

An Imp's Return to Sleep: A Study on Munro's *Night*

Y.ZH. PENG

North China Electric Power University English Department, Hebei, PRC

ABSTRACT: This paper attempts to expose the main character's inner loneliness and analyze the narrative strategies in the Munro's story *Night*. The main character's emotion is not directly expressed. In the end she stopped wandering through the dark house after seeing and talking with her father who sat in the darkness.

KEYWORD: Uselessness; Loneliness; Narrative Perspective

1 THE STORY

1.1 Introduction

The short story *Night* appears in the collection of short stories written by the Canadian female writer Alice Munro, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2013. Munro excels in short stories. Her works centers on lives of ordinary females, ranging from young girls to house wives, which illustrate their inner world including their observations, desires, fears, anxiety and disappointment. Munro devotes few words to the description of the scenery and the characters' appearances. As usual, it is not necessary to equip ourselves with Canadian historical knowledge to understand the themes of Munro's stories. The story *Night* is not an exception.

1.2 The plot

The main character is the narrator of the story, which is convenient to describe the surrounding environment and to see through her thinking and feelings. It began with the outbreak of her burst appendix in a snowstorm. There was a description, at the very beginning, of road conditions in winter in the place she lived when she was young. She was transported to a hospital and given an operation. Because of her sickness, she was allowed leave from school. She considered the leave as a holiday from school and enjoyed the privilege of being excused from physical training even in school.

It didn't mention when she knew it was not appendicitis but cancer. Her mother kept it a secret from her, and as a result the disease had not been taken deservingly seriously. When June came, she got out school and was totally free from school work. Consequently, she had too much time to spend

and too much freedom to handle. She began to feel the uselessness due to the idleness and to have trouble in sleeping. Not being able to fall asleep, she wandered through the darkness to get food. After a long time, she was accustomed to walking in the darkness. Suddenly one night she detected a figure in the dark that was her father. He had known her habit. She talked with her father. To her surprise, he didn't blame her, just taking her sleeplessness as natural. In fact, father is mentioned after she received the surgical operation for its charge. Later ever since the communication between the daughter and the father, the daughter or the main character of the story had no difficulty in sleeping.

The story goes smoothly and has a simple plot. The unexpected ending arouses our curiosity about the main female character's inner world. What comforts her in her peaceful talk with her father? What drives her to think without stopping in the night? What problems bother her to such a degree? What is her attitude toward her mother and sister? To put it further, what is her attitude toward her life?

1.3 Unable to sleep: why

Like any other child in the real world, the main character, obviously a girl, was delighted at the leave from school because of her disease. She was excused from physical training in school accordingly. It was apparent that leisure and idleness were initially wonderful. "...and perhaps not all that unhappily, because it meant a holiday from school and it gave you some kind of status – set you apart, briefly, as one touched by the wing of mortality, all at a time in your life when that could be gratifying." (Munro, 2012:272) "Then I went back to school, enjoyed

being excused from physical training for longer than necessary..." (Munro, 2012:272)

As time went by, in the summer she did fine. "I looked well, I did chores around the house, I read books as usual, nobody knew there was a thing the matter with me." (Munro, 2012:273) She was still in a peaceful state of mind, being occupied with chores and reading books. She slept in a room together with her sister. She loved her sister but couldn't help teasing her. It is a sign that she began to be not quiet and want to do something due to the restlessness. It is much the way children do things. They want to make a difference in their life. Even though the girl was fourteen years old at that time, she had fun playing with her sister in this way. When being peaceful, everything was fine. Her sister had her own friends and games. The girl herself gave her sister some advice on some matters.

With work to do and books to read, the girl was able to handle life and had no other problems. When being freed from school and little work to do at home, she felt like a visitor. She was not needed and cared in her family. Her mother could manage most of the work and even a house maid was hired to help. Her disease excused her from practically all work. Her restlessness arose, hence. "It must have been just that every moment of the day was not filled up with jobs, as it was in summers before and after." (Munro, 2012:275)

"It was all inward – this uselessness and strangeness I felt." (Munro, 2012:275) Freedom was developed into idleness and was regarded as uselessness. Energy not to be consumed away, she lost control of herself and couldn't get sleep. She composed rhymes and poetry, but was mocked by people around her. It was much like the situation the writer Munro herself was in. When she wrote stories, people in her town didn't appreciate her writing and would not care about reading. As a matter of fact, the writer's voice was heard in some places in the story. For example, mentioning her father, the fourteen-year-old girl did not think of the medical expense. But an explanation was followed in brackets. It was a guess about how her father paid the medical treatment, which was evidently made when the writer was writing or when the girl became old and looked back on her previous life. The verb tense changed from the past to the present. It is hard enough to distinguish between the voices of the writer and the later grown-up self of the main character. "Now I have to..." (Munro, 2012:273) Present tense is here used to carry on the story. But it is not certain whose voice it was. It was a story after all, not a memoir.

Without much work to do, the girl could not fall asleep at night. She wandered through the house and knew clearly where everything was put. During the day, she had some fun with her sister and then slept in the garden. When all people went to sleep,

perhaps except her father, she couldn't stop thinking; she wrote poems and struck others as being weird.

