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Girl power in ‘A Trip to the Coast’

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1. Some background about the *Dance of the Happy Shades* collection

Although Alice Munro had previously written individual stories for radio broadcast and magazines, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) was her first book publication, and her first presentation to a wider, international readership. She was a writer from childhood; but the account of her difficulties in finding the time and space to write in Victoria, British Columbia, having married right after university and now with commitments as a wife and mother is well known. Mr Malley, in the story called ‘The Office’ in the collection, is in addition to his other qualities perhaps also a metaphor for all the kinds of needy encroachments of others that prevented Munro progressing with a big, novel-length project—and forced her to accommodate to a stop-start work rhythm and the production of shorter fictions. These factors lie behind the *Dance of the Happy Shades* collection (which, we should note, Munro dedicated to her father Robert E. Laidlaw, aged 67 when it appeared). In her 1994 *Paris Review* interview, Munro reveals how in 1967 a publisher advised her that if she could write three more stories ‘we’d have a book’; and so she wrote ‘Images,’ ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy,’ and ‘Postcard’ during the last year before publication, and these were added to the dozen written, Munro says, up to fifteen years earlier:

‘The Day of the Butterfly’ was the earliest one. That was probably written when I was about twenty-one. And I can remember very well writing ‘Thanks for the Ride’ because my first baby was lying in the crib beside me. So I was twenty-two.

(McCulloch, Jeanne, and Mona Simpson. 1994: 228)

So while *Dance of the Happy Shades* is the first mature flowering of this major writer, it is also work from a significant span of the young author's life, from age 21 to 36. Given that span of crucial, technique-perfecting years, the stories are remarkable for their collective coherence, with minimal disparity of style and tone.

In them, the twenty-something and then thirty-something Munro by no means writes about everything she knows: there is relatively little in them about young couples, consummated sexual relationships, babies, or affairs and infidelity. Instead she mostly writes about those things she has known about for a decade or two, and now has some distance from: the lives of girls, their mothers, their grandmothers, and the unmarried, in varied situations of emotional, intellectual, or material confinement, in small-town Ontario in the 1950s and 1960s.

What are the stories' themes? Most centrally I believe they are about struggle and hostility between a girl approaching puberty or emerging into adulthood and her mother or grandmother. Generally, these older female 'opponents' present models of the feminine which their reluctant protégées find entirely uncongenial. At the same time no radically alternative female role-models seem available: the lives of the wives and mothers are seen by the girl narrators-focalisers as mostly repellent, but worse are the lives of the women who are not wives or mothers. Even a story that does not have this as a main topic, like 'Images', conveys this message. In 'Images' the young narrator accompanies the father she is devoted to when he goes to check the traps which he sets in the river to catch and kill muskrats for their fur. Escaping the house for the day gets the girl away from the hearty Mary McQuade, an unmarried cousin of her father's, mature in years and rough in manners, who has descended upon the family to tend to the girl's mother, who is evidently dying. Of her father's side of the family, the narrator comments:

A bad thing... was to have them say you were sensitive, as they did of my mother. All the aunts and cousins and uncles had grown tremendously hardened to any sort of personal cruelty, reckless, even proud, it seemed, of a failure or deformity that could make for general laughter. (35)

There is no shortage of meanness and cruelty and petty sadism in these stories, born presumably of crushed hopes and frustrated ambitions—or resentment of others' successes.

Towards the end of their long day checking the traps, father and daughter encounter the crazed-seeming and easily-misinterpreted loner called Joe Phippen (faint echoes here of ‘eccentrics’ in the first two stories in the *Dubliners* collection). Or rather, Joe creeps up on the father, wielding an axe and failing to recognise him, while the girl says nothing, as if to observe her father pass a test of masculine coping with violent danger. He does, and they visit with Joe in his shack long enough to watch him feeding toxic moonshine whisky to his cat. This in turn provides material for the father’s joshing of his spinster cousin, when they get home: ‘We found the one for you today, Mary!’, he begins. In such ways, we and the witnessing girl are to understand, men and women in this part of rural Ontario rub along toward the grave.

Like all Munro stories, ‘Images’ has many layers. At one level it is about a young girl coming to terms with the approaching death of her mother—although the mother, suffering from an unspecified condition, is only briefly described: a powerful absence. At another level it is about the curious, quasi-marital relation that the girl sees emerge ‘naturally’ in the temporary co-habitation of her father and Mary McQuade. It is also about her seeing that this is an option or privilege sometimes available to men, but never to women (another, altogether more poignant, developed, and erotic version of an alternative but denied pairing, again briefly glimpsed by a focalising daughter, appeared in the opening story, ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’). At yet another level the story is a day-long venture into real-world education, paradoxically characterised in the final paragraph as almost fantastical, from which the girl returns ‘dazed and powerful with secrets’. At least two of those words—*power*, and *secrets*—resonate through the entirety of the Munro oeuvre. But it is useful to think of all these stories as empowering their young female narrator-focalisers with secret knowledge, or of them cumulatively empowering a composite female young adult consciousness that emerges in the course of the sequence of stories. A consciousness that is wise and mature enough both to be Helen and to understand Maddy, at the end of ‘The Peace of Utrecht’.

