the protagonist» (Jackson 1981: 24). The characters' inner strangeness, uncertainty about what is true or not true, what is 'seen' and 'known,' reconstructing what really happened, and the *unheimlich* of the «familiar domesticity of woman's place» (Vancopernolle 2010: 60) are key elements of Munro's Gothic. Often, Munro's characters are trapped in «narrow worlds of male dominance» (*ibid.:* 60) and manipulative power games from which they struggle to break free.

Munro's Southern Ontario Gothic draws from the rich tradition of the 18th century British Gothic, which was influenced by public spaces such as cathedrals, monasteries and churches, particularly in their theatricality. As Phyllis Richardson notes, the ritual and symbolism invited the idea of plot, of happening. The architecture of the space gives rise to notions of strangeness and the occult. The history of martyrdom of the church lends the space to imaginings of horror, but also flamboyance and magnificence. Fictional Gothic castles are often used to stage public events, such as balls, or to entertain large parties of boisterous guests, as well as to display large collections of art. In the 19th century, when the cost of maintaining these estates rises, they are often sold and eventually become akin to museum spaces and sites of inspiration for the Romantic poets. For Romantics like Mary Shelley, who continues the Gothic tradition, former supernatural elements become introjected psychically as inner terrors. This essay explores the connection between the internal psychic states of the female protagonist and the architectural setting of the house as a liminal space between the private and the public. The Gothic plays with liminality and transcending boundaries. The duality of inside/outside, urban/domestic folds into spaces:

> The idea of a traditional house as a refuge from external anxieties, which dates back to the 18th century, weakens as the population gets closer and closer to the 'nomadic' idea of Deleuze and Guattari, in constant movement and without a specific condition of belonging. The house loses its exclusively private character to be completely opened to the public sphere. From being a closed microworld, the house is a node in an infinite series of global relationships in a hyperconnected, public, accessible, and visible world. A world of exteriors. (Alcocer and Martella 2020)

Small town Western Ontario is a composite social space. Anca Radu discusses Munro's work as a «realistic chronotrope of small-town Western

Ontario» – a site that can harbor several places at the same time. It is both a place of fantasy and physical reality that investigates the fundamental tensions between apparently stable places that coerce individuals to adopt a set identity but also mark the individual's striving for liberation from such constraints. There is a misconception that this kind of space connects individuals to a utopian homogenous community. In enclosed and protected locations Munro's characters let out their secret side that is inappropriate for the 'real' world (Radu 2018: 101-108).

Munro's stories have a recurrent obsession with home and houses in narratives of displacement and dispossession. Elenora Rao remarks that the concept of home cannot be pinned down to a single notion, because it is a concept that changes constantly: prison, security, protection, place of violence and nurturing. The house is represented as either a fortress or a labyrinth, a place that fails to offer comfort and stability, a site of shame and abjection, secrecy and transgression. The persistent representation and detailed descriptions of houses in Munro's fiction, along with the conflicting emotions they generate emphasize the limit or threshold between inside and outside (Rao 2018: 42-58).

Robert McGill also remarks on the house as a central figure in Munro's fiction, a place infused with secrets, and a place of marginalization, especially when inhabited by women. He mentions Henry Lefebvre's theory of the mundus, «a sacred or accursed place in the middle of the […] township. A pit, originally – a dust hole, a public rubbish dump […] for trash and filth of every kind. […] It connected the city, the space above ground […] to the hidden, clandestine, subterranean spaces which were those of fertility and death» (Lefebvre quoted in McGill 2018: 38). As the mundus compels one to gaze upon the local and the abject, it becomes a metaphor for the complications of the domestic in Munro's stories (McGill 2018: 38).

The house as a liminal space

In Munro's collection titled *The Love of a Good Woman* the house functions as a liminal site of suspense and dread that heightens the heroine's inner state of shock and pushes the horror into the realm of the sublime. The domestic as a liminal space and potential disruptor of clearly defined categories is present in all these stories. Carol Davison notes that the genre of the female Gothic has as its protagonist a persecuted maiden who is virtually imprisoned in an ancestral castle or manor house by a ruthless and attractive Gothic hero-villain who threatens the young woman's maidenhead and inheritance (Davison 2016: 51). Much of the plot revolves

around the protagonist's exploration of the sometimes haunted castle and its maze-like corridors, which leads to a confrontation with the protagonist's self. In this ideologically conservative genre, the narrative concludes with a process of self-discovery that results in a more mature heroine with more sensible and realistic marital expectations. The heroine's virtue is rewarded by marriage and inheritance, and she develops faith and fortitude (*ibid.:* 51). The Gothic castle or house as the site of these adventures tests the heroine's fears and anxieties about sexuality, marriage, and male loyalty, and mirrors the woman's experience of entrapment and longing for the protection she looks for within patriarchal institutions. The genre focuses on women who can't seem to escape entrapment in the house. Thus, the house becomes a central image in these women's novels, and takes on ambivalent connotations, from the house as a symbol of male privilege and protection to that of a sinister and threatening place.

