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Signifying Autobiographical Intimacies of Woman, Mother, and Daughter in Alice Munro's Short Stories
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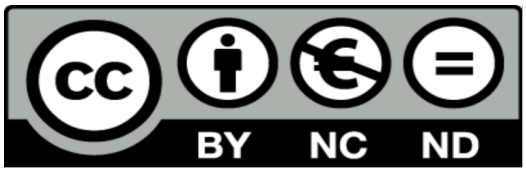

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SIGNIFYING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INTIMACIES OF WOMAN, MOTHER, AND DAUGHTER IN ALICE MUNRO'S SHORT STORIES

SIGNIFICACIÓN DE INTIMIDADES AUTOBIOGRÁFICAS DE MUJER, MADRE E HIJA EN LOS CUENTOS CORTOS DE ALICE MUNRO

Iris Melanie Lucio-Villegas Spillard

Directora: María Jesús Hernáez Lerena

> A new East—the sun accompanying the birth of a little girl. Another—the other—being brought into the world. A dawning as powerful as that of the Greeks. Giving birth to a veiled landscape. But not a new origin.
>
> You are witnessing the revelation of the end of a unique truth. Not as the advent of chaos, but as the possibility of the copula—in the sun.[1]

Dedication and acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this thesis to:
my father, who left too soon,
my mother, who is always there,
Antonia, for her understanding and broad horizon,
Inés, for her ingenuity, loveliness, and charm,
and Jacobo, for his goodness and calm intelligence.

I would like to acknowledge the support, wisdom, and generosity of my thesis supervisor, María Jesús Hernáez Lerena.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Mahmood Hayat, who has kindly authorised me to use his *Fragmentation* painting as the cover of my work.[2]

[1] Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, trans. Joanne Collie and Judith Still (New York: Routledge, 1992), 95.
[2] Mahmood Hayat, *Fragmentation* (Lahore, 2014).

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Alice Munro's reception of the Nobel Prize in 2013 jointly positioned the short story genre and female narrative at the forefront of literature, suggesting or perhaps confirming a deep connection between women's experience and vision, and short fiction. Her work can be broadly contextualised within postcolonial and postmodern literature and, more specifically, included in the Canadian cultural movement which, coinciding with second-wave feminism, gave rise to a writing community of prominent female authors. In this regard, and although she has no feminist agenda, Munro has become a chronicler of women's lives in the Western world at the turn of the millennium, asserting alternative epistemological stances that have helped create a collective female consciousness, promote the understanding of women's realities, and challenge traditional stereotyped perspectives.

A compendium of three published articles, this doctoral dissertation explores Alice Munro's literature to interpret and signify themes and events revisited throughout her collections from different angles and perspectives rendered as kaleidoscopic portrayals of intimate revelations or subjective realities closely connected with the experience of womanhood of her female characters and her own personal biography and observation. In this sense, the short story genre provides the ideal instrument to describe these instances of existential apperception of truths, frequently belonging to the realm of the emotional, which inhabit outside the scope of linear time and space of long fiction and the external world, so often in line with the male discourse of patriarchal structures.

After a close reading of Munro's collections, my literary analysis is built on previous literature on the author, short story theory, and female autobiography studies, and ultimately aims to understand, support, and extend the often-claimed autobiographical dimension of Munro's literature, while offering an insight into Munro's intimacies of femalehood that transcend her writing and which, I argue, stem from the author's biography and involve existential strokes of female experience: the mother-daughter dyad from the perspectives of daughter and mother, and the sexual pleasure and desire that hinge the two.

RESUMEN

Alice Munro recibió el Premio Nobel de Literatura en 2013, situando de manera conjunta el género del cuento corto y la narrativa de autora en un primer plano literario, y sugiriendo, o quizá confirmando, el fuerte nexo que existe entre la visión y experiencia de las mujeres y la ficción breve. En términos generales, su obra se puede contextualizar dentro de los marcos de la literatura poscolonial y posmoderna y, de manera más específica, pertenece al movimiento cultural canadiense que, coincidiendo con la segunda ola feminista, dio lugar a una comunidad de escritoras relevantes. En este sentido, y aunque no tiene una agenda feminista, Munro es cronista de las vidas de las mujeres del mundo occidental en el cambio de milenio, y presenta posicionamientos epistemológicos alternativos que conforman una conciencia femenina colectiva, fomentan la comprensión de las realidades de las mujeres y desafían los estereotipos tradicionales de género.

Esta tesis doctoral es un compendio de artículos publicados que exploran la literatura de Alice Munro con el fin de interpretar y significar temas y eventos revisitados en sus colecciones desde distintos ángulos y perspectivas, creando así retratos caleidoscópicos de revelaciones íntimas o realidades subjetivas estrechamente conectadas con la experiencia de ser mujer de sus protagonistas y con su propia biografía y observación personal. A este respecto, el género del cuento corto supone el instrumento idóneo para describir momentos de apercepción existencial de verdades, que frecuentemente pertenecen al ambiento de lo emocional y que habitan fuera de la concepción lineal de tiempo y espacio típica de la novela y del mundo exterior, tan en consonancia con el discurso masculino de las estructuras patriarcales.

