

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Michelle L. King for the degree of Master of the Arts in English presented on June 13, 2007.

Title: Revisioning Grandeur: An Exploration of Intertextuality in Alice Munro and Virginia Woolf

Abstract approved:

Anita P. Helle

In this thesis I argue that Alice Munro's work takes part in an ongoing feminist discourse that examines alterations in male and female gender relations, as they have been represented in domestic fiction by women writers since the late nineteenth century. I analyze two short stories written by Munro: "Meneseteung," collected in *Friend of My Youth* (1991), and "Cortes Island," collected in *The Love of a Good Woman* (1999). I contrast Munro's depiction of the woman writer figure with that of her predecessor, Virginia Woolf, and argue that in coming after Woolf, Munro's perspective enables her to both revive the relevancies of Woolf's portrayals, and by expanding upon them, acknowledge their shortcomings. In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and "Professions for Women" (1931) Virginia Woolf theorizes the situation of the twentieth-century woman writer figure, and in "Meneseteung," and "Cortes Island" Munro gently parodies Woolf's theoretical portrayals of that figure. In ironically allegorizing Woolf's spectacle of the woman writer figure, I argue that Munro textually reconfigures a more feminist view of literary history.

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Revising Grandeur: An Exploration of Intertextuality in Alice Munro and
Virginia Woolf

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University Libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Michelle L. King, Author

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This thesis is dedicated to my sister, Andrea, without whom I would never have made
it to the state of Oregon.

Revisioning Grandeur:

An Exploration of Intertextuality in Alice Munro and Virginia Woolf

“Our strength’s that we’ve survived the trials
 The one who bore us brought us.
 I’ll bare my wolf-fangs when she smiles
 Wolf mothers breed wolf daughters” (61).

Electra, Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*

Introduction: My Reader’s Guide to Alice Munro

Scrawled upon the flyleaf of my bent and beat up paperback copy of Alice Munro’s collection *The Love of a Good Woman* (1999) I’ve written: “you need to know what to be afraid of – what to fear – in order to avoid it.” Since entering the Master’s degree program in English Literature and Culture here at OSU, I’ve grappled with my growing obsession with the short fiction of Alice Munro. Why do I find her work to be so compelling? I’ve struggled to locate her within a tradition of women writers whom I highly respect. I’ve attempted to situate her writing within a wider feminist context in order to elicit from her subtle tendencies a revolutionary message. I’ve developed a seemingly insatiable desire to read feminist theory and feminist literary criticism in an attempt to collect the proper intellectual tools with which to explore her writing. I’ve taken to reading interviews given by Munro, and biographies written about her, in the hopes of uncovering an authorial legend that I can use to decode the gloriously reinvigorating and entertaining fictional map she has drawn with her more recent collections of short stories. I’ve done all this, in the hopes of learning more about what it is that Munro’s work *shows* me, that as a reader I am eager to be aware of.

To the fascination of a feminist critic like myself, I’ve also discovered that at various points in her career, Alice Munro is in continuous dialogue with feminist

ideologies that emerged from second-wave feminism. Yet through my intellectual journey I have also come to realize that one of the ways that Munro's literary world is explicitly unexplored is that she has not, until recently, been linked to such a dialogue. Instead, as critic Cindy Lou Daniels notes: "much has been made of whether Munro's [work] is or is not, in fact...autobiograph[ical]...as though if one were able to prove this, it would prove something else altogether about Munro's stories" (95-96). And a possible tendency of feminist critics may be to attempt to evaluate the relevance of work like Munro's on the basis of it being somehow representative of "women's experience" *because* of its autobiographical nature. However, like Daniels, I don't share that tendency.¹ In fact, I find it imperative to differentiate between Munro's biography and her fiction because I want to argue that a critical analysis of Munro's relation to feminist literary history is pertinent *not* because women – women Virginia Woolf might identify as "educated men's daughters" – are familiar with the situations Munro fictionalizes, but instead because her exploration has consistently been marginalized as unripe for critical investigation.² Moreover, this marginalization has been intensified by Munro's postmodern literary strategies, which continue to remain critically under-explored, and by her choice to work exclusively in the short story genre.

¹ As most Third Wave feminist critics argue, a universally shared "women's experience" can neither testify to, nor transcend, the experience of individual women.

² In "Shirking the Imperial Shadow: Virginia Woolf and Alice Munro," Jane Lilienfeld notes that Munro's fiction "focuses on what some readers might still view as quotidian and trivial" (262). Furthermore, Munro's earlier work was regarded by some critics as "piece[s] of fluff" (263), nothing more than an "attempt to write for glossy women's magazines" (263).

Nevertheless, I must ask myself, *am* I drawn to Munro because my experience as a female body – middle-class, North American, Caucasian, heterosexual, atheistic – whispers to me: listen now, and listen carefully, because Alice Munro *knows*. Her writing can prepare you; from reading about her mistakes, you can learn to avoid making certain mistakes of your own. Am I drawn to her writing because my experience as a woman has taught me that Munro’s fictional preoccupations are my own real-life concerns? Yes, I must admit, partially. And as a faithful Munro reader for over a decade, I’ve always thought it wouldn’t hurt for every woman – no matter what her circumstance – to read Alice Munro; Munro “should probably be required reading for all men” (Edemariam) too, says Chip McGrath, the former fiction editor at *The New Yorker*, where Munro got her start in the late 1970s. But allow me put my personal “woman’s experience” aside. I often think Munro’s short fiction is so seductive because of the multiple levels upon which a reader can construct meaning when reading her stories. In some cases, Munro writes about human relationships, and the complex institutional structures, like marriage or the nuclear family, that rule human lives. In other cases (and these are the stories I’m most interested in) Munro writes about complex individuals who, in the hopes of casting off the rules of culture, succeed at least in restructuring them.

In linking Munro to a feminist discourse that has as its focus the notion of social change, her work takes on relevance beyond that of personal experience.³ Am

³ In her article “History as Usual? Feminism and the ‘New Historicism,’” Judith Lowder Newton notes that the feminist critic is identifiable by “the degree to which [she] situates herself as author of her text within feminism as seen as a vital political movement and the degree to which she thereby expresses a *political predisposition to*

I also drawn to Munro then, because she is one of those writers who walks softly, but carries a big stick? Her fiction may be overtly a-political (she is very much like Virginia Woolf in that way) and her feminism rather understated; but am I drawn to Alice Munro because she takes on the historical assertions of feminism in an indirect way, illuminating some of the subtle ambiguities of its claims? Again yes, partially. “Alice Munro has repeatedly stated that she espouses many of the goals of the women’s movement” (256) notes critic Jane Lilienfeld in “Shirking the Imperial Shadow: Virginia Woolf and Alice Munro” (2004). And in an interview given in 1975, Munro herself states: “I’m intellectually a great supporter of the women’s movement” (Lilienfeld 256). Yet I have oftentimes wondered, how relevant is such a quote when critiquing Munro’s fiction? In seeking to answer this question, I have focused my research on the subtly nuanced fictional strategies Munro employs in order to delicately engage thematic notions generated by feminist thought.

In a 2003 interview titled “Riches of a Double Life,” Munro discusses with Aida Edemariam the origin of some of the themes explored in her ninth collection of stories, *The Love of a Good Woman*. In this interview, Edemariam links Munro’s family history to the more general history of feminist thought in the 1970s:

The [Munro] family had moved, to “the last and grandest house, which I entered with premonitions of disaster” [Cortes Island 142]...Munro was restless. And she was resonating to a broader restlessness, the promise of women's liberation. Her conversation often circles back to the choices women have, the difficulties of reconciling nurture and ambition, marriage and independence, what has been achieved and what has not. “Neither situation is totally satisfactory,” [Munro] says regretfully. “But there was a time in the mid-70s when it was thought that with goodwill – from men – and strength in ourselves, we could do it. We could have both these worlds.” (Edemariam)

see social change and human agency as possible” (Newton 160, emphasis mine). It is with this predisposition that my work is guided.

As the daughter of a “Women’s Libber,” a feminist critic like myself often feels the need to mark this same moment in time, during which the “promise of women’s liberation” (Edemariam) substantially resonated throughout popular North American culture, because in coming *after* such a moment I have difficulty perceiving the causes of its genesis. Many of the circumstances that roused this feeling of a “broader restlessness” (Edemariam) in Munro’s generation have, to some extent, been mitigated. North American feminists have made advances that have enabled women to, at the very least, achieve somewhat of a balance between the two worlds Munro mentions.⁴ And in many of her short fictions, Munro portrays the lives of women who, desiring “liberation,” actively work toward a greater degree of emancipation as individuals.

However, Munro’s work remains important because she also draws attention to the ways in which her protagonists fall short of achieving an idealistic reconciliation of “both these worlds” (Edemariam). Munro’s women often fail to fully achieve the expectations hoped for by feminist ideologies, making more apparent the fact that the goals toward which second-wave feminism worked remain unachieved. The stories collected in both *Friend of My Youth* (1991) and *The Love of*

⁴ The achievements in women’s rights I am referring to here are such as: the ability to apply for a credit card as an unmarried woman; granting of child-support alimony to divorced mothers; social acceptability of divorcees; social normalization of the single-parent-family phenomenon; illegalization of sexual harassment in the workplace; paid maternity leave; the establishment of a private network of child care centers; sexual education in public school systems that includes contraception in its curriculum; legalization of abortion; sexual liberation – i.e. a legally binding marriage contract is no longer required to morally legitimate heterosexual intercourse; elimination of sexist language (i.e. policeman) in public discourse; desegregation of higher education institutions; rise of Women’s Studies in academia; etc.

a Good Woman (1999) capture the ambiguities of in-between moments, in which North American women were fighting for “liberation,” but their success was to remain indeterminate. As twenty-first century feminist critics, it is knowledge of in-between moments like these we need to resuscitate, interpret and disseminate if we hope to sustain hard-won change. For example, second-wave feminists identified the illegalization of abortion, and the lack of public school education about methods of birth control, as *symptoms* of women’s oppression. The right to have an abortion, or the right to be educated about types of contraception (other than abstinence), was seen in light of a feminist continuum in which reproductive rights for women were necessary to establishing a foundation for women’s rights, and to preserving the future of those rights. And, in coming *after* the Women’s Liberation Movement, twenty-first century women are situated within a reality that has been affected by the hard-won changes produced by feminism’s second wave. But unfortunately, with second-wave feminism’s success, and the consequent slackening of the “broader restlessness” (Edemariam) and agitation felt by women of Munro’s generation, so too has their perspective begun to disappear. And in being deemed a “successful” part of the past, feminist activism is threatened with becoming obsolete. For a feminist critic like myself – especially at a time like ours, when a woman’s right to a simple abortion is being gravely threatened – it is imperative to examine Munro’s depictions of the ambiguous, in-between moments *prior to* second-wave feminism, that generated the achievements we now *attribute to* second-wave feminism.

Virginia Woolf's Munro:

“I really grew up in the 19th Century,” [Munro] says. “The ways lives were lived, their values, were very 19th Century and things hadn’t changed for a long time.”

— Alice Munro, “Riches of a Double Life” (2003)

The above statement is startling to some extent because it suggests Munro’s understanding of her dialogue with literary history begins with the nineteenth century, a period much explored from a modernist vantage point by Virginia Woolf herself. In arguing that Munro’s work takes part in an ongoing feminist discourse that examines the evolving allegorizations of the role of the woman writer in domestic fiction since the late nineteenth century, I analyze two short stories written by Munro that appear in two different collections, published eight years apart: “Meneseteung” is collected in the 1991 edition of *Friend of My Youth*, and “Cortes Island” appears in *The Love of a Good Woman*, published in 1999.⁵ The more closely I began to read “Meneseteung” and “Cortes Island,” the more parallels I began to see between Munro’s representation of the situation of the woman writer, and Virginia Woolf’s treatment of the same; however, in coming *after* Woolf, Munro’s perspective enables her to both revive the relevancies of Woolf’s portrayals, and, by expanding upon them, acknowledge their shortcomings. In *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), and “Professions for Women” (1931) Virginia Woolf theorizes the situation of the twentieth-century woman writer figure; as I intend to show, in certain of her short stories Alice Munro gently parodies Woolf’s theoretical portrayals of that figure. I chose the figure of the woman writer because for both Woolf, and Munro, the

⁵ Both stories appeared originally in *The New Yorker*.

spectacle of a woman alone, creating has always been a revolutionary one.⁶ In Munro's ironic allegorization of Woolf's spectacle, I see a desire to reconfigure a feminist view of literary history.

Munro's critics have found her difficult to classify, and *The New Yorker's* former fiction editor Daniel Menaker describes her as "a very modern and experimental writer in the clothing of a classical writer" (Edemariam). While the subject matter Munro explores may be stereotypical of conventional domestic fiction, her use of parody, or ironic allegorization, can be categorized as postmodern. In her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), Linda Hutcheon is careful to differentiate postmodern parody from "the negative connotations of trivialization caused by the retention of an historically limited definition of parody as ridiculing imitation" (34). Instead, Hutcheon argues that in postmodern literature, parody can function as a reverential or deferential form of critique. Hutcheon redefines the postmodern craft technique of parody as: "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (26). In identifying Munro's use of this craft technique, I analyze the "differences" Munro depicts between her own representations of the figure of the woman writer, and Woolf's. Within Munro's depiction of difference, her texts document large-scale, cultural challenges to North American gender ideologies, and how these challenges have been made visible in the twentieth-century fictional portrayal of the woman writer figure.

⁶ It was with a good bit of irony that Anais Nin said: "A woman alone creating is not a beautiful spectacle;" as feminist critics have interpreted, perhaps this is true only for the men observing her.