The physical space of the female Gothic brings into focus what Davison calls «the ambivalent nature of the domestic sphere» and «the dark side of domestic spaces related to ideals of marriage and motherhood» (Davison 2016: 53). In female Gothic novels, as the heroine explores the Gothic house in which she is trapped, she also explores her relation to her body and all the connotations of power and vulnerability associated with it. The heroine has anxieties about boundaries of the self, fears that her self-identity and autonomy are threatened or, on contrary, that previously suppressed impulses will be given expression. In the process, Davison claims, the «self is revealed to be other, and the Other an aspect of the self» (*ibid.*: 53). The theme of transformation is a common motif of the Gothic.

It is significant that the young female narrator's self-revelation happens in a Gothic-like interior setting that becomes porous to the public gaze as the plot progresses. Davison points out that the purpose of the domestic setting – the house – as the place where most middle-class and upper-class women of the late eighteenth century spent the majority of their lives – is the setting that is most likely to lead to identity and sexual psychic catharsis. Rebecca Janicker notes that the device of the Gothic house is that of a liminal space, caught between past and present, as a transitional area that shapes identity, and where previously repressed things are revealed. Liminality is connected to initiation rites and sacred time outside normal experience of society, Janicker notes, and the novitiate has the opportunity to absorb vital knowledge in the liminal space (Janicker 2015: 184). Thus, the setting functions as a space of isolation, apart from the narrator's everyday experience, and as a place of confrontation – ideal for individual development and growth: an island, a dying patient's home, the tempo-

rary living arrangement of a basement, or a holiday cottage. The protagonist of the female Gothic holds a precarious and vulnerable position as she undergoes her initiation in a space of entrapment that is also shrouded in mystery. For this reason, the Gothic castle, manor or house is important as a place of disruption and destabilization – not as a permanent home, but as a transient place (*ibid.*: 185). Janicker argues that the haunted house is the modern version of the haunted castle – where several layers of history coalesce (*ibid.*: 190), and Emma Zimmerman (2015) argues that the hotel is another key space of modernity, also because of its liminal nature, as it embodies the confusion between the private and public spheres.

The house as a nursing home

The house as a liminal space and potential disruptor of clearly defined categories is present in «Some Women» as well. The setting of the story bears Gothic undertones from the start with mention of illness, death, waist cinchers, crinolines, «decline in a tragic atmosphere», and death (Munro 2010: 165). The protagonist is a thirteen-year old girl who retells the story from the retrospective glance of old age. The house as the space of tragic decline into illness and death is foregrounded from the beginning: high ceilings, a deathbed upstairs, instead of downstairs, where it would be more convenient. But the Crozier household, under the strict rule of Mrs. Crozier, who walks with a cane and makes an «ominous-sounding journey up the stairs to see her stepson», the dying young Mr. Crozier, has inflexible notions about what is proper in a household arrangement (*ibid.*: 166). «The idea of a bedroom downstairs would have outraged her as much as the notion of a toilet in the parlor[…] . She would have made the laborious climb as often as necessary, rather than pursue a change so radical and unnerving» (*ibid.*: 166). The Crozier house is presented as older and grander than that of the protagonist. The dying patient adds to the Gothic mystique of the house. Through the female adolescent's eyes, «Mr. Crozier looked terrible. A tall man, whose ribs showed like those of a famine survivor […] whose head was pretty bald, and whose skin looked as if it had the texture of a plucked chicken's, his neck corded like an old man's» (*ibid.*: 173). Whenever the protagonist – who is hired by old Mr. Crozier to look after the patient for a few hours a day, when his wife Sylvia is off teaching – waits on him, she avoids looking at him. She explains that «this was not really because he was sick and ugly. It was because he was dying. I would have felt a similar reticence even if he had been angelically handsome. I was aware of an atmosphere of death in the house, which grew thicker as

you approached his room, and he was at the center of it, like the Host the Catholics kept in the box so powerfully called the tabernacle. He was the one stricken, marked out for everybody else» (*ibid.*: 174). The house here gains spiritual and mystic overtones for the narrator, compared to a sacred temple that contains the sacred body of a sacrificial scapegoat. The young woman is witness to his gradual decline, and she reflects on it. «Anybody could see how he was failing. There were hollows in his cheeks like an old man's, and the light shone through the tops of his ears, as if they were not flesh but plastic» (*ibid.*: 180). There is an explicit parallel drawn between the dying body – its corporeality, and the solid, inflexible structure of the house, with its solid, unbreakable oak doors. As the young protagonist witnesses the sexual overtures made by young, vital, overly sexualized Roxanne, Mrs. Crozier's masseuse, on the patient, she becomes both fascinated and repulsed by the idea of «carnality at death's door» as something that she wanted to «shake off back then, just as I would shake caterpillars off my sleeve» (*ibid.*: 188). This attraction/repulsion reaction inscribes the story in the realm of gothic horrors, with its potential for disrupting borders. It is significant that here, too, the house is not a permanent home, not the protagonist's own house. It is a transient private space, temporarily transformed into hospice care by imminent death, where the girl spends only a few hours a week, for one summer, although the experience haunts her for a lifetime, making this a modern day version of the haunted castle story. Mr Crozier's dying body serves both as a ghost and, in a twisted way, a kind of vicarious male seducer in the story.