Tras una lectura exhaustiva de las colecciones de Munro, mi análisis se fundamenta en crítica literaria sobre la autora, la teoría del relato breve y autobiografía femenina, y tiene como objetivo entender, apoyar y ampliar la dimensión autobiográfica de su obra, al mismo tiempo que delineo las intimidades de feminidad que trascienden su escritura y que, argumento, surgen de su biografía y suponen trazos de experiencia femenina: la diada madre-hija desde las perspectivas de hija y madre, y el placer y deseo sexual como bisagra de unión entre las dos.

1. INTRODUCTION

In her introduction to "The mother as material", in *The Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro* (2016), Elizabeth Hay mentions how "among Alice Munro's stories were a select number about her own mother that spoke directly to me, offering a deeper and more personal truth than I was used to finding in fiction" and explains how this truth has "to do with the way intimate yet tentative knowledge about one's mother leads to unsparing self-knowledge".[3] Now that I have to write the introduction to my thesis and justify my selection of Munro stories, their grouping in three different published articles, and the joint foundations of my literary analysis, I realise my main motive is no more than an extension of Hay's words. I recognize myself in the stories I have selected to explore throughout this doctoral process, not only personally, but on a female level. They tell me truths about myself that go beyond the merely superficial—however incisive and complex—portrayals of the experience of being a woman that the rest of her writing communicates to me, primarily because they plunge deep down to a layer of consciousness infrequently visited, momentarily illuminating a female darkness within that is purely emotional, shedding light on the kind of incoherent existential truths I glimpse at only in moments of stark solitude, when I confront myself alone, and suddenly understand something about myself so irrational it is practically impossible to put into words. The understanding is timeless, since it explains an emotion that I carry within me, which has overwhelmed and enveloped me periodically since a distant point in the past, and I know will carry on doing so in the future. The revelations are inherent to my femalehood, and brief fiction bridges the gap of inarticulation.

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Alice Munro's reception of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013 was a combined recognition of the relevance of short fiction and female narrative. Women authors had previously won the prize, as well as writers who had published short story collections as part of their literary corpus. Nonetheless, it was the first time the prize was awarded to a literary career solely based on short fiction. In this sense, although the 19th century provided outstanding writers of short fiction—Anton Chekhov, Henry James, Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, and Edgar Allan Poe, among others; the latter also advocated his

[3] Elizabeth Hay, "The mother as material," in *The Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro*, ed. David Staines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 178.

belief in "the unity of effect" in short fiction in his 1842 essay "The Importance of the Single Effect in a Prose Tale"[4]—the genre remained belittled by long fiction and only gained momentum—in terms of authors, popularity, and scholarly consideration—during the 20th century.[5] James Joyce, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, Virginia Woolf, Jerome D. Salinger, and a long list of international authors established the art of the short story as meriting the attention of serious criticism and the world of academia, with brevity as its undisputed distinguishing element and focus of discussion.[6] In fact, this trait entails a series of particular features which differ significantly from those of long fiction, so that a relevant amount of short fiction theory revolves around the analysis and description of these differences, with the conceptualisation of experience and reality taking the lead in terms of academic attention.

In this regard, Charles May argues that the very length of long fiction requires the creation and description of the "experience" of reality, while short fiction as an art form is limited by "the primacy of 'an experience' directly and emotionally created and encountered". May's theory therefore links long fiction or novels to the writer's illusion of reality of the external and material world, and short stories to the immaterial reality of the author's inner world in relation to a personal experience, which essentially leads to an enlightened moment of truth—or epiphany. The difference is remarkable, since it contextualises the novel within the realm of the outside social world—the familiar reality of the everyday—and the short story within the unconscious emotional reaction to a given instance or experience, a revelation that "defamiliarizes our assumption that reality is simply the conceptual construct we take it to be, and throws into doubt that our propositional and categorical mode of perceiving can be applied to human beings".[7] The description of this momentary and mysterious perception belongs to the compressed

[4] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Importance of the Single Effect in a Prose Tale," in *The Story and its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*, ed. Ann Charters (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1999), 1531–2.

[5] See Dominic Head, *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); María Jesús Hernáez, *Short Story World* (Logroño: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de La Rioja, 2003); Charles E. May, "The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction," in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles E. May (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994), 327–38.

[6] See Gema Soledad Castillo, María Rosa Cabellos, Juan Antonio Sánchez, and Vincent Carlisle, "Introduction," in *The Short Story in English: Crossing Boundaries*, eds. Gema Soledad Castillo, María Rosa Cabellos, Juan Antonio Sánchez, and Vincent Carlisle (Alcalá de Henares: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alcalá, 2006), iii–v; Blanche H. Gelfant, "Introduction," in *The Columbia Companion to the Twentieth Century American Short Story*, ed. Blanche H. Gelfant (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 1–8; Joan Thomas, "Introduction," in *Turn of the Story: Canadian Short Fiction on the Eve of the Millennium*, eds. Joan Thomas and Heidi Harms (Toronto: Anansi, 1999), vii–xv.