Another way in which Munro's literary world is under-explored is that the intertextuality it shares with other texts included in the twentieth-century English literary tradition have not been much examined. Yet after a year of in-depth research, I was unable to put aside my suppositions that the cultural work pursued by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and "Professions for Women," had indeed been extended by Munro in her short fiction. In fact, in light of my textual discoveries, it was precisely the absence of extensive critical commentary linking Munro and Woolf that drove me to take up this project. And while we can't be positive of the extent of Alice Munro's familiarity with Virginia Woolf, or the texts of *A Room of One's Own* and "Professions for Women," we can with some certainty suggest an awareness of them on Munro's part. At the very least, we know that Munro *read* Woolf; in a recent 2006 interview published in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, when asked if she kept journals that she writes from, Munro replied: "When I read Virginia Woolf's journals, I think, *This is marvelous*. It's marvelous that she sat down every day and did that. And she was also writing her novels. But I don't have that much literary energy" (Awano). And in a second interview from 2006, Susan Salter Reynolds writes:

Munro thinks a lot about men and women. She feels just as passionately about things now, [Munro] says, as she did when younger, and it shows. "Do you remember Lily Briscoe in Virginia Woolf's book *To the Lighthouse*?" [Munro] asks. "Remember that scene where she's trying to paint in the garden and that young scientist starts interrupting her and the only way she can get him to go away is to compliment his boots?" (Reynolds)

A few scholars have directly or tangentially made similar connections between Virginia Woolf and Alice Munro. In his essay "Out of the Water: the Presence of Virginia Woolf in Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*" (2006)

Brian Diemert argues that “Woolf haunts Munro’s text” (123), contending that Munro uses “Woolf as an exemplar” (128) from which to model her character of Miss Farris. Diemert argues that Munro presents Miss Farris’ suicide “as an alternative destiny...that figures the dangers for women writing within a patriarchal literary tradition” (124) that Woolf herself engaged with and eventually succumbed to.

In “Shirking the Imperial Shadow: Virginia Woolf and Alice Munro” (2004), another critic, Jane Lilienfeld, links Woolf and Munro through their fictional praxis, or the literary techniques and narrative strategies employed by both writers. Lilienfeld suggests that: “consciousness, the random event, and the ironic rewriting of ‘the marriage plot’ are three elements of [Munro’s]...stories that show Munro practicing the suggestions Woolf laid out for ‘Modern Fiction’” (268-269). Lilienfeld also notes “the several similarities between [the biographies of Munro] and Woolf” (261), including “the writers’ complicated relationships with their mothers [that] were further distorted by the sicknesses of each mother” (260).

Taking my cue from Jane Lilienfeld, who argues that “Munro deftly continues and develops several aspects of the pathways in fiction that Woolf’s stories and novels helped pioneer” (268), I argue that a portion of Munro’s extensive body of work – “with its development of tasks Woolf left for others to realize” (Lilienfeld 269) – also includes a fictional exploration of the pathways in feminist literary history and criticism that Woolf pioneered in *A Room of One’s Own* and “Professions for Women.” *A Room of One’s Own*, which Woolf published in 1929, is a book-length essay that has come to be defined by feminist theorists such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis as a “major study of the role of gender, power, and oppression in the history of

culture: unequal access to resources, intellectual harassment, recruitment and formation of artists, writing and sexual difference” (“Woolfenstein” 99). In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf concentrates on the masculine norms of literary authority that functioned to exclude women from equal access to literary opportunity in nineteenth-century England. Woolf focuses on the effects that women’s exclusion from educational institutions and intellectual spheres of influence, and the confinement of women to the domestic sphere, may have had upon their writing. “Professions for Women” is a significantly shorter essay that Woolf wrote in 1931; its inception lead Woolf to conceive of “an entire new book – a sequel to *A Room of One’s Own* – about the sexual life of women: to be called *Professions for Women* perhaps” (Leaska 276) which she never went on to write. “Professions for Women” focuses on the difficulties that early twentieth-century women writers face in exploring female subjectivity, and sexuality, in fiction.

My research extends and gives Munroian criticism a particular focus in several ways. First, I argue that what Woolf has to say in *A Room of One’s Own* about the effects of domesticity upon middle-class women writers is echoed by Munro and her critics when discussing her decision to work within the short fiction genre. Second, by investigating the intertextuality between Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and “Professions for Women,” and two of Munro’s short stories – “Meneseteung” and “Cortes Island” – I hope to identify several new sites where these connections have been overlooked or under-explored. In coming after Virginia Woolf, women writers like Alice Munro have been influenced by Woolf’s politics, and I argue, extended its reach. By re-inscribing Woolf’s concerns in her postmodern

short fiction, Munro validates them as pertinent to contemporary twenty-first century feminist criticism, and in the very act of re-writing is also able to transform them.

A Genre of One's Own:

“When my oldest daughter was about two, she’d come to where I was sitting at the typewriter, and I would bat her away with one hand and type with the other. I’ve told her that. This was bad because it made her the adversary to what was most important to me” (254).

— Alice Munro, “The Art of Fiction CXXVII” (1994)

Both Virginia Woolf and Alice Munro are interested in the vexed relation of gender and genre choice. In 1929, with the publication of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf avers: “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4). Woolf’s statement becomes significant to feminist discourse because it connects heterosexual, middle-class, Anglo-American women with the domestic sphere in a revolutionary way, by highlighting their seclusion to, or exclusion within that sphere AND simultaneously illuminating their alienation from it. In *A Room of One's Own: Women Writers and the Politics of Creativity* (1995), Ellen Rosenman notes Woolf’s attention to the alienation experienced by the women of her class and generation: “Woolf describes the dislocation of women in their own society...they are outsiders in a deep sense because they cannot claim full citizenship in this cultural world” (41). Yet at the same time, by demanding a “protected, autonomous space of one’s own room” (Rosenman 42), Woolf makes obvious the lack of such a space within the family home, which Woolf felt psychologically alienated women while physically imprisoning them. As Rosenman notes:

[An] imagined room of one's own implies the paradox of women in domestic space: the home is supposed to be their province, but, Woolf implies, they are never quite at home there. The private sphere of the home is also culturally constructed, not a magical place exempt from the values and demands of public space...but an extension of them in somewhat different form. Women are trapped in the sphere over which they preside – wielding considerable power, perhaps, over the practices of the family life but unable to claim their autonomy or assert their needs within it. (43)

In *A Room of One's Own* when Woolf questions: “what, in short, [women] did from eight in the morning until eight at night” (46), she is searching for a written record of the duties that have dominated the domestic lives of women, prior to the early twentieth century. Woolf not only suggests that these duties, of which she can find no written record, have kept women busy enough to hinder them from writing; they are also the bodily acts that have historically counted to define the female gender role in relation to the norms of writing. What Woolf “in short” imagines women have been doing is something akin to housework; women, she writes, “have borne and bred and washed and taught, perhaps to the age of six or seven years, the one thousand six hundred and twenty-three million human beings who are, according to statistics, at present in existence, and that, allowing that some had help, takes time” (AROOO 112). More recent critics like Eve Sedgwick corroborate Woolf's observation. In “Adam Bede and Henry Esmond: Homosocial Desire and the Historicity of the Female,” Sedgwick identifies housework, as represented in Thackeray and Eliot, as: “the work of the (diminished) household, now become ‘woman's work,’ [that] remains stubbornly task-oriented and unrationalized” (279) and I would add, unpaid. Woolf implies that because ‘woman's work,’ including “care of children, the sick or the elderly, cannot stop when the clock strikes” (Sedgwick 279), without the existence of a separate space – a room of their own – women have an even more

difficult ‘time’ actualizing the autonomy necessary to assert their needs or desires to write.

As a twentieth-century short fiction writer, Alice Munro has expressed a similar awareness of the ambiguous connotations of the middle-class domestic sphere.⁷ In interview given in 1994 to the *Paris Review*, Munro describes her writing situation during her first marriage, when her children were small:

I was supposed to be doing housework, [but] I would also do my writing then...I would write until everyone came home for lunch and then after they went back, probably till 2:30, and then I would have a quick cup of coffee and start doing the housework, trying to get it all done before late afternoon. (“The Art of Fiction CXXVII” 236)

While the domestic arrangements Munro describes may not be out of the ordinary for women who partially identify as stay-at-home-mothers, Munro has credited genre choice for enabling her to circumvent certain debilitating effects of these conditions upon her writing practices. In a 1986 interview Munro says: “I never intended to be a short story writer...I started writing them because I didn’t have time to write anything else – I had three children” (Boddy 80). In interviews, Munro is candid in her discussion about *why* she chose to write short stories; doing so somehow enabled her to fulfill both her duty to herself as a writer, and her duties to her family as a wife

⁷ In “The Art of Fiction CXXVII” Alice Munro defines herself as “a friendly person who is not very sociable. Mainly because of being a woman, a housewife, and a mother, I want to keep a lot of time” (257). What remains unmentioned here is exactly what it is that Munro wants to “keep a lot of time” for. If we speculate that Munro means to keep it for herself, we are also left to speculate as to why she bothered to separate *herself* from her role as a housewife, as a mother, even as a woman. An additional question that comes to mind is: why does Munro not include “a writer” in her list of definitions? The interview was given in 1994 long after Munro was well established as an author. Why does she not include the role that is her most public – i.e. her occupation – and in some senses her most personal – i.e. her calling – when offering up a list of what defines her as an individual?

and mother. For Munro, working within the short-story genre seems to provide a solution to the problems women writers face within the confines of twentieth-century, middle-class, and patriarchal domesticity. Like Woolf, who argues that women writers need a separate space – a room of their own – in order to actualize the time necessary to write, Munro articulates that women writers need suitable genres – in her particular case, the short story – in order to actualize the time necessary to write.

Moreover, in contemporary critical analysis of Munro's work, she is consistently portrayed as an author who embodies the tension present in a woman writer's dual commitment to the material realities of the domestic sphere, and the material practice of producing short fiction at home. In "Riches of a Double Life" (2003) published in *The Guardian*, Aida Edemariam describes Munro's early writing years as such: "[Munro] feared the fug of maternity, and clung to what she called her 'double life' – scribbling when the children took naps; keeping pieces short because it was too hard to concentrate for long; guilty that time spent writing was time taken from her family." As Munro's children matured, the feared "fug of maternity" gradually retreated and Munro's fictional style became more complicated, as JoAnn McCaig notes in her book *Reading in Alice Munro's Archives*. Of Munro's later writing years, Munro herself "implies that her later stories have 'grown longer, and in a way more disjointed and demanding and peculiar' (x) partly because her children have grown up and left home" (McCaig 2).

Theorists of the short story genre have also drawn parallels between Munro's obligation to maintain the work/family balance within the home, and her genre

choice. In his introduction to the *Eureka Studies in Teaching Short Fiction* (Spring 2006) edition focusing on the art of Alice Munro, Charles Mayer writes:

Although [Munro] was writing at an early age and never really stopped, her obligations to her three daughters and the family's bookstore business confirmed her preference for producing short fiction because it didn't require the long uninterrupted concentration demanded by novel writing.

Gerald Lynch makes a similar observation about the controversial link between gender and genre, in his analysis of the short story and the emerging genre of the short story cycle titled *The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles* (2001). He first aligns the amount of time it takes to *read* a short story with the amount of time it takes to *write* one. In both cases, "to begin is almost to end" (Lynch 8); in other words, a distinguishing factor of the genre is that the short story is short. This, in itself, is hardly controversial; however, Lynch goes on to note: "interestingly, this lack of time as a result of domestic responsibilities was still being given in the mid-twentieth century by such Canadian women short story writers as Margaret Lawrence and Alice Munro as the main pragmatic cause of their writing short stories instead of novels" (8).

The danger here is that controversial comments like those made by Edemariam, Mayer and Lynch run the risk of both trivializing the short story genre, and of romanticizing the effects of gender difference upon writing habits and norms. It seems negligent, if not insulting, to suggest that writing short stories doesn't require bouts of uninterrupted concentration; it also seems erroneously naïve to suggest that a "lack of time" to write isn't an obstacle shared by both male and female authors.⁸

⁸ After all, even acclaimed minimalist Raymond Carver cited "domestic responsibilities as the cause of his writing short stories instead of

Kasia Boddy, another theorist of the short story genre, addresses the dangers of being swept away by this sort of reasoning in her essay, “Women Writers and the Short Story.” Boddy writes: “Rather than actually identifying certain forms or techniques as male or female, we must content ourselves with considerations of why some [genre forms] *tend* to attract male writers and others female writers” (84). In fact, Boddy goes on to argue *against* the idea that “the practical conditions of women’s lives,” and the fact of women “not having much time to themselves” (Boddy 80) might be generalized as the *only* influences that cause women writers like Munro to choose the short story genre. Instead, Boddy analyzes additional forms and techniques particular to the short story that lend themselves to application by “submerged population group[s]” (Boddy 81), one of which “might be added to the list is, of course, women [authors]” (Boddy 82). These include the features the short story format shares with poetry – Boddy argues that the short story is more accessible to women writers because it occupies a mediating position between the novel, which has historically been open to women’s influence, and poetry, which has traditionally been a male-dominated genre.

Boddy also suggests that short story cycles are popular with consumers: “women writers, editors, publishers and readers” (85). When discussing Munro’s authorial legend and career in *Reading in Alice Munro’s Archives*, JoAnn McCaig draws a similar conclusion. In her chapter titled: “‘Short Story:’ Remaking Genre,” McCaig focuses on the marketability of the short story, and argues that, for Canadian women writers especially, the genre is appealing because the ability to sell short

novels, . . . recount[ing] a poignant scene of genre choice, having been left in charge of his two children and a load of laundry” (Lynch 194).

stories provides for economic stability and financial independence. “To reap the rewards of all three of these markets – magazine, anthology and published collection – is, in a way, to ‘have it all,’ as a rather trite feminist slogan used to promise” (82). McCaig cites Janice Kulyk Keefer’s “Gender, Language, Genre” for denoting that Canadian women writers (like Munro, and Mavis Gallant) depended “on writing ‘for...economic survival; in the days before mega-advances, short stories would have produced quicker economic results, more often’” (95). An additional characteristic of the short story genre that might help explain why women writers like Munro, as members of “submerged population groups” (Boddy 81), would be attracted to it would be its economic viability.

As I hope I have shown, Alice Munro’s genre choice is multi-faceted, to say the least. Yet before moving on, I would like to briefly return to a consideration of the connection between the facet of Munro’s genre choice that has been influenced by her domestic circumstance, and what is meant by Virginia Woolf’s ideological imperative that a woman needs “a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (AROOO 4). Woolf observes that the production of literary fictions, of genius or otherwise, are the “work of suffering human beings and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in” (AROOO 42). And, in *A Room of One’s Own*, “like several of her immediate feminist predecessors, Woolf insist[s] that lack of educational opportunities, time, and especially independence made writing difficult, often impossible, for women” (Hite) confined to the domestic sphere. What Woolf wants, then, is for the concept of a separate space, “a room of one’s own,” to function as the means by which women writers are able to

access the “educational opportunities, time, and...independence” necessary to enable them to write. Yet what is most significant here is that Woolf recognizes that *if* the material structures of fiction writing are linked to women’s oppression, paradoxically they are also the very structures that women have had to embrace, when writing, in order to overcome that oppression.

