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Other rooms, other texts, other selves: Alice Munro’s “Sunday afternoon” and “Hired Girl”

Ildikó de Papp Carrington

1 In 1957 the *Canadian Forum* published one of Alice Munro's early short stories, "Sunday Afternoon," later included in her first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, 1968. This story, which Munro has identified as using adolescent "autobiographical material," narrates the humiliating experience of Alva, a poor country-high-school girl working for the Gannetts as a summer maid in their affluent suburban home ("Real" 23; "Conversation" 58). Although she is lonely, self-conscious, and virtually invisible and mute, she insists that she does not feel "lonesome and downtrodden" (*Dance* 167). During a cocktail party, Mrs. Gannett's cousin sneaks out to the kitchen to kiss Alva and confide that he has been invited to the Gannetts' Georgian Bay island for an August weekend. Although he restores her self-confidence, the story's conclusion suggests her reluctance to recognize what she might encounter on the island, "a new and still mysterious humiliation," most likely inflicted by this socially superior seducer (171).

2 In 1994 the *New Yorker* published Munro's "Hired Girl," a sequel to "Sunday Afternoon" and the first such sequel that Munro has ever written (11 Apr. 1994). It continues and completes the unresolved situation in the conclusion of the earlier story.[1] Although Alva is now called Elsa and the Gannetts have been renamed Montjoy, Elsa is the same country teenager employed for the summer, still refusing to "admit that [she is] in the least humbled or lonely" ("Hired" 83). The August weekend mentioned in "Sunday Afternoon" brings Mr. and Mrs. Hammond to the Montjoys' Georgian Bay island, and Ivan Hammond, like the man in the earlier story, goes out to the kitchen to talk to the hired girl, but his wife is with him. When Mrs. Hammond leaves, he makes the slightly risqué suggestion that Elsa try swimming in the nude, but he does not kiss her. Later, swimming topless, Elsa fantasizes about the disturbing "pleasure" she could get from "his desired

corruptness" (87). This difference between the behavior of the two girls and of the two male characters signals major changes in the second story.

3 In interviews Munro has defined her repeated use of the same material as a method for trying to achieve new understanding. "It may be that you... have to go back... and mine the same material and look at in different ways, or in the same way, and sometimes you get to it and sometimes you don't." Making "changes in technique" prevents you from becoming "mechanical" and "maybe assist[s]... you to fresh perception" ("Real" 12, 13). The fresh perception is the product not only of new techniques but also of maturity. "[T]he way you see your life does change as you grow older and so there is just a constant reworking of... material ("Scottish" 91).

4 In the sequel's reworking of "Sunday Afternoon," Munro's new perception is revealed in two integrally related shifts, a shift in point of view and a corresponding shift to textual and tonal complexity. Munro moves from the defensiveness of an adolescent protagonist in "Sunday Afternoon" to the self-criticism of a retrospective adult narrator in "Hired Girl." "Sunday Afternoon," in which the last word is *humiliation,* criticizes the rich characters for exploiting poor young Alva (*Dance* 171), but in "Hired Girl" Elsa criticizes herself for believing that being "young and poor" gave her "the right" to achieve a "queasy triumph" over her employers (88). Simultaneously, Munro also increases the significance of literature, reading, and storytelling to her narrator's definition of her own identity. Through a combination of explicit allusion and subtly ironic echoes, the narrator's reading and storytelling in "Hired Girl" create complex levels of intertextuality to make a metafictional comment on both stories and on Munro's authorial identity.

5 These changes can be seen by comparing similar scenes in the two stories: scenes between Alva/Elsa and her female employer and between the girl and her employers' daughter, letter-writing scenes in which the hired girl lies about her situation, the already-mentioned cocktail party kitchen scenes with the male guest, and scenes in which literature and reading become the hired girl's instrument for defining her identity as more than just a servant. Against the background of similarity in these scenes, the differences between the two stories are dramatically highlighted.

