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Stylistic Perspectives on Alice Munro's *Dance of the Happy Shades*

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## Why write stylistic analyses of Munro's stories?

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What is a stylistic approach to a literary text? It is a textual analysis and a commentary articulated in linguistic terms. It assumes that the descriptive and explanatory systems of one linguistic model or another should be a good way of enhancing our understanding of how the text works. And not just 'should' but 'must'; and not just for a literary text, but any text.

As Michael Burke reminds us in his Introduction to the recently-published *Routledge Handbook of Stylistics* (2014), the origins of stylistics lie in the poetics and rhetorical studies of the ancient Greeks, but it has reinvented itself many times over to suit changing times. Within the English literary tradition, for example, the Renaissance period saw the emergence of handbooks of elegant and 'cultured' style. Then in the Augustan and Classical period, writers like Pope, Dryden and Johnson continually commented on the writing of the time in ways that were covertly stylistic: they expressed censure or approval of writers' grammar and usage very much on the assumption that alternative choices of grammar and phrasing would be demonstrably better (or worse). Thus they did not aim merely to promote their subjective tastes and opinions on matters of effective writing; rather they sought arguments and evidence to support their judgements, as stylisticians do.

We can fast-forward to the Russian formalists (and, later, Bakhtin), to structuralist scholars of poetics like Shklovsky, Mukařovsky, and Jakobson, and then to the steady growth of interest in a loose coalition of literary-linguistic traditions over the last fifty years. Today there are many hyphenated sub-types of stylistics, most notably cognitive stylistics or poetics, but also corpus stylistics, pragmatic stylistics, (critical) discourse

stylistics, ecolinguistic stylistics, and several more. Mostly, more unites these than separates them. Mostly they study, from different angles, the language of literature, so linguistic categories and methods take pride of place, albeit a substantially contextualised linguistics. By a contextualised linguistics I mean one that recognises that form, meaning, value and interpretation are open to change with change of reader, despite the degree of convergence or similarity, among diverse readers' reading of a single text, which makes the idea of a shared language and textual analysis possible.

As has been often noted, stylistic analysis of a text aims to be explicit and accessible: it tries to talk about texts in terms which are clear and comprehensible to all. Most stylisticians would regard it as a kind of failure if the discourse of their article about a 'difficult' poem was comprehensible to a smaller group of readers than the poem itself was. That is the failing which, some stylisticians have argued, the more esoteric and subjective types of literary criticism are prone to, denouncing such criticism as elitist or presumptuous. If a poem is (roughly) understandable by a hundred people in a given population, while the critical commentary on that poem is understandable by only fifty of the original hundred, then there is a sense in which the commentary serves no useful purpose at all (those fifty already understood). By contrast if a stylistic commentary enables two hundred people to derive more understanding and appreciation of a poem independently roughly understood by half that number, then the readership has grown, and an effort of outreach and awareness-raising has been worthwhile.

How patronising, didactic, and question-begging to put the case in those terms, displaying a presumption just as deplorable as the literary critic's, the reader may think (both critic and stylistician would seem to be in the same business, of asserting 'the expert knows best'). But there are significant differences in the roles: the intuition-dependent, impressionistic critic is more like a judge who makes declarations without reasons, the stylistician more like an advocate, who offers reasons and proposes conclusions, for general readers (members of the jury) to accept or reject. Stylistics does not hide its teacherly tendency, seeking only to justify it by underpinning it with good arguments, clear evidence, scope for postulated claims to be tested and amended if necessary. And what does this idea that a stylistic commentary is 'retrievable' or 'falsifiable' really mean? It means that the stylistician aims to show the reader how to repeat the analysis and invites them to do so—or to apply the same method on a comparable text.

In this way a ‘transfer of skills’ lies at the scientific core of stylistics: most of its practitioners do not aim to dazzle their readers, awed into intellectual silence by the brilliance and incontrovertibility of the literary-linguistic analysis. Rather, they seek to involve and engage the reader, by showing their working as they develop evidence for interpretive points (some of these may be quite pedestrian), and inviting the reader to question the steps in the argument, the strength of the reasoning, and the possibility of alternative readings.

I should add that as I compose these pious claims, with all their vulnerability to the complaint that they show no capacity for self-criticism, I am acutely aware of the danger of being hoisted by my own petard. Is my own article in this collection clear and comprehensible along the lines I have protested? Will it add to the ideas about the story that those who have read it already have? Will it help anyone to appreciate the story fuller? I am in the reader’s hands.

Why, though, is a stylistic approach appropriate in the case of Alice Munro’s fiction? I believe a stylistic approach is justified because everything about Munro’s work reveals that her writing involves the most painstaking craft, alongside exceptional psychological insight into people’s drives and emotions, their fears and desires, and their sheer bafflement at the complexities of living. Munro is not a general practitioner or a psychiatrist or a priest, she is not our wife, our husband, our daughter or grandmother, our lawyer or our accountant. She is not our embalmer. But it is as if she sees and hears all that these intimates and experts might see of us, and selectively discloses these insights in ‘scenes from the life’ that are as composed and weighted as a sonnet or a sonata. Her best stories are perfect structures, ‘*où tout se tient*’. That certainly does not mean they are texts where all is explained; certainly not, for the simple reason that not all is explicable. There will be gaps, secrets, mysteries, and lacunae; there will be causes and reasons that never quite come clear. These unnarratable things, Munro often reminds us, are the things most worth trying to tell.