Both Munro and her critics associate a lack of time and autonomy as an *impetus* for writing *short* stories, and, especially when discussing *women* writers in general, do attribute that lack of time to the female author’s pragmatic commitment to domestic duties and responsibilities (i.e. her confinement to the domestic sphere.) However, the parallel I would like to draw between the two authors is that Munro’s decision to work within the short story genre functions for her, in much the same manner as Woolf’s “room.” In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf uncovers a hierarchy in which the woman as writer (i.e. professional or autonomous individual) is subordinated to the woman as domesticated member of the family unit (i.e. the married heterosexual woman’s gendered role as wife and mother.) For Munro, the short story genre *tends* to attract her because as a woman writer, it allows her to nullify the hierarchy identified by Woolf, enabling Munro to write within the confines of the domestic sphere. By this I mean, if writing short stories functions for Munro the way writing within “a room of one’s own” theoretically functioned for Woolf, then Munro would be able to meet the demands placed upon her by the domestic household while still *being* herself a writer.

The question of whether or not writing short stories, vs. working within other literary genres, lends itself to supporting and perpetuating, or deconstructing, gender

performance is at present debatable. Regardless, the critical discussion surrounding women writers working within the short story genre echoes the theoretical concerns raised by Woolf. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf links the constructed-ness of the female gender role and the norms of writing to the material structures and domestic conditions in which women live. And much as Woolf does in theory, in practice Munro's struggle to write within the short story genre demonstrates that she has actively sought to re-engage the material circumstances that make "writing beyond the ending" (DuPlessis) possible.

“I’m not afraid spontaneity would betray me because I’ve done some fairly self-exposing things. But I’m afraid it would be repetitious and boring if I wrote that way. It’s as if I must take great care over everything. Instead of splashing the colours out and trusting they will all come together, I have to know the *design*” (16, emphasis mine).

— Alice Munro, “What Is” interview in *For Openers: Conversations w/ 24 Canadian Writers* (1981)

Part I

In attempting to situate Alice Munro’s short story “Meneseung,” which appears in her seventh collection of short stories titled *Friend of My Youth* (1991), as a text in dialogue with certain ideologies addressed by early waves of feminist thought, I have undertaken a laborious project. The dialogue in which Munro participates is indirect; as I note in my introduction, Munro’s work takes part in an ongoing feminist discourse that examines gender ideologies, as women writers have represented them in domestic fiction since the late nineteenth century. I also need to clarify my focus; I argue that the feminist discourse about the fictional figure of the woman writer, to which Munro is responding most directly in “Meneseung,” is the figure speculated upon by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*.

In examining how female authors of domestic fiction in English have represented gender ideologies, I turn to theorist Rachel Blau DuPlessis. In *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (1985), DuPlessis investigates the “contradictions between love and quest plots dealing with women as a narrated group, acutely visible in nineteenth-century [domestic] fiction” (3). DuPlessis argues that the main mode of plot resolution available to nineteenth-century women writers was “an ending in which one part of

that contradiction, usually quest or *Bildung*, is set aside or repressed, whether by marriage or by death” (3-4). This mode of resolution, DuPlessis suggests, is unsatisfactory at best, and life threatening, at worst. In addition, DuPlessis asserts:

In nineteenth-century narrative, where women heroes were concerned, quest and love plots were intertwined, simultaneous discourses, but at the resolution of the work, the energies of the *Bildung* were incompatible with the closure in successful courtship or marriage. (6)

DuPlessis explains the either/or position female characters were trapped in; individual quest, for women, was not conducive to marriage, and so in the end had to be sacrificed to the marriage ending, even in texts which seemed to be all about female quest. DuPlessis concludes: “Quest for women was thus finite; we learn that any plot of self-realization was at the service of the marriage plot and was subordinate to, or covered within, the magnetic power of that ending” (6).

However, DuPlessis argues that it is against the “magnetic power” of that romantic ending that Virginia Woolf (among others) worked as a fiction writer. In fact, as DuPlessis notes, Woolf criticized the master plots of romance, heterosexual thralldom (i.e. romantic love), marriage, motherhood and housewifery for their “social, psychic, and narrative limitations” (DuPlessis 152); Woolf predicted “there will be books with all that cut out – him and her – all that sort of thing” (qtd in DuPlessis 152). Because a significant portion of DuPlessis’ book is dedicated to demonstrating that Virginia Woolf is one of the pivotal twentieth-century women writers who succeeds in writing beyond the romantic domestic fiction ending, my discussion takes this assumption as a point of departure.

DuPlessis goes on to assert that it is:

the project of twentieth-century women writers to solve the contradiction between love and quest and to replace the alternate endings in marriage and death that are their cultural legacy from nineteenth-century life and letters by offering a *different set of choices*. (4, emphasis mine)

Virginia Woolf then, is one of the twentieth-century women writers whose modernist and postmodern narrative strategies offer posterity a “different set of choices” from which to proceed. Taking my cue from DuPlessis, in Part I I look at how the contemporary Canadian author Alice Munro further revises the “different set of choices” provided readers by Virginia Woolf’s publication of *A Room of One’s Own*. How do the intertexts between Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, and Munro’s short story “Meneseteung,” aid Munro in repositioning the female *Kunsterlerroman*⁹ outside the boundaries enforced by the nineteenth-century conventional romantic plot ending?

“Meneseteung” is divided into six sections that, curiously, are not chronologically ordered, and reads as a feminist critique of the nineteenth-century female *Kunsterroman* marriage or perish ending. Parts I and VI take place in the present, and are narrated in the first person by an unnamed, twentieth-century woman researching the biography of Almeda Joynt Roth, a nineteenth-century poetess.¹⁰ The unnamed narrator is “driven to find things out, even trivial things” (“Meneseteung”

⁹ The *Kunsterroman* is defined as “a form of the apprenticeship novel [*Bildungsroman*] in which the protagonist is an artist struggling from childhood to maturity toward an understanding of his/her creative mission” (Harmon 278).

¹⁰ “In the 19th Century most of the raw, thriving small towns of southwestern Ontario had a local ‘poetess’... These women were [poetry’s] lonesome practitioners out at the edge of Victorian civilization... They wrote poetry that was sometimes mediocre, and sometimes very bad... [and] reading their published poetry, reading what the papers said about them, you get a sense of claustrophobia and waste... So I thought, What about imagining one of these women and giving her some talent” (Munro, “Contributors Notes” 322).

73) about Almeda's writing life, and in Part I she gleans the significant details of the poetess' life story from reading the preface to her book of poetry, and the poems themselves, as well as old newspaper articles published in the local *Vidette*. In Part VI, after discovering Almeda's obituary on microfilm, the narrator sojourns to the cemetery where the Roth family is buried, and uncovers the headstone marking the poetess' grave; it simply reads, *Meda*. Part II is set in 1879, and Parts III, IV, and V take place a year earlier, in 1878; in these middle sections, the narration switches to third-person omniscient to represent Almeda's thought-processes. In Part II, the location of Almeda's house is described; it backs up to Pearl Street, at the end of which is a bog where "nobody but the poorest people, the unrespectable and undeserving poor, would live...even the town constable won't go down Pearl Street on a Saturday night" (M 55-56). Almeda, however, sleeps at the back of the house, facing east, and believes the swamp to present a fine sight at dawn.

Meneseteung is the name of a river that runs through Southern Ontario, or the "wilds of Canada West (as it then was)" (M 51) to which Almeda Roth's family migrated in 1854. From the narrator's research, we learn that in 1857, Almeda suffered the loss of her younger siblings, and shortly thereafter her mother, and in 1872, when her father died she inherited the family's remaining money, and the Roth family home. A year later, at the age of 33, Almeda published a book of poems titled *Offerings*. The narrator also discovers that in 1878, when Almeda was 38 years old, she secured a gentleman suitor named Jarvis Poulter, but in the end rejected his courteous advances and continued to occupy the "the comfortable house in which [she] now live[s] (alone)" (M 51) until she dies unmarried in 1903.

The narrator's intervention in the re-construction of the hazy popular legend of Almeda Roth provides for the possibility of reclaiming some of the underestimated pieces of Almeda's history, and for crafting a female *Kunstlerroman* that exceeds the boundaries enforced by the nineteenth-century conventional romantic plot ending. Because the narrator is driven to "put things together...just in the hope of seeing this trickle in time, of making a connection" (M 73), it is due to the narrator's conjuring that the re-remembering of Almeda's past can be constituted. Munro's narrator takes the "facts" that she finds out about Almeda's life and combines them with her own imaginings of Almeda's circumstances; she locates evidence that Almeda was being courted by Poulter, and from reading Almeda's obituary she knows Almeda rejected his hand in marriage. But the rest of the story – the *why* behind Almeda's rejection of Poulter – is liberally imagined by the narrator in Parts III, IV, and V.

It took numerous careful readings for me to unravel the timeline Munro sets up in "Meneseteung." In the first paragraph of the story, the narrator tells us the year in which Almeda's book was published: 1873. Parts III, IV, and V, in which Almeda is finally being courted – "anyway, it's five years since her book was published, so perhaps she has got over that" (M 59) – take place in 1878. Yet why would Part II, which begins: "In 1879, Almeda Roth was still living in the house at the corner of Pearl and Dufferin Streets" (M 53), structurally come *before* Parts III, IV, and V? Why in Part II does Munro mention that Almeda "still" lives at corner of Pearl and Dufferin Streets, "in the house her father had built for his family" (M 53)? One possible answer would be that in critiquing the nineteenth-century female *Kunstlerroman* marriage or perish ending, Munro wants to ensure her protagonist's

survival. In the finite nineteenth-century plot-endings that DuPlessis discusses, the alternate endings in marriage, or death are immediate; in refusing to marry, death comes to a female character because it is her only other option. In rejecting marriage, some characters suffered death as a form of punishment for rebelling against the status quo; for others, death was experienced as a form of liberation from that oppressive status quo. In “Meneseteung,” Almeda’s death does not occur until twenty-five years *after* she rejects Jarvis Poulter’s marriage proposal; her death is neither punishment for not marrying him, nor does it represent a form of spiritual freedom, in which Almeda can finally embark upon her artistic quest in the afterlife.

In the “Contributors Notes” to *The Best American Short Stories 1989*, in which “Meneseteung” is anthologized, Alice Munro describes the story’s germination:

I didn’t want [Almeda] to be particularly odd. *I wanted her to have choices.* I wanted to see what she would do about poetry, sex, and living, in that town, that time, when so many sturdy notions were pushing up together...I ended up with a poetess half mad but not, I thought, entirely unhappy in the midst of this. (323, emphasis mine)

Instead of marriage to Jarvis Poulter, or death, one of the “choices” Munro offers her protagonist is “a bit of money, which her father left her, and she has her house” (M 58). Munro provides Almeda with exactly that which, in *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf argues women writers need: “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4). To some extent, Munro legitimates Woolf’s avowal by revisiting it. Without the design of Woolf’s master-plot echoing in the background of “Meneseteung” to counterbalance the force of a seemingly unstoppable traditional romance plot, Munro’s story would read as a quintessential

nineteenth-century love story. In fact, according to the “magnetic power” of that nineteenth-century romantic ending, without her inheritance, and her home, an untimely death would have been Almeda’s only alternative to marrying Jarvis Poulter.

Money:

“It is a fact that still takes my breath away – the power of my purse to breed ten-shilling notes automatically” (37).

— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf questions “the reprehensible poverty of our sex. What had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us?” (21). Woolf notes that before 1880, it was nearly impossible for married women to earn money in England, and had it been possible, by law they would have been denied “the right to possess what money they earned” (AROOO 22) because legally a wife’s income became her husband’s property. Woolf argues that for this reason, women living in nineteenth-century England were unable to amass wealth, and were powerless to provide suitable inheritances to their daughters, as well as their sons. To the female students to whom she delivers her speech,¹¹ Woolf advocates for the necessity of both earning a living with the help of their pens, and providing financial security to the daughters coming after them.

In “Meneseung,” it is unclear how much of Almeda’s income is derived from the sale of her book of poetry. Also, the untimely death of her siblings in 1857

¹¹ *A Room of One’s Own* is an essay based upon two papers read aloud to the Arts Society at Newnham and the Odtas at Girton (women’s colleges in England) in October 1928.

and her mother in 1860 leave Almeda to “become housekeeper to my father...for twelve years until he died one morning at his shop” (M 51). As the unmarried and sole surviving female member of the Roth family, Almeda inherits both money, and a home of her own. Like Woolf herself, who had been left a legacy of “five hundred pounds a year forever” (AROOO 37) by a deceased aunt, Almeda’s inheritance provides her with financial, and Woolf would argue artistic, freedom. Almeda’s financial independence plays a pivotal part in allowing her to reject Jarvis Poulter’s marriage proposal and maintain future control of her finances. Although Munro grants Almeda the economic necessities that Woolf argues nineteenth-century women writers lacked, Almeda remains childless; somewhat ironically then, Almeda herself does not have a daughter to bequeath her legacy to.

A Room of One’s Own:

“Privacy, for women like...Virginia [Woolf], who had lived in Victorian patriarchal families (and for those of us who live in them now), was a holy state akin to the state of grace for Christians, a goal to be fought for” (76).