6 In "Sunday Afternoon" the emphasis in most scenes is upon the Gannetts' affluence, upon what they possess: not only two beautiful homes with lawns manicured by "Chinese gardeners," "glittering cars," and boats, but "a whole island that they owned; nothing in sight that was not theirs" (Dance 166, 167,169). Amid all this, Alva's poverty is objectified by the painful contrast between herself and Margaret, the Gannetts' teenage daughter. Compelled to wear the former maid's ill-fitting uniform, Alva rationalizes her helpless envy of Margaret's collection of expensive summer formals: "Alva had not known [Margaret] had so many" (168). In "Hired Girl," this symbolic contrast is muted, for Elsa does not have to wear a uniform. Although the cheap homemade dress in which she arrives is already sweat-stained, she is usually allowed to be comfortable in shorts. Because the Montjoys' daughter, Mary Anne, is only ten, her wardrobe is not an issue.

7 But the most important difference between the Gannetts and the Montjoys is that in spite of owning a summer home on a beautiful island, the Montjoys are a family not defined by the glamour of possession but marked by many different kinds of loss. Because Mr. Montjoy has very poor eyesight, he is constantly misplacing and losing things, an affliction that Elsa finds comic. Far worse, Mrs. Montjoy's mother, Mrs. Foley, has lost her mind. Suffering from what seems to be Alzheimer's, she cannot recognize her own daughter. Neither can she remember the Montjoys' most tragically ironic loss, the death

of Jane, their pretty three-year-old daughter, in a freak accident precipitated by a search for a lost bracelet. Trying to locate her valuable possession, Mrs. Montjoy moved a cupboard that "toppled down on" the child and killed her (88). Until the story's climax, Mrs. Montjoy does not speak of her dead child; but, as if somehow attempting to prevent what has already occurred, she is obsessed with always keeping everything in the right place in her cupboards. Mr. Montjoy's constantly repeated question, "Where the hell is the---?" (85), Mrs. Foley's pitiful query, "Can you tell me where Jane is?" (86), and Mrs. Montjoy's cupboard-organizing compulsion all emphasize the family's dispossession and the irony of their family name. And even their friends are marked by loss. Although Elsa finds Ivan Hammond handsome, glamorous, and "courtly," he has been invited to the island because he has lost his job and is "depressed" (86). The upperclass seducer in "Sunday Afternoon" is unemployed, unhappy, and uninterested in seduction in "Hired Girl." Therefore, the wealthy Montjoys and their lavishly entertained friends are paradoxically have-nots as well as haves: their wealth has not protected them from infirmity, death, or grief. But the adolescent Elsa, obsessed with *her* loss of identity as the Montjoys' servant, has to grow up before she can recognize their suffering.

8 Thus the difference between possession and dispossesion emerges from a change in Munro's narrative technique that makes such recognition possible. "Sunday Afternoon" is limited to Alva's adolescent point of view, presented both objectively and subjectively. The first and third sections of the story are narrated about Alva from a third-person point of view. In the middle section of the story, however, the third-person narration is interrupted by a long quotation from Alva's letter to her mother, in which her first-person narration reveals that Alva is not only concealing her unhappiness from her mother but also trying to conceal it from herself by denying and rationalizing her humiliating position. "Hired Girl," on the other hand, is narrated by Elsa as a much older, retrospective first-person narrator, remembering and evaluating her adolescent experience. The double-voiced technique of such a point of view is immensely flexible. It allows the narrator to "slide up and down the time axis that connects [her] two [temporally distant] selves" (Cohn 145) and thus to introduce constant interruptions of both monologues and dialogues to comment on and criticize her past behavior.