[7] May, "The Nature," 328 and 333 respectively.

form of the short story—its lifespan is an eternal but timeless moment, a personal reaction to an experience translated onto the page.[8]

In a similar line, Michael Trussler focuses on how writers of short fiction often explain the genre in terms of epistemology—closely related to reality. For example, Charles Baxter describes the notion of the expanded moment of insight into truth, "where you think reality takes place", while Thomas Leitch considers short stories to pose "a challenge to knowledge" by emphasising the significance of an isolated event within a shortened context of time, again in contrast with the delated and informed span of the novel's reality.[9] On the other hand, Suzanne Hunter Brown discusses the brevity of short fiction as opposed to the length of the novel, and its impact on plot content, quoting Harry Mark Petrakis's words on the subject: "[…] the short story, by necessity, becomes an episode of selected incident. You move into it at a given time. You move into it in a given place. You are not given the liberty, which you have in the novel, and you must catch the character 'at a point […] of crisis in his life'".[10] She therefore links this brevity with the constraints of portraying limited segments of time, often full of dramatic tension, and applies Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's Enlightenment era observation that visual art "must be content with simultaneous actions, or with mere figures, which, by their posture lead us to conjecture an action"[11]—i.e., a "pregnant moment"—to the short fiction genre in order to explain its tendency to describe epiphanies and thus turn "technical limitations […] into expressive advantages".[12]

This analogy between the short story genre and visual art tallies with the arrival of postmodernism halfway through the 20th century and a change in the conceptual perception of reality, where successful representations of the human condition can only be accomplished through "the use of fragments, as in the short stories".[13] The use of

[8] Thomas, "Introduction."
[9] Michael Trussler, "Suspended Narratives: The Short Story and Temporality," *Studies in Short Fiction* 33, no. 4 (Autumn 1996): 560, https://www.proquest.com/docview/1297938216?pqorigsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true.
[10] Suzanne Hunter Brown, "The Chronotope of the Short Story: Time, Character, and Brevity," in *Creative and Critical Approaches to the Short Story*, ed. Noel Harold Jr. Kaylor (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 181–214.
[11] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Lacoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. E. C. Beasley (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1853), 100.
[12] Brown, "The Chronotope," 187.
[13] Farhat Iftekharrudin, Mary Rohrberger, and Maurice Lee, "Introduction," in *Speaking of the Short Story*, eds. Farhat Iftekharrudin, Mary Rohrberger, and Maurice Lee (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), ix.

fragmentation as a technique of representation forces the audience to conceive the whole picture—similarly to impressionism—rather than consider the individual fragments independently. It also provides an opportunity to portray experiences in a non-continuous temporal framework, where each fragment may belong to a different temporal dimension, thus providing depth and subjectivity and a closer illustration of how humans perceive the reality of life and existence.[14] Furthermore—and again informed by the observation of practitioners of the genre—Farhat Iftekharrudin, Mary Rohrberger, and Maurice Lee delve into the dialogical experience developed between readers and story derived from fragmentation. Thus, in their interviews with contemporary writers, the author Clark Blaise depreciates the simplicity of the novel's linear narrative in favour of readers being required "to project from the details on the page something that is not on the page", and Isabel Allende claims to give readers only half of the story, forcing them to recreate the other half, creating in this way a shared space of narrative experience. The intimations in terms of readers' self-reflectivity are obvious, especially "as a means of understanding humanity" and, by extension, themselves.[15]

A further integral trait of postmodern short fiction belongs to gender, with the female voice taking centre stage to counter and question universal and traditional male scripts of knowledge and reality,[16] and showcase the flip side perspectives of a myriad of hitherto seldomly explored visions and understandings of the world, where experimental autobiography and epistemology have a foothold. Concurring and coinciding with second-wave feminism, the emergence of a female writing community—with a significant representation of Canadian short story writers[17]—set forth to inclusively present a vast array of visions and perspectives, eclectic and divergent, but that became collective in their pursuit to expose historical oppression and

[14] Jorge Luis Borges, *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (Barcelona: Biblioteca de Literatura Universal, 1993). Borges's work (in English, "The Garden of the Forking Paths") delves into the notion of time not being one but several, occupying various dimensions, so that we do not always coincide with the people that surround us in the same temporal spaces. The short story was originally published in 1941.
[15] Iftekharrudin, Rohrberger, and Lee, "Introduction," xii and ix respectively.
[16] Farhat Iftekharrudin, "Women's Identity in the Postmodern World," in *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues*, eds. Farhat Iftekharrudin, Joseph Boyden, Mary Rohrberger, and Jale Claudet (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 63–106.
[17] Mercedes Díaz, "'Count your Blessings'": Order vs. the Grotesque in Alice Munro and Diane Schoemperlen," in *New Perspectives of English Studies, 32nd International Conference of the Spanish Association for English and American Studies*, eds. Marian Amengual, Maria Juan, and Joana Salazar, (Palma: Edicions UIB, 2008