— Jane Marcus, “Liberty, Sorority, Misogyny”

No doubt, Virginia Woolf is also a figure who is often acknowledged for providing feminism with a fable of female generativity. *A Room of One’s Own* afforded feminism a grand narrative, or master-plot, of female creativity that illuminated its examination of the material conditions and domestic structures dominating nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women’s lives. This grand narrative attempted to identify some of the material conditions that historically made it difficult for women to write. Woolf also hypothesized a *design* for the domestic structures that would be necessary to ease a woman writer’s ability to practice the

creative art and/or act of writing. Woolf's articulation of her design has become a feminist literary paradigm: "it is necessary to have five hundred a year, and a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction or poetry" (AROOO 105). And like Woolf herself – who insists "even allowing a generous margin for symbolism, that five hundred a year stands for the power to contemplate, that...lock on the door means the power to think for oneself" (AROOO 106) – both feminist theory and feminist literary criticism have extended their interpretations of Woolf's ideas beyond the physical realm. For example, critic Susan Stanford Friedman argues, "Woolf's metonym of a room of one's own with a lock on the door specifies the woman writer's need for material space free from interruption and family obligation, as well as the figurative 'power to think for oneself'" (127). And as Ellen Rosenman notes, in Woolf:

Space is a political and economic construction as well as a physical and psychological one...the room of one's own is both the sign that a woman writer has achieved economic independence and *the means by which she can continue to do so*, for it provides her with a protected space in which to write. (44, emphasis mine)

How do the Woolfian notions about the links between a private physical space, and economic and psychological autonomy, connect to Munro's fictional exploration of the same themes in "Meneseteung?" On the surface, Munro has simply copied Woolf's theoretical design. Almeda always already possesses an inheritance, and a home of her own, which provides her with a separate space within which to write and allows her to exercise her artistic autonomy as a poet. But according to Woolf, on a deeper level Almeda's domestic circumstance also provides her with both the economic and psychological "power to contemplate [and]...think

for [her]self” (AROOO 106). As a woman writer, Almeda can economically support herself, with the help of her inheritance, by writing and publishing poetry. Because the reproduction of her access to her own means of economic production is guaranteed, she can reject the financial security offered by Poulter’s marriage proposal. More importantly, however, as a woman poet Almeda can psychologically reject the female gender role, scripted in the nineteenth-century romance plot, that marrying Jarvis Poulter would have required her to adopt. It is this psychological rejection that enables Almeda to secure the future of her creative agency as a poet. Somewhat ironically, however, also according to Woolf, Almeda’s ability to reject both the economic and psychological effects of marriage is dependent upon her possession of a private space necessary to write. Munro seems aware of this, and because she is in dialogue with Woolf’s conceptions of feminist literary history, by using Woolf’s design and supplying her protagonist with “a protected space in which to write” (Rosenman 44), Munro provides Almeda with leverage to maintain her creative autonomy. To some extent, Almeda can continue to re-create because she is always already provided with the means necessary to begin creating, as Woolf argues women writers need be.

In a 1994 interview given in the *Paris Review* titled “The Art of Fiction CXXVII,” Munro elaborates her description of “Meneseteung’s” germination:

I knew for years that I wanted to write a story about one of the Victorian lady writers, one of the authoresses of this area [southern Ontario]. Only I couldn’t find quite the verse I wanted; all of it was so bad that it was ludicrous. I wanted to have it a little better than that. So *I* wrote it. (245, emphasis in the original)

This quote is quite intriguing on two levels. First, Munro’s inability to uncover a talented nineteenth-century poetess echoes the conclusion Woolf draws, concerning

the absence of women writers from the English literary canon and the Western historical record. It qualifies Woolf's response to a bishop "who declared that...it would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare" (AROOO 46). In an effort to try to unmask the seeming incontestability of the bishop's statement, Woolf writes: "let me *imagine*, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say" (AROOO 46, emphasis mine). Woolf's imaginings lead her to determine that:

A highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty...To have lived a free life in London in the sixteenth century would have meant for a woman who was poet and playwright a nervous stress and dilemma which might well have killed her. (AROOO 49-50)

In Woolf's version, although Shakespeare's "extraordinarily gifted sister...was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as [her brother] was" (AROOO 47) she (like Woolf herself) was not educated, and was altogether discouraged from writing – "perhaps she scribbled some pages up in an apple loft on the sly, but was careful to hide them or set fire to them" (AROOO 47). Contrary to her every wish, "Judith" was betrothed, and because "marriage was hateful to her" (AROOO 47) escaped to London, where, although she had a "taste for the theatre" (AROOO 48) she was laughed at and barred from admittance. Woolf imagines that "Judith"

could get no training in her craft. Could she even seek her dinner in a tavern or roam the streets at midnight? Yet her genius was for fiction and lusted to feed abundantly upon the lives of men and women and the study of their ways. At last...Nick Greene the actor-manager took pity on her; she found herself with child by that gentleman and so – who shall measure the heat and violence of the

poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body – killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at the cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle. (AROOO 48)

But because Munro is writing approximately sixty years after the publication of *A Room of One's Own*, although she too must *imagine* her own version of “Shakespeare's sister,” she is not doing so in the same void within which Woolf was working. Instead, Munro gently parodies Woolf's portrayal of “Judith” by exaggerating upon the design offered by Woolf, in which a female protagonist is supplied with an inheritance, and a home of her own.

In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism* Linda Hutcheon argues that the “paradoxical conviction of remoteness of the past and the need to deal with it in the present has been called ‘the allegorical impulse’ of postmodernism. I would simply call it parody” (95). Hutcheon insists that in postmodern fiction, ironic allegorization, or parody highlights the constructed-ness of representations and in doing so also functions as a literary means by which to reverentially acknowledge one's literary ancestors. Hutcheon asserts that in postmodern fiction, the “collective weight of parodic practice suggests a redefinition of parody as a repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity...Parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity of return to previous conventions” (Poetics 26).

In “Meneseteung,” Munro reverentially parodies Woolf in order to ensure that what happened to Woolf's imaginary “Judith” will not happen to Almeda Roth. In “Meneseteung,” Munro provides her version of “Judith” with financial independence and a house of her own to write in, and it is this provision that fortifies Almeda's

rejection of the stability that marriage to Jarvis Poulter and “a fit of welcome and submission” (M 60) to her gender script would have otherwise provided. Almeda does not, like “Judith,” die pregnant, poor, and unwed – a victim of her own hand – because Woolf has suggested a significant counter-option to this tragic ending that Munro then fictionally exploits. Munro makes a crucial alteration – a repetition, but with a difference – of Woolf’s “Judith” allegory, and by breaking the form provided by Woolf is able to produce new content.

Unlike “Judith,” Almeda is free to “feed abundantly upon the lives of men and women and the study of their ways” (AROOO 48). After refusing Poulter’s proposal, Almeda forays into the under-explored hinterlands of the nearby bog – roaming Pearl Street at midnight – in order to receive the inspiration that will generate “great” poetry. Almeda thinks:

Poems. Yes, again, poems. Or one poem. Isn’t that the idea – one very great poem that will contain everything and, oh, that will make all the other poems she has written, inconsequential, mere trial and error, mere rages? Stars and flowers and birds and trees and angels in the snow and dead children at twilight – that is not the half of it. You have to get in the obscene racket on Pearl Street. (M 69-70)

Unlike “Judith” – who was forced to offer her body in exchange for the price of admission into the London theatrical scene (or “the hub of the universe” (AROOO 47), as Woolf calls it) – Almeda can enter on her own terms, much like Shakespeare himself, who Woolf speculates wrote his way in. She can resist the advances of Jarvis Poulter (unlike “Judith,” who couldn’t escape the “pity” of Nick Greene), and can resist marriage, pregnancy, and the like, because she always already has the material conditions that, as Woolf argues, are necessary for a woman writer to fall back on if she is to be enabled to write. Furthermore, Almeda does not lie buried

anonymously at a crossroads because as the story concludes, Munro's unnamed narrator literally uncovers Almeda's overgrown gravestone.

Secondly, although the "real" story of the "real" nineteenth-century poetess is never written because Munro could locate no suitable record of its having occurred, Munro herself is able to invent a narrator who is able to imagine the poetess' story and in turn narrate it. When reading "Meneseteung," we must delineate between Alice Munro as author, the unnamed narrator of the story, and Almeda Roth, the story's protagonist because the presence of the narrator with no name mediates the distance between Woolf and Munro, and evidences Munro's practice of writing beyond the romantic ending. Even though Roth herself indeed dies at "Meneseteung's" end, the unnamed narrator survives to tell (or revisit) Roth's tale. This narrator can be said to represent the woman writer who is no longer yoked to nineteenth-century plot endings, and functions as the teller of a new tale of feminist literary history, in much the same manner as Woolf would like the burgeoning women-writer students to whom she speaks in *A Room of One's Own*:

What one wants, I thought – and why does not some brilliant student at Newnham or Girton supply it – is a mass of information; at what age did [a woman] marry; how many children had she as a rule; what was her house like; had she a room to herself; did she do the cooking; would she be likely to have a servant? (AROOO 45)

Munro's narrator actually supplies answers to these five questions (among others), and while Woolf decries the absence of the sort of research that "Meneseteung's" narrator amasses, she suggests to the female students at Newnham or Girton that they do, quite simply, what "Meneseteung's" narrator does:

It would be ambitious beyond my daring, I thought, to suggest to the students of those famous colleges that they should re-write history, though I own that it often

seems a little queer as it is, unreal, lop-sided; but why should they not add a supplement to history? calling it, of course, by some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety? (AROOO 45)

The “unreal” and “lop-sidedness” that Woolf refers to here is an absence in literary history of stories that fairly represent women’s experience – that transparent and redundant daily-ness ignored by history books. As a researcher herself, Virginia Woolf was unable to uncover pertinent information about the lives of women prior to her generation for two reasons. First, she implies that none of them had written extensively about that life; they had been busy with marriage and motherhood, and had been unable to do so. Second, there had been no women writers who, by profession existed to record other women’s stories and fill that gap in the literary and historical records.¹²

Almeda’s poetry survives partly because, we are to infer, she was *not* busy with marriage and motherhood, but instead wrote poetry that consequently could be uncovered. In coming after Almeda, “Meneseung’s” unnamed narrator is able to recover Almeda’s poetry and write her biography, and in doing so also reinsert the name of Almeda Joynt Roth into the twentieth-century cultural moment as an artist. Moreover, as an author herself, the unnamed narrator supplements the information she amasses about Almeda, with her own interpretation of Almeda’s life story, in order to reclaim it as a version of the female *Kunstlerroman*.

Almeda Roth – whose death could possibly have assured her of becoming yet another unknown nineteenth-century female poetess – does not lie buried

¹² According to Woolf, one of the difficulties facing nineteenth-century women writers was that they “had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help. For we think back through our mothers if we are women” (AROOO 76).

anonymously at a crossroads. Instead, as we learn in Part VI, the narrator discovers her gravesite in the family plot:

I began pulling grass and scrabbling in the dirt with my bare hands. I worked away and got the whole stone clear and I read the name ‘Meda’ . . . I made sure I had got to the edge of the stone. That was all the name there was – Meda. So it was true that she was called by that name in the family. Not just in the poem. Or perhaps she chose her name from the poem, to be written on her stone. (M 73)

The narrator speculates that the nickname inscribed on Almeda’s gravestone, “Meda,” is generated from a line of Almeda’s own poetry: *Come over, come over, let Meda come over* (M 53). Unlike “Judith,” Almeda does not lie buried in an anonymous grave but instead names herself as a poet, and Munro’s unnamed narrator – who literally uncovers Almeda’s overgrown gravestone – proceeds to include her, as such, within the twentieth-century English literary tradition.

Munro’s unnamed narrator, then, differs from Woolf in that she has not necessarily suffered the adverse effects that a “lack of tradition has on the mind of a writer” (AROOO 24); in fact, she is able to, quite literally, think back through the mind of her foremother Almeda Roth and celebrate her achievements. Moreover, Munro’s narrator must neither marry nor perish, and in “rescuing one thing from the rubbish” (M 73) writes the female *Kunstlerroman*. As the biographer of Almeda Joynt Roth, the narrator represents Munro’s portrayal of a woman writer capable of writing *beyond* the endings produced by nineteenth-century domestic fiction. More importantly, the narrator has been produced by an author, Alice Munro, who (as I argue in my introduction) herself has actively sought to re-engage the material circumstances that make writing beyond the ending possible.

The Feminine Masquerade:

“What is ‘performed’ [in gender] works to conceal, if not disavow, what remains...unperformable” (20).

— Judith Butler, “Critically Queer”

In Parts III, IV, and V “Meneseung’s” narrator uses third person, free indirect discourse to describe a particular instance in Almeda’s life – it is 1878, and Almeda is 38 years old. She is becoming friendly with her gentleman-neighbor, and bachelor suitor, Jarvis Poulter:

Everyone takes it for granted that Almeda Roth is thinking of Jarvis Poulter as a husband and would say yes if he asked her. And she is thinking of him. She doesn’t want to get her hopes up too much, she doesn’t want to make a fool of herself. She would like a signal. (M 59)

Almeda’s signal comes late one sweltering August evening, over the course of which she has been making grape jelly; she “started late in the day and the jelly is not made by nightfall. In fact, the hot pulp has just been dumped into the cheesecloth bag to strain out the juice” (M 62). Almeda is suddenly awakened by “the fracas of a summer Saturday night on Pearl Street” (M 65). Both her house and Jarvis’ border on the unsavory Pearl Street Bog, a violent, impoverished, disease-infested, and crime-ridden neighborhood at the edge of town. That night a lover’s quarrel erupts at Almeda’s back gate, where a drunken woman is beat unconscious and lies puddled in her own vomit. Almeda thinks the woman dead and implores Poulter for help; he fiercely awakens the drunken woman, pushes her back down Pearl Street, and returns Almeda home. Almeda, disgusted at her own mistake, suddenly begins to “taste...bile at the back of her throat” (M 66). Following is the scene from which my close reading proceeds:

The back gate being locked, they walk around to the front. The front gate stands open. Almeda still feels sick. Her abdomen is bloated; she is hot and dizzy. “The front door is locked,” she says. “I came out by the [back] kitchen [door.]” If only he would leave her, she could go straight to the privy. But he follows. He follows her as far as the back door, and into the hall...He takes hold of her arm just above the elbow. She can’t open her mouth to speak to him, to say thank you. If she opened her mouth, she would retch.

What Jarvis Poulter feels for Almeda Roth at this moment is just what he has not felt during all those circumspect walks and all his solitary calculations of her probable worth, undoubted respectability, adequate comeliness. He has not been able to imagine her as a wife. *Now that is possible*. He is sufficiently stirred by her loosened hair...her flushed face, her loosened clothing, which nobody but a husband should see. And by her indiscretion, her agitation, her foolishness, her need? “I will call on you later,” he says to her. “I will walk with you to church.” (M 67, emphasis mine)

As is customary of Munro, whose writing is replete with unutterable bargains and unrecognizable signals, Almeda’s signal comes not from Jarvis Poulter, as she had expected, but instead from her own female body. Almeda is nauseated when she recognizes her error, which was to refuse to assist the battered woman. By mistaking the woman for dead, Almeda is able to transform her own inaction into a cry for help – a cry for help that would have otherwise been unnecessary, but which is vital if she is to enact the proper gender role of a “lady” and beg for Poulter’s aid. Almeda manipulates the situation to her advantage by confusing the battered woman’s condition in order to display feminine traits she has heretofore been unable to muster in Poulter’s presence. When “barefoot, in her nightgown and flimsy wrapper” (M 65) Almeda flees to Poulter’s house to display her agitation, foolishness and need, she succeeds in attracting her suitor.