9 This difference in the manipulation of point of view in the two stories is integrally linked to another major difference: the relative significance of the scenes in which literature and reading form the narrative topic.[2] In "Sunday Afternoon" Alva has no other diversion but sitting in the maid's room and reading books from her employers' den. When she goes there to get a book, Mr. Gannett asks her if she gets enough to eat. Annoyed by this question that reduces her to "a heifer," she rejects the "mysteries and historical novels" he is about to offer her and asks him for *King Lear* and *The Red and the Black*; she leaves the den "feeling well-pleased" because "she [has] shown him she [does] something besides eat" (*Dance* 165, 166). By impressing her employer, she has redefined her position, but she does "not want to read" in her stiflingly hot room (166). To try to escape from this room, she writes a letter to her mother in which she insists, "I'm not a maid really" (167), repeatedly denies being lonesome, thereby of course revealing that she is, and enthusiastically pretends to look forward to going swimming in Georgian Bay.[3]

10 What redefines Alva's identity in her own eyes, however, is neither the unread books nor the strained concealment of her letter but the amatory attention of the male guest. Until he comes into the kitchen, another hot room, she feels not only invisible because "nobody look[s]... at her" as she serves the food (164), but also inaudible because, surrounded by

the "incomprehensible faint noise" of the party, "she [cannot] make a sound..., not a dint" (170). His lingering kisses, however, make her see herself in a dramatically different way: "This stranger's touch had eased her; her body was simply grateful and expectant, and she felt a lightness and confidence she had not known in this house" (170). The promise of erotic excitement that she reads into his future presence in Georgian Bay fills her with a paradoxical mixture of anticipation and apprehension: "She saw [the Island] indifferently now; it was even possible that she wanted to go there. But... there was something she would not explore yet---a tender spot, a new and still mysterious humiliation" (171).

11 In "Hired Girl" Munro develops and resolves this open-ended situation by assigning literature, reading, and storytelling much more significant functions than they have in "Sunday Afternoon." In 1994, the same year "Hired Girl" was published, she defined the "excitement" of reading as a subject in her fiction: "people don't generally write about... how big a part reading plays in your life[:]... it's like a constant other room you go into besides the room you're living in" ("Scottish" 93). She communicates the excitement of this other room by alternating and ultimately intertwining two strands of literary references through "Hired Girl." One strand alludes explicitly to Homer's Nausicaä and implicitly to the Nausicaä episode in James Joyce's *Ulysses,* and the other includes quotes from two of Isak Dinesen's *Seven Gothic Tales,* "The Dreamers" and "The Supper at Elsinore." Through this intertextuality, Munro weaves a unifying but paradoxical pattern to structure her narrative, to comment on her narrator's style and on her own authorial role, and, at the story's climax, to illuminate and criticize how Elsa exploits the Montjoys' loss of their child in order to recoup her loss of identity as their servant.

12 "Hired Girl" is set on Nausicaä, the Montjoys' Georgian Bay island. When Mrs. Montjoy and Elsa arrive there by boat, Elsa sees the island's name "written on a board at the end of the dock" (82). Although Mrs. Montjoy identifies Nausicaä as a Shakespearean character, Elsa suppresses her impulse to explain that Nausicaä was "the girl on the beach---the princess playing ball with her friends---whom Ulysses surprised when he awoke from his sleep" (82). This introductory scene not only differentiates between the philistine Mrs. Montjoy and Elsa but also, because Elsa does not parade her "superior knowledge," begins to erode her sense of herself, which is defined by the "familiar... satisfaction and misgiving" of such knowledge (82).

13 This erosion of her identity continues in many other ways. Dislocated on the island, Elsa is almost immediately aware that nothing is there for her, not even the rocks and trees, because she is a servant. Mary Anne tactlessly announces that, although Elsa is "sort of pretty," her prettiness "isn't the same thing" as the attractiveness of rich girls because she is a maid (83). This remark virtually erases Elsa's pleasing physical identity. In addition, poor Mrs. Foley is repeatedly confused about who Elsa is---maybe the grocery delivery girl? But as the delivery service has long been discontinued, there is no such girl. Ivan Hammond also confuses Elsa with someone else, addressing her as Minnie. When Mary Anne is naively astonished that the unathletic Elsa cannot define herself by her proficiency in one of the sports with which the affluent occupy their leisure, Elsa begins to use a literary weapon, storytelling, to resist the cumulative erosion of her identity.