2 PRESSURE FROM LONELINESS

2.1 *Failure to stop thinking*

Idle and free during the day, the girl found it a difficult job to get sleep at night. She had to fight off the thought in her head in order to fall asleep. She made efforts to drive the thought away but in vain. She explained it was not jealousy, hatred or any other horrible feelings she bore secretly in her mind. It was simply a thought -- contemplation. She couldn't stop thinking. What's more, it is shown that she was not bothered by any desires to hurt any person. She loved people around her, including her younger sister. She was telling us she was not an evil by offering the explanation. "...the bad part of it indeed was so absurd – that I could get rid of it fairly easily. My brother and sister had gone off to their classes in the public school, but their dishes were still on the table, a few bits of puffed rice floating in the excess milk. Absurd. When my sister got home from school we would swing in the hammock, one of us at either end." (Munro, 2012:279) When her brother and sister returned home from school, the girl totally forgot their bad manners and played with them. "...one of us at either end." This picture reveals a touch of happiness. It is a child's need: to be with another child or another human being. It is a human being's need as well as a child's. "And since I did not speak of my night difficulties, nobody came up with the simple information that I'd be better off getting more action during the day." (Munro, 2012:279) The girl was alone in the fight against her sleeplessness. The reason that she didn't tell her problem with her parents or others is worth thinking. What did she fear? It was interesting that she spoke out "Strangle her," when talking about her sister. It was an echo to the explanation she made about the thought she couldn't fight off. Therefore it was jealousy. She envied her sister for she could lead a life as ordinary as others. Before speaking out the idea, the girl was not aware of her own feelings. The real reason for her failure to fall asleep lies in her jealousy, hatred, viciousness or anger. Therefore it can be inferred that she longed to go to school as other children. Being alone and treated in a different way impose pressure upon us regardless of our awareness. It can be seen that a fourteen year old child has complex feelings with love and jealousy in her mind.

2.2 *Desire to get rid of loneliness*

The girl was totally left alone due to her physical problem. She had a considerate mother. But being left alone, even if it was a sign of being cared, she

couldn't bear the spiritual isolation from the outside world. She was controlled by her thought and even couldn't get sleep. The desire to get rid of sleeplessness is the desire to get rid of the thought that controlled her tightly. "The more I chased the thought away, the more it came back." (Munro, 2012:277) The lonelier she felt, the more jealous she was and the more difficult it was for to fall asleep. The solution to sleeplessness lies in the disappearance of loneliness. She needed someone to share her feelings and thoughts. Fortunately her father sat in the darkness and had a sensible talk with her.

2.3 *The talk*

The girl encountered her father one night when she was walking through the house. It is written as follows: "I could not continue walking, the whole rhythm of it had been broken." (Munro, 2012:281) She was caught by her father. She confirmed her difficulties in getting sleep because there were no other ways to account for her wandering early in the morning. She planned not to say much to her father. But her father didn't ask her questions. She was not reluctant to tell the truth accordingly. She uncovered her secret feelings and waited for her father's blame. He listened and took her jealousy as natural. "Then he said not to worry. He said, 'People have those kinds of thoughts sometimes.'" (Munro, 2012:283) The girl waited for her father's questions and plans to take her to see a psychiatrist. "He could have questioned me further about my attitude to my little sister or my dissatisfactions with my life in general." (Munro, 2012:283) The word "dissatisfaction" is finally spoken out thanks to the father's calmness and sensibility. The girl was not dissatisfied with her life, in contrast with the initial happiness for being away from school. "It set me down, but without either mockery or alarm, in the world we were living in." (Munro, 2012:284) The girl was moved by her father's attitude, "without either mockery or alarm". Her strangeness was accepted by her father as something pretty normal and ordinary. She felt she was living in the same world as others at that time. She was part of the world, not lonely any longer.

There are not many exchanges of words on the conversation between father and daughter, which leads to its success. Father's acceptance of the

daughter's "weird" feelings and thoughts settles her down. She could finally sleep with peacefulness on her face and in her mind. When she looked back on the experience, she said she wanted to be a psychiatrist "for a child, a generation and an income further on" (Munro, 2012:283). As a human being, we need the spiritual comfort from another human being for our mind.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Munro's *Night* is a short story with a simple plot: a girl haunted by sleeplessness. After a detailed analysis of the girl's feelings lying behind her strange habit, importance is attached to the communication between human beings and accommodation by the human world. Munro's stories feature in the uniqueness telling you what a human being need by just telling an ordinary story.

The story is interwoven with some comments made by the writer herself or the main character at her old age. It is helpful for us to understand the writer's intention.

The writer's care about human beings' inner world – their emotions – is intended to convey to the reader. "I don't suppose it ever crossed my head to wonder how my father was going to pay for this distinction." (Munro, 2012:272) It is what in a child's mind. Money or the material thing was not taken into account in a child's mind. What a child needs is being accompanied in their life.

4 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was financially supported by "the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities" (2014MS175).

REFERENCES

- [1] Miller, Judith (ed). 1984. *The Art of Alice Munro: Saying the Unsayable*. Waterloo: University of Waterloo Press.
- [2] Munro, Alice. 2012. *Night*. In *Alice Munro, Dear life: 271-285*. New York: Random House, Inc.
- [3] Thacker, Robert. 2005. *Alice Munro: writing her lives: a biography*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.