But while seemingly driven to do so, it’s as if Almeda is simply experimenting with this new role, trying “woman” on to see if it suits her, and Munro constructs the scene to emphasize a disturbing excess of “womanliness.” When

Almeda hastens for Poulter's help, she is in fact acting out her own romantic illusions, manifested earlier in the "fit of welcome and submission" (M 60) that overtook her when she imagined being Poulter's wife. Yet at the same time, Almeda is aware that by behaving accordingly, she is performing womanliness – a part somehow alien to her; her nausea, don't forget, gathers strength as Poulter's ability to imagine Almeda "as a wife" increases. Almeda is made physically ill by her masquerade of womanliness. *Now that it is possible* for Poulter to imagine Almeda as his wife, she quite literally recognizes the (w)retchedness of the situation she has in fact created. For "now that is possible" (M 67) indicates that Poulter is drawn to Almeda's performance of womanliness – her agitation, foolishness, and need – rather than to herself. That Almeda cannot permanently perform the gendered traits that Poulter needs to see in order to be attracted to her becomes obvious when doing so sickens her.

One could argue that because Almeda is always already provided with an inheritance, and a room of her own, she is able to reject the traditional acts that womanliness would have required a nineteenth-century wife to *perform*. Because during the nineteenth century, being a woman was often equated with being a wife and mother, it is Almeda's possibility to act as a poet – as something other than a wife and mother – which provides for the possibility of altering the nineteenth-century female gender role. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay on Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" Judith Butler writes:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a

different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (520).

In “Meneseteung,” Almeda’s existence as poet – or, at the very least, her gendered performance as such – is maintained by the “different sort of repeating” that Woolf argues possessing an inheritance, and a home of her own, might have allowed for a nineteenth-century women.

A Room of One’s Own provides feminism a foundation from which to question the constructed-ness of the female gender role in relation to masculine norms of literary authority because it rudimentarily presupposes that role to be a type of performance. In investigating what women “did from eight in the morning until eight at night” (AROOO 46) Woolf wants to demarcate the bodily acts that have dominated the domestic lives of women living prior to her generation. Woolf argues that these acts have been either misrepresented, or excluded from public discourse, and posits that the duties women have been fulfilling, within the domestic sphere to which they’ve been confined, have limited their creative impulses. When Woolf asks of her foremothers, “at what age did she marry; how many children had she as a rule; what was her house like; had she a room to herself; did she do the cooking; would she be likely to have a servant?” (AROOO 45), she is questioning what *acts* count as “female,” in visible and normative ways in the performance of the female gender role, that also work to exclude writing from women’s lives.

Woolf asserts that, when performed through the limiting material structures of the domestic sphere, the gendered acts that constitute femininity inhibit women from writing therein. But if this is true, so too must the inverse be true, as Woolf is careful to demonstrate in casting a fable of female generativity that posits material structures

and specifically private domestic spaces through which women are enabled to write (i.e. a room of one's own.) In doing so, Woolf speaks to the much larger project of altering the acts that are deemed acceptable to constitute future performances of femininity in relation to the norms of writing, as they are expressed through the material conditions of domesticity.

If we accept that male and female gender roles are reproduced by acts whose performance is compelled by gender norms, what "Meneseteung" does is imply that by changing those acts, one can alter gender performance and in turn, eradicate or transform constricting gender roles and masculine norms of literary authority. The traditional endings of nineteenth-century domestic romances functioned to entrench female characters within a female gender role that equated femininity with certain *acts*; in turn, the performance of these acts ensured the propagation of that gendered role. Because these plot endings had the power to define both acceptable, and unacceptable behaviors that "counted" as feminine, Alice Munro's rewriting of Virginia Woolf's female *Kunsterroman* ending (as represented in *A Room of One's Own*) functions to redefine what acts "count" as acceptable feminine behavior within the performance of writing norms.

In DuPlessis' account of nineteenth-century *Kunsterromane* written by women, she identifies the figure of the female artist/heroine as encoding "the conflict between any empowered woman and the barriers to her achievement" (84). DuPlessis goes on to argue that this "central struggle between designated [female gender] role and meaningful vocation is negotiated by different narrative tactics in nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts" (84). I would like to end this chapter by

discussing the features that the character of Almeda Roth shares with the figure of the female artist/heroine as depicted by Munro's nineteenth-century female predecessors, and then by examining the "different narrative tactics" Munro's twentieth-century text employs to negotiate the conflict Almeda represents.¹³ As Susan Gubar argues, in the nineteenth-century novel "the two scripts felt to have been absolute alternatives – artistic production and biological reproduction – are joined in the twentieth-century women's *Kunstlerromane*" (DuPlessis 220). In concluding, I argue that "Meneseteung" evidences this transformation exactly.

First, according to DuPlessis, "in the nineteenth-century works, the husband or suitor is the major problem for the artistic career" (91). In "Meneseteung," Jarvis Poulter clearly exemplifies this figure. The Canadian countryside is the preliminary subject matter for Almeda's poetry, and she is wary of having it occluded – "filmed over, in a way, by [Poulter's] talk and preoccupations" (M 61) – because Poulter himself has a territorial relationship to the landscape. If the two were to explore the countryside together, Almeda "would be glad to be beside him...receiving his attention from him in front of the world. And sorry to have the countryside removed for her –...the countryside that she has written about in her poems actually takes diligence and determination to see. Some things must be disregarded" (M 61). Here, Almeda imagines what it would be like to perform as Poulter's beau "in front of the world," and is reluctant to do so; it would require her to disregard not what is

¹³ As I have already argued, as the author of "Meneseteung," a twentieth-century text, one of Munro's most significant narrative tactics is her invention of the unnamed narrator, who does NOT die at the story's end. Rather, the narrator exists to write the nineteenth-century female *Kunstlerroman* and through this process she creates a revised, twentieth-century version.

uninspiring about the countryside, but instead what inspires her most. The diligence she devotes to her poems would instead have to be fixed upon Poulter, and because disregarding Poulter's presence in favor of poetic inspiration is unacceptable, to preserve her creative impulses Almeda rejects Poulter altogether.

Secondly, DuPlessis asserts that the artwork produced by fictional nineteenth-century artist-heroines "can only be made with an immersion in personal vulnerability, a breakdown, or a breakthrough" (103). Almeda suffers a Laudanum-induced breakdown of majestic proportions that incites her to conceive of the "one great poem that will contain everything" (M 70). In fact, Munro's female protagonists often reject the 'medicine' offered by a male-female relationship – and by the traditional romantic plot itself – choosing to remain 'sick' or else settling for a different relationship that, rather than having the ability to 'cure' them, instead offers acceptance of their 'ailment.' Oftentimes the relationship they abandon is secure – a stable marriage – and the relationship they escape into is one that quickly dissolves, leaving them autonomous.

In "Meneseteung," this analogy between bodily and marital dis-ease is concretized in various ways. Almeda suffers from sleeplessness, for which her doctor "has given her bromides and nerve medicine" (M 62), and advised her:

Don't read so much, he said, don't study; get yourself good and tired out with housework, take exercise. He believes that her troubles would clear up if she got married. He believes this in spite of the fact that most of his nerve medicine is prescribed for married women. (M 62)

Although the doctor offers her nerve medicine [Laudanum], he verbalizes that the real solution to her problems lies in housework and marriage. Almeda is aware that should she choose this method of recovery, like the married women for whom most

of the nerve medicine is prescribed, her physical and mental health risk deteriorating even further.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Almeda is physically nauseated upon realizing that Poulter intends to officially call upon her. She rejects his courtship by refusing to leave her kitchen, and instead takes the nerve medicine that causes her to hallucinate images that bolster her instinctual decision to refuse Poulter's proposal. "So much is going on in this room that there is no need to leave it. There is not even the thought of leaving it" (M 69), Almeda thinks, just after Poulter has read her letter declining his invitation and departed. As she listens to his retreat, Almeda has a vision: "an image comes to her of tombstones – it makes her laugh. Tombstones are marching down the street on their little booted feet, their long bodies inclined forward, their expressions preoccupied and severe" (M 69). Together with Poulter's retreat, Almeda envisions death receding. In this parodic moment, Munro gives us an image of the woman writer who not only evades marriage; she also laughs at the threat of death this would imply in the nineteenth-century female *Kunstlerroman* ending. In Munro's ironic allegorization of the nineteenth-century marriage or perish ending, Almeda laughs at the scripts of femininity that do not allow for the triumph of the figure of the woman-as-artist.

In addition, it is Almeda's Laudanum-induced breakthrough that reveals her desire to explore the Pearl Street Bog:

You have to get [into poetry] the obscene racket on Pearl Street and the polished toe of Jarvis Poulter's boot and the plucked-chicken haunch with its blue-black flower. Almeda is a long way now from human sympathies or fears or cozy household conversations. She doesn't think about what could be done for that woman or about keeping Jarvis Poulter's dinner warm and hanging his long underwear on the line. (M 70)

Almeda is encouraged to abandon the domestic sphere for a wilder space – the bog is a place of untamed nature, inhabited by the uncivilized. In “Meneseteung,” Munro’s redrawing of the material structures that constitute domesticity functions to destroy the boundaries between the domestic (or private) and the public. The effect of this dissolution of physical boundaries, between where it is acceptable and unacceptable for Almeda to venture, is to dissolve the psychological boundaries that constrict Almeda’s creative impulses. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf imagines the woman writer who embraces: “knowledge, adventure, art...she reaches out for it, and has to devise some entirely new combination of her resources...so as to absorb the new into the old without disturbing the infinitely intricate and elaborate balance of the whole” (AROOO 85). Like Woolf’s woman writer, Almeda absorbs the “new combination of resources” offered by the bog; in adventuring into the uncultivated swamp, Almeda can generate artistic material that she can continue to explore in new ways, in her poetry.

As is typical of Munro, who is quite comfortable exploring the messier realities of the female body, this generative frenzy coincides not only with Almeda’s own menstruation; it is also exaggerated by the shedding of dark purple grape skins upon her kitchen floor. In what Pam Houston “can only briefly hesitate to call ‘Meneseteung’s menstruation scene’ is the story’s climax” (85), in which the grape jelly Almeda has been making overflows its basin, and “is running over her kitchen floor, staining the boards of the floor, and the stain will never come out...She knows she will have to mop it up, but not yet, and she walks upstairs leaving purple footprints and smelling her escaping blood” (M 70-71). And yet what’s most

interesting about ‘Meneseteung’s menstruation scene’ is the contradictoriness of its allusion. Under ordinary circumstances, female menstruation can signify two opposing states. On one hand, the capacity to menstruate signals reproductive fertility; once a woman enters menopause she is no longer able to procreate. On the other hand, however, the physical act of menstruation signals the opposite of fertility and reproduction; it is the process of shedding an unfertilized egg. In the tradition of nineteenth-century domestic fiction, it seems likely that a scene depicting the menstruation of a spinster would signify the latter. However, for Almeda, her menstruation is poetically procreative.

As Almeda “matures toward an understanding of her creative mission” (Harmon 278) as an artist, in rejecting marriage, she rejects motherhood as well. And yet when she chooses her house and “a room of her own” over Jarvis Poulter, she seems to give birth to poems. In her Laudanum-induced hallucination, Almeda realizes she “cannot escape words...soon this glowing and swelling begins to suggest words...Poems, even. Yes, again, poems. Or one poem. Isn’t that the idea – one very great poem that will contain everything” (M 69-70). In this ritual, what is sloughed off both by Almeda’s female body, and by the menstruating house, with its “plop, plup,” of the “grape pulp and juice [that] has stained the swollen cloth dark purple” (M 68) represents another fable of autonomous female generativity. In Munro’s twentieth-century fiction, female menstruation becomes redefined as an artistically *creative* endeavor of revision.

In parodying Woolf’s master narrative of female generativity, Munro succeeds in creating one of her own. Not only does Munro revisit Woolf’s design by providing

Almeda Roth with money, and a room of her own to write in; in gently parodying Woolf's figure of "Judith" Munro's version of the woman writer is able to escape the marriage or perish fate suffered by nineteenth-century women-writer heroines. In "Meneseteung," by blending the biological/reproductive with the artistic, Almeda is not forced to choose between the two: instead she maintains access to both. In blurring the boundaries between artistic production and biological reproduction, Munro illustrates a feminist paradigm of literary history that is more representative of women's experience than the nineteenth-century texts Woolf critiques. In "Meneseteung," Munro utilizes the cultural work already undertaken by *A Room of One's Own* to her advantage in order to write beyond the tragic ending of the woman writer as depicted by Woolf.

“For women of Munro’s generation, sexual expression was a liberation and a way out. But a way out of what?” (xviii)

— Margaret Atwood, *Carried Away: A Selection of Stories By Alice Munro*

Part II

In Part II, I would like to continue my exploration of the narrative tactics used by Alice Munro to write beyond the romantic ending of nineteenth-century domestic fiction. In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (1989), Rita Felski argues that the classic marriage or perish ending is also transcended in the contemporary feminist *Bildungsroman*,¹⁴ or female quest narrative. Felski argues that in nineteenth-century texts,

the [male] hero’s quest of identity [through education or apprenticeship] requires a critical engagement with social values and norms [that] is...unavailable to the nineteenth-century heroine, whose trajectory remains limited to the journey from the parental to the marital home and whose destiny remains permanently linked to that of her male companion. (125)

“Cortes Island,” another key story which Munro extends beyond the stereotypical trajectory of the nineteenth-century plot, portrays a twentieth-century woman writer figure whose “journey from parental to marital home” (Felski 125) is illustrated not as the culmination of the heroine’s journey, but instead as the commencement of it. In fact, “Cortes Island” – which appears in Munro’s ninth collection of short stories titled *The Love of a Good Woman* (1999) – picks up the domestic romance plot where nineteenth-century women writers left off: in the aftermath of the wedding. Moreover, Felski insists that in a feminist *Bildungsroman*,

¹⁴ The traditional *Bildungsroman* is defined as: “a novel that deals with the development of a young person, usually from adolescence to maturity; it is frequently autobiographical” (Harmon 59).