2. ‘A Trip to the Coast’ in the context of the collection

‘A Trip to the Coast’ has been described by Munro as her least favourite story in the *Dance of the Happy Shades* collection. It has certainly been

overshadowed by the more powerful and nuanced final stories, 'The Peace of Utrecht' and the title story 'Dance of the Happy Shades', masterpieces in different ways. But there are many wonderful things in 'A Trip to the Coast' which make it worthy of the closest reading. It is the kind of story that, given its place in the sequence of this collection, makes you think how carefully Munro and her editors have planned that ordering, and the concomitant thematic progression that is detectable (again, Joyce's *Dubliners* is just one of the precursors that may have influenced Munro). The age of the female protagonist or observer, broadly speaking and with admitted exceptions such as 'Thanks for the Ride', gradually advances as the stories proceed. And likewise the age of the female antagonist, broadly, moves from younger to older: in the final three stories, for example, the antagonists are the grandmother, on her last day alive, in 'A Trip to the Coast'; the recently-deceased mother of Helen (the narrator) and Maddy in 'The Peace of Utrecht'; and the soon-to-be deceased Miss Marsalles in 'Dance of the Happy Shades'. Each of the fifteen stories is at the same time different from the others, and certainly the first six in the collection are absorbingly varied in topic, age of protagonist, and setting. But the next triple, the seventh to ninth stories placed at the middle of the collection ('The Time of Death', 'Day of the Butterfly', and 'Boys and Girls'), display linkages: in each we witness a young girl react to a death (of a sibling, caused by negligence; of a classmate, by illness; and of a loved horse, by commercial necessity, respectively). In two of the following three stories, 'Red Dress' and 'Sunday Afternoon', a late-teenage protagonist is about to embark on a sexual life of their own. And chronological age and sexual experience notwithstanding, there is something of the naïve teenager in Helen, the jilted mistress who imagined she was an undeclared fiancée, in the third, 'Postcard'.

3. Smells, Tastes, Shapes

There is another preoccupation of these stories, again perhaps indicative of the focalisation repeatedly coming from a young female narrator who (whether she likes it or not) is 'sensitive' to such details: body smells, and the body shapes of men as well as women. So strong are these preoccupations that in effect Munro has the senses do part of the telling: time and again, an individual's smell, or shape, or colouring, or the feel of their skin, or what they *sound* like (their body noises as well as any speech

and accent idiosyncrasies) is remarked upon. Even, in some cases, a taste is attributed to a character: the girl narrator in 'Images' recalls not only Mary McQuade's unwelcome smell, but also an alien taste in all the food she prepared 'and perhaps in all food eaten in her presence...--something foreign, gritty, depressing' (32). Here, and generally, the smells, sounds, and tastes of these Others whom Munro's narrators comment upon are almost always unpleasant -- a reflex, perhaps, of the focalisers' heightened pubertal sensitivity to everything emanating from the body.

One implication of the intense narratorial awareness of sense impressions is that this assumes an exceptional implied *proximity* of the narrator, and by extension of the reader, to the character depicted. We can contrast this with a narration of characters' words and actions that includes little or no mention of their smells, or the little sounds they make—a silence about such matters which could be entirely reasonable, for example if such physical details are not deemed relevant, or if the narrator simply lacks such proximate and even intimate knowledge of the characters. You can hear what someone says, and report it in a narrative, without being close enough to them to be able to describe their visible detail, or their smell, or the feel of their skin. But there is no such character-narrator distance in these Munro stories.

4. Grotesques

Narrative preoccupation with characters' shape, appearance, and presentation to the senses easily develops into an emphasis on the grotesque, and there is an element of the latter in character-descriptions in several of the stories, introduced for different thematic purposes. Characters in the early stories who shade towards the grotesque—a kind of representation of any difference or unconventionality or eccentricity as a cause for general censure, or even societal expulsion—include Mrs Fullerton in 'The Shining Houses' and Joe Phippen in 'Images'. In 'The Office' the description of Mr Malley, the man who rents a room for the narrator-writer to work in, moves in the direction of the grotesque too. His appearance in the narrative present of the story is contrasted unfavourably with his slimmer self seen in a grandly framed photograph, taken a dozen years earlier (63). Now he is heavy around the hips and thighs, and described as 'matriarchal' (gender is never far from the forefront of these narrators' minds) in ways that are impliedly unsettling. Most striking of

all, however, is the physical description of the grandmother in 'A Trip to the Coast':

Things dangled on her in spite of her attempts to be tidy and fastened up; it was because there was no reasonable shape to her body for clothes to cling to; she was all flat and narrow, except for the little mound of her stomach like a four-months' pregnancy that rode preposterously under her skinny chest. She had knobby fleshless legs and her arms were brown and veined and twisted like whips. Her head was rather big for her body and with her hair pulled tightly over her skull she had the look of an under-nourished but maliciously intelligent baby.

