



Études de stylistique anglaise

8 | 2015

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

“Here was no open straightforward plan”: Jumbled Space in “The Shining Houses”

Eleonora Rao



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/esa/883>

DOI: 10.4000/esa.883

ISSN: 2650-2623

Publisher

Société de stylistique anglaise

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 March 2015

Number of pages: 71-82

ISBN: 978-2-36442-060-1

ISSN: 2116-1747

Electronic reference

Eleonora Rao, « “Here was no open straightforward plan”: Jumbled Space in “The Shining Houses” », *Études de stylistique anglaise* [Online], 8 | 2015, Online since 19 February 2019, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/esa/883> ; DOI : 10.4000/esa.883

“Here was no open straightforward plan”: Jumbled Space in “The Shining Houses”

Eleonora RAO
University of Salerno, Italy

In this essay I shall look at Alice Munro’s use of place and space in “The Shining Houses”, the second story in *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Compared to the other stories in the collection and to Munro’s subsequent work, “The Shining Houses” is unusual for its brevity, with almost no events, but very dense in its treatment of place, space and landscape as it portrays a wilderness city transformed into a residential, sort of suburbia, subdivision. In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan proposes a specific differentiation between space and place. He considers space as an area of freedom and mobility, while place is seen as an enclosed and humanized space: “Compared to space, place is a calm center of established values” (Tuan 1977, 54). Munro’s story devotes special attention to both space and place, in a manner similar to Tuan’s conceptualization of them, and also shows their interaction and metamorphosis.

This essay considers space and landscape in the story not as inert empty containers; it looks instead at their function as metonyms. As a consequence, space is not subsidiary to plot and character but interconnected with them. Traditional notions of space see it as a kind of stasis, characterized by neutrality and passivity, where nothing really happens. Since the 1970s, a new approach to geography has questioned these concepts and has initiated the so called “spatial turn” within the

human and social sciences.¹ This new branch of the discipline known as human geography or radical geography sees space as a social construct and therefore constituted through social relations and material social practices. To summarize the main points about space and place in human geography relevant to the analysis carried out in this article, it should be considered, first of all, that space is the product of interrelations, constituted through interactions. Secondly, space should be conceived as the “sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity.” (Massey (2005), 2007, 9). Space must be predicated upon the existence of plurality. Thirdly, space must be regarded “always under construction [...] always in the process of being made [...] never finished; never closed.” (9). Tuan also links space to movement and place to pauses: “From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa” (Tuan 1977, 6).

A scenario of outsiders and /or strangers populates Munro’s macro text. Critics have discussed this at length². This essay examines corollary aspects related to the outsider condition. “The Shining Houses” revolves around the transformation of a rural area into middle class suburbia. An inhabitant of the old rural neighborhood, Mrs. Fullerton, refuses to sell her property, which in the minds of the new residents has some disconcerting qualities: it is dilapidated and smelly, possibly because of the chicken she keeps in her yard. Mrs. Fullerton thus turns into an outsider, and her house and the land surrounding it become the locus of

¹ See in particular Henri Lefèbvre, *La production de l’espace* (1974), Paris: Anthropos, 2000 (4th ed.), transl. by N. Donaldson-Smith, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991; Tuan, *Place and Space*; Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, London & New York: Verso, 1989.

² Robert Thacker. *Alice Munro: Writing Her Life. A Biography*. Toronto: Emblem McClelland & Stewart, 2011. Rowland Smith. “Rewriting the Frontier: Wilderness and Social Code in the Fiction of Alice Munro” in *Alice Munro*. Harold Bloom ed., New York, Infobase Publishing, 2009, pp. 153-166. G. Balestra, L. Ferri, G. Ricciardi eds. *Reading Alice Munro in Italy*. Toronto: The Frank Iacobucci Centre for Italian Canadian Studies, 2008. Gerald Lynch. *The One and the Many: English Canadian Short Story Cycle*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. Georgian Murphy. “The Art of Alice Munro: Memory, Identity, and the Aesthetics of Connections” in *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*. Mickey Pearlman ed., Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993, pp. 12-23. James Carscallen. *The Other Country: Patterns in the Writing of Alice Munro*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1993. David Williams. *Confessional Fictions: A Portrait of the Artist in the Canadian Novel*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991. Coral Ann Howells, *Alice Munro*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.

eccentricity in the newly created residential area. The new owners try to find legal ways to force her to sell, and eventually succeed. The story shows how the creation of place by necessity involves the definition of what lies outside. As cultural geographer Tim Cresswell observes, “the ‘outside’ plays a crucial role in the definition of the ‘inside’”. The term place suggests “a tight connection between geographical place and the assumptions about normative behavior. People and practices [...] can be ‘in-place’ or ‘out-of-place’”(103).

In the story the subdivision called “Garden Place” is meant to provide comfortable dwellings at reasonable costs. Those homes “were for people like Mary and her husband and their child, with not much money but expectation of more” (23). The houses in “Garden Place” with their “vivid colours” and their “geometrical designs” (29) are intended for middle class young families. Here the symmetrical roads are named after flowers and the “ingenuously similar houses” look “calmly at each other, all the way down the street” (23).

The story thus encapsulates three figurations or themes that are dear to Munro. First, the representation of an outsider to the community; second, the attention to the representations of homes; the third element, the landscape, is constantly linked to the other two, the houses and the outsider. Furthermore, the landscape at the end of the story metamorphoses and assumes the role of character. This article will look at the spatial dimension of the story intended here not merely as setting. In order to do so, I rely on the work of human geographers such as Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose who see space as something in constant process. Traditional conceptualizations of time and space –Massey argues – see the two opposed to each other where time is the one which matters and out of which History (with capital H) is made. As she puts in plain words: “Time Marches on but space is a kind of stasis, where nothing really happens” (Massey 1994: 253). On the contrary, for radical geographers, “far from being the realm of stasis, space and the spatial are also implicated [...] in the production of history” (Massey 1994: 254). Radical geographers speak of space/time and consider the dimensions of space and time “inextricably interwoven” (Massey 1994: 261). Space – they argue – must not be conceptualized in terms of absence or lack. In their positive definition both space and time should be inter-related and as a result an “absolute” dimension of space does not exist: “space is not absolute, it is relational” (Massey 1994: 261). In this perspective space becomes “the perfectly

obvious, manifest fabric of social existence, not its mysterious underside” (West-Pavlov 2009: 23).

Many of Munro’s characters pursue an unrelenting search for comfort and security in a house / home and sooner or later discover its elusiveness and precariousness. As, for example, in “Oh, What Avails”:

Far back in the house, Joan’s mother is singing along with the radio. She doesn’t know of any danger. Between the front door, the scene outside and their mother singing in the kitchen, Joan feels the dimness, the chilliness, the frailty and impermanence of these high half-bare rooms – of their house. It is just a place to be judged like other places –it’s nothing special. It is no protection. (*Friend of My Youth* 193).

“The Peace of Utrecht” from *Dance of the Happy Shades* represents homecoming as an impossibility: “I have been at home now for three weeks and it has not been a success” (190). From this opening onwards, home and family fail to provide the comfort and the stability that is traditionally associated with them; what they offer instead is “the dim world of continuing disaster [...] home” (191). The sense of bounded reassurance will be shattered, albeit subtly. In actual fact, as the story closes, it is a glass bowl, a “heavy and elaborate old bowl” which will slip out of one of the protagonist’s hands and smash on the floor (210).

The power, often negative, that places or houses can have on the subject is beautifully established in “Who Do You Think You Are?” The protagonist makes this painful recognition after having spent some time in the mansion of her very rich prospective parents in law: “She had never known before how some places could choke you off, choke off your very life” (112). This episode shows how place and / or space becomes an agent in ways that could be tyrannical and hard to pin down (Gordon 2000); of how it can elicit desires, then disappoint or reappropriate these desires and camouflage the ache of disappointment. There is a kind of unrepresentability about that particular oppressing space, a pressure that has to do not only with social maps but also with what is repressed, hidden, encrypted or unspoken. Space “exerts its own variety of agency, modeling the human actors who have configured it” (West-Pavlov 2009: 19). As Robert McGill argues in his excellent article “Where do you think you are? Alice Munro’s Open Houses”, to “notice when landscape functions as metonym and not as metaphor is to be aware that space is not subordinate to character but interconnected with them” (2002 4 b). In this respect, Munro herself has remarked: “Fiction is all bound up with the? local. The internal reason for that is surely that feelings are bound up

in place [...] The truth is fiction depends for its life on place” (in Rasporich: 122). “In other words – McGill observes – physical space does not dissolve but is all the more important as space because of its relationship with human mental life” (4).

In “The Shining Houses” Mrs. Fullerton’s home is first described by Mary, one of the newcomers to “Garden Place” and the only person sympathetic towards the elderly woman. When the story opens she is at Mrs. Fullerton’s to buy fresh eggs. Mary engages in conversation and learns that the older woman has lived alone since her husband walked away without explanation twelve years before. However, the experience of visiting Mrs. Fullerton’s place is far from ordinary. When Mary steps into this property she feels as if she is crossing an invisible boundary to enter alien territory. In particular, the surroundings of the house are baffling to her, in their display of an accretion of old and discarded objects mingled with vegetables and flower beds – all in the most unusual and startling array. This is the dwelling place of an old lady who is definitively perceived by the new community as an eccentric, in a derogatory sense.

When Mary came out of this place, she always felt as if she were passing through barricades. The house and its surroundings were so self-sufficient, with their complicated and seemingly unalterable layout of vegetables and flower beds, apple and cherry trees, wired chicken-run, berry patch and wooden walks, woodpile, a great many roughly built dark little sheds, for hens or rabbits or a goat. (22)

Many of Munro’s protagonists aspire to the solace of home and community which is constantly denied them. However, hard they cling to that idea of the home as place of safety and protection, the reality keeps escaping them. They show a strong need to be part of a collective identity – be it the rural village or a larger town, or even just a “subdivision” (22), as in “The Shining Houses”. The function of the community in providing the reassurance these characters very much need, can be found in what Hannah Arendt calls “The Common”: “The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves” (50). The way some of these stories develop, however, shows at the same time also a radical undoing of this common world or community. The world around these characters at some point in these stories ceases to offer the “comforting illusion of dwelling in common” (Yeager 1996: 10). In “The Shining Houses”, for example, the “community” of the new subdivision establishes its cruel supremacy at the expense of older residents of the place, Mrs. Fullerton in particular. The

newcomers in the subdivision strongly need to fulfill their sense of community. As the narrator comments: “But these are the people who win, and they are good people; they want homes for their children [...] they plan a community – saying that word as if they found a modern and well-proportioned magic in it, and no possibility anywhere of a mistake” (*DHS*: 29).

In the story “The Office” the feeling of being “sheltered and encumbered [...] warmed and bound” (*DHS*: 61) in one’s home, is set against moments in which the protagonist steps “out of the darkness of sheltered existence” (Arendt: 51); as a result meaning-filled places change into “derangements of anonymous space” (Yeager: 10). This causes the protagonist to feel “exposed” and to experience both freedom and loneliness in such a “harsh” way that they are impossible to bear (*DHS*: 61). In the end she will renounce freedom and opt for the bounded and reassuring familiar space of home. A more fundamental and encompassing sense of uncertainty and loss of reference points can be found in the story “Images”. Here disorientation and insecurity are connected to one of the characters’ home: “‘Whose house is that?’ my father said pointing./ It was ours, I knew it after a minute. We had come round in a half-circle and there was the side of the house that nobody saw in the winter, the front door that went unopened from November to April and was still stuffed with rags around its edges, to keep out the east wind ” (*DHS*: 42).

Lorna Hutchinson has effectively summed up Munro’s writing complexity: “Munro deals with the intricacies of human nature and a realism that develops through the extraordinary detail of place and person amidst a mire of ambiguity”. In her stories “the familiar world is inextricably linked to the unfamiliar; it exists only through its darker sphere, and vice versa” (189, 194). It is worth emphasizing that in Munro’s texts, as Robert McGill reminds us “the realist plea is for verisimilitude [...] Munro’s concept of what is ‘real’ is more complex than one might first suspect” (2002: 11 a). In “The Shining Houses” as well as in the first story in the collection, “Walker Brothers Cowboy” place and landscape undergo transformations like “a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine” (WBC 18).

In addition, the persistent representations and detailed descriptions of houses in Munro’s fiction emphasize the limit (*limen*) between inside

and outside, an edge that promotes dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, as well as acts of trespassing (see Martin and Mohanty 1986). In doing so the story establishes the role of place in the constitution of the normal and the 'pathological', the 'in-place' and the 'out-of-place'. To quote Crosswell again, "Place as home thus plays an active role in the constitution of the normal, the natural and the appropriate [...] deviation from the expected relationship between place and practice [leads] to labels of abnormality and inappropriateness" (122). As a consequence, when "something or someone has been judged to be 'out-of-place' they have committed a transgression. Transgression simply means 'crossing a line' [and is] an inherently spatial idea. The line that is crossed is often a geographical line and a socio-cultural one. It may or it may not be the case that the transgression was intended by the perpetrator. What matters is that the action is seen as transgression by someone who is disturbed by it" (103).

In the story "The Shining Houses" an imaginary border separates two adjacent areas: the old settlers' houses and the newly-built "Garden Place" subdivision. The new community's defense of their secure place is bought at the price of exclusion, denial and blindness. The invisible border between the new and the old area grows more powerful as the story progresses and towards the end transformations occur. Here landscape bounded and unbounded metamorphosize more than once, swapping roles: the supremacy of the new Garden Place is decidedly subdued at night time. Once more space and time are represented as inextricably linked. In the darkness the border between the new and the old areas becomes fluid and indefinite:

Mary went out and walked [...] up the street. She saw the curtains being drawn across living-room windows; cascades of flowers, of leaves, of geometrical designs, shut off these rooms from the night. Outside it was quite dark, the white houses were growing dim, the clouds breaking and breaking, and smoke blowing from Mrs. Fullerton's chimney. The pattern of Garden Place, so assertive in the daytime, seemed to shrink at night into the raw black mountainside (*DHS*: 29).

One of the oldest houses, Mrs. Fullerton's, is surrounded by heaps of debris and relics, in addition to the plants, likewise arranged in no apparent order. The array of the plants and of the old objects do not follow any planned pattern, in clear contrast with the symmetry of the front and back yards of the houses of the subdivision, with their straight edges and perfect flower beds.

Here was no open or straightforward plan, no order that an outsider could understand; yet what was haphazard time had made final. The place had become fixed, impregnable, all its accumulations necessary, until it seemed that even the washtubs, mops, couch springs and stacks of old police magazines on the back porch were there to stay (22).

For anthropologist Marc Augé, the act of looking at ruins does not involve a journey into history; it implies instead a different and peculiar experience of time, of what he calls “pure time” (36). According to Augé ruins exist through the gaze of the onlooker. Between the multiplicity of their past, however, and their lost functionality, what one is left with is a sort of “time outside history” (41), de-historicized, a-temporal. It is thanks to this pure time – this time without history – that the onlooker is able to achieve a greater awareness and understanding; it is thanks to this moment that the spectacle of ruins can offer “a brief rapture of intuition” (38). In “The Shining Houses” Mary, one of the newcomers, who is here the onlooker, perceives the long rows of white houses in construction (she notices they are “not entirely white”) as cause, as she puts it, of “the wound of the earth” (*DHS*: 23), thus suggesting a slanted critical stance. Mary alone among the newcomers has sympathy for Mrs. Fullerton and does not want to see her forced out.

Héliane Ventura has discussed Munro’s landscapes in terms of the ephemeral and of the fragment with special reference to the short story “Vandals” in the collection *Open Secrets* (1994). Ventura’s argument is pertinent also to the story discussed here:

The ‘other country’ which is conjured up in Alice Munro’s writing evidences a mythic and mystic landscape of origins strewn with aesthetic traces which belong in the temporal category of the ephemeral, the half-glimpsed, the transient, such as footprints dissolving on sand, or mist burning away in the sunshine. Munro creates a territory which relies on flux density, on energy and forces. Her ephemeral traces [...] move along lines of deterritorialization and reterritorialization that belong in the machinery of desire, on the surface of fluid planes. They repudiate heaviness to suggest the inchoate, transient stuff that dreams are made of [...] In her ironically chiasmatic aesthetics, Munro uses de-vastation as the foundational moment of her writing [and] makes a case for the poetics of the fragment, the scattered bits and pieces, the vanishing, the irretrievable, half-glimpsed, and ephemeral revelations of the minor genre [...] called the short story (309; 320).

The characteristic of this kind of ephemeral landscape in “The Shining Houses” is suggestive again of dark corners, slanted walls, wild uncut

bushes, and of a disordered accretion of discarded objects that characterizes Mrs. Fullerton's property:

And under the construction of this new subdivision, there was still something else to be seen; that was the old city, the old wilderness city that had lain on the side of the mountains [...] But houses like Mrs. Fullerton's had been separated from each other by uncut forests and a jungle of wild blackberry and salmonberry bushes; these surviving houses, with thick smoke coming out of their chimneys, walls unpainted and patched and showing different degrees of age and darkening, rough sheds and stacked wood and compost heaps and grey board fences around them – these appeared every so often among the large new houses of Mimosa and Marigold and Heather Drive – dark, enclosed, expressing something like savagery in their disorder and the steep, unmatched angles of roofs and lean-tos; not possible on these streets but there. (*DHS*: 24).

The whole scenario evokes Conradian images of an inviolable, jungle-like, heart of darkness, albeit with a fluctuating border. Space and landscape are thus represented as both chaos and order, jumbled and linear: as places that are continually disaggregated and re-sutured. As Martin Heidegger writes: “A boundary is not that at which something stops, but that from which something begins its presencing” (153).

WORKS CITED

- ARENDDT, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- AUGÉ, Marc. *Le temps en ruines*. Paris: Galilée, 2003.
- CARSCALLEN, James. *The Other Country: Patterns in the Writing of Alice Munro*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1993.
- CRESSWELL, Tim. *Place: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.
- DELEUZE Gilles and GUATTARI Felix. *A Thousands Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Continuum, 1987.
- DVORAK, Martha and NEW W.H. eds. *Tropes and Territories: Short Fiction, Postcolonial Readings, Canadian Writing in Context*. Montreal: McGill University Press, 2007.
- GORDON, Mary. *Seeing Through Places. Reflection on Geography and Identity*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- HEIDEGGER, Martin. « Building, dwelling, thinking ». *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper and Raw, 1971, pp. 151-153.
- HOWELLS, Coral. *Alice Munro*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.
- HUTCHINSON, Lorna. “Uncovering the Grotesque in Fiction by Alice Munro and Gabrielle Roy”. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 33 , 1 (2008): 187-210.

- LYNCH, Gerald. *The One and the Many: English Canadian Short Story Cycle*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.
- MARTIN, Bidy and TALPADE MOHANTY Chandra. "What's Home Got to Do with It?", in *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa De Lauretis, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, pp. 191-212.
- MASSEY, Doreen. *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994.
- *For Space*. London: Sage, 2005.
- McGILL, Robert. "Somewhere I've Been Meaning to Tell You: Alice Munro's Fiction of Distance." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 37.1 (2002): 9-29 a
- "Where do you think you are? Alice Munro's Open Houses." *Mosaic*, 35, 4 (2002): 103-120. b
- MUNRO, Alice. *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968). New York: Vintage, 1998.
- *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978). Toronto: Penguin, 1991.
- *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982). Toronto: Penguin, 1986.
- *Friend of My Youth* (1990). Toronto: Penguin, 1991.
- MURPHY, Georgian. "The Art of Alice Munro: Memory, Identity, and the Aesthetics of Connections" in *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*. Mickey Pearlman ed. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 1993, pp. 12-23.
- RASPORICH, Beverey. *Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1990.

“HERE WAS NO OPEN STRAIGHTFORWARD PLAN”: JUMBLED SPACE IN
“THE SHINING HOUSES”

SMITH, Rowland. “Rewriting the Frontier: Wilderness and Social Code in the Fiction of Alice Munro” in *Alice Munro*. Harold Bloom ed. New York: Infobase Publishing 2009, pp. 153-166.

THACKER, Robert. *Alice Munro: Writing Her Life. A Biography*. Toronto: Emblem McClelland & Stewart, 2011.

VENTURA, Héliane. “Aesthetic Traces of the Ephemeral: Alice Munro’s Logograms in ‘Vandals’”, in *Tropes and Territory*, pp. 308-322.

TUAN, Yi- Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977.

WEST-PAVLON, Russell. *Space in Theory: Kristeva, Foucault, Deleuze*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009.

WILLIAMS, David. *Confessional Fictions: A Portrait of the Artist in the Canadian Novel*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.

YEAGER, Patricia ed. *The Geography of Identity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.

YEAGER, Patricia. “Narrating Space”, in *The Geography of Identity*, pp. 1-39.