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Rachel Lister



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"Preposterous Adventures": Affective Encounters in the Short Story Cycle

Rachel Lister

- 1 In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed observes that hegemonic notions of happiness are associated both with a sense of belonging to a community and a sense of direction or "telos": happiness is often figured as the "endpoint" of a unidirectional "path" (199, 32). Exposing the limitations of such paradigms, Ahmed explores other means of apprehending and defining happiness. Her model involves accepting happiness as provisional, as a feeling that "comes and goes" and is experienced in "moments" (219). If one accepts the dominant model, experience "becomes a question of following [happiness] rather than finding it" (32). This act of following requires other people, a community, that will provide narratives for the human subject seeking happiness: "If the same objects make us happy – or if we invest in the same objects as if they make us happy – then we would be directed or oriented in the same way." If we are "affected in a good way by objects that are already evaluated as good," this means that we become part of "an affective community" because "we align ourselves with others by investing in the same objects as the cause of happiness" (38). Happiness as thus defined, "creates its own horizon, as a horizon of likes." However, accepting this definition carries a risk. If one embraces one's place in this affective community, it becomes "possible to be surrounded by likes that are not your own, and by promises that haunt you in their emptiness" (76-7).
- 2 This article will examine how three twentieth-century women writers have used a particular literary form, the short story cycle, as a vehicle for challenging the norms of these "affective communities" and for dramatizing Ahmed's model of "happiness" as something one finds for a moment, rather than something one follows. It will examine Katherine Anne Porter's *Miranda* cycle (1939-44), Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples* (1949) and two cycles by Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and *The Beggar Maid* (1978),¹ focusing particularly on the "happiness" that springs from two kinds of

moments that occur in these cycles: moments of potential transformation and moments of return to a site of past experience.

- 3 As contemporaries from America's South, Porter and Welty spoke often of their admiration for each other's work, praising each other's ability to capture the complexity of a character's internal world while preserving its "mystery." Porter reserves particular praise for Welty's story "A Memory," "where external act and internal voiceless life of the human imagination almost meet and mingle on the mysterious threshold between dream and waking, one reality refusing to admit or confirm the existence of the other, yet both conspiring toward the same end" (Introduction xxi). In "Katherine Anne Porter: The Eye of the Story," Welty notes that while "[m]ost good stories are about the interior of our lives, Katherine Anne Porter's stories take place there" (30). Munro has cited both writers as influences, noting similarities between the "absolutely Gothic" nature of the American South and her childhood home, small-town, rural Ontario (Interview with Gibson 248). She has spoken frequently of the influence of the Weltian "vision" on her work: she was "mesmerize[d]" by *The Golden Apples* (Thacker 142). Her reflections on Welty's influence have inspired several critical comparisons of their fictional worlds.² When Munro has been invited to identify literary influences, she has included Porter in her list but she has not elaborated on this particular connection. In an interview for the *Paris Review* she states: "The writers of the American South were the first writers who really moved me because they showed me that you could write about small towns, rural people, and that kind of life I knew very well [...]. I loved Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Katherine Ann [sic.] Porter, Carson McCullers. There was a feeling that women could write about the freakish, the marginal" (par. 128). Critics have noted similarities in their style and thematic concerns. In a review of Munro's short story collection *Open Secrets* (1994), Ted Solotaroff identifies Munro as "a great stylist of 1920's realism. A Katherine Anne Porter brought up to date" (665). In her illuminating study *Alice Munro*, Ailsa Cox makes a brief but intriguing case for a comparative reading of their work, noting thematic "echoes" of Porter's story "Noon Wine" in the title story of Munro's collection *Open Secrets* (3-4).
- 4 This article will focus on these writers' representations of the kinds of women most likely to resist hegemonic notions of happiness in favor of unlikely experiences that open them up to new ways of apprehending their lives and identities: the kinds of "preposterous adventures" that excite the young heroine of *The Beggar Maid*, Rose (67). Ahmed notes that these are the kinds of women who are identified in their communities as "feminist killjoys": they reject the idea that happiness for women requires the suppression of their imagination with its accompanying "narrowing of horizons" and sacrifice of "an interest in what lies beyond the familiar" (61). In my earlier article, "Female Expansion and Masculine Immobilization in the Short Story Cycle," I argued that the story cycle is a particularly useful vehicle for the exploration of alternative, female quest plots. This article will take a closer look at the moments during these quests that seem to bring happiness to their heroines: a kind of happiness that transports them beyond the familiar.
- 5 The short story cycle is in many ways the ideal form for subverting hegemonic notions of happiness. By presenting readers with a series of beginnings and endings, it disconcerts preconceptions of character, time, and plot, decentering protagonists. As Karen Castellucci Cox observes in her article "Magic and Memory in the Contemporary