So in these complex tellings (even in these early stories, Munro’s gifts of anachronic narration and unexpected shifts of point of view are apparent) all will *not* become clear by the ends of these stories, with initial lack filled or problem solved. Sometimes it is only towards the end of a story that reader and protagonist begin to discern that there *is* a problem, let alone its precise nature or extent. Or if story-closure of a kind is achieved, it is of a literally temporary kind: imposed by the unstoppable passage of time, the fact that at some point in texts as in exams and as in

life, 'time is up'. So Munro's stories, by design, have little in common with the ruthless symmetry of the new subdivision of "shining houses" and yards in the story of that name, violently forced upon the old wilderness city. Munro's story structures might be better compared to the unpicturesque jumble of objects surrounding old Mrs Fullerton's house, of which the narrator remarks:

Here was no open or straightforward plan, no order that an outsider could understand; yet what was haphazard time had made final. ("The Shining Houses", 22)

Time, not design, as the arbitrary imposer of finality. In the story there can be no peaceful co-existence, let alone reconciliation, between the new order and the old disorder. There is a noticeably masculine emphasis to the new settlers' enterprise, involving 'competitive violence and energy' on the path to 'soundness and excellence' and 'a community'. This last *desideratum* is proposed, the narrator comments, "as if they [the new suburbanites] found a modern and well-proportioned magic in it, and no possibility anywhere of a mistake" (*mistake*, by the way, is a favourite Munro word – perhaps because they are one thing we all make). There is an almost Beckettian ending to this story, where the thoughts of Mary, the story's focaliser, are relayed in free direct form. Mary is the only newcomer sympathetic to Mrs Fullerton, but she is outvoted by her peers, who are intent on bulldozing what is old, unmodern, dirty and smelly out of the neighbourhood. Her downbeat conclusion is "There is nothing you can do at present" (29).

But surely the kind of 'micro' analysis that these stylistic papers present, poking and prodding little oddities of wording, or repetition, or choice of phrase, will tend to cause us to neglect the larger picture? Aren't stylists admiring individual trees, and thereby failing to see the forest as a whole? And could Munro have really *intended* all the extensive ideas and associations that these essays assert are carried by the various parts of the texts discussed? The questioner could have a point here, certainly. But these kinds of scepticism might cause us to disregard the meticulous—obsessive, even—care with which every little detail of the wording and the phrasing has been worried over, worked upon, and—yes—improved upon by Munro as she has put these stories through (who knows?), dozens of drafts. Consider how a top class chef will be a perfectionist with regard to every aspect of the preparation and the presentation of a dish—a dish that

will be gone within the hour! How much more anxious and perfectionist is the architect, or the painter, or the literary writer.

You might think that once Munro had ‘got the hang of’ writing stories—say after 20 or 30 years!—she would do less polishing and revising, would know ‘at once’ when she had put things the best way she could. Or, in effect, that the tiniest details of word-choice and phrasing were of no significance, so that to keep things as they were would be as good as to change them—which is really to say that such moments are not perceptible as details at all. Some ‘details’ encountered in a reading of a Munro story may certainly be of that kind: is the story printed in Times New Roman, or Bookman Old Style? Is the initial letter of each story section in a larger font than the rest of the text, or is the initial word in small caps? Are *ise/isation* words spelled with *s* or *z*? Is *cloakroom* (in “Red Dress”, 158-9) spelled as two words, or as one word, or hyphenated? Even these variations, a multimodal stylistician would consider. My point is that all textual phenomena ‘above’ this level are significant details for Munro and therefore for the reader: each of them may trigger story-relevant inferences or implicatures that enrich, by making more complex, a reader’s apprehension of the story.

Consider Munro’s story called “Passion”, was first published in *The New Yorker* magazine in March 2004, and was then included in her collection *Runaway* (Knopf), which appeared later the same year. Before publication in the *New Yorker*, the story will have gone through multiple drafts, with comments and critique from her agent, and then from her editor at the magazine, so that the version published there was a fine one, a finished work. Except Munro wasn’t finished with it. In the book-published story, I have found over 200 changes made by Munro to the version published a few months earlier in the *New Yorker*: more than 200! My favourite is the last change in the story: a mention of *a cheque for a thousand dollars* is changed to *a cheque for one thousand dollars*. What’s the difference, one may ask? A thousand is one thousand, and one dozen is a dozen... But Munro is subtly exploiting a linguistic difference where grammar overlaps with pragmatics, that is, with meaning in context. Saying ‘a thousand’ of anything simply reports a quantity, but does not particularly focus on the completeness or emphasise the precise amount of the quantity. Viewed in written form or spoken aloud, *a cheque for one thousand dollars* cannot be read or said without paying some extra attention to the *one*, beyond what you would pay to the indefinite article, *a*. The use of *one thousand* implies that the cheque is for a whole

thousand dollars, or as much as a thousand dollars. The altered choice better captures the point of view of the impecunious young woman (whom the story focaliser, now forty years older, remembers herself once to have been), for whom this sum is a life-changing amount of money, a passport to a new life.

Incidentally, on the topic of Munroian revision there is revealing moment at the end of the Nobel Prize interview that Alice Munro gave in her own home (in November 2013), in lieu of travelling to Stockholm to receive the award and deliver an acceptance speech. The interviewer asks Do you ever go back these days and read any of your old books? and Munro replies:

No! No! I am afraid to! No, but then I would probably get a terrific urge to change just a little bit here, a little bit there, and I have even done that in certain copies of my books that I would take out of the cupboard, but then I realize that it doesn't matter if I change them, because it's not changed out there.

Here is another confirmation of Munro's stylistic perfectionism which, in light of the power and depth of the work she is burnishing, is the best reason for giving her stories the stylistic attention that the following essays attempt.

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