The grandmother is presented as an object of derision, an uncanny or impossible combination of features that is the essence of the grotesque: her bulging stomach would suggest she is carrying a baby, but her head if that of a baby. This is gratuitously cruel, even if we speculate that the assessment is largely May's, the teenage focaliser (it may well not be). The mocking and critical evaluations are loaded, or unreasonable: why should intelligence ever be characterised as *malicious*? It is interesting writing since it is memorable and funny, but it invites us to laugh at the character and, I suspect, is writing that in her later maturity Munro would eschew.

5. Shadows, foreshadowing, and prolepsis

At the end of the ominously titled 'Day of the Butterfly', the terminally-ill child Myra makes a generous gift to the narrator, Helen, and also invites her to come and play at her house at some future time when Myra has returned from the hospital she is to be moved to, in the city. These kind offers, received by the girl narrator who clearly grasps that Myra will not be returning from the hospital and who can also hear vigorously noisy children playing snowballs outside, have an unsettling effect:

This sound [of the children] made Myra, her triumph and her bounty, and most of all her future in which she had found this place for me, turn shadowy, turn dark. (110)

A shadow frequently serves as an emblem of death or the spirit, the reduction of body to a ghostly presence. But a shadow can also come before the thing it represents, e.g., when the sun is behind the entity; such literal foreshadowing is the source for uses of *shadowing* expressions to denote presaging, prolepsis, and premature glimpses of future plot

developments. A further characteristic of one's own shadow is that you can never shake it off: it is always there beside you, this attendance usually being understood as a burden rather than a comfort.

But the shadow motif is just one of the means by which prolepses are woven into these stories – including prolepses concerning minor but indicative characters as well as major ones. Examples of these can be found early in 'The Office'. Within just two paragraphs on page 62, the narrator provides a brisk evaluation of the lives and natures of Mr and Mrs Malley, the couple with whom she intends to make the purely business arrangement of renting an office to write in. Mrs Malley is described comparatively directly: 'She had the swaying passivity, the air of exhaustion and muted apprehension, that speaks of a life spent in close attention on a man who is by turns vigorous, crotchety and dependent.' And this we find is the case, and continues to be the case. As for Mr Malley, he is rather interpreted by means of a portrait of him, hanging on the wall, 'with its own light and a gilded frame'. In the portrait, our writer-narrator judges, Mr Malley is uneasy in his prosperous businessman role, perhaps inclined to be intrusive and insistent. But, she continues sharply, 'Never mind the Malleys. As soon as I saw that office, I wanted it.' (63). Everything foreshadowed here about Mr Malley is confirmed as the next weeks go by. The writer discovers that she cannot have the office without also 'minding' Mr Malley, with his 'accusing vulnerability' (65) and his 'craving for intimacy' (66). Never minding the Malleys is the one thing the writer-narrator is not allowed to do, in this almost-inversion of Melville's 'Bartleby' story.

Turning to 'A Trip to the Coast', we find just one use each of the words *shade*, *shady*, and *shadowy*. Most interesting of these is the last, which occurs when May gets up exceptionally early and imagines the day to be still pure and untainted by her mother and grandmother, since, she assumes, they are still asleep. 'The back yard at this time of day was strange, damp and shadowy', we are told, and May's imagining is called 'a delicate premonition of freedom and danger'. But in one of those moments of dry humour that Munro does so well, May is soon disabused of her romantic fancy: her grandmother comes around the side of the house carrying kindling, evidently having been up and out for some time. May suffers 'a queer let-down feeling that seemed to spread thinly from the present moment into all areas of her life, past and future.' Her grandmother is for her the worst kind of shadow: 'It seemed to her that any place she went her grandmother would be there beforehand.'

6. Prominent phrases and keywords: a corpus stylistic foray

In the latter half of this chapter I would like to take further the attention to specific word choices begun in the first half, by using simple corpus-stylistic methods to highlight some important kinds of lexical repetition or patterning. Single lexical words that are repeated many times in a story may be noticeable and noteworthy; but sometimes even more noteworthy are those few multiple-word phrases found to occur three or more times, either in the narrative (non-direct-speech) part of the text, or in the direct speech part. It is important to separate out the searching of the narrative and the direct speech (dialogue) sections, since their narratological status of each is normally quite distinct. By and large the narrative text is attributable to an author-narrator, who in principle may have different values and perspective from each of the characters and their ostensibly faithfully reported speech. By the same token, if a particular character is found to use a particular phrase several times over in their directly-reported speech, this is chiefly indicative of that character (they 'own' that speech) and may tell us little about the narrator and their stance. In 'Images', for example, Joe Phippen is reported saying 'I never knew it was you' twice over, and then 'I didn't know it was you, Ben', and these are indicative of his character and mindset; but they seem to have no resonance with larger themes in the story. With that qualification noted, we can say that paying attention to any simple multi-word phrases that recur three times or more in a story of the size of 'A Trip to the Coast', may help to alert us to kinds of emphasis and characterisation that might otherwise go unnoticed.