Story Cycle," readers of the form "may [...] find that a seemingly central character has disappeared from the text without warning" (155). This is the case with *The Golden Apples*, where the focus shifts frequently both between and within the constituent stories: Virgie's status as heroine emerges more as a result of her realizations in the final story than her dominance of the cycle itself. Porter's Miranda remains in the background of several short stories in the collection *The Old Order*, as Aunt Nannie, Uncle Jimbilly and 'the Grandmother' take center stage. Munro's cycles focus more consistently on a single heroine, although it is worth noting that the subtitle of *The Beggar Maid* is *Stories of Flo and Rose* and thus gives Rose's stepmother equal billing. In each case, the form derails the kinds of teleological structures that have been repeatedly identified and embraced as routes to happiness and challenges received wisdom about the role of social norms in finding happiness.

- 6 For the heroines in these cycles, the determination to see beyond the familiar emerges in their very early years, in arguably naïve but telling ways. At the end of Porter's first Miranda story, "Old Mortality," the heroine returns home as a young woman and determines to find her own "truth," taking some pleasure in the "sudden collapse" of the "old painful structure" underpinning the familiar discourses and conventions of Home (*Collected Stories* 221). In Welty's *The Golden Apples*, the heroine, Virgie Rainey, vows to "butt her brains out against the wall" at school, leading her peers to envisage her moving beyond the "horizon of likes" that shapes her affective community and finding her own happiness: "she would go somewhere, somewhere away off, they said then, talking with their chins sunk in their hands" (43). In Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del Jordan rejects explicitly the "horizon of likes" for women that has been established by her affective community and involves marriage, domesticity, and childbearing: "I wanted men to love me, and I wanted to think of the universe when I looked at the moon" (198, emphasis in original).
- 7 In *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*, Joanna Russ explores the strategies used by women writers who do not want to limit themselves to the narrative lines that are traditionally assigned to female characters. She suggests "lyricism" as a strategy for the female writer who "no longer cares" about narratives representing "How She Fell in Love or How She Went Mad" (87). By "lyricism" Russ means "a particular principle of structure [...] setting various images, events, scenes, or memories to circling round an unspoken, invisible center" (87). This "invisible center" defies representation in "available dramatic or narrative terms": the lyric mode is "associative." Russ draws on the fiction of Virginia Woolf to demonstrate the strategies, characteristics, and effects of "lyricism," such as "repetitiousness" and "the gathering-up" of texts "into moments of epiphany" and "indirection" (87).
- 8 This associative approach is of course not limited to the work of female writers, although essentialist notions of "women's writing" often point to these kinds of strategies as evidence of common aims and sensibilities. The cycles by these women writers suggest that female characters are more likely to find themselves framed by reductive narratives; other storytelling strategies are therefore required. In *Lives of Girls and Women*, the men and women of Jubilee use the insanity narrative to frame women whose behavior becomes unaccountable: Uncle Benny's runaway wife Madeleine finds no fulfillment in marriage and so becomes "[t]hat madwoman!" to the people of the community when she abandons her husband (32). Russ's theories are not restricted to the novel form, either. Her notion of the associative lyric mode will

resonate with writers and readers who are familiar with the principles of the short story cycle, a form that galvanizes the synchronic sensibility of the reader by disrupting or muting the emphasis on linear progression and by dispersing networks of imagery and moments of epiphany across the cycle. Porter, Welty, and Munro deploy the kind of strategies that Russ identifies with the lyric mode in their navigation of a common thematic "center": not the search for a male counterpart or the descent into madness or alienation but the quest for an authentic sense of "truth." For the heroines of these cycles, happy endings constitute moments of clarity. It is by expanding their imaginations that they find this clarity.³