The conflict between the women is brought to a halt by Mr Crozier's own intervention, with the help of the narrator, who contrives to get the key and lock the door to Mr Crozier's room, just as hints of a plot transpire in which Old Mrs Crozier and Roxanne plot «something special» for Mr Crozier, before any chance of being alone with him vanishes (*ibid.*: 182). Ella Vancoppernole notes that the symbol of the locked door is related to the fantastic and its «problems of vision» (Vancoppernole 2010: 45) – the fact that mysteries happen behind closed doors, and «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» (Rosemary Jackson quoted in Vancoppernole 2010: 45).

In one of her introductory remarks Alice Munro links the structure of a short story to the edifice of a house, as follows:

> You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room and corridors

> relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from these windows. And you, the visitor, the reader, are altered as well by being in this enclosed space, whether it is ample and easy or full of crooked turns, or sparsely or opulently furnished. You can go back again and again, and the house, the story, always contains more than you saw last time. It has also a sturdy sense of itself, of being built out of its own necessity, not just to shelter or beguile you. (Munro: 1997, «Introduction to the Vintage Edition»)

In reflecting on the shared features of both house and story, Susanne Becker writes that this common structure relies on 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 the complicated structure of the gothic house with its uncanny center» (Becker 1999: 114-115). The story follows this structure, with Mr Crozier's room as the uncanny center of the house, and the way the story moves back and forth between this place where the narrator makes brief forays into the abyss of uncertainty of the sublime and the rest of the house with its stairs, kitchen, library, and sunroom, where Old Mrs Crozier is getting her massages (Vancoppernole 2010: 45). At the intersection between these spaces, the narrator gets a precocious understanding of adult 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» (Munro 2009: 187).

«The Love of a Good Woman» features another Gothic-like house turned into a nursing home/hospice care. The space of the house takes on the attributes of Mrs Quinn, the dying patient. Mold grows in the jars of jam, vile-smelling water sits rancidly in a jar, and a general sense of disintegration and disorder takes over. Mrs Quinn reigns with displeasure over the disintegrating domain, while high blood pressure pulse and temperature are being recorded, as well as what she has eaten, vomited, excreted, and medicines taken. Behind closed doors Enid overhears «something deliberately vile» (Munro 1998: 56). Mrs Quinn's betrayal, her deliberate and compulsive acts of adultery with Mr Willens, the optometrist, and Mrs Quinn's husband, Rupert's, attack of Mr Willens, are in fact highly stylized and meant to illustrate stock villainous characters engaged in vile and reprehensible acts. Mr Willens, both in life and in death, is utterly repulsive. The grotesquery of his cadaver is highly stylized as well: «His eyes were not quite open, not shut either, and there was dribble coming out of his

mouth. But no skin broke on his face or bruise you could see – maybe it wouldn't have come up yet. The stuff coming out of his mouth didn't even look like blood. It was pink stuff, and if you wanted to know what it looked like it looked exactly like when the froth comes up when you're boiling the strawberries to make jam» (Munro 1998: 57).

However, the real Gothic characters in the story are Enid and Rupert in their human goodness, their penitent and almost sanctimonious righteousness. Enid pays for her outward dutiful self-restraint with her wild, incomprehensible, torturous dreams, in which, ironically and quite amusingly, she performs atrocious sexual acts with the same dispassionate pragmatism and detachment with which she performs her nursing duties. This adds to the grotesque Gothic dimension of the dreams: «In the dreams that came to her now she would be copulating or trying to copulate (sometimes she was prevented by intruders or shifts of circumstances) with utterly forbidden and unthinkable partners. With fat squirmy babies or patients in bandages or her own mother. She would be slick with lust, hollow and groaning with it, and she would set to work with roughness and an attitude of evil pragmatism[…] . She woke up unrepentant, sweaty and exhausted, and lay like a carcass until her own self, her shame and disbelief, came pouring back into her» (Munro 1998: 51).

Mrs Quinn, laying in her stupor and breathing faintly is a kind of scapegoat that embodies the murderous secret of the house. She is pregnant with the poisoning sickness (uremia) that is taking her to the grave, while Rupert, the murderer, and Enid, get to continue on, reconciled in a dark yet comforting way to the secret buried in the yard, a secret that unites them wordlessly in a binding, and in the end, almost mysterious and romanticized affection for one another. The story ends with two lonely, misunderstood, yet finally reunited, soulmates, intimately and irreversibly connected by their shared monstrous side, poised in the liminal space between the light space of the domestic and the dark chthonic realm (of the underworld).