14 For Mary Anne's benefit, she exaggerates "all the isolated and bizarre circumstances" of her poor rural background to dramatize a "false impression" of constant hard work and hardship because, in her self-defensive pride, she has a mistaken idea of the Montjoys' attitude. As the retrospective narrator interrupting this past storytelling now recognizes, "it seemed that I had to protect... a whole precious and intimate though often unpleasant

way of life from contempt, which I supposed to be nourished in the icy hearts of people like the Montjoys" (85).[4] Through the verbs *seemed* and *supposed,* the retrospective narrator distances herself from her deluded adolescent self.

15 The first indication that Mr. Montjoy is perhaps not as icily contemptuous as Elsa imagines him to be is also related to the topic of literature. When she finds *Seven Gothic Tales,* a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection that Mr. Montjoy has been reading, she immediately begins reading it, too, while eavesdropping on the Montjoys' disagreement about the book, which Mrs. Montjoy finds confusing but her husband enjoys. The central "psychological theme" of the *Tales* is "the mysteries of identity" (Langbaum 96), and the passage that Elsa reads comes from the end of "The Dreamers," a tale about transforming identities. Mira, the old storyteller, is responding to the narratives that the other characters have been telling him about Pellegrina Leoni, a famous opera singer who, when she loses the glorious voice that has defined her identity, fakes her own death and then recreates herself by assuming a series of masks to change from one person to another (*Seven* 344,345, 347). Her transformations are so successful that she tricks three men into believing her to be three different women and falling in love with her. When Mira says, "I have been trying for a long time to understand God. Now I have made friends with him. To love him truly you must love change, and you must love a joke, these being the true inclinations of his own heart..." (355; qtd. in "Hired" 85), his emphasis on change and jokes defines the role of the storyteller or artist as the earthly representative of God, "the greatest mask artist of them all" (Johannesson 80). "The Incomparable Storyteller," a recent article about Munro, cites her comment about her participation in amateur plays near Clinton, Ontario: "With acting, I love the mask" (qtd. in Turbide 46). By quoting Mira from "The Dreamers," Munro is thus playing with a series of masks. Mira is a mask for another incomparable storyteller, Isak Dinesen, Karen Blixen's pseudonym (Aiken 52), and behind this double mask in "Hired Girl" is a third mask, Munro's own.[5] Her mask is Elsa the storyteller, who has just been redefining her identity by dramatizing it for Mary Anne.

16 However, this brief self-dramatization fails to protect Elsa against her invisibility during the August weekend promised in "Sunday Afternoon" and developed in "Hired Girl." By connecting the Homeric beach of Nausicaä with the Georgian Bay beach at the beginning of the story, Munro prepares us to read the beach scene on this weekend through the ironic prism of the Nausicaä episode in Joyce's *Ulysses.* After Ivan Hammond has suggested that Elsa swim in the nude, she goes for a swim off the dock with the "Nausicaä" sign. On her way she encounters some party guests who, like the guests in "Sunday Afternoon," do not actually see servants. They simply make "way for [her] body without looking at [her]" (87). But, in spite of Hammond's difficulty in remembering her name, she hopes that he will surprise her on the beach.