- 9 For the heroines in these cycles, finding one's own happiness means resisting the easy repetition of established patterns. Ahmed notes that the narrative structures commonly associated with happiness "involve[...] the comfort of repetition, of following lines that have already been given in advance" (48). Many story cycle writers have used the form to highlight the dangers of this kind of repetition. *The Golden Apples* follows the lives of girls and women from Morgana, a fictional, small town in Mississippi. Jinny Love Stark, the daughter of a well-established Morgana family, repeats the line established for her by the older women of the town by marrying Randall MacLain, son of King, the town's much-mythologized philanderer. With typical economy, Welty figures the limitations of Jinny's life with a single image: her final moment in the cycle sees her "grimacing out of the iron mask of the married lady" as she tells Virgie Rainey that she must marry soon (255). In Porter's Miranda stories, Miranda's Grandmother and Nannie collude through their repetitive storytelling to form a reassuring and familiar picture of the future: "They talked about the past, really—always about the past. Even the future seemed like something gone and done with when they spoke of it. It did not seem an extension of their past, but a repetition of it" (*Collected Stories* 359). Miranda learns that she will have to account for any deviations from her family's script. In "Pale Horse, Pale Rider", she dreams that she is back at her childhood home. Her dream self decides to leave the house before the rest of the family rises: she knows that, once day arrives, "faces will beam asking, Where are you going, What are you doing, What are you thinking, How do you feel, Why do you say such things, What do you mean?" (269). In *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del's aunts take comfort in repetition, telling themselves "the same stories" so that "every word, every expression of the face, every flutter of the hands came to seem something learned long ago, perfectly remembered" (68). The writers of these cycles exploit the alinearity of the form to counter this kind of repetition. As each story ends, any sense of closure is undermined by the possibility of meeting characters again several stories later. These writers use the form to re-enact moments from different perspectives, whether through a shift in focalization or time, thereby relativizing representations of what has been presented as true: as Janet, the heroine of a mini cycle in Munro's collection *The Moons of Jupiter* (2004), observes, "innumerable variations" lurk within the "innumerable repetitions" of ostensibly familiar stories (231). This relativizing poetic makes the story cycle a fitting form for the representation of Ahmed's model of provisional happiness.
- 10 All of the heroines of these cycles experience a particular kind of repetition through the act of homecoming.⁴ In most cases this is a positive form of repetition, a crucial process that enables the heroines to achieve happiness, no matter how provisional, by gaining fresh insight into their pasts and seeing their communities anew. For Ahmed, finding happiness means "[e]mbracing possibility": this entails "returning to the past,

recognizing what one has, as well as what one has lost, what one has given, as well as what one has given up" (218). Both Munro and Porter have used the form to explore their interest in the kinds of awakening that can occur when we return to sites of past experience. Throughout her career Munro has maintained an interest in "what people don't understand [...] [w]hat we think is happening and what we understand later on" (Interview with Hancock 204). Speaking to Barbara Thompson, Porter has observed that "we understand very little of what is happening to us at any given moment. But by remembering, comparing, waiting to know the consequences, we can sometimes see what an event really meant, what it was trying to teach us" (Interview Thompson 39-40). This moment of delayed comprehension will be familiar to readers of story cycles: "[m]oving from one story to another, we may reach a fuller understanding of an earlier conflict, only partially resolved in its own section, or we may discover the narrative interests to have utterly shifted" (Karen Castellucci Cox 155). Paul Ardoin explores this dynamic in his reading of Jean Rhys's *Sleep It Off, Lady* (1976). Ardoin reads Rhys's work as a short story cycle and argues that the form "emphasizes" through its structure "the value of perpetual return and the inescapability of the past" (246). Acts of return are a common feature of the cycles by Porter, Welty, and Munro. All four close with moments of return that enable characters to confront feelings they have ignored or dismissed. The act of return, whether physical or psychological, generates feelings that defy full identification or expression but which leave readers and characters with a powerful, lingering sense of possibility. In her book *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai identifies such feelings with "affect," a concept which she interprets as being "less sociolinguistically fixed" and "less formed and structured than emotion" (27, emphasis in original). As Ngai notes, this interpretation of affect differs slightly from others that view it as entirely without structure. Using Ngai's interpretation, we will consider the affective nature of these moments of return: moments which seem to leave these heroines with the sense of possibility that, for Ahmed, remains crucial to achieving happiness.

- 11 Miranda Gay, haunted by memories of her home, makes several returns. The first occurs at the end of "Old Mortality" but is not a return of possibility, as any potential for growth is restricted by the heroine's unqualified resistance to familiar discourses and patterns. Forced to listen to the nostalgic banter of her father and Aunt Eva, Miranda determines to separate herself from her family and find her own "truth." This moment of resistance to easy repetition masquerades as one of empowering self-determination but is undercut by the narrative voice, which alerts us to Miranda's naivety:

Oh, what is life, she asked herself in desperate seriousness, in those childish unanswerable words, and what shall I do with it? It is something of my own, she thought in a fury of jealous possessiveness, what shall I make of it? She did not know that she asked herself this because all her earliest training had argued that life was a substance, a material to be used, it took shape and direction and meaning only as the possessor guided and worked it; living was a progress of continuous and varied acts of the will directed towards a definite end. (Porter, *Collected Stories* 220)

- 12 Miranda feels that she must reject her family's particular narrative of happiness in order to find her own, but the narrative voice tells us that, despite her declaration of self-sufficiency, her vision is shaped by her family's assumptions about the structures that will lead to happiness: she determines to choose a different kind of happiness but still sees it as a promise, a "path." The narrative discourse characterizes her resolution

as evidence of her "ignorance" (221). A sense of authenticity and "truth" will not emerge by dismissing the past entirely. It is only later in life that Miranda recognizes that she has been pursuing and preparing for happiness rather than seizing it. In the later story, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," Miranda's lover Adam asks her to tell him about her life as she lies ill with influenza. She responds: "There's nothing to tell, after all, if it ends now, for all this time I was getting ready for something that was going to happen later, when the time came" (302).