Much of the rich scholarship on this story focuses on the way the innermost dark mysteries of human nature evade rationalization. The deepest desires of the heart return with mythic violence to restore the ecstasy of joy and pain dulled by the ordinary rituals of work and duty. As Enid sinks ecstatically into a downward progress in her unsettling dreams, she becomes aware of the opening of a secret inner space. This finds its correspondence in the outward surroundings of the house, in which Rupert and Jeanette Quinn enacted their own archetypal Bluebeard murder (as Judith McCombs points out). This inner dwelling is the chthonic realm (of the

underworld) – a liminal site in which passive inner processes stir in Enid a series of desires that complete and resolve the murder mystery in the same «dull, simple, amazing, and unfathomable» way in which the «deep caves [of the Gothic small town home are] paved with kitchen linoleum» (Munro, *Lives* 210). The dark and slimy caverns of the psyche distort the surrounding space of the patient's home into a similar archetypal setting of a murder mystery.

However, the opposite might be true as well. Dennis Duffy reflects on the Pauline allusion to a «dark sort of mirror» through which we now see darkly (Duffy 1998:183-84; 1 Corinthians 13:12), in reference to the trivial rites of domesticity that are set in sharp contrast to the gothic violence at the end of the story. The dark mirror speaks of a mimetic relationship between the inner psychic space and the outer domestic space, seemingly anodyne and yet a symmetrical and proper replica for the nurse's inner secrets. The repressive space of the house contains open secrets that are only barely contained – spilling inwardly outward and vice-versa. Enid has flashes of disturbing childhood memories about her father's adulterous relationship. Mrs Quinn's unseemly revelations of adultery connect the decay of the body to the decay of the house and, further inwardly, to the malignancy of Enid's nightmares. The Gothic machine at work in the narrative creates an utterly human experience of the mythic and the sacred in the chthonic space of the psyche.

The house is a mediator between the subjective inner experience of the outsider ingénue of the female Gothic (Enid) and the shared experience of the dwellers of the Bluebeard cave (Rupert, Jeanette, and Mr Willens, all of whom inhabit the dual roles of perpetrator and victim). Judith McCombs highlights the «thrilling sex-and-death versions of the fairy-tale quest» (McCombs 2000: 329), often taking place in dark chambers with lustful demon-lovers (McCombs 2000: 332), and which renders the Gothic space as not just a disordered nightmarish realm but also as a kind of Dionysian underworld. In this world Mrs Quinn «becomes Enid's dark mirror» (according to Coral Ann Howells quoted in McCombs 2000: 338). For Duffy, the dark mirror is more literally a reference to the underworld: «whatever one sees through this dark sort of mirror, will soon be seen face to face. Call it death» (Duffy 1998). The sacred dimension of the mythical emerges out of the ritual of ephemeral ordinary existence in the liminal space of the house. Both a living space and a place for death, the house witnesses the slow decay of the dying patient and the grotesque and violent murder of Mr Willens.

The liminality is also mirrored in Enid's dreams, where the violence is overlaid with illicit sexuality and its ecstasy, hinting at a Dionysian space

that awakens the primal drives of the unconscious. The fertilizing, liberatory and cathartic forces thus unleashed are directly linked to the body, as John Van Rhys notes in his analysis of the incarnational nature of this short story. In this paradigm, the anxiety that «the body is rubbish» (Rys 2020: 273) is countered by the «hope of renewal and resurrection» in the face of «death and decay» (Rys 2020: 273). Munro's incarnational imagination affirms humans as «inspirited dust or flesh» (Rys 2020: 273). Ironically, the sickroom is the ideal space to explore the desire of the body, as Enid's father intuits when he prohibits Enid's nursing occupation from the start. It is the sickroom that poisons Enid's dreams with perversion and violation. The sickroom resembles, at the macro level, the mysterious red box of the optometrist, which «contains an ophthalmoscope, a tool for examining the eye's interior, […] as well as a retinoscope to examine the refraction of light in the eye» (Rys 2020: 277). This latter instrument contains the «'dark sort of mirror' with a hole for a tiny, missing light to shine through» (Munro 20 quoted in Rys 2020: 277) that introduces «the figurative problem of vision, sight, and knowledge» (Rys 2020: 278) in the narrative. This is the mystery of the flesh, which, like another biblical parable of the decaying grain of wheat, dies in order to be transformed into new life.