“it is only *after* the experience of marriage that the heroine is able to see through and reject the seductive myth of romance as the key to female identity, so that the journey to self-discovery frequently occurs at a relatively late stage in the protagonist’s life” (137-138, emphasis in original). It is in so beginning, Felski goes on to note, that a character’s rejection of the heterosexual romance plot in favor of female quest, with its individualist ideological imperatives, becomes possible.

“Cortes Island” is narrated retrospectively in the first person by a woman identifying herself only as the “little bride” (“Cortes Island” 117). The story is broken up into two sections, the first of which (about twenty-five pages) is significantly longer than the second and contains seven unmarked segments. Set in Vancouver, B.C. in the early 1970s, the little bride and her husband Chess are newlyweds living in a shabby two-and-a-half room basement apartment, rented furnished. At the start of “Cortes Island,” the little bride’s domestic environment is represented as a feral space upon which the weight of tradition has not yet settled, or alternatively, has been cast off. The ambiguous little bride is welcome to naively experiment with domestic arrangements should she so choose, but is also encouraged by her ambitious husband, who labors eagerly toward financial prosperity, to branch out her interests.

In the first unmarked segment of section one, we meet Mr. and Mrs. Gorrie, the couple’s landlords, who settle in Vancouver after living “away off in the wilds” (CI 121) of Union Bay, Vancouver Island, just off the west coast of Canada. “But that wasn’t too wild. Cortes Island” (CI 121) was wilder, Mrs. Gorrie explains to the little bride. It’s not until segment six that we learn that Mrs. Gorrie was formerly

Mrs. Wild, and originates from Cortes Island. A house-fire took the life of her first husband, Mr. Wild, under somewhat dubious circumstances, and as readers we are only given the local newspaper's account of the incident: "Mrs. Wild was not at home at the time of the fire having gone to Vancouver Island on a boat belonging to James Thompson Gorrie of Union Bay" (CI 136). In the text, Cortes Island is represented as a space whose wildness constitutes a contrast to the domestic order in which the Gorries now live. Not only has Mrs. Gorrie sprung from the 'Wilds,' but also in remarrying and migrating to the city of Vancouver, her wild influences have been tamed.

In segments two, three, four and five we witness the newlyweds basking in the newfound pleasures that the conjugal rights of marriage grant them. Chess, a dedicated husband, works zealously to support his wife and future family. The ambiguous little bride, although half-heartedly searching for work, is unemployed; a burgeoning fiction writer, she fills her days reading voraciously, as a modernist might ("I read the novels of Aldous Huxley and Henry Green, and *To the Lighthouse*" [CI 124]) and writing fiction. Furthermore, like many twentieth-century fictions of the 1970s, "Cortes Island" allies female sexual expression and experimentation with artistic, creative or generative expression. In segment two, we are told by the narrator: "our bed was in an alcove off the kitchen," (CI 122), and "a curtain was kept closed all the time across the foot of the bed" (CI 123). "In the full spate of sex, and during its achieved aftermath," the curtain fabric became "a reminder of what I liked about being married" (CI 123). "The other thing I did behind the curtain was

read” (CI 124) and the little bride admits, “it seemed that I had to be a writer as well as a reader. I bought a school notebook and tried to write” (CI 124).

Through segment five, the little bride also struggles to adjust to being a wife – innocently, and curiously, taking on the role of the domestic: learning how to properly sort laundry, care for dependents, and participate in afternoon tea with neighboring housewives. We see this illustrated in an episode in which Mrs. Gorrie accuses the narrator of not properly caring for her man, by washing the colored laundry together with the whites. The little bride retorts: “‘Chess doesn’t mind,’ I said, not realizing how this would become less and less true in the years ahead and how all these jobs that seemed incidental and almost playful, on the borders of my real life, were going to move front and center” (CI 130). Here Munro’s narrator exposes the disconnect between herself as a newlywed – a person as-yet ungoverned by the domestic institution and its gendered expectations – and herself as the wife and mother she is to become. The little bride is, as yet, ignorant of the redundant domestic routine – mundane, underappreciated and unrewarding – she is soon to become solely responsible for maintaining.

In segment six, when the narrator accepts her first job, it consists of afternoons spent caring for, and reading to, her upstairs neighbor, Mr. Gorrie, whose speech and mobility has been impaired by a stroke. Despite his invalided condition (he is wheelchair-bound) the narrator is adversely attracted to Mr. Gorrie: “he was on a grand scale, with his big noble head and wide laboring chest” (CI 131), “a relic, he was, an old warrior from barbarous times” (CI 132), with “skin that I thought of as thick and leathery, with its lordly excretions and animal heat” (CI 132). Sickly

qualities that, in an elderly woman, would have disgusted the narrator “seemed in his case not just forgivable but somehow an expression of ancient privilege” (CI 132). In segment six Mr. Gorrie also discloses the possibility of, nearly fifty years ago, an illicit affair between himself and the woman (Mrs. Gorrie, nee Wild) who was to become his wife, and the mysterious circumstances surrounding Mr. Wild’s death.

Segment seven documents the little bride’s official transformation from her reader-ly, writer-ly, undomesticated, “old self – mulish, unfeminine, irrationally secretive” (CI 140) into a “young wife, and then, without undue delay, a young mother” (CI 144). As the plot progresses, she gives up her job sitting for Mr. Gorrie in order to accept a full-time, better-paying position at the Kitsilano Public Library (which she only keeps “until [she] was halfway into [her] own first pregnancy” [CI 138]).

I had less time for reading now, and sometimes I would hold a book in my hand as an object, not as a vessel I had to drain immediately – and I would have a flick of fear, as in a dream when you find yourself in the wrong building or have forgotten the time for the exam and understand that this is only the tip of some shadowy cataclysm or lifelong mistake. (CI 138)

The little bride’s sacrifice of the subversive act of reading is committed with severe misgivings; she likens it to a nightmare in which one recognizes a cataclysmic mistake. Throughout the course of “Cortes Island,” we witness the gradual regression and hibernation of the little bride as both a voracious reader and budding fiction writer. Writing is eventually ostracized entirely from her daily life, and the little bride tells us: “the last notebook grew cold, hidden in the drawer with my tumbled socks and underwear. It grew cold, the sight of it filled me with misgivings and humiliation. I meant to get rid of it but didn’t” (CI 138).

“Cortes Island’s” second section is only five pages in length. In it, Munro foreshadows the undoing of the domestic bliss to which the little bride has seemingly succumbed. In section two, we learn that with two salaries, the couple is able to afford to move into a more upscale apartment. Although the little bride seems enthralled at first with the couple’s economic prosperity, such upward mobility transforms their domestic environment from disordered happenstance into a more oppressive, controlled situation. The couple literally moves from an untamed (i.e. wild), threadbare bachelor-pad style apartment into an abode more representative of their newly emerging, solidly middle-class status.¹⁵ Moreover, in section two the link between the couple’s drive for material progress, and the necessity to subordinate the little bride’s reader-ly and writer-ly selves to this purpose, becomes clear. It is not without doubts on the narrator’s part, and persistent thoughts of how to escape, that the little bride makes the move:

We fell in love with each other in a new way, in love with our new status, our emergence into adult life from the basement that had been only a very temporary way station...Every move we made – the rented house, the first house we owned, the second house we owned, the first house in a different city – would produce this euphoric sense of progress and tighten our connection. Until the last and by far the grandest house, which I entered with inklings of disaster and the faintest premonitions of escape. (CI 142)

Munro illustrates how the twentieth-century North American cultural myth of progress, represented here by ideologies of financial prosperity, falls short in its

¹⁵ In his 2005 biography titled *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*, Robert Thacker notes that “after fifteen years of marriage, the fundamental class differences [between Alice Munro and her husband, Jim] remained between them. These differences became more pressing after the Munros had moved...into the house on Rockland that [Alice] Munro accepted but did not want. The size of the house, the image it projected, the requirements it seemed to demand – all underscored the class differences between them...that house on Rockland was the undoing of the Munros’ marriage” (227).

attempt to enlarge the domestic space from within. As the end of the story makes clear, the protagonist's final move – with the “inklings of disaster and the faintest premonitions of escape” (CI 142) it includes – foreshadows her emergence from the patriarchal family structure and the restoration of her *Bildung*, or individual quest to become a writer. As Felski argues, in a feminist *Bildungsroman*, “sometimes, the shift in physical space is as symbolically important as any changes in personal relationships...The inward recognition and rejection of the ideological basis of existing gender roles is expressed externally in the narrative through the act of leaving a husband” (131). Rather than marking the endpoint of the protagonist's development, because of its oppressive function in “Cortes Island,” the little bride's marriage, and the adoption of ideologies of financial aggrandizement it requires, serves as the starting point from which the little bride must journey out.

The Wild Island:

While Chess and the little bride embody a “liberated” couple, captivated by the myths of material progress and sexual freedom promised by the idealism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, they are shadowed by an elderly, old-fashioned couple that lives directly above them. The Gorries are relics from a previous era, and while they appear to be a picture of marital bliss, they represent a decaying image of the perfect couple. Mrs. Gorrie's repressive advice echoes that of *Dear Abby*, and she constantly stifles the little bride with irrelevant lifestyle tips that could have come directly from *Good Housekeeping*, while Mr. Gorrie, in his brooding silence, resembles a crumbling patriarch. The couple, however, have quite a few traumatic skeletons in the closet of their past; in segment six of section one, when the little

bride agrees to sit with Mr. Gorrie a few afternoons a week, while Mrs. Gorrie supposedly volunteers in the gift shop at St. Paul's Hospital, she discovers that Mr. Gorrie, now a wrecked hulk of a man, may have once been a reckless adulterer.

Mr. Gorrie has the little bride read through the scrapbooks he made documenting his life, drawing her attention to articles published in the *Vancouver Sun* in April 1923. We learn that a house-fire killed Mrs. Gorrie's first husband, Mr. Wild, under questionable circumstances, but as readers we are unsure if Mr. and Mrs. Gorrie's romantic relationship preceded Mr. Wild's death,¹⁶ or began in the aftermath of it. However, it seems unlikely that Mr. Wild's death was accidental, because according to newspaper reports, before the fire started the Wilds' son Ray "said that his father had given him some bread and apples and told him to walk to Manson's Landing" (CI 136). However, the doctor who examined Ray at the time believed he may have also simply "run away at the first sight of the fire" (CI 136), implying that his father did not deliberately send him to safety. Also, an investigation into the cause of the fire "found that suspicion of arson by the deceased man or by person or persons unknown cannot be substantiated. The presence of an empty kerosene can at the site of the fire has not been accepted as sufficient evidence" (CI 136). Thus we are not let to know for certain if Mr. Wild's death is accidental, or if he killed himself because he believed his wife to be having an affair or alternatively (although less

¹⁶ On the Wednesday prior to the weekend of the fire, Mrs. Wild accepted a ride to Vancouver Island and "was intending to return the same day but remained away for three days and four nights...On Sunday morning she returned with the friend [Mr. Gorrie] who had offered her the ride and together they discovered the tragedy" (CI 135).

likely) if Mr. Gorrie and Mrs.-then-Wild perhaps had a hand in orchestrating Mr. Wild's death.¹⁷

Because of the conflicting nature of the newspaper reports, the powerful, though hazy accounts of Mr. Gorrie's history serve to transform him into an almost mythical creature in the mind of the little bride. In being named for Hernando Cortes, the Spanish conquistador who is credited with savagely "discovering" the New World, Cortes Island represents a wild space ripe with the possibilities of regeneration. Despite his currently invalided condition, Mr. Gorrie's obscurely dangerous origins, like those of his wife, signal a discarded wildness; for the little bride, Mr. Gorrie's wild, mythical origins come to symbolize the possibility for renewal. Mr. Gorrie's speech is impaired, and the narrator mentions, "he made...noises...grunts, snorts, hawkings, barks, mumbles" (CI 133), but after a few days "they sounded to me almost like words. They did sound like words. I heard them not only as peremptory statements and demands...but as more complicated pronouncements" (CI 133). But for the narrator, Mr. Gorrie's tumultuous history – the possibility of an extra-marital affair between himself and Mrs. Gorrie and the suspicious circumstances surrounding Mr. Wild's death – represents a myth of regeneration. When Mr. Gorrie points out the defamatory articles in his scrapbook to the little bride, she imagines him to be saying: *There you are, what do you think of*

¹⁷ Furthermore, although the Wilds' son Ray's life was spared, he harbors a great deal of resentment toward his mother; the narrator explains, "he never gave her an inch" (CI 118). It also is possible (though even less so) that Ray was responsible for starting the fire, in reaction to his mother's perceived abandonment of him. Mr. Wild's death might have very well been the result of his son's cry for attention.

that? I don't care. I don't care what you think of it. Did you ever think that people's lives could be like that and end up like this? Well, they can (CI 137).

On the one hand, the Gorries' alienation from the 'Wilds' of Cortes Island, and their migration to a sedentary existence in the Vancouver house acts as a metaphor for plot of "Cortes Island," which documents the little bride's transformation from an anonymous, unrefined and unbounded consciousness (i.e. her "old self – mulish, unfeminine" [CI 140]) into a gendered subject (i.e. a "young wife, and then, without undue delay, a young mother" (CI 144)). On the other hand, however, the history of the Gorries' marriage represents the contingent and uncertain nature of domestic relationships, against which the little bride can begin to generate a new conception of marital relations.¹⁸ In questioning – *Did you ever think that people's lives could be like that and end up like this?* – the little bride becomes aware of the extent to which the Gorries' lives have changed, and the little bride's recognition of the mutability of experience within her own life is brought about by her interpretation of Mr. Gorrie's admonition. To an outside observer like herself, the stable yet suffocating existence the couple now leads does not adequately represent their traumatic origins, because nearly fifty years after the fire on "Cortes Island," the Gorrie's extreme domestication has almost entirely effaced any evidence of their connection with the 'Wilds' of Cortes Island. But, although the Gorrie's married relationship epitomizes the "deceptive mythology of romance [and] the ideological

¹⁸ In the "Novel of Self-Discovery: Integration or Quest," Felski notes that in a feminist *Bildungsroman*: "individual development requires some kind of recognition of the contingency and uncertainty of experience; this form of knowledge is counterposed to the deceptive mythology of romance, the ideological fiction of idyllic married bliss which provides an already written script without space for the articulation of dissent" (136).

fiction of idyllic married bliss” (Felski 136) that the little bride herself is supposed to venerate, she is also made aware that their relationship did not begin as such. It is this awareness that allows the little bride to recognize the possibility of articulating dissent against the already scripted demands of domestic ideology to which she is expected to succumb.