- 13 It is in a shorter story, "The Grave," that Miranda makes the kind of return that opens up previously unnoticed possibilities. This story dramatizes the last in a series of relativizing moments in the cycle that capture Miranda's ongoing struggle to apprehend and accept her mortality. In "Death and Repetition in Porter's Miranda Stories," George Cheatham identifies Miranda's preoccupation with mortality as the "obsessive center" of the cycle and delivers detailed readings of her encounters with death (610). In "The Grave," nine-year-old Miranda goes hunting with her brother Paul and experiences a series of potentially epiphanic moments through their discovery of several potent symbols at an empty grave: a ring, usually interpreted as representative of marriage; a screw head that takes the shape of a dove, with obvious connotations of redemption and immortality, and a dead, pregnant rabbit, shot by Paul. Most critics seem to read Miranda's confrontation with the rabbit's dead foetuses as a moment of apprehension of her sexuality and the final of a series of childhood moments when she recognizes her mortality without fully exploring its implications. It is one of several "affective moments" in the cycle where Miranda struggles to find the language for what she is feeling: "looking at each other with pleased adventurous eyes, they said in solemn tones: 'These were graves!' trying by words to shape a special, suitable emotion in their minds, but they felt nothing but an agreeable thrill of wonder" (362).
- 14 Years later Miranda is transported back to this moment in the coda to "The Grave." At the age of twenty nine—the oldest age at which we see her and therefore her final moment in the cycle—Miranda recalls this childhood day of discovery while walking through a market in a "strange country" and finally confronts the doubleness of her feelings about her mortality, awakened by the image of the dead rabbit and its foetuses twenty years earlier. In the market she sees some "sugar sweets" in the shape of rabbits and the memory of that day returns, this time as a "dreadful vision": however, the vision takes on a double meaning, the "raw flesh" and "wilting flowers" of her immediate surroundings alerting her to the intermingling of "sweetness and corruption" in her childhood experience (367). It is another, forgotten feeling that emerges from this memory, however, as this vision is supplemented by the image of her brother Paul, "turning the silver dove over and over in his hands" with a "pleased sober smile in his eyes" (368). Most critics have interpreted the vision of Paul and the dove as a kind of reconciliation of the tensions that have worried Miranda throughout her young life. Unrue notes: "[o]nly with the intervening twenty years can [Miranda] regard the experience with a total perspective and know that in addition to the corruption of death and destruction which they discovered, they also found the sweetness of an affirmation of a life" (150). The double memory of the rabbits and her brother's "sober smile" reveals the possibilities of the nine-year-old girl's experience. It is a kind of clarity of vision that Miranda has desired from a young age: she has always "wanted most deeply to see and to know" (366). The other "endings" to the constituent

parts of the Miranda cycle are qualified by the narrator's ironic commentary. The ending of "The Grave" presents Miranda at her most happy and most true.

- 15 Strangely, in a cycle that explores and privileges the stories and voices of a range of family members, this is the first and only appearance by Miranda's brother Paul. In a pattern commonly found in short story cycles, a character who was part of the heroine's life all along enters the cycle in its closing scene to develop her vision. Like Porter, both Welty and Munro stage encounters with forgotten or marginalized figures in their final, homecoming scenes. By introducing or re-introducing these characters at this late stage, these writers give expression to the sense of possibility that Ahmed associates with happiness. These encounters work to expand the heroines' imaginations by relativizing their preconceptions of happiness and authenticity and illuminating the possibility of finding connections with people who move beyond (albeit ostensibly remaining a part of) the communities that forged these preconceptions. Expounding her idea of happiness, Ahmed encourages us to: "think of those moments where you are brought to life by the absurdity of being reminded of something, where a sideways glance can be enough to create a feeling that ripples through you" (219). The marginalized characters in these cycles often rely on subtle, non-verbal gestures such as the "sober smile" or "sideways glance" to alert the heroines to these possibilities.
- 16 Ahmed draws on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) to examine modes of "community" that offer an alternative to those whose models of happiness hinge on the repetition of familiar narratives and manners. She examines the possibilities that emerge from the "odd intimacy" that Clarissa Dalloway experiences with strangers such as Septimus Smith, the shellshock victim whose suicide is mentioned at her party: "Clarissa, thinking of her 'odd affinities' with strangers 'she had never spoken to,' sits on the bus and wonders whether the 'unseen part of us' might provide a point of attachment to others and might even be how we survive through others, 'perhaps – perhaps'" (72).⁵ "[O]dd affinities" such as these thrive in the short story cycle because the form accommodates multiple visions and sensibilities, including those of characters who reside in the margins of the text's fictional world. As I have discussed, cycle writers often choose to close their cycles with a sense of promise furnished by a moment of renewed contact between the recurring character who is most familiar to the reader and a character who has featured only fleetingly or not at all. These kinds of characters abound in the cycles of Welty and Munro, in which the heroines experience the sense of possibility that Ahmed associates with happiness by responding to these presences.
- 17 The word "happy" rarely appears in *The Golden Apples* but it surfaces in the final story, when Virgie Rainey plays host to Morgana's community for her mother's funeral. Virgie has not moved away from Morgana permanently, as predicted, but has escaped the prescriptive narratives peddled by its citizens, the keepers of happiness who counsel marriage and domesticity. She did, however, run away from home when she was seventeen. It is the memory of this earlier return to Morgana that enables Virgie to retain this distance and find a kind of happiness that eludes her peers. After burying her mother in "The Wanderers," the final story of the cycle, she reflects on the moment that she returned home after she ran away:

... in that interim between train and home, she walked and ran looking about her in a kind of glory, by the back way. Virgie never saw it differently, never doubted that all the opposites on earth were close together, love close to hate, living to dying;

but of them all, hope and despair were the closest blood – unrecognizable one from the other sometimes, making moments double upon themselves, and in the doubling double again, amending but never taking back. For that journey, it was ripe afternoon, and all about her was that light in which the earth seems to come into its own, as if there would be no more days, only this day [...] She had always loved that time of day, but now, alone, untouched now, she felt like dancing; knowing herself not really, in her essence, yet hurt; and thus happy. (265)

- 18 Having identified happiness as an embracing of possibility, Ahmed refers us to Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*: "This possibility that is said to be so light is commonly regarded as the possibility of happiness, fortune etc. But this is not possibility.... No, in possibility all things are equally possible, and whoever has truly been brought up by possibility has grasped the terrible as well as the joyful" (qtd. in Ahmed 219). Ahmed argues that in order to embrace possibility, we must liberate our imaginations. Virgie's moment of happiness, like Miranda's, involves recognizing the proximity of ostensibly antithetical feelings. Her moment has inspired a welter of critical readings but Ruth Vande Kieft's eloquent analysis is particularly relevant to this essay. Kieft argues that Virgie displays at this moment a kind of "imaginative wisdom" that takes the form of a "double vision" (518). As Howells has noted, "double vision" is characteristic of Munro's work (31).
- 19 Munro has acknowledged Welty's influence here: when asked to explain how *The Golden Apples* as a cycle has influenced her work as a reader and writer, Munro stresses "vision" over formal qualities: "I wouldn't say that I was conscious of the *structure* being modelled on hers [...] but I have to acknowledge an enormous debt to her ... I think more in this matter of vision" (Interview with Metcalf 58, emphasis in original). In a brief observation in his book on Munro, W. R. Martin surmises that she "must have found" Virgie's vision at this point in *The Golden Apples* "congenial" (204). A moment in Munro's collection *Runaway* (2004), published eighteen years after Martin's book, verifies his speculation. *Runaway* features a microcosmic story cycle: three linked stories about a woman named Juliet, who at one point expresses wonder at the closeness of apparently polarized feelings when she is reunited with the man she hopes to marry. Unsure of his response at her surprise arrival, she feels "flooded with relief" when he welcomes her: "assaulted by happiness," she is "astonish[ed]" to find "[h]ow close to dismay" this feeling is (85).
- 20 Although Virgie does not leave Morgana for long and returns to live with her mother, she does make another kind of return in the final story. As I have noted, Virgie "embraces" the "contradictory" nature of her feelings for one of the community's outsiders, her piano teacher, Miss Eckhart (Lister "Female Expansion" 47). Although Miss Eckhart sensed an affinity with her favorite pupil, Virgie did not fulfill her potential as a pianist and spurned her teacher's devotion. By finally acknowledging the proximity of antithetical feelings, Virgie accepts the "horror" and "separateness" that is an integral part of the "love" that she felt for Miss Eckhart (275).
- 21 Vande Kieft observes that this reconciliation generates a feeling that defies language: it constitutes "more than [Virgie] can articulate" (533). In *The Golden Apples* those characters who bring others to a deeper understanding of life's possibilities rarely do so through language. They share a performative sensibility. In the story "Moon Lake," these possibilities are embodied by another outsider, the orphan Easter. On holiday with young girls from Morgana, Easter, who asserts that she is destined to become a singer, alerts Morganan Nina Carmichael to the possibility of transforming and finding

