

Silent Voices in Munro's *Runaway*

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Abstract. Alice Munro devotes her writing to presenting ordinary females' life, especially to exposing their inner world. *Runaway*, one of her masterpieces, is no exception. This paper is intended to follow the spiritual path that Carla, the heroine, went through when she ran away from home and came back again to her husband. The path illustrates a solution females can count on and also shows Munro's concern and sympathy toward an ordinary woman.

Introduction

Alice Munro, a Canadian female writer, won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2013 for her short-story writings. Munro is always able to uncover an individual's innermost thought beneath the smoothly going quotidian life. The story itself is generally not unusual, a mixture of her real life experiences and imagination. "...as a very autobiographical writer, she has used her own experiences as the basis for her fiction to a high degree. More than that, at the root of her stories she may be seen imagining and shaping the lives she is describing. Munro is often connected with different possibilities in her characters' lives, different directions that their life might have taken." [1] [p.1] Each story can become a possible life. The point is that there can be different possibilities in life. Specifically, Munro is interested in women's life, particularly the ups and downs undergone in their mind that determines what choice they would make in dealing with their life and future. The main character in Munro's stories is usually a female – an ordinary woman, to be specific. Their life is closely related to family life, their love, marriage and children. So there are not many characters in her stories. Munro seldom devotes time to a description of a woman's appearances. One of Munro's masterpieces *Runaway* is one of the fascinating experiments she designs for an ordinary housewife Carla. Carla's decisions to leave home and eventually return home are not easily made. She experienced long-time complicated conflicts in her mind. Therefore, Carla's thinking and feeling and behaving all become what Munro wants to describe, narrate and expose.

Stylistic Characteristics

The story *Runaway* is comprised of a series of segments but they are not organized into a whole according to a chronological order. There are five characters in the story: Carla, her husband Clark, her neighbors Mr. and Mrs. Jamieson, and her animal Flora. The story centers on Carla's departure from home. She told Mrs. Jamieson that she was badly treated by her husband. Mrs. Jamieson tried to help her escape away from her husband and pursue a new better life in another place. Due to fear of the uncertain future, Carla came back to live with Clark. Yu Yanping attributed the failure to the lack of economic and ideological independence. [2] "Therefore, if females want to achieve their consciousness as a subject, they should be independently, economically and ideologically." [2] [p.112] Carla's runaway is a possible solution to the daily boredom and so-called "marital violence" – being neglected and under-valued by their husbands. "Therefore, marital violence has negative impact on the development of female self-consciousness. Marital violence lowers females' self-evaluation. They rely on the marital relationship for self-recognition." [3] [p.101] The question is that it is possible for a woman to be totally independent of men, provided they enjoy the economic and ideological independence like the main character in *To Reach Japan*. She is considered to be able to think clearly by herself and for herself. She is clear about what she is pursuing. But there still exists

conflicts. Her future is still uncertain, like the bottle floating on the ocean. “She found herself writing a letter. It didn’t begin in any conventional way. No Dear Harris. No remember me.

*Writing this letter is like putting a note in a bottle –
And hoping*

It will reach Japan.” [4] [p.14]

Therefore, the result is not an ending and there seems to be no definite ending for a woman’s emotional life. The process, that’s the spiritual path, is full of adventures, on which Munro means to put focus on. Undoubtedly, each story offers a different path to explore the reality of life. The voices deep in the characters’ mind are to be heard and understood thanks to Munro’s seemingly plain writing of the quotidian life.

Narrative Perspective. In terms of narrators, Munro is skillful in shifting among first-person narrator, third-person narrator and more in the story *Runaway*. “Because Munro has used so much from her own life and from that of her family in her work, she has been able to create in her best stories the sense that ‘all this happened,’ that this is the way life is. And as you say, Munro’s shifting narrators – for some time in the 1970s it appeared that she was using first-person narrators more and more – place a role in this. More recently, irrespective of whether a narrator is first-person or not – there is much greater complexity in the narrative point of view.” [1] [p.3] In its first segment, Carla learned that Mrs. Jamieson was coming back home. She was afraid of seeing Mrs. Jamieson and of letting her husband know their secrets by asking Mrs. Jamieson. Initially, the third-person narrative perspective is employed, which allows us to see what Carla and Mrs. Jamieson or Sylvia were doing respectively. “It’s her, she thought.” [5] [p.1] “But still Carla hoped. *Let it not be her.*” [5] [p.1] Carla’s thinking is indicated either with a different tense or by the use of the italic written form. In the first case, there is no quotation mark in an effort to bring the reader to the scene. The third person narrator is naturally shifted to the first person narrator even without the awareness of the reader who is just brought to experience the feeling by herself or himself. In the second case, the italic words are also Carla’s thinking. The reader is manipulated to understand and share Carla’s concern. These two cases do not conform to the regular use of direct speech but affect the reader to a much greater extent. The reader feels as if being brought to the very front of scene. “When she turned her head there was something like a bright flash – of inquiry, of hopefulness – that made Carla shrink back. So. Maybe Clark didn’t know yet. If he was sitting at the computer he would have his back to the window and the road. But Mrs. Jamieson might have to make another trip. Driving home from the airport, she might not stopped for groceries – not until she’d been home and figured out what she needed. Clark might see then. And after dark, the lights of her house would show. But this was July, and it didn’t get dark till late. She might be so tired that she wouldn’t bother with the lights, she might go to bed early. On the other hand, she might telephone. Any time now.” [5] [p.2] A flash of inquiry and hopefulness is apparently Carla’s feedback to Sylvia’s head turned back. Carla considered the action to be a flash of inquiry and hopefulness that frightened her backward. The following inference may be the inference made by the third-person narrator or by Carla herself. The speculation about Sylvia’s intention to reveal the scheme to Clark is the same case. The reader has been put in the then situation by the ambiguous narrator. The first-person narrator “I” doesn’t appear in the narrative text, which unexpectedly shortens the distance between the story and the reader. The character’s thinking and behavior become fused, forming an organic whole. The action of thinking and the thoughts become events the story is intended to unfold.