Mrs Quinn's sickroom is also the new bride's room. Enid is careful to preserve the narrative of the sacrificial, faithful good nurse even as she undergoes her own psychological crisis. Self-denial and sacrifice are mirrored in another chthonic space of repressed memories and childhood denial. Her silent complicity with both mother and father enshrines her as a saint in the strict definition of holiness, as someone «set apart», chosen, for a sacred duty. The irony of the fact that Enid's goodness comes from harboring the perverse secrets of her parents is echoed later, in her own crisis of faith. The grey space of ethical judgment regarding Rupert's identity as either protector or murderer, sinner or saint, is ultimately deemed as grace, « a sideways and uncertain form of grace, a mystery» (Rys 2020: 290). The incarnational imagination gives expression to the subjective truth of embodied experience, molding it according to the archaic structure of Dionysian myth. Enid errs on the side of survival, life, fertility and the chaos of new life growing on top of the old decayed grain of wheat. The dead underneath the ground (grotesquely coupled in the underworld – as Jeanette rejoins Mr Willens) make room for the new couple exuberant with nurturing life. Their quiet domestic triumph transforms the grave of the sickroom into a new, clean, orderly space, effervescent with children and life: «Enid in 'bountiful good spirits' lets her own 'hair loose,' suns her bare legs, and makes for the children special treats and memorable 'holiday'

games (McCombs 2000: 339). Like a «good fairy godmother [she] shows the children how to make, from bent-wire 'bubble-wands' and soapsuds, 'as large a shinning bladder as possible'» (McCombs 2000: 339). The inner drama of the story is a drama of renewal from death to the redemption of a new life – a full cycle taking place in the same house: «Like a victorious True Bride […] Enid will make this house into her realm, 'a place that had no secrets from her and where all order was as she had decreed'» (Munro «Love» 77 quoted in McCombs 2000: 341).

This new revelation opens itself up to the same movement, as if stuck in a cycle of eternal return, where «inwardly questing Enid has slipped once more into a secret vision that opens her to love, or to death» (McCombs 2000: 342). The motion toward renewal is ritualistic and thus sacred – a metaphysical underpinning of the heavy materiality of domestic existence. The body with its leakage and odors and decay is rooted in a spiritual, unseen reality, after all, under whose care Rupert and Enid will set the stage for the drama of renewal to be enacted anew for the next generation – namely, Mrs Quinn's two girls. Even though ambiguous, the ending is thus hopeful, hinting at the fact that on this side of the grave there is grace, but not purity. All life springs anew from decay, with the violence of the Dionysian, unspeakably monstrous and mysterious, yet cathartic – a mimesis of an experience that will be fully seen and understood at a future moment, forever deferred. Meanwhile, life happens in the liminal space of the «now», which is the only sacred space on this side of heaven. The objective correlative of this space is the red box as a microcosm of the psycho-space of the house, an almost mythical object. Ildikó de Papp Carrington has defined the box as a «metafictional metaphor for the mystery's narrative complexity» (Carrington 1997: 169). For Catherine Sheldrick Ross «the solid presence of the red box in the museum seems to lend additional weight to Mrs Quinn's final version of the story» (Ross 2002: 790) and, I would argue, to the entire story, as the reader keeps reading in order to make interpretive sense of the «objective» foundation of Enid's moral dilemma.

The house as classroom/education

The female narrator of «Wenlock Edge» from *Too Much Happiness* is virtually imprisoned of her own accord when she accepts a dinner invitation at the house of Mr. Arthur Purvis, the elderly villain of the story. His assistant, Mrs. Winner, asks the young student to strip naked before entering the dining room. Even though no physical violation occurs, the experience counts as a psychological violation for the narrator later in the

story, when she reflects that «I would always be reminded of what I had done, what I had agreed to do. Not being forced, not ordered, not even persuaded. Agreed to do». The dinner becomes the central moment of self-discovery. Unlike Nina, the young woman who is previously much used and abused by life and predatory men, and who is largely ignorant of bookish knowledge, the narrator believes herself to be more worldly and sophisticated than she actually is. She also thinks herself impervious to violation due to her superior knowledge of literature and philosophy.

Even though Nina is framed as a vulnerable child throughout the story, and the narrator as the worldly intellectual, critical of herself and others, we are given early hints of the narrator's immaturity. For example, she has a «country girl's notion» that all men who live in the city indulge in a certain level of prosperity, and when she goes out to dine with her older cousin Ernie, she takes a long time choosing from the menu, «like a five-year old trying to decide between flavors of ice cream» (Munro 2010: 65). Her so-called virtue is more a matter of lack of experience, a certain amount of privilege, and a great deal of self-righteousness. Up until she is «trapped» in Mr. Purvis's house, she has had little experience with either sex or the vicissitudes of life. Mr. Purvis's house is not the secluded «stodgy mansion surrounded by acres of lawns and unfarmed fields north of the city» that she imagines (*ibid.*: 76). Instead, the narrator and Mrs. Winner travel to a prosperous part of town in a neighborhood of «mock-Tudor houses with their lights on», to a house that she recognized as «modern» by its flat roof and long wall of windows and the fact that the building material appeared to be concrete» (*ibid.*: 76). From here the description of the house takes on Gothic overtones. The car slides «down a ramp into a cavernous basement garage», and then the two women take the elevator up one floor and emerge into a hallway (*ibid.*: 76). The house begins to take on a maze-like, old manor quality, particularly as seen through the narrator's eyes: upholstered straight-backed chairs, little polished tables, mirrors and rugs. Next, the young woman and Mr. Purvis move to a «windowless room with benches and hooks around the walls, like a school cloakroom, except for the polish on the wood and carpet on the floor» (*ibid.*: 77). It is in this room that the narrator is asked to remove all her clothes with a mocking taunt from Mrs. Winner: «I hope you're not a baby. […] Oh no. […] So you're just a bookworm. That's all you are» (*ibid.*: 77).