a new kind of vision for her life. She does so with a single gesture: as she sleeps, her hand lies open, beckoning the night to join her and deliver its "fiercest secrets" (139). Looking at the hand, Nina Carmichael realizes that she has been "only thinking like the others" (138). In "Music from Spain," it is the "most unexpected music" of the Spanish guitar player that frees Eugene MacLain from anxiety about the future and transports him to a "vast present-time [...] affect[ing] him like a secret" (196-7). During a storm, Miss Eckhart plays the piano for her pupils Virgie, Jinny Love, and Cassie Morrison and generates a feeling that defies language, measurement, or even expression through the senses. The music comes from a place "where Virgie, even, had never been and was not likely ever to go" and causes the pianist to "assume[] an entirely different face [...] the face a mountain could have, or what might be seen behind the veil of a waterfall" (56). The narrative voice hints at a kind of feeling that lies beyond everyday experience: "What Miss Eckhart might have told them a long time ago was that there was more than the ear could bear to hear or the eye to see, even in her." Although the students are disturbed by the music, they find themselves asking Miss Eckhart to repeat the performance, "begging for the last thing they wanted" (58).

- 22 Alice Munro has repeatedly stressed her fascination with unaccountable feelings and responses. Both of her cycles end on moments when the heroines sense an "odd affinity" with a marginalized character that leads to an expansion of imaginative vision. Both Del from *Lives of Girls and Women* and Rose from *The Beggar Maid* return to their small home towns and encounter forgotten figures from their childhood.⁶ Like their literary predecessors, they have resisted the claims of societal norms. Miranda and Virgie dabble in scandalous behaviour in order to assert their independence from their communities' codes and conventions, Miranda by eloping and Virgie by indulging in fleeting love affairs. Del distances herself from Jubilee through her writing, turning it into the setting of a Gothic romance. On her return, however, she recognizes that the tropes and structures of this genre cannot capture the mysteries of its everyday world: mysteries which "persist, in spite of novels" (*Lives of Girls* 274). In the closing moments of the cycle, Del is reminded of these mysteries when she is invited into the home of one of the town's peripheral figures. Bobby Sherriff, an eccentric who is marginalized both in Jubilee and in Del's sensationalist rendition of the town, has returned from the asylum and asks Del into his home. He remains elusive to her: "[t]here must be some secret to madness, some *gift* about it, something I didn't know" (275, emphasis in original). This elusiveness is captured by his closing, enigmatic gesture: after wishing Del luck, Sherriff elevates himself "on his toes, like a dancer, like a plump ballerina" (276-77). Unable to decode this gesture, Del senses nevertheless that it has "a concise meaning, a stylized meaning," like a letter or word "in an alphabet [she] did not know" (277). Like the open hand of Easter in "Moon Lake," Miss Eckhart's tempestuous performance and the "sober smile" in the eyes of Miranda's brother, this gesture awakens the heroine both to "what she has learned and what she does not understand" (Howells 50).
- 23 In *The Beggar Maid*, two figures, both mimics, fulfill a similar function, introducing Rose to the possibility of resisting societal coding. Tolerated by his aunts and the community at large, town mimic Milton Homer is labeled and dismissed as an eccentric and therefore free to ignore the etiquette required at the town's social occasions. Like Miss Eckhart and Bobby Sherriff, he is "missing [...] a sense of precaution," the inhibition that keeps the rest of the town's citizens under control (198). He is eventually sent to the county home, the final destination of Morgana's Miss Eckhart. In the closing story

of *The Beggar Maid*, Rose recalls how she and a boy at school named Ralph Gillespie used to mimic the people of West Hanratty. Rose is particularly impressed by Ralph's impression of Milton Homer. When Rose re-encounters Ralph years later in the final story of the cycle, he is a wounded and seemingly defeated war veteran. Although they struggle to communicate verbally, Rose feels "the same silent joke, the same conspiracy, comfort" that characterized her relationship with Ralph years ago (209)—a closeness that has eluded her in her adult relationships with men. Earlier stories in the cycle trace Rose's doomed marriage and ensuing love affairs, showing how she expected happiness to emerge from long-term, romantic relationships with men. As Ahmed notes, the marriage plot dominates notions of happiness for women in particular. Munro acknowledges the power of this expectation. In the story "The Beggar Maid," Rose reflects on the reasons why she continually returned to her husband Patrick, attributing it to the desire to "bring him back his happiness" (98). The lure of the promise of happiness is clear: "she sometimes thought it had not been pity or greed or cowardice or vanity but something quite different, like a vision of happiness [...] sometimes, without reason or warning, happiness, the possibility of happiness, would surprise them" (99).