With a digitised and searchable version of the story, and using the N-gram function of the free online text analysing programme called *Antconc* or of such programmes as *Wmatrix* or *WordSmith Tools*, the recurrent multi-word phrases can be quickly identified. (An n-gram is a sequence of words of any number, 'n'. Thus a 7-gram is a sequence or 'string' of seven words, and free software will enable you to identify in a text all occurrences of the same seven words in exactly the same sequence. In actuality, it is quite rare for a text to contain even a second occurrence of any of its seven-word sequences—unless that sequence is a quoted title, phrase, or proverb.) In the event, the most repeated multi-word phrases in 'A Trip to the Coast' are only of limited interest. As it happens, all three

occur in the direct speech of the travelling salesman who performs to deadly effect in the final pages of the story.

Using Antconc's N-gram or word clusters function, and setting the N-gram size at 5 words, we find that there is just one 5-word n-gram, which is used only by the salesman, a remarkable six times: *nothing to be afraid of*. This is the mantra that the salesman uses over and over again to the grandmother, as he hypnotises her with a metal bottle-opener. It is to her that he repeats this mantra that we can see, with hindsight and in the circumstances (it turns out that she is dying) as quite poignant. The salesman also asks the grandmother three times to *[just] keep your eyes* on the bottle-opener he is holding out in front of her; and, after she has 'gone under', he three times asks whether she *can still see*. But by this point the old woman has definitively gone under – the text describes 'enormous cold eyes and its hard ferocious expression' – so that his final repeated expression, 'wake up. Wake up', has no effect. We should not make great claims for this n-gram evidence, but it does clearly show that the one speaking character in the story who repeats themselves in multi-word phrases is the salesman; such repetition is in his character, and perhaps part of what makes him a salesman and a hypnotist.

N-gram searches have to be post-processed carefully, so as to set aside the relatively uninteresting but repeated phrases. Consider the repeated sequences of three words. As is to be expected, there are plenty of these, but some of the most frequent may not be of much stylistic importance. Thus by far the most frequent is *the old woman* (27 uses), followed by *her grandmother said* and *she did not* (9 occurrences of both these). In a story with a grandmother as one of the two main characters, none of these is unexpected or revealing. But the next 3-gram in the list, arguably, is. This is *as if she*, which occurs 8 times, always in the narrative text (i.e., not in the direct speech), mostly with the grandmother as the referent of the pronoun *she*:

. *Her grandmother looked at her as if she were a stove pipe and came ahead with its stained walls and calendars as if she had to keep it all in sight ; want-ad section of the city paper , as if she had no store to open or breakfast Candy Apples lipstick on and it looked as if she shaved her legs. 'We go to the in this same loud monotonous voice as if she were talking to a deaf person or held her head between her two hands, as if she were pressing something in . and then she ran out after him, as if she wanted to call something , as if as if she wanted to call something, as if she wanted to call ' Help '*

Among these, the fourth example should also be distinguished as quite unlike the other seven in structure and effect (*looked as if*, paraphraseable as 'seemed, appeared'), which are all adjuncts describing the manner of a preceding process.

Colligationally, *as if she* predicts a following finite predicate or verb phrase, one that describes a state, action or event which is not actually or certainly the case. That is to say, the sequence *as if she* predicts a following predicate like *had won the lottery* or *knew the bus-driver personally*; but the two examples also imply that it is not at all certain that the person denoted by *she* has in fact won the lottery or is acquainted with the bus-driver. Where literal factuality is concerned, if the narrator were certain, there would be no point to their hedging with the *as if* construction (it would be misleading). But often enough the construction is used in non-factual and figurative uses, as in the first example above: May incontrovertibly is not a stove pipe, but the way her grandmother looks at (or through?) her, it is as if she were no more than one. The *as if she [Predicate]* formulation, high frequency in this story's narration, draws our attention to a particular kind of distancing or negative-mode narration (Simpson 1993: 46-85; Toolan 2001: 68-76) that Munro resorts to quite extensively: the narrator cannot describe the situation in full and with certainty, but makes a defeasible suggestion which, once made, the reader cannot ignore.

Reflecting on the prominence of this construction in the narrative can inform evidence-based interpretation, even though we should recognise that the list above derives from the (frequent) instances of the specific sequence *as if she* in the narrative. For example, a fuller search of all instances of *as if*, followed mostly by other definite or indefinite pronouns, confirms that this distancing-but-interpreting narrative mode is even more extensive in the story. (But 'as if' only the *twentieth* most frequent two-word sequence in the text, so much less prominent than *as if she*, which ranked fourth). Narratologically it is an appropriate construction to use, where a narrator wishes to maintain a degree of mystery or uncertainty about actions, motives, and story trajectory. Every *as if* stimulates in the reader's mind the thought that, while the situation has been described in one way, the narrator seems to be conceding that a different explanatory description would be more accurate. By the end of the story, for example, we might want to revisit the description of how the grandmother 'held her head between her two hands, as if she were

pressing something in' and wonder whether, unbeknownst to the narrator, she is actually suffering a cerebral aneurysm or stroke at this point.