The challenge brings into focus two issues: one, the narrator's lack of actual worldly experience, particularly with men. The second, the house itself. The space brings into focus what Davison calls «the ambivalent nature of the domestic sphere» and «the dark side of domestic spaces related to

ideals of marriage and motherhood» (Davison 2016: 53). In female Gothic novels, as the heroine explores the Gothic house in which she is trapped, she also investigates her relationship to her body and all the connotations of power and vulnerability associated with it. The heroine has anxieties about boundaries of the self, fears that her self-identity and autonomy are threatened or, on contrary, that previously suppressed impulses will be given expression. In the process, Davison claims, the «self is revealed to be other, and the Other an aspect of the self» (*ibid.*: 53). The theme of transformation is a common motif of the Gothic, and we see it gradually developing in Munro's story throughout the narrator's dinner with Mr. Purvis. Even though she doesn't feel in danger of being raped, and acknowledges the fact that she is probably not kept in the house against her will, there is a sense in which the young woman feels under compulsion to perform a perverse act for the benefit of Mr. Purvis' sexual appetite, and that she has little power to control the situation. As she sits naked at the dinner table making polite conversation with Mr. Purvis, she becomes self-conscious about her «large and lollopy» breasts and suffers from «waves of flushing», and imagines that, upon observing her discomposure, Mr. Purvis's voice changes slightly, «becoming more soothing and politely satisfied, as if he'd just made a winning move in a game» (*ibid.*: 80). The house is revealed to be the equivalent of an extended boudoir or harem, and old and thin Mr. Purvis the proprietor of it, and by extension, of the narrator's naked performance. The young woman's repressed anxieties are explored in this setting, and she becomes conscious both of a sexual fluster and an objective distancing from her body.

As they move together from the dining room to the library, the narrator examines her surroundings specifically in relation to her naked body, thus drawing a direct link between the interior of the house and her vulnerable flesh. The house becomes not only the stage upon which the narrator performs her nakedness, but also a direct extension of her body. The chair on which she sits in the library is upholstered with dark plush material «which prickled, setting off an intimate agitation», and the lights in the library are brighter and seem more «prying and reproving than those in the dimly lit dining room (*ibid.*: 82). As they move from one room to another, the narrator recalls stories in which «the room referred to as a library would turn out to be a bedroom, with soft lights and puffy cushions» (*ibid.*: 82). The heroine's heretofore repressed sexuality is obliquely acknowledged through her fear – not of what Mr. Purvis might do to her physically, but what she herself might willingly put herself in a position to want to happen to her. She represses such thoughts by viewing female

embodiment as repulsive and abject. As she walks behind Mr. Purvis, she is glad that he is not behind her and cannot see the back of her body, «the most beastly part» (*ibid.*: 81). In the midst of her sexual agitation, she is also able to double up on the situation with a meta-commentary on the nature of the human condition, both in order to regain some control over her situation and to stave off the acknowledgment of her repressed sexuality: «the thought came to me that everybody in the world was naked. We were all sad, bare creatures» (*ibid.*: 83).

It is significant that, even though she prides herself in obtaining all her knowledge in a university setting, the young female narrator's main self-revelation happens in the gothic-like interior setting of a home turned classroom for a different kind of education. Davison points out that the purpose of the domestic setting – the house – as the place where most middle-class and upper-class women of the late 18th century spent the majority of their lives – is the place that is most likely to lead to identity and sexual psychic catharsis. Rebecca Janicker notes that the device of the Gothic house is that of a liminal space, caught between past and present, and is a transitional area that shapes identity where previously repressed things are revealed. Liminality is connected to initiation rites and sacred time outside the normal experience of society, Janicker notes, and the novitiate has the opportunity to absorb vital knowledge in this liminal space (Janicker 2015: 184). Thus, Mr. Purvis's house functions as a space of isolation, apart from the narrator's everyday experience, and as a place of confrontation – ideal for individual development and growth. The protagonist of the female Gothic holds a precarious and vulnerable position as she undergoes her initiation in a space of entrapment that is also shrouded in mystery. For this reason, the Gothic castle, manor or house is important as a place of disruption and destabilization – not as a permanent home, but as a transient place (185). The confusion between private and public is at the core of the destabilizing experience for the narrator in Mr. Purvis's house. She arrives seemingly to engage in a social situation, but this only masks her desire for initiation and education of a different kind.

Joanna Luft (2010) analyzes the metanarrative of the story – the medieval legend of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, according to which the narrator is cornered in Mr. Purvis' house the same way hunting game is cornered in the woods and hunted down. She also notes how the heroine is served up, just like the cornish hen, for his sexual appetite, and how her body is like an open book for him. His consumption of her is sexual, and in her innocence, she becomes complicit in her own destruction. The setting of the house is crucial to Mr. Purvis' execution. The house is a consumption

trap. The kitchen, the bedroom, and the library are all consuming spaces, because the Gothic house itself is a place of perverse consumption.