- 24 In contrast, there is no model for her feelings for Ralph, which defy linguistic framing: Rose senses between them "a wave of kindness, of sympathy and forgiveness, though certainly no words of that kind had been spoken" (210). This sense of connection mutes the "peculiar shame" that has become associated with her work as an actor, although she senses the inadequacy of her performances and worries that "she might have been paying attention to the wrong things, reporting antics, when there was always something further, a tone, a depth, a light, that she couldn't get and wouldn't get" (209). Her potential mistakes lose their significance in Ralph's presence and instead "[t]here seemed to be feelings which could only be spoken of in translation; perhaps they could only be acted on in translation" (210). Rose chooses not to pursue this act of translation, however, concerned that language cannot do justice to these feelings: "not speaking of them and not acting on them is the right course to take because translation is dubious. Dangerous, as well" (210). In Munro's cycles, it is the marginal figures whose presences are felt by the characters, despite the lack of regular contact, who alert the "feminist killjoys" to the possibilities inherent in relationships edited out of hegemonic models of happiness.⁷
- 25 It is highly significant that both Ralph and Milton are accomplished mimics. Inspired by their craft, Rose ponders the possibility of transforming: "She wanted to fill up in that magical, releasing way, transform herself; she wanted the courage and the power" (204). As noted, Ahmed associates happiness with possibility: specifically, in these cycles, the possibility of transforming excites the imaginations of the heroines. After meeting the Morganans the day before her mother's funeral, Virgie goes to the Big Black River for a dip and experiences a moment that transports her beyond the limits of her own body: "Virgie had reached the point where in the next moment she might turn into something without feeling it shock her" (249). In *The Beggar Maid*, a young Rose marvels at the prospect of transformation. At the end of the fourth story, "Wild Swans," she reflects on a tale that she has heard from her stepmother, Flo, about a woman who booked into a hotel under a pseudonym and assumed a new identity for a weekend: "She thought it would be an especially fine thing, to manage a

transformation like that. To dare it; to get away with it, to enter on preposterous adventures in your own, but newly named, skin" (67).

- 26 The night before Virgie Rainey leaves Morgana as an adult, a strange woman comes to her door with a gift: a night-blooming cereus. As Marrs notes in her biography on Welty, this plant is "an emblem of life's beauty and its fragility" (45). The gift reminds the reader and Virgie of the provisional nature of her happiness. "[T]roubled" by it, she throws it away (267). In an analysis of *The Beggar Maid*, Ailsa Cox observes how "Rose's life does not run in a straight line" but rather "embrac[es] contingency" (31, 33). She accepts that the comfort she feels alongside Ralph is fleeting. It will continue to resist any kind of framing. At the end of her cycle, Del accepts that the mysteries and secrets of Jubilee will continue to elude her. The contingency of these women's lives is dramatized through the continual relativizing of particular moments. Howells compares the endings of the individual stories in *The Beggar Maid* and the cycle as a whole to Derrida's concept of the "supplement": the endings provide "some insight or additional detail of information [...] which unsettles the carefully constructed narrative" (10). Juliet, the heroine of the later cycle that forms part of *Runaway*, most emphatically embraces contingency and relinquishes the expectations of how her life should develop. In the concluding story of the cycle, "Silence," Juliet struggles to come to terms with her estrangement from her daughter Penelope but by the end accepts it, embracing a different kind of life from the one she foresaw. She hopes that Penelope will contact her but does not do so "in any strenuous way" (158). The mood of the closing paragraph of the Juliet cycle is one of contentment. She continues to study; she works in a coffee shop and would not leave even "if she could afford to"; she maintains some relationships, letting others go. Her friend Larry "continues to visit, and to make jokes" (158). The relationship with Larry is platonic: he "was not a man who wanted anything from Juliet but her friendship and good humor" (153). The relationship is not "going anywhere": it is neither a path nor a promise. Like Welty's Eugene, she exists in a "vast present-time."
- 27 Ahmed writes that "[h]appiness might not simply provide a sense of possibility; it is a sense of possibility" and that "[t]o turn happiness into an expectation is thus to annul its sense of possibility" (220). Freeing oneself from this expectation means that "other things can happen" and one might develop "a certain kind of openness to the possibility of an encounter" (220). It is this freedom that the feminist killjoys of Porter, Welty, and Munro sample in the closing moments of their cycles. It is this openness that they develop. In her essay "Some Notes on Time in Fiction," Welty writes of the "arbitrary, bullying power" of "clock time" and shows us how writers might use fiction to outdo it (*Eye* 165). All of the moments of truth, happiness, and fulfillment that conclude these cycles debunk teleological models of happiness. When Miranda sees the animal-shaped sweets, she is overwhelmed by the way that the memory of "that far-off day leaped from its burial place before her mind's eye" (367). As Virgie Rainey floats in the river, she senses that she is beyond time, "suspended in the Big Black River as she would know to hang suspended in felicity" (249). Rose's intense identification with classmate Ralph Gillespie and Del's apprehension of the unending mysteries of her old, everyday life in Jubilee defy the tyranny of linearity. These moments enable the heroines to reclaim abandoned or suppressed feelings and sensations and to comprehend what they did not initially understand. In her celebratory essay on Porter, Welty identifies "[s]eeing what is not there, putting trust in a false picture of life" as "one of the worst nightmares that assail her characters" (*Eye* 35): it is this nightmare