Also useful for its focussing function, as one embarks on interpretation, is the Keyword function (available via all three of the text-analysing packages recommended above). The Keyword function is a mathematical calculation that identifies those words in a text which, relative to a comparable body of texts (e.g., other modern narrative fiction), are disproportionately frequent or infrequent in the text under scrutiny. In the case of 'A Trip to the Coast', of course, various words such as character names (*grandmother*, *May*) or means of referring to characters (*old*, *woman*, *she*) turn out to be Keywords, but for the obvious reason that they denote central characters. Because these serve to name characters, they are not fully lexical or content items: they mainly refer, rather than carrying much meaning (of course names carry *some* meaning: most readers will have multiple associations with a word/name like *grandmother*, and the name *May* might also carry associations, being the name of a tree and of the Northern Hemisphere month when spring approaches summer, suggesting a burgeoning and blossoming and youth).

Slightly less predictable is the fact that *store* and *stove* are also Keywords; but *store* is the setting of much of the story, while *stove* occurs 8 times only: perhaps just enough to be noticeably prominent in the story. The stove seems to be the object around which the grandmother's life revolves: she cooks her food on it, spits into it, looks at May 'as if she were a stove pipe', sits for hours 'looking with concentration at nothing but the front of the stove', and describes her dream (a premonition of death, we assume) in which she is visited by 'the biggest bird you ever saw, black as that stove top there'. Most elliptically Munroian is the grandmother's seemingly throwaway remark 'I don't want to keep the stove on today any longer'n I can help.' Perhaps she says this simply because the coming day promises to be even hotter than usual; but later, with hindsight, the reader may wonder if the grandmother foresees her own death, and the need for her body to be kept in a room as cool as possible prior to burial. The grandmother is nothing if not practical, brutally practical even: were she to die on the mooted trip to the coast to see her son, she suggests, 'They could put me in that [train] car with the lettuce and tomatoes ... and ship me home cold.'

7. Key Semantic Domains

Wmatrix's ability to identify not only keywords but also key semantic domains in a text provides useful confirmation of what was noted on an intuitive basis earlier, about the stories' attentiveness to bodies, and the senses with which we apprehend bodies (sight, touch, smell, hearing, etc.). If a calculation of the story's semantic domains is performed, the following categories are noted as 'most key':

| Freq in | and | % of story | Freq in | and % of ref. corpus | Keyness | Semantic category |
|---------|-----|------------|---------|----------------------|---------|-----------------------|
| T3+ | 43 | 0.74 | 300 | 0.13 | +72.23 | Time: Old; grown-up |
| T1.3 | 91 | 1.57 | 1424 | 0.64 | +53.30 | Time:Period |
| O2 | 74 | 1.27 | 1045 | 0.47 | +52.22 | Objects generally |
| I2.2 | 29 | 0.50 | 221 | 0.10 | +44.88 | Business:Selling |
| B1 | 141 | 2.43 | 3057 | 1.37 | +36.90 | Anatomy, physiology |
| W2 | 5 | 0.09 | 0 | 0.00 | +36.71 | Light |
| Q2.1 | 142 | 2.44 | 3216 | 1.45 | +32.12 | Speech: Communicative |
| X2 | 9 | 0.15 | 22 | 0.01 | +29.86 | Mental processes |
| T1.1 | 5 | 0.09 | 4 | 0.00 | +24.55 | Time: General |
| F1 | 51 | 0.88 | 906 | 0.41 | +22.87 | Food |
| S2.1 | 37 | 0.64 | 586 | 0.26 | +21.17 | People: Female |

As in the case of several of the highest-ranked Keywords, and for the same reason, a closer look at the text confirms that most of the above semantic categories listed here as key are not really so *on semantic grounds*. Take the most key category, Time: old. A quick click on the Concordance lines for these 43 instances reveals that the vast majority of them are simply uses of the phrase *the old woman* to refer to the grandmother. In the case of the second most key semantic domain, Time: period, again a click on the Concordance lines shows that the programme has classified every use of the girl's name, *May*, as a 'Time: period' instance, and this is the cause of this domain's high frequency. With the third most key semantic category, Objects generally, the analyser has more usefully highlighted the prominence of 'things' in this story. The importance of some of those Objects has already been noted above: *the stove, the bottle-opener*.

Still, the anatomy/physiology domain, although ranked fifth here, is reflected in a striking 141 words in the story (more than 2% of the whole text). As the label suggests, it is a hybrid category: it includes all mentions that someone *slept* (5), or was *asleep* (3) or *woke up* (3), along with single occurrences of *sleeping, yawning* and *tired*, i.e. bodily states and processes. But it also includes many mentions of body parts, in particular

someone's *face* (14), *head* (10), *hand* (8), *hair* (6), *feet*, *legs*, *hands*, *eyes*, *body*, *mouth*, *arms*, *shoulder*, *elbows*, or *stomach* (to list only those items occurring more than once). In fact the 141 tokens come from 59 different types (thus, along with the body words listed above that occur several times over, there are plenty more that occur once only, but add to the 'body' emphasis in the story: *knee*, *chin*, *thumb*, *ankles*, *belly*, *fingers*, etc). The sheer diversity of these body words is important to the argument about semantic prominence; it is the opposite of semantic prominence created by the use, over and over again, of just one or two words. (As elsewhere, and being an automatic classifier, the software makes some mistakes, such as misclassifying several locative uses of *back* -- *the back yard*, *the back of the store* -- as though they were the body part.)