17 Then, just as Joyce's Gerty MacDowell, sitting on the "rocks along Sandymount shore" on a "summer evening," hears the sounds of a choir at a "men's temperance retreat" in a nearby church and fantasizes about an imaginary lover (346, 354), so Elsa, swimming off the rocks, hears "the sounds of the cocktail party" and fantasizes about Hammond ("Hired" 87). The ironic contrast between the temperance retreat and the cocktail party that is highlighted by the similarity of the setting and of the fantasizing girls alerts us to further intertextual ironies. After Leopold Bloom, who is sitting at a distance and who has kicked back the ball of some playing children, begins to watch Gerty intently, she focuses her fantasy on him. Soon she can "almost feel... the first quick hot touch of his handsome

lips" (Joyce 366). The diction of Elsa's fantasies about Hammond is almost identical with Gerty's. She imagines a "first touch,... then kisses, hot pressures..." ("Hired" 87). Excited by Bloom's "passionate gaze," Gerty, pretending to watch fireworks exploding overhead, leans back on the rocks to expose her drawers, her legs and thighs in "wondrous revealment," and Bloom explodes in an orgasm (Joyce 362, 366). Similarly Elsa, excited by Hammond's skinny-dipping suggestion, not only takes off the top of her bathing suit but "even dare[s] to... bob... up and down and [rise] into the light like a mermaid, wet and gleaming, with nobody to see" ("Hired" 87).[6] When she hears footsteps approaching the boathouse, she momentarily believes that now somebody *will* see her, that by exposing her breasts she has "actually entered the world of secret signals, lovers' meetings, ruthless desires," but instead of Hammond, the man in the boathouse is only old Mr. Foley, who "never notice[s] her presence" (87).

18 Comparing this scene to Joyce's Nausicaä episode calls attention not only to the disappointing absence of the hot male gaze that Elsa longs for to burn away her invisibility but also to the methods that she then uses to achieve the identity she wants. The first method is, once again, storytelling in which her imagination gives her control, both as heroine and author. "To hold [her] own against" the continuing drunken din of the party, after her swim she writes a letter to a friend (87). Unlike the letter that Alva writes to her mother in "Sunday Afternoon," this letter does more than just conceal reality. It transforms reality by creating a fictitious identity for Elsa. In her imagination, she escapes the servant's room in the boathouse loft to become desirable but virtuous. Instead of being ignored by Hammond, she is first "fondled... in the kitchen," then passionately pursued down to the beach, where he makes "a determined attack" but is driven away by her resistance (87).

19 The conclusion of this letter, however, introduces a significant tonal shift in which Munro assumes the tone of both Joyce and Dinesen to make a metafictional comment. "So hold your breath," Elsa writes her friend, "for the next installment---`The Kitchen Maid's Adventures,' or `Ravaged on the Rocks of Georgian Bay,'" which the young author later realizes should have been *ravished* ("Hired" 87). Although Elsa's letter as a letter pretends to be true, her assigning it alternate titles not only labels her letter as fiction but moves outside its textual boundaries to classify it as a certain kind of fiction. Her smiling self-mockery, intensified by the comically corrected malapropism, is doubly self-reflexive. By echoing Joyce's "burlesque of sentimental *kitsch*" in his narration of Gerty's florid interior monologue (Cohn 121), this metafictional comment distances not only Elsa from her novelettish narrative but also Munro from her earlier story. Stepping outside the limits of "Hired Girl," she pokes fun at Alva's imagination in "Sunday Afternoon." Like Dinesen's Mira, Munro the storyteller loves a joke, even a joke on her own early storytelling.

20 The second method that Elsa employs to insist on her identity involves storytelling in the sense of deliberately lying to Mrs. Montjoy. When Mary Anne tells Elsa about Jane's death, the child says that she does not believe her sister is in heaven. "She is just dead, she is nothing" ("Hired" 83). In the climax of the story, Elsa assumes a mask of ignorance to pretend to Mrs. Montjoy that she does not know who Jane was. Repeating Mrs. Foley's pathetic question for Mrs. Montjoy, Elsa asks, "Was Jane one of the girls who worked here some other summer?" (87). Until this scene Munro's narrator withholds a crucial fact: Mary Anne has already told Elsa the circumstances of Jane's death. Thus, when Munro completes this analepsis by having her narrator confess to us her prior knowledge of how Mrs. Montjoy accidentally killed her child, we understand the motive behind Elsa's

disingenuous question. By pretending to believe that Jane was a former maid, Elsa forces Mrs. Montjoy not only to reveal and relive the tragedy of her life but also to pay attention to her maid. Thus, even though Elsa is a maid, she demonstrates that *she* is *not* nothing. Remembering her ambivalent reaction of "guilt" and "queasy triumph" after the success of this demonstration, the retrospective narrator severely criticizes her adolescent behavior :