Stream of Consciousness. The beginning of *Runaway* doesn’t give us any of Carla’s, Clark’s and Sylvia’s background information. We do not know about their appearances, jobs and something the like. A woman called Carla who is the heroin of the story came to our sight. What she was doing, thinking and feeling is put directly at the beginning of the story. In addition, there is a touch of the tense relationships between Carla and Sylvia and between Carla and her husband. The picture is just put there. Then the writer continues to tell us how and why the young couple managed to make a living there. All of this is gradually unfolded, interwoven with Sylvia’s interference in Carla’s martial life and her involvement in Carla’s escape from the life. The segment-by-segment structure suits the style, in which stream of consciousness can be effective in exposing the character’s innermost thoughts and feelings. Each segment serves to present us a picture or to give us a flashback. The

stream of consciousness emerges from time to time. Hence, the reader not only gets to know what had happened before and what was happening, but also gets to follow the spiritual path Carla was undergoing, for the story is not confined to a certain physical space and a certain temporal limit.

Fear and Metaphor. Fear prevents a human being from moving ahead. Carla left her parents for Clark, with an illusion of a happy life with him. After being married, she was used to the life together with Clark and more and more dependent upon him. His rudeness and indifference generates complaints and dissatisfaction. Sponsored by the learned Mrs. Jamieson, she was determined to leave behind the current life with Clark. On her way to Toronto, Carla was gaining confidence and hopeful of the bright future. “Mrs. Jamieson’s presence had surrounded her with some kind of remarkable safety and sanity and had made her escape seem the most rational thing you could imagine, in fact the only self-respecting thing that a person in Carla’s shoes could do. Carla had felt herself capable of an unaccustomed confidence...” [5] [p.31] Carla was happy and light-hearted at the beginning of the trip. Then she began recalling the first time she left everything behind in her life. She remembered a note written by her mother. “*I have always felt the need of a more authentic kind of life. I know I cannot expect you to understand this.*” [5] [p.33] This note, combined with the familiar surroundings, put Carla to tears. The strangeness and uncertainty ahead in Toronto and the life without Clark there drove Carla to get off the bus. The impact from Mrs. Jamieson vanished away. “As Mrs. Jamieson might say – and as she herself might with satisfaction have said – *taking charge of her own life*. With nobody glowering over her, nobody’s mood infecting her with misery.” [5] [p.34] Mrs. Jamieson was trying to awaken Carla to be the master of her mood, immune from misery imposed by others. But the real life seems to be closely and strongly connected to Clark. “*Come and get me. Please. Come and get me. I will.*” [5] [p.35] Carla gave up the idea of leaving Clark, finally. Her joy turned into a torture and she was overwhelmed. Fear of the uncertainty brings Carla back home. When Clark went to ask Sylvia for information about Carla, the sudden and unexpected appearance of Flora, the goat Carla liked most, scared both Sylvia and Clark. Sylvia caught a glimpse of regret crossing Clark’s face. Clark was reminded of Carla by the sight of Flora. All of them seemed to be put together by fear. Flora, an ordinary goat, was granted a holy significance because her disappearance and appearance were thought to signify the break-up and reunion among human individuals. In a letter written by Sylvia to Carla, the importance of Flora’s appearance is shed light on. Sylvia thought highly of her appearance. Ever since that, Sylvia saw the light of humanity. “*Yet her appearance at that moment did have a profound effect on your husband and me. When two human beings divided by hostility are both, at the same time, mystified – no, frightened – by the same apparition, there is a bond that springs up between them, and they find themselves united in the most unexpected way. United in their humanity – that is the only way I can describe it. We parted almost as friends. So Flora has her place as a good angel in my life and perhaps also in your husband’s life and yours.*” [5] [pp.45-46] When a person feels connected to another person, there is warmth between human beings. The letter exemplifies Munro’s compassion toward human beings as a whole. Munro conducts an experiment with the life of an ordinary woman with the help of a learned lady. After a series of ups and downs, the ordinary woman, her husband and the learned lady came to taste the sweetness and enjoyed the warmth of being together. So Munro’s wish or hope seems not to encourage women to leave their homes. She has a deeper concern: an individual can listen to her or his true feelings and would not be blinded by the hostility caused by daily conflicts. *Runaway Day* can be taken as a possible event to experiment the realization of our desires for a different life from the current boring and ordinary one. After following the emotional ups and downs deep in the characters’ mind, we get to see what humans’ true longing is. Munro offers us a warm ending, anyway. Just as she said in an interview, she wanted to change the ending of the story *Mermaid* by Anderson that was too sad to her. [6] Her own writing is proven to be a place she can realize her dream of composing her own ending.

Conclusions

Characters in Munro’s stories tend to be ordinary people, particularly ordinary females. Munro leads our attention to their spiritual world by adopting a mixture of narrators, regardless of physical and temporal space. The shifts and changes she has made in *Runaway* are not odd in an order not to

frighten away an ordinary reader. Fear, the powerful feeling, can always pull people down to earth from some illusions. The metaphor is also not hard to understand in *Runaway*. Munro's writing style is not weird and easy to access, just as the characters in her works, the strategies adopted to expose humane innermost feelings are successfully used, though. Carla's return makes much the same sense as her runaway. Both reflect her true feelings and thoughts that Munro really cherishes. In one word, Munro's deep concern about human spiritual world cannot be unseen.

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