that haunts all of the women in these cycles. The story cycle is the perfect vehicle for dramatizing the freedom and vision that these writers associate with happiness, as it provides multiple escape routes from preordained plots but also provides the possibility of returning and looking anew. Ahmed writes of the transience of happiness: "We can value happiness for its precariousness, as something that comes and goes, as life does. When I think of what makes happiness 'happy' I think of moments. Moments of happiness create texture, shared impressions: a sense of lightness *in possibility*" (219, emphasis in original). In a letter to Morton Zabel, Porter concurs, writing of happiness as transient and particular to the individual human subject: "Trust your happiness and the richness of your life at this moment. It is as true and as much yours as anything else that ever happened to you" (468).

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NOTES

1. Porter's sequence of Miranda Gay stories traces the maturation of its central heroine but is in some ways more fractured than other variations on the sequence form, as it stretches across several texts. It consists of two long stories, "Old Mortality" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," separated by the unrelated "Noon Wine" and published collectively as *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), and a sequence of short stories published as *The Old Order* in the collection *The Leaning Tower* (1944). It is perhaps owing to this unconventional publication process that commentators on the short story sequence rarely include the Miranda stories in their studies. Only Susan Mann includes *The Old Order*, "Old Mortality" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" in her list of short story sequences in *The Short Story Cycle: A Companion and Reference Guide*, page 203.
2. Readers and critics have drawn connections between the works of Welty and Munro, often focusing on similarities in theme and content between Welty's story "June Recital," from *The Golden Apples*, and two stories by Munro: "Dance of the Happy Shades" from the collection of the same title and "Changes and Ceremonies" from *Lives of Girls and Women*. See for more on this, works by Coral Ann Howells (28-30) and Heather Cam.
3. Margot Kelley explores the short story cycle or "novel-in-stories," her preferred term, as a site for female experience in "Gender and Genre: the Case of the Novel-in Stories."
4. I have noted briefly the prevalence of homecomings in story cycles and their yielding of connections with marginalized figures in the articles "Female Expansion and Masculine Immobilization in the Short Story Cycle" and "The Short Story Sequence in 'The Homeland of the Novel': A. S. Byatt's *Matisse Stories*." Ahmed writes about the "myth" of the "happy family" and the power of "happy objects" that come from the family home and promise of continuity. She quotes from Simone de Beauvoir: "The ideal of happiness has always taken material form in the house... Within its walls the family is established as a discrete cell or a unit group and maintains its identity as generations come and go; the past, preserved in the form of furniture and ancestral portraits, gives promise of a secure future" (qtd. in Ahmed 46). The writers of these cycles, however, do not focus exclusively on reunions with family members or a return to a family house but a return to relationships with people who are from the community's margins.
5. Suzan Harrison's highly illuminating book *Eudora Welty and Virginia Woolf: Gender, Genre and Influence* offers detailed analysis of the dialogue between these writers. She notes that the novels of both writers "seek out the private realities lying beneath the social fabric and foreground the tension between the two realms" (3).
6. Howells writes that *The Beggar Maid* is "obsessed with homecomings" (63), and Carrington observes how "many" of Munro's characters return to their home towns, despite their "intense ambivalence" towards them (209).
7. Carrington writes in illuminating detail about the significance of acts of watching from the periphery in Munro's fiction in her book *Controlling the Uncontrollable*.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article explore l'utilisation de la forme du cycle de nouvelles par trois écrivaines du vingtième siècle pour développer des récits défiant certaines notions hégémoniques du bonheur. S'appuyant sur le domaine des études de l'affect, cet article analyse la manière dont Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter et Alice Munro utilisent les cycles pour représenter des modèles

alternatifs d'épanouissement pour les personnages féminins. Sont appliquées à ces cycles les théories de Sara Ahmed, afin de démontrer la façon dont elles ouvrent à des récits et des espaces au-delà des « communautés affectives », qui ont tendance à construire et perpétuer des modèles de bonheur féminin. Ces lectures apportent une analyse détaillée de types de moments particuliers qui interviennent dans les cycles des trois auteurs, moments produisant la sensation fugace de possibilité qu'Ahmed associe aux notions affectives du bonheur. On compte parmi ces moments : la rencontre furtive avec une figure marginalisée ayant trouvé le bonheur au-delà de l'« horizon des semblables » instituée par sa « communauté affective » ; des moments de transformation inattendue ; et des moments de retour vers les « communautés affectives » familières.

AUTHORS

RACHEL LISTER

Rachel Lister teaches part time at Durham University, England, specializing in modern American Fiction. She is the author of books on the novels of Toni Morrison and on Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. She has written articles on the short stories of Katherine Anne Porter, A. S. Byatt, and Grace Paley and on the films of Nicole Holofcener and Sarah Polley.