21 Instead of making her too superior to be a servant, her literary knowledge makes her conceited and clumsily cruel.

22 This self-criticism is justified even further by the conclusion of the story, in which Mr. Montjoy shows that he does not consider Elsa nothing. Just before she leaves Nausicaä, he makes her a present of *Seven Gothic Tales* because he has seen her reading it and thinks she would enjoy it. His sympathetic understanding springs from his boyhood poverty. When his physician father died, Mary Anne has told Elsa, Mr. Montjoy had to work his way through college. But although surprised by this gift, Elsa is reluctant "to give anybody whose father had been a doctor credit for being poor" (88). Feeling as if Dinesen's book "had always belonged" to her (88), she joyfully begins reading it again. Sitting in the servant's room, she quotes a description of a gorgeously glowing and fragrant room in "The Supper at Elsinore" :

23 By echoing both the Homeric and the Joycean allusions to Nausicaä, Dinesen's mythological image completes the intertextual pattern. But, more significantly, this room sounds like the "other room" that Munro feels reading opens for her ("Scottish" 93). In the concluding paragraph, the retrospective narrator feels that entrance into this imaginary room has "rescued" her from the "shame" of her "nature" and "condition" through the magic of reading.[7]

24 The rescue in "Hired Girl," therefore, is effected not by the promise of future erotic excitement, as it is in "Sunday Afternoon," but by the excitement of reading. In "Sunday Afternoon" Alva is obsessed with her condition, whereas in "Hired Girl" the dual-voiced narrator criticizes Elsa's nature, her self-absorbed inability to recognize the reality of her employers' identities as well as of her own. In a characteristic paradox, Munro's adult narrator locates both her adolescent blindness and her developing artistic vision in her love of literature.

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NOTES

1. *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Who Do You Think You Are*? *(The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose* in the United States) are both a series of linked stories about the same character. In *Open Secrets*., "Carried Away," "Vandals," and "Spaceships Have Landed" are stories about two generations of the same family. "Carried Away" also includes a character briefly mentioned in a much earlier

story, "Thanks for the Ride" (See Carrington, "What's"555). However, none of these stories can be classified as sequels in the sense defined above.

2. Cf. Miriam Marty Clark's essay and Carrington, "Double-Talking" 73, 83.

3. Cf. Carrington, *Controlling* 104-5.

4. In "Jesse and Meribeth," a teenager brought up in "threadbare decency" and employed by Mr. Cryderman as a maid feels the same compulsion to "snip one little hole in his contempt" (*Progress* 168, 175).

5. For an earlier example of a character functioning as an authorial mask, see "A Wilderness Station" and Carrington, "Double-Talking," 89.

6. Because Munro's mermaid simile suggests an image of the bare-breasted statue of Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid, seated on a rock in Copenhagen harbor, this comparison is perhaps another allusion to the Danish Dinesen.

7. Cf. Clark's comment on the "liberatory... power of books and reading" in Munro's fiction (61).

RÉSUMÉS

La nouvelle "Hired Girl" d'Alice Munro, se veut une suite qui, non seulement complète "Sunday Afternoon" mais aussi porte un regard critique sur celle-ci en ayant recours à un point de vue plus complexe : d'une adolescente sur la défensive - l'héroïne de "Sunday Afternoon" - Munro passe à un narrateur adulte qui se penche sur son passé et s'adonne à une autocritique ; à travers l'ironie de l'intertexte, ce narrateur commente de manière metatextuelle les deux histoires mais aussi définit l'identité de Munro, l'auteur.

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