The edifice of Munro's house adjusts its architecture to become a space for consumptive bodies (succumbing to disease or old age, as it were) and consumable bodies. Indeed, the inner space of the house accommodates the gradual initiation into each successive stage of embodied female existence. As Julie Rivkin notes, the three-storied layout of the house in «Wenlock Edge» follows the trajectory of the expected female experience. Starting at the top, the studious narrator occupies the third floor and the life of the mind; one level below, two students engage in prosaic female occupations of boyfriends and the life of the body; a final descent takes us to the life of matrimony on the first floor, amid a «scene of misery and confusion» (Munro 81 quoted in Rivkin 2021: 1094). In this micro-buildingsroman of the female trajectory «the architecture makes visible a tension between high and low, or mind and body» (Rivkin 2021: 1095). With her contradictory mix of worldliness and ignorance, Nina, the outsider, disrupts this predictable pattern as she introduces «a strain of the marvelous into the story» (Rivkin 2021: 1095), thus turning the narrator's «educational journey [into] a form of medieval quest romance» (Rivkin 2021: 1095).

As with the other stories discussed here, the ultimate goal of the Gothic space is to educate the female heroine into the maturity needed as preparation for matrimony. The male villain occupies the position of educator, and Mr. Arthur Purvis is a fastidious master that teaches his student an inverted perversion of the Arthurian romance (Rivkin 2021: 1089). She learns from this lesson, belatedly, after several days pass, that a studious young woman has only the illusion of control in her confrontation with the elderly villain; and that the real violation does not come through exposure of nakedness alone, but rather through the secret shame at having been compliant in her own victimization; finally, that evil is not something she can learn about from books, but only from real experience. Therein lies her true education – namely, in a kind of disciplinary fantasy akin to an initiation (Rivkin 2021: 1085). Thus, entering Mr. Purvis's library is like «coming inside a story' for the narrator for whom 'libraries in houses […] were known to [her] only from books' (Munro 86 quoted in Rivkin 2021: 1096). [The] wall panel door that opens at Mr. Purvis's touch might well be a book cover, and the space she's invited into a magical inner sanctum of literature itself» (Rivkin 2021: 1096).

The house as a Gothic dream space

Dreams, nightmares, and altered dream states permeate the stories and enhance the uncanny effects of Munro's female Gothic. When the protagonist's psyche is disturbed, the house becomes the outward embodiment of the nightmare and the site of suspense and dread that heightens the heroine's inner states of shock and horror, to the point of pushing the horror into the sublime. Enid's disturbing sexual dreams in «The Love of a Good Woman» collide with domesticity, romance, and the nursing of a dying woman, and they take a Gothic, monstrous turn. The dreams unveil the forbidden and the unthinkable to underscore the heavily censored states of knowledge and perception of young women who must not 'know' anything and whose perceptions cannot be trusted. The protagonist's states of mental confusion are externalized in the setting of the house. Carol Davison notes that the persecuted maiden of the female Gothic is trapped in a haunted castle with maze-like corridors, which leads to a confrontation with the protagonist's self. The Gothic castle or house tests the heroine's fears and anxieties about sexuality. Dreams perform the same function in Munro. They underscore the fact that women's perceptions cannot be trusted, and they themselves should not trust their own intuition. Dreams are liminal states that disrupt the distinction between real and imagined, and slide from horror and terror into the sublime. Enid's monstrous dreams disrupt her previous conceptions of systems, order, identity and goodness, and become a threat to her idea of self, a figuration of sexual horror. Abjection, as Julia Kristeva remarks, consists of thinking the unthinkable and the forbidden, when the ejected outside becomes the revolting inside. As Vijay Mishra notes, «the Gothic celebrates both the power of the sublime and the self's willingness to be subjugated» (Mishra quoted in Nadal 2000: 383).

In «My Mother's Dream» we are in a dream within a dream, a nightmare, in which a young mother realizes she has forgotten her baby outside of the house, on the ground, where overnight snow had fallen. The dream coincides with the states of confusion, exhaustion and hormonal imbalance brought about by post-partum, and oscillates between nightmare and fairy tale to capture the disorientation of new motherhood that can easily slide into horror and psychosis. For Ronald Thomas «every dream is a possession», both in terms of being possessed by one's fears and desires, and in terms of using the dream as a mirror, past which the protagonist can learn self-possession. In this latter case, Ronald argues, the little girl inside can recover her «dream of authority» as a «frightening kind of possession» and make it her own: «a force that lived its own life and told its own sto-

ry through her» (Thomas 1990: 1). It is a process of recovery and resistance, and the protagonists of Munro's female Gothic learn, through their dreams, that mastery of self-knowledge and perception involves co-opting and expressing in language the «operation of the mind at the moment of its deepest indecipherability, the moment of the dream» (*ibid.*: 1).