8. Conversational uncooperativeness

Many of the stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* involve a humiliation, a defeat, or a victory, and these usually unfold in an environment of explicit competition and wilful hostility (cf. the grandmother in 'A Trip to the Coast', who from May's point of view forbids her from going swimming chiefly just to upset her, confronting her with hollow reasons and 'flourishing them nastily, only to see what damage they could do'). The milieu is one of struggle to be fit to survive and flourish. Indeed there is an element of Social Darwinian struggle in many of the stories. The struggle may be for survival, or for peace, or for a longed-for trip (to the coast or elsewhere), or for a boyfriend, or some other transitional experience, with its possibilities of escape from the entrapment felt by these girls going through puberty, or by these women resisting the conformities of motherhood and wifehood in small town Canada in the 1960s.

In 'A Trip to the Coast' there are some echoes of other distinguished short-story fiction (e.g. Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find* collection), but there is also abundant narrative originality and stylistic accomplishment – especially in the three vividly-drawn figures of the grandmother, 11-year-old May who focalises the story, and the hypnotising travelling salesman. Even in the fairly conventional-seeming opening paragraph, which ironically takes half a page to describe the story's setting as a place with 'nothing there', it is the local turns of phrase that take the writing – not the setting itself – out of the ordinary. Those passing through the crossroads called Black Horse (it is implied that

everyone who sees it is only passing through) may notice *worn elbows of rock* and *harmonious woodlots* giving way to the *less hospitable scrub-forest*, where the trees seem to be retreating into the distance, *like a company of ghosts*. This last image, which ends the story's opening scene-setting paragraph, invites thoughts about its similarity to, and differences from, the title of the final story and of the collection as a whole.

The story is structured around a series of engagements with a winner and a loser, like a female domestic counterpart to a sequence of clashes between two rutting bucks, compelled to seek dominance. Unlike the bucks, however, the motivation is not directly a matter of breeding and sexual priority, but rather concerns grandmother and granddaughter keeping (or making) their own living space, in the face of familial constraints and obligations; so, territory-marking in a broad figurative sense.

May's first 'victory' is her excitement at having awoken and started the day (as she imagines) while her mother and grandmother are still asleep, and the 'freedom and danger' she feels. But as noted earlier, victory turns to defeat as she discovers her grandmother is already up and outside collecting kindling. Small skirmishes follow, woven into their dialogue (insofar as it is a dialogue: May's grandmother only answers when she feels like it, we are told). If May wants coffee, she must get her own cup, her grandmother announces. She responds in hostile kind by choosing to drink from a 'good cup with green birds on it'. No further textual explanation is given, but the reader is trusted to invoke background cultural knowledge about saving the 'good china' for use with 'company' and special occasions, proprieties which May calculatedly defies. All this the readers knows might have triggered a reproof from the grandmother, although on this occasion she chooses to say nothing.

Throughout this section of the story, charting May and her grandmother's interaction, asynchrony and a refusal to coordinate turns of talk are uppermost. An examination of the awkward relations between one turn and the next could be undertaken, showing how each speaker in turn seems bent on disregarding what conversational analysts call 'recipient design'. But equally we can bring out some of the evidence of hostility and disharmony by invoking Grice's idea that, other things being equal, we try in conversation to interact cooperatively with fellow conversationalists, composing our contributions so that they will be true, suitably informative, relevant, and orderly (these four adjectives are rough glosses of Grice's four conversational maxims). By the same token, when we produce

conversational responses that an interlocutor judges to be deliberate departures from what would be truthful, informative, relevant and orderly, then that interlocutor is entitled and expected to calculate what covert message is being conveyed. In the language of Gricean pragmatics, breaches of the maxims trigger the deriving of implicatures. Many such implicatures can be derived by the reader, as ‘overhearer’ of the conversation between May and her grandmother.

A glaring example is that of May announcing (‘conversationally’) that Eunie Parker’s cousin, Heather Sue, will be coming that day. Not only does this elicit no conventional acknowledgement from the grandmother, the latter instead embarks on an entirely unrelated topic, challenging May to guess her age. When May does guess, the grandmother withholds the normal teacherly third move (usually comprising a ratification and an optional evaluation: e.g., *Correct. Well done!*); she remains silent ‘for so long that May thought this was only another of her conversational blind alleys’. Thus the grandmother has embarked upon what Sinclair & Coulthard long ago identified as a classic IRF exchange (elicit-answer-feedback), only to breach her own interactional undertaking, in blatantly uncooperative fashion. Veering away from what she suspects is a blind alley, May can be forgiven for trying again with her own previously-launched topic of Heather Sue Murray: now she tells of Heather’s prowess at Highland dancing. We are unsurprised when this draws from the grandmother the reply ‘Seventy-eight’, and the added remark that ‘Nobody knows that’, which, as noted earlier, casts in an odd light her previous question to May about her age: if nobody knows her age, the earlier question clearly was not asked in good faith or a spirit of cooperative sharing. We hardly need to infer this, since the contrariness is embedded in the language of the exchange: ‘Do you know [X]?... Nobody knows that, I never told.’ The women are sitting at the same table, and talking to each other, but it is recurrently clear that there is no shared or ‘accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange’, to use Grice’s characterisation of the cooperative principle that he argued guides ordinary conversation.