Mr. Gorrie’s disclosure of his alienation from the ‘Wilds’ of Cortes Island illuminates his uncivilized origins, and parallels the little bride’s alienation from a similarly uncivilized, or unfeminine, eroticism. In “Cortes Island,” the narrator’s indoctrination into a twentieth-century cult of domesticity is represented by the dissolution of her read-ly and writer-ly self in tandem with the gradual repression of her erotic sexuality. This indoctrination corresponds with the little bride’s submission to an institutionalized female gender regime, and her adoption of the conventional female gender role as scripted for a traditional wife and mother. Moreover, in segment seven of section one, her eventual employment as a librarian finalizes her acceptance of the limitations and privileges inherent to adopting that role. While on her way to work at the library, the little bride tells us:

At such times my immediate past could seem vaguely disgraceful. Hours behind the curtain, hours at the kitchen table filling page after page with failure, hours in an overheated room with an old man...Recalling all that was like recalling a period of illness in childhood...Such times were not regretted so much as naturally discarded. And it seemed to be part of myself – a sickly part? – that was now going into the discard. You would think marriage would have worked this transformation, but it hadn’t, for a while. I had hibernated and ruminated as my old self – mulish, unfeminine, irrationally secretive. Now I picked up my feet and acknowledged my luck at being transformed into a wife and an employee. Good-looking and competent enough when I took the trouble. Not weird. *I could pass.* (CI 140, emphasis mine)

In confessing: “you would think marriage would have worked this transformation, but it hadn’t, for a while,” the narrator explains that marriage is, in fact, responsible for working this transformation. The part of herself that the little bride falsely identifies as “a sickly part?” – and that is to be discarded – is composed of the highly literate, artistically generative and erotic aspects of her character. Having sufficiently rehearsed for her role as a wife, and an employee, the narrator is eventually able to truly pass as such, despite her pretense. However, once acknowledging the disappearance of her “vaguely disgraceful,” yet genuine past self, and the appearance of her newly fashioned “not weird” self as wife and employee, the little bride adjusts to the artificiality of this new role with some unease.

In section two, the narrator hints at marital unrest and impending divorce, and her abandonment of domesticity is suggested when she discloses that:

Mr. Gorrie showed up in my dreams...and the action was explosive, for these were erotic dreams....All the time I was a young wife, and without undue delay a young mother – busy, faithful, regularly satisfied – I kept having dreams now and then in which the attack, the response, the possibilities, went beyond anything life offered. And from which romance was banished. Decency as well. (CI 144)

The little bride’s ability to maintain an erotic life comes to depend on her ability to dream about an indecent, unromantic, uncivilized sexual relationship. In this scene, the narrator exposes an inner disconnect between the “faithful, regularly satisfied” heterosexuality, represented in domestic romance that she is expected to exercise, and the eroticism that has been alienated from that heterosexuality. Also, when describing her erotic dreams of Mr. Gorrie, the physical location of Cortes Island “seemed to exist in a natural confusion, more extravagant and yet more ordinary than anything I could dream or invent. Like a place that will go on existing whether you

are there or not, and that in fact is still there” (CI 145). Thus the ‘Wilds’ of Cortes Island, from which Mr. and Mrs. Gorrie emerge, exist in opposition to the domestic order in which they, together with the narrator, find themselves trapped; furthermore, for the little bride herself, the ‘Wilds’ represent a place of re-assemblage, in which the parts of herself that cannot be permanently silenced, or tamed, will be reinvigorated at the end of her marriage.

The Angel in the House:

“In those days – the last of Queen Victoria – every house had its Angel...It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing...It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her – you may not know what I mean by The Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can” (285).

— Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women”

At various points in her career, Munro is in conversation with feminist ideologies in a speculative way, rethinking propositions of earlier waves of feminist thought. In “Cortes Island” Munro revises and extends Virginia Woolf’s discussion of certain obstacles facing women writers in “Professions for Women” (1931).¹⁹ These obstacles include two common experiences that Woolf argues are shared by early twentieth-century women writers: first, that “killing the Angel in the House [is] part of the occupation of the woman writer” (“Professions” 286) and second, that the woman writer is both outwardly and inwardly obstructed from telling the truth about her experience as a *female* body.

¹⁹ Woolf read an abbreviated version of her essay “Professions for Women” to a branch of the National Society for Women’s Service in January of 1931 (Leaska).

In “Professions for Women” Virginia Woolf describes the Victorian woman writer’s “need to do battle with a certain phantom” (285): The Angel in the House. The Angel functioned as the enforcer of both the Victorian cult of domesticity, and repressive nineteenth century sexual mores; and, as Woolf suggests, the Angel’s reign was all the more damaging because it had been internalized. Woolf imagines that when a woman sits down to write, the Angel inside her whispers: “be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. And above all, be pure” (“Professions” 285). Much like the male-authored nineteenth-century romance plots, the nineteenth-century version of the Angel in the House functions to uphold gendered, heterosexual hierarchies that oppress women. Woolf writes of the Angel:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily...in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. (“Professions” 285)

In “Cortes Island,” the character of Mrs. Gorrie represents the Angel in the House figure. And on the surface, Munro’s twentieth-century version of the Angel functions in much the same manner as Woolf’s did. In the narrator’s waking life, Mrs. Gorrie externally enforces the little bride’s performance of the traditional married-woman’s gender role. Mrs. Gorrie excels in the “arts of family life” and, however weary the little bride may be to hear her advice, is eager to share her knowledge with the little bride: “She told me things that had to do with my future, the house and the future she assumed I would have, and the more she talked the more I felt an iron weight on my limbs, the more I wanted to yawn and yawn in the middle

of the morning, to crawl away and hide” (CI 120). Like Woolf’s “intensely sympathetic...immensely charming” Angel, the little bride notes that Mrs. Gorrie’s “appetite for friendliness, for company, took no account of resistance” (CI 119). “Utterly unselfish,” Mrs. Gorrie reminds the little bride: “always have some baking on hand for when people might drop in...and never serve coffee in mugs” (CI 121). Mrs. Gorrie, too, “sacrifices herself daily” – she prescribes to the little bride: “always get dressed first thing, just as if you’re going out to work, and do your hair and get your makeup on...and then you can always put an apron on if you have to do the washing or some baking. It’s good for your morale” (CI 121).

However, Munro’s ironic allegorization of the Angel in the House figure is significantly exaggerated; Mrs. Gorrie is presented as a grotesque figure, a near monstrosity who only masquerades in manner as the ideal woman and perfect housewife. The little bride tells us: “Her eyebrows were pink – a variation of her pinkish red hair. I did not think the hair could be natural, but how could she have dyed her eyebrows? Her face was thin, rouged, vivacious, her teeth large and glistening” (CI 119). Here we see the little bride likening Mrs. Gorrie to a ravenous, ferocious creature. Furthermore, in section two when Chess and the little bride inform Mrs. Gorrie that they are moving, the narrator tells us “that raised her to a new level of hostility. In fact, she went a little crazy” (CI 142). Thus the masquerade is not only physical, but psychological as well. Mrs. Gorrie, while pretending to be an upholder of the traditional ideals of womanliness, is in fact envious of the little bride’s position to transgress them. Mrs. Gorrie’s “crazy” state of mind signals that Munro’s woman writer character will not need to kill the Angel in the House because

the little bride already acknowledges that the Angel's oppressive expectations are in themselves "crazy."

Yet another way in which Munro's narrator can discover for herself that the "already written script" (Felski 136) provided by domestic ideology is indeed alterable is by being exposed to the story of Mrs. Wild's transformation, from a housewife and mother, into an adulteress, and back again into Mrs. Gorrie.²⁰ Although Mrs. Gorrie functions as the source of the "seductive myth of romance" (Felski 138) *against* which the little bride can begin to align her misgivings, at one time Mrs. Gorrie herself revolted against the very same "seductive myth of romance" (Felski 138) she has now become the enforcer of. Munro parodies Woolf's figure of the Angel in the House, by installing her version with a more complex history – Mrs. Gorrie remember, emerges from the 'Wilds' of Cortes Island – and by exaggerating her ferocity, in order to expose the ridiculousness of her demands. Most importantly, Munro's ironic allegorization is far from pure; in fact, we are made to doubt Mrs. Gorrie's marital fidelity, her supposedly maternal instinct, *and* her moral integrity. Although already married (to Mr. Wild), Mrs. Gorrie purportedly fled her marriage bed, took a lover (Mr. Gorrie, whom she eventually remarries), abandoned her son to his father's care, and quite possibly had a hand in her first husband's death. Additionally, Mrs. Gorrie lies about her reasons for hiring the narrator to sit for Mr.

²⁰ In "Meneseteung," the unnamed narrator's purposeful reconstruction of Almeda Roth's history serves to make more explicit Almeda's constructed-ness as an ironic allegorization of "Judith," Shakespeare's imaginary sister. However, because "Cortes Island" is told from the first person point of view, this ironic distance is structurally absent. Although the little bride may not directly comment upon Mrs. Gorrie's pretensions, we as readers are provided abundant clues to recognize her as a parody of Woolf's Angel in the House.

Gorrie; instead of volunteering in the gift shop at a nearby hospital a few times a week, Chess spots her getting off a bus downtown, “and it wasn’t anywhere near St. Paul’s Hospital” (CI 132).

In parodying Woolf’s figure Munro is able to depict an “ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (Hutcheon, “Poetics” 26) when presenting readers with an obsolete and ineffectual twentieth-century Angel.²¹ Munro’s benign Angel, in failing where Woolf’s succeeded, no longer poses as threatening an obstacle to a twentieth-century women writer like the little bride. In fact, unlike Woolf’s imaginary protagonist – who must first murder the Angel in the House in order to begin writing – in “Cortes Island,” Munro kills off the Angel in the House’s *husband* instead. Thus the figure of the Angel in the House, whose self-inflicted murder Virginia Woolf depicts in “Professions for Women,” and that I argue Munro revisions as Mrs. Gorrie in “Cortes Island,” does not triumph at the conclusion of Munro’s twentieth-century text. Instead, the obstacles to a woman writer’s achievement that she represents are subverted.

The Letters of Dorothy Osborne:

“Since no woman of sense of modesty could write books, Dorothy, who was sensitive and melancholy...wrote nothing. Letters did not count” (62).

— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*

²¹In “*Adam Bede* and *Henry Esmond*: Homosocial Desire and the Historicity of the Female,” Eve Sedgwick argues that the “nineteenth-century narrative fictions that consciously offer historical or mock-historical accounts of women’s changing family roles in relation to...women’s own sexuality...end with a ratification of the female role usually identified with the bourgeois Victorian ‘angel in the house’” (272-273). Thus Munro’s refusal to ratify the role of the Angel (by depicting her failure instead of her triumph) evidences another way in which Munro writes beyond the romantic plot ending.

As feminist literary critics such as Woolf have argued, other *female* characters often serve as the staunchest enforcers of the gendered categories that subject women to strict codes of behavior (both within, and outside of, the domestic sphere.) And, in “Cortes Island,” Mrs. Gorrie’s character seems to serve that purpose; one possible answer to Chess’ naïve question: “What is the point of old women anyway?” (CI 143) is, to *be* the Angel in the House. Munro’s figure of the Angel in the House symbolizes the self-censorship and mental-block suffered acutely by the little bride, in her attempt to write fiction while maintaining the work/family balance within the home. Furthermore, as critic Margaret Atwood notes in her introduction to the Everyman’s Library collection of Munro’s stories titled *Carried Away* (2006), in Munro’s texts “women are immediately attuned to the sexual power of other women, and are wary of it, or envious” (xvii). Mrs. Gorrie is wary of the little bride’s sexual power escaping the boundaries of the domestic sphere, because Mrs. Gorrie was unable to confine her own sexuality within the limits established by it – i.e. in relation to her behavior as a wife and mother, in service to her family. Yet what is also important to note is that in “Cortes Island,” the conventions that Mrs. Gorrie represents are overthrown; the narrator eventually deposes the Angel in the House figure, and in so doing is able to exercise a certain amount of creative freedom that may not have been available to heroines of nineteenth-century texts.

Another way in which Munro revisions the situation of the nineteenth-century woman writer is by exploring the domestic tradition of letter writing by women. In Virginia Woolf’s search to uncover “the conditions in which women lived”(AROOO 41), she bemoans the fact that “there are only a handful of her letters in existence”

(AROOO 45) that, along with a scarcity of diaries, constitute a shocking absence of “a mass of information” (AROOO 45) that may have otherwise helped her in her search. On the one hand, Woolf identifies this scarcity as a result of the reluctance, and in some cases, dread, women had of being caught red-handed in an attempt to write, and of being ridiculed for it. However, after locating a volume in which Dorothy Osborne’s letters have been collected, Woolf notes that Osborne – who “one could have sworn...had the makings of a writer in her” (AROOO 63) – abhorred being identified as a writer, confessing in one of her letters that she could never be “soe ridiculous else as to venture at writeing book’s and in verse too; if I should not sleep this fortnight I should not come to that” (AROOO 62). But because “letters did not count” (AROOO 62) as literary attempts, women *did* write them.²² On the other hand, then, Woolf wants to valorize the female epistolary tradition, and seeks to redefine it as a type of writing worthy of critical examination. Woolf tells us, “the strange thing is, I thought, turning over the pages of Dorothy’s letters, what a gift that untaught and solitary girl had for the framing of a sentence, the fashioning of a scene” (AROOO 62).