Dreams encrypt the internal conflict between the heart and the mind – the schizophrenic split of the female protagonist who has to choose between her inner knowing – a truth that reconstitutes her whole being along new lines of being in the world – and that of the world around her – the many voices that place demands and expectations on her she is either unwilling, or unable to fulfill. The psychic struggle manifests as indecision and mental and emotional wavering during waking states, and as frightening, gruesome, or just confusing, dreams or nightmares during sleep states. In each of the stories of the collection where dreams appear, the protagonist is facing some kind of personal dilemma, a decisive moment at a fork in her life. On one hand, there is the swarm of voices, the collective mental chatter with its weight and pressure. On the other hand, there is a truth that arises out of her lived and embodied experience that feels compelling, but so radically set against the conventional opinion as to seem untrustworthy or dangerous if lived. The veracity of this inner truth, and the certainty that one comes to the correct interpretation and application of that inner truth, is on a deeper level the problem of these stories, and the decision that must ensue.

The nineteenth century is struck with the revelation of the self as a liminal category, as Christine Berthin notes. At the intersection of scientific, medical and philosophical discourses, the boundaries of the self are perceived as receding into the previously unexplored realm of the psyche. This is a shift from the supernatural into the psychological. Explanation of dreams moves from the «external visitation of a supernatural being, the incubus, lying heavily upon the dreamer's body» (Berthin 2016: 203) to the internal, but just as mysterious, figure of the psyche. Dreams are used widely in the Gothic fiction of the time to show the tension between religious and scientific interpretations. Dreams are in turn rationalized when they become threatening and unsettling as nightmare and irrationalized as part of the traditional Gothic plot in order to show conflicts and complexities in the character (*ibid.*: 204). As Berthin notes, dreams in the nineteenth century novel serve «as a process of internalization of the other» and are the roads that lead to [the protagonist's] subconscious. Dreaming, in the Gothic, has become more openly linked to desire (*ibid.*: 204).

Sue Chaplin argues that Gothic dreams and visions relate to a kind of «extraordinary reality» of the heroine that has to do with her juridical cer-

tainty (Chaplin 2007: 101). The woman's dreams encode the conventions of a truth related to the Gothic spaces of the dream. Their «dark, funereal chambers and labyrinthine passages» connect the fears of the inner psyche to the outer architectural space (*ibid.*: 101). Upon waking, the heroine has to confront a disturbing truth in reality that had announced itself in the dream. The suggestion of a supernatural prophetic meaning of the dream is both present and undercut in Radcliffe's Gothic novels, as Chaplin points out (*ibid.*: 101). In the wake of the dream, the heroine «is indeed about to come to terms with some spectre concerning her past and to fulfill a destiny that will place her on new terms with the law 'outside' this Gothic dream-space» (*ibid.:* 102). Her journey deeper into the interior of the Gothic house oscillates between composed exploration with the aid of reasonable inquiry and the compromise of this composure through curiosity and terror upon discovering artefacts that invoke the Gothic reality of the dream. Ultimately, even though the supernatural is disavowed, its extraordinary power is revealed to be at work to reveal a truth about the past (*ibid.:* 102). Desire is the theme of the protagonists' dreams in Munro's collection. As Freud himself theorizes in his own rather Gothic *Interpretation of Dreams*, dreams come to reflect those desires that are either «censored or illicit»: «a dream is the veiled expression of a repressed wish» (Berthin 2016: 204), And, in contemporary fiction, «the indecipherability of dreams […] no longer simply speaks of a complex self. It has become the symptom of shattered psyches» (*ibid.:* 205).

In Munro's female gothic «the familiar domesticity of «woman's place becomes radically unheimlich» (Becker 1999: 24) because of an excess of everyday experiences (*ibid.*: 24). In fact, Magdalene Redekop notes 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 […] uncanny» (Redekop 1992: 12). Munro's two stories, «Wenlock Edge» and «Some Women» both employ the house as a site of an excess of domesticity that spills into the barely submerged and contained horror and fascination of a sexual encounter for two young and inexperienced, but keenly observant young female narrators. Both protagonists remain unnamed as a marker of their status as novices or liminars when it comes to sex. In both cases, at the center of the house and of the sexual conflict we find two seemingly weak and emasculated men – one by age, the other by illness who, intentionally or not, provide each of the female protagonists with the horror of the unspeakable at the core of the traditional house. The domestic space is a mod-

ern day version of the Gothic castle, where young women are «trapped in a narrow world of male dominance» (Vancoppernole 2010: 60), and where, to compensate for their servitude, women also manipulate other women. For example, the two women turn against Sylvia, and Nina becomes the student narrator's spiteful revenge object in «Wenlock Edge», making the narrator both victim and perpetrator, and doubly victimizing the hapless Nina. As Vijay Mishra notes, «the Gothic celebrates both the power of the sublime and the self's willingness to be subjugated. The will to power […] is thus linked to a desire, a will, to be subjugated in the first instance» (quoted in Nadal 2000: 382).

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