Now the old woman’s talk turns to the financing of a headstone, at which May understandably protests ‘What do you want a headstone for?’, only for this to be nicely trumped by the old lady’s rejoinder ‘I never said I *wanted* one’. But before we are told of this reply, May’s memory of an earlier occasion is recounted, when she came home from school to find her grandmother laid out on the couch, as still as a corpse. This had prompted

fear and crying in the girl, at which, still without moving, the grandmother had opened her eyes to remonstrate, *faux innocent* but also with 'a curious spark of triumph' in her look.

9. Victory and defeat

The previous section began the exploration of the May-Grandmother relationship as a kind of struggle for supremacy, with regard to conversation; in this final section I wish to show how this theme of struggle, victory and defeat extends into the narrative and the action. If, as a fairly ordinary reader of Munro's story I have the impression that there is rather a focus on conflict, struggle, winning and losing in this story—that May, or the narrator insofar as the narratorial role can be distinguished from May's focalisation, sees relations between herself and her grandmother as shaped by competition (rather than love, affection, respect, mutual tolerance, or other desiderata of well-functioning family life) – is there some way in which corpus stylistic analysis can help confirm that impression? I believe there is, if we exploit the semantic tagging function of Wmatrix. This can be used to uncover how the semantic tagger classifies those words in the story that one instinctively notices as having to do with competition, defeat and victory. Hopefully, several of these words—such as *defeat*, *triumph*, *victorious* – will be tagged as belonging to the same semantic category. If they are not, we have to explore the implications of the automatic semantic classification diverging from the more situated and context-sensitive informal semantic classification of this real reader: one or other process may be faulty, or both may be.

We can begin with the word *triumph* from the phrase quoted at the end of the previous section (*a curious spark of triumph*): this word is classed as a X9.2+ item, semantically, in Wmatrix's UCREL semantic tagging system. The next word whose classification I will check is the near antonym of *triumph*, namely *defeat*, found in this sentence near the story's close: *Now for the first time it seemed to her she saw the possibility of her grandmother's defeat*. Very satisfactorily, for our purposes, this is classified as X9.2- in the tagging system. What about the story's final word, *victorious*? This is X9.2+ also. What do these classifications denote? The UCREL semantic tagset labels state that X9.2 words concern 'Success and

failure' in combination, with the plus and minus sub-types (X9.2+ and X9.2-) expressing success and failure respectively, taken separately.

At this point the corpus stylistician can simply reverse the procedure, and focus on the semantic class rather than any particular word. Thus one can ask the computer for a list of all the words in the story that are automatically classified as X9.2, X9.2+, or X9.2-. It transpires that no words are classified as of the higher X9.2 category (presumably because there are no joint mentions in the text of winning and losing, success and failure, or similar). Just two words in the story are classified as X9.2-: *defeat* and *lose*, while six words are classified as X9.2+: *triumph*; *came through*; *flourishing*; *prevailed*; *success*; and *victorious*. Now we must consider these eight instances in contexts, to see just how revealing they are in the flow of the text.

Of the two X9.2 'failure' examples, the one concerning *defeat* was noted above and is central to the idea that the story focusses on a struggle to 'win'; the second instance, the use of *lose* in *lose her breath a moment*, at first sight and in that truncated co-text appears inconsequential to the 'struggle for victory' thesis. But consider the fuller co-text. The grandmother has just taken up the challenge, from the hypnotising salesman, that he can put her to sleep (she, of course, is confident that he cannot). Now the salesman suggests she lie down, to relax better; but she replies:

'Sitting down--' she said, and seemed to lose her breath a moment—'sitting down's good enough for me.'

In *this* context, the seeming to lose her breath might be an actual losing of breath, the reader surmises. As such, it is another proleptic hint of what is about to happen; it foreshadows the grandmother permanently losing her breath.

As for the six X9.2+ instances, all but one support the 'struggle for victory' thesis, if we note their immediate cotexts (all of which are inspectable in the Concordance function of Wmatrix), with the 'success' word itself in bold:

1. innocence and a curious spark of **triumph**. 'Can't a person lay down around here
2. a hot, creeping wind **came through** the country grass . Because it
3. same reasons out of the bag, **flourishing** them nastily, only to see what

4. soft, and it penetrated and **prevailed** over the more commonplace odours
5. of it. I've had pretty good **success** with some insomnia cases. Not
6. grandmother lay fallen across the counter dead, and what was more, **victorious**.

Instances (1) and (3) and (6) I have discussed earlier; they clearly support the general thesis. Example (4) refers to the 'sweetish and corrupt' smell, as May registers it, of her grandmother's flesh. This is part and parcel of the grotesque or alienated description of the grandmother, and one has to remind oneself that the grandmother is very much alive at this stage, even though the phrase *smell of corruption*, which the text's phrasing skirts around but avoids actually using, often collocates with references to dead bodies. Again it is hard not to think of prolepsis at work here. Example (5), spoken by the hypnotist, would be an unremarkable turn of phrase in normal circumstances, but against the background here of competitive judging and scorning, and introduces a mildly disturbing complication, the voice and actions of a third party, volubly confident of *their* success—and a third party whom in a sense May deploys in her battle of wills with her grandmother.

The one instance that must be set aside as irrelevant—indeed as mis-classified—is example (2). *Came through* is plausibly classified as a single but multi-word expression. When used intransitively it often has the idiomatic meaning that a positive outcome has transpired—*my promotion finally came through*—but in the story it is used transitively—*a hot creeping wind came through the country grass*—so the automatic classification has erred in grouping it among the success/failure words. This is another reminder that the semantic tagger is an imperfect instrument: it may err in including a phrase as carrying a success/failure meaning when it does not. The tagger can also err in failing to identify a success/failure meaning in the text, particularly in a multi-word expression, where no single word carries the full success or failure sense. Thus the narrative reports that time and again May had hitherto 'watched her grandmother's encounters with the outside world', convinced 'that the old woman would get the better of it [sc., the world]'. The 'success, prevail' meaning here of *get the better of it* is not identified by the tagger, although in fairness it does classify the phrase as S7.1+, words with meanings of 'in power'. Likewise we might regard the text's use of the word *capitulated* at the story's high-point (*If her grandmother capitulated*

it would ... crack the foundations of her life) as clearly lexicalising the success/defeat/conflict theme; but again it is not grouped with the ‘success and failure’ words by the automatic semantic tagger. Not entirely unreasonably, it is classed as a G3 item (Warfare, defence and the army; weapons), the only item so tagged in the story. But these examples demonstrate the need to supplement any automatic search for instantiations of a more complex theme with further review from a human interpreter.

What I have hoped to show is that with the assistance of some quite simple text-analysing resources—principally, an application of Gricean conversational norms to the abnormality of the grandmother-granddaughter dialogue, and some use of corpus-linguistic searches—the stylistically-minded reader can not only find some degree of corpus-linguistic confirmation of readerly intuitions about the story, but may also find their attention directed to details of the text that they had to some degree overlooked. In the latter function, the searching and sorting arguably stimulate a fuller appreciation of the story’s narrative texture.

Several of the stories in this collection are focalised from the perspective of a teenage girl—younger, and approaching puberty, or older, already physically a woman and now negotiating the complex business of establishing her own identity, values, and independence. This pre-occupation is summarised in this article’s title as ‘girl power’, a provocative phrase. In an early wave of feminism that Munro certainly lived through, *girl power* was a still-patronising description of the assertion of kinds of independence by young western women: it was as if patriarchal society conceded to females that they should have some freedom and independence—but that they were still ‘girls’ after all. But this is not what girl power is about in the *Happy Shades* collection: for Munro, the first obstacle confronting girls is the women who raise them, and who would have their daughters confine themselves to the same circumscribed man-servicing arenas (the kitchen, the secretary’s desk, the marriage bed) that the older women have accepted. So the power seized by the girls in these stories is a rejection of the attenuated power offered them by their female elders.

In the struggle not only to survive but to make a mark, to be a self—free enough to know and express their own wishes and seek to fulfil them—these girl-women must first fight their families, then their school-friends, and later sometimes their work or social acquaintances. ‘A Trip to the Coast’ is one such fight story, at the early, intra-familial phase. Also

striking is the *intimacy* of the setting, and the proximity of May's implied horizons. Everything is quite close: she sees, smells, hears nearby things (her grandmother especially, but also the house, her friends, the salesman, the surrounding scrubby hills) and these are what predominate in her thoughts and therefore the narrative. Only at the very end of the story does May become aware that she could take to the road and walk 'in any direction she liked', and that the world is now 'flat and accessible' to her. She has an intimation of such possibility at just about the point that the salesman appears: she is reported seeing a 'new light' in the world, and a power in herself, 'like the unsuspected still unexplored power of her own hostility'. This last phrase is a brilliant, disturbing encapsulation of May's situation, but has to be read carefully: it frankly recognises her hostility towards her grandmother (this is presupposed); it then asserts that there is a power in that hostility, which has not until now been recognised and therefore not yet explored and tested. Again the reader is given a glimpse of the narrative future, since we are here invited to expect that before long May *will* put her powerful hostility to the test, in some clash with her grandmother, which she does when she sides with the salesman and declares, concerning the question whether he could hypnotise her grandmother or not, 'I bet he could'. Of course there is irony and cold comfort in the grandmother lying dead but 'victorious' at the story's end; but it does at least leave open the possibility that she 'defeated' the salesman, by dying before his technique could take hold.

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