In “Cortes Island,” the dilemma that Woolf recognizes as being played out in the female epistolary tradition is revisited by Munro’s little bride, who also disguises her fiction writing attempts as correspondence. In Munro’s text it is important to consider the mode, as well as the content of narration because as a woman writer herself, the protagonist is constantly struggling with vocational impediments that are

²² “A woman might write letters while she was sitting by her father’s sick-bed. She could write them by the fire whilst the men talked without disturbing them” (AROOO 62).

circumvented in disguise. In the second segment of section one, the narrator conceives of herself as a writer:

[I] did write, pages that started off authoritatively and then went dry, so that I had to tear them out and twist them up in hard punishment and put them in the garbage can. I did this over and over again until I had only the notebook cover left. Then I bought another notebook and started the whole process once more. The same cycle – excitement and despair, excitement and despair. It was like having a secret pregnancy and miscarriage every week. (CI 124)

However, to avoid chastisement and ridicule, she conceals her intentions from Mrs. Gorrie, by disguising her fiction writing attempts as letter writing. When writing in her notebook, Munro's protagonist is oftentimes interrupted by invitations to join her landlady for coffee. The narrator explains: "If I said [to Mrs. Gorrie] that I couldn't spare the time, I had things to do, she would laugh and say, 'What things?' 'Letters I'm writing,' I said" (CI 119). When caught in the act of writing in the library by her future co-workers, the little bride again disguises her actions, giving the excuse: "I said I had been writing letters" (CI 138). On the one hand, in using the domestic literary tradition of letter writing as a disguise, the little bride intimates that she is not doing anything out of the ordinary, but rather she is simply doing what, historically, women have often done. Like "Dorothy," she succumbs to social pressures that prohibit women "of sense and modesty" from writing books; dishonestly pretending to write letters is safe because it does not reflect negatively upon the little bride's ambition. Writing letters, remember, does not count as literary performance.

On the other hand, in adopting the female letter-writer's disguise, the little bride's actions also function to clear a space for making letter writing count. And not only does the narrator embrace the domestic female epistolary motif, but in her mention of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* we are reminded of another adored letter-

writing character, Mrs. Ramsay. This allusion heightens our awareness of features in Munro's work that serve to reconfigure literary history so that it can include the types of writing that more fairly represents women's experience. Furthermore, as an author Munro herself often includes letters in her short fiction, using female letter-writing protagonists, and the letters they send, to set scenes and advance plot. This is significant because like Woolf, Munro wants to emulate a type of literary practice that has been historically undertaken by women; Munro moves a step beyond Woolf, however, by creating a protagonist who, in *pretending* to write letters, ironically succeeds instead in writing fiction.

Writing as a Feminine Body:

As I argue in Part I, "Meneseteung" captures a textual moment in which Munro is in dialogue with some of feminisms early propositions. "Cortes Island" captures a similar textual moment, in which Munro is in dialogue with some of second-wave feminism's specific tenets.²³ "Cortes Island" is one example of a story in which, in one subtly grand gesture, Munro crafts a female protagonist in whom she links female sexuality, as it is practiced within the confines of heterosexual marriage, with both the act of reading, and the material practice of writing. In the designation of the marriage bed as a space for both writing and coupling, Munro's repertoire includes an investigation of sexuality that was markedly absent from Woolf's.

In "Professions for Women," Woolf laments that in writing, "telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I don't think I solved. I doubt that any woman

²³ Felski points out that "the concerns of contemporary second-wave feminism are prefigured in a number of twentieth-century literary texts in which women writers strive increasingly insistently to escape the confines of the heterosexual romance plot" (125-126).

has solved it yet. The obstacles against her are still immensely powerful” (288). For Munro, this is not the case, and in her short fiction she explicitly examines the carnal realities of the female body and textually foregrounds female sexuality, in its heterosexual expression. Mona Simpson is one of the few critics who sees Munro in active dialogue with the feminist discourse began by Woolf; in a review of Munro’s more recently published works titled “True North,” which appears in the December 2006 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Simpson notes:

Sheila Munro—in her respectful, spunky, and modest memoir about growing up with Alice Munro—reminds us that years before her mother was asked whether her daughters found it embarrassing that she articulated a woman's carnality, Virginia Woolf herself acknowledged that she was powerless to represent a woman's corporeal experience, as were women writers before her. Most readers—not only Munro's daughters—would agree that Munro did just that. (132)

Simpson implies that Munro’s ability to “represent a woman's corporeal experience” certainly extends the cultural work pursued by Woolf in “Professions for Women.”

Furthermore, in “Cortes Island” Munro depicts a protagonist who is also more inwardly uninhibited, and outwardly unobstructed, from telling the truth about her experience as a *female* body than the audience to which Woolf was speaking in 1931. The little bride’s marriage is portrayed as a commitment she and her husband entered into moments too soon – just prior to the Sexual Revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s:

Chess and I both came from homes where unmarried sex was held to be disgusting and unforgivable, and married sex was apparently never mentioned and soon forgotten about. We were right at the end of the time of looking at things that way, though we didn’t know it yet. (CI 123)

Yet the little bride goes on to brag:

Having a place of our own and a bed of our own where we could carry on as we liked seemed marvelous to us. We made this bargain, but it never occurred to us

that older people – our parents, our aunts and uncles – could have made the same bargain, for lust. It seemed as if their main itch had been for houses, property, power mowers, and home freezers and retaining walls. And of course, as far as women were concerned, for babies. All those things were what we thought we might choose, or might not choose, in the future. (CI 123)

Munro's text represents a situation in which an increased degree of sexual liberation for women has been confused with an alteration in the heterosexual female gender script that functions to define women within the domestic sphere. The little bride mistakes a newfound power to "choose" to acknowledge the erotic life, and delight in "lust," or the sexual act, as a woman, with the power to make similar choices within the heterosexual couple, the patriarchal family structure, and other domains governed by institutionalized gender regimes. As "Cortes Island" progresses the little bride begins to realize that she has no more the power to choose, or not choose, "all those things" brought on by an impending domesticity as her predecessors did before her.

As she notes, her husband Chess:

worked hard, not asking that the work he did fit in with any interests he might have had or have any purpose to it that he might once have honored. No purpose except to carry us both toward that life of lawnmowers and freezers which we believed we had no mind for...I thought, it's what men do. (CI 125)

The very same "itch" that drove the little bride's predecessors to succumb to the responsibilities of domestic materiality will drive the little bride and her husband Chess to do the same. In "Cortes Island" both male and female gender roles work to recreate the material structures through which those roles are enabled to function as oppressive.

Like Mona Simpson, Margaret Atwood is another writer and critic who views much of Munro's short fiction as taking part in an active dialogue within feminist discourse. She notes that in Munro's texts "for later generations of women – post

Sexual Revolution – enjoying sex was to become simply a duty...yet another thing to add to the list of required accomplishments” (Atwood xviii). Although in “Cortes Island” Munro “articulates a woman's carnality” (Simpson 132), the narrator’s experience of this carnality is still bounded by constricting twentieth-century ideologies that govern gender roles in relation to the heterosexual couple. For women like the little bride, enjoying sex eventually becomes just another requirement that the domesticated female gender role demands dutiful fulfillment of. In fact, as we have seen, the narrator’s physical eroticism dissipates as her domestication intensifies.

Munro’s text investigates the possibility for women to “‘have it all,’ as a rather trite [second-wave] feminist slogan used to promise” (McCaig 82). In seeking to enlarge the representation of domestic space from within, in “Cortes Island,” Munro explores a woman’s opportunity to simultaneously produce creatively and reproduce biologically in the private sphere. Yet unlike the conclusion of “Meneseteung,” in which access to both artistic and reproductive recreation is presented as a possibility for Almeda Joynt Roth, in “Cortes Island” such a possibility is denied for the little bride. The twentieth-century cultural myths of sexual liberation, and material progress, as represented by financial prosperity, both serve to disappoint Munro’s protagonist, who is ultimately unsuccessful in her struggle to expand the scope of the domestic. Yet because of the little bride’s struggle to enlarge domestic space from within, she is consequently able to displace a domineering and disabling domesticity, and begin a quest of her own. Munro’s text exemplifies a feminist *Bildungsroman* in which the female character’s rejection of the heterosexual

romance plot, in favor of writer-ly quest, with its individualist ideological imperatives, becomes not only a possibility, but also a fictional reality.

Conclusion:

In my introduction, I make mention of an inscription I scrawled upon the flyleaf of Munro's *The Love of a Good Woman* that reads: "you need to know what to be afraid of – what to fear – in order to avoid it." Certain of Munro's short stories show me what it is I am afraid of – what I most fear becoming – but because Munro's body of work is so subtle and yet complex, and so extensive, in my thesis I have most likely fallen short in my attempt to clarify all that this entails. However, for a reader such as myself, one of the benefits to reading Munro's short fiction is the exposure to different options for living-as-a-woman that it offers. I know that Munro's fiction cannot possibly provide to other readers what it offers to me; that is why I was anxious to situate myself in my introduction as a middle-class, North American, Caucasian, heterosexual, atheistic reader. Granted, her work may not even speak to other readers in my demographic as it does to me; and alternatively, readers of different demographics may find themselves as drawn to Munro as I myself am. But in examining the alternatives to becoming a woman – the different set of available choices – that Munro's texts provide, what I appreciate most about the various options she explores is that they appear as textual suggestions, rather than ultimatums. That is the majesty of Munro's work – that it helps us to recognize our fears and explore our options for change, but carefully stops there. This is crucial because the struggle to avoid becoming what we each fear most is an individual struggle, even if in being shared by others, that struggle can become collective.

Munro's work shows me what I am eager to be aware of, but it does not tell me how to avoid it. That Munro leaves to readers to figure out for themselves. As a

twenty-first-century feminist literary critic, reading Alice Munro's fiction reminds me that the cultural work necessitated by second-wave feminism is far from accomplished. However, this is not disheartening, because for me as an individual reader Munro's depictions also motivate me to work toward the goals espoused by feminism.

Yet in this thesis I hope to clarify not only why Munro matters to me, as in individual reader, but also to add to the critical discussion surrounding why Munro's work should matter to others in the academy. In doing so, however, I have not examined much in the way of Munro's critical reception, except to argue that her work remains under-explored. Munro has been publishing short fiction for nearly forty years now, and while her career has evolved immensely, book reviews of her work from the early 1980s onwards remain praise-driven. Munro has undoubtedly become one of Canada's most critically acclaimed contemporary authors, and she has been praised in *The Atlantic Monthly* as "the living writer most likely to be read in a hundred years" (Simpson, "A Quiet Genius" 126). However, there does remain a certain thematic element of Munro's work that has always garnered criticism; Munro is "occasionally faulted for limiting herself to a narrow thematic range...It is this [thematic] emphasis on the seemingly mundane progression of female lives" ("Alice Munro," eNotes.com) that seems most to disturb other critics that I myself, as a critic, am most intrigued by.

One of the reasons I think certain Munrovian themes – such as love, marriage, motherhood and housewifery, and of course, female sexuality – have garnered such criticism is because of the associations these themes share with the romance genre. It

is important to address Munro's engagement with stereotypically romantic themes, not only because in my thesis I argue that, as a twentieth-century woman writer she writes beyond them, but also because critics of the romance genre argue that the romantic formula itself has begun to be appropriated by feminism. Much like Rita Felski, who argues that the concerns of second-wave feminism are prefigured in a number of twentieth-century literary texts by women, in her book *Feminist Popular Fiction*, Merja Makinen claims, "romance fiction...charts the small changes that feminism has affected within the major social institutions" (34). Makinen surveys the romance genre from its inception, tracing its development through the 1990s and providing instances of how feminist ideology has invaded it. In 1990s romantic fiction, for example, it is the female protagonist, rather than the male character, who needs to be coaxed into marriage, and Makinen believes this illustrates that "marriage, as a patriarchal structure, holds more perils for women" (30). "The 'temptation' (from a feminist perspective) experienced by the 1990s heroine is not to surrender her precious virginity, but to commit the post-feminist sin of giving up her hard-won independence" (Makinen 29).

While most critics (myself included) would refuse to categorize Munro as an author of popular romance, throughout my thesis I demonstrate how Munro *writes beyond the romantic plot endings* perpetuated by the domestic fiction produced by women writers during the nineteenth-century. To some extent, then, Munro's texts serve as an example of how gender ideologies, such as those represented in the romantic formula, have begun to be appropriated by feminism. It is productive to analyze the themes of romance, marriage, female sexuality and the like, as they are

explored in domestic fiction such as Munro's, because in doing so we analyze how these themes have been reconfigured by second-wave feminism as we've moved into the twenty-first century.

As I argue in my introduction, *if* the domestic conditions and material structures of fiction writing are linked to women's oppression, paradoxically they are also the very conditions and structures that women have had to embrace, when writing, in order to overcome that oppression. In an attempt to reconcile this contradiction, one of Munro's primary thematic struggles has been an attempt to enlarge the representation of domestic space from within, by exploring how feminist ideologies might play out if integrated into the domestic sphere. In fact, in "The Art of Fiction CXXVII" Munro states: "The only things that ever stopped me writing were the jobs – when I was defined publicly as a writer and given an office to work in" (251). Here, we see Munro situating herself as a woman writer who derives inspiration from the same domestic environment that has historically alienated literary authority in women. In her short fiction, Munro seeks to expand the options open to women in the domestic sphere by critiquing the oppressive gender roles, and masculine literary norms, that the traditional conventions of domesticity have historically tried to enforce upon women writers.

In *Writing Beyond the Ending*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes: "[Virginia] Woolf formulates something that becomes central to her criticism and her praxis: the 'uncomfortable' idea that narrative emphasis changes when one focuses on gender, and on the twentieth-century woman, not the nineteenth-century plot" (152). In coming after Woolf, Alice Munro is able to provide a preliminary sketch of how such

a change in narrative emphasis might look, if one were to focus on “gender, and the twentieth-century woman” instead of on “the nineteenth-century plot.” Furthermore, Munro’s change in narrative emphasis provides her with the opportunity to textually examine the “ways gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 521), and “what possibilities exist for the cultural transformation of gender through such acts” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 521).

Instead of working to perpetuate the ideologies of a dominant, patriarchal status-quo, Munro’s twentieth-century plot endings investigate feminist ideologies, and offer us a glimpse of a future that is more hopeful than that proposed by the marriage or perish plot endings of nineteenth-century *Kunstlerroman* and *Bildungsroman* by women writers. When Munro notes: “I guess because I didn’t understand that you could have conditions for writing that would be any better than any other conditions” (“The Art of Fiction CXXVII” 251), she is in fact acknowledging that there are certain conditions for writing that can be better than others. In seeking to enlarge the representation of domestic space from within, Munro is interested in transforming the domestic situation, in which men and women write, into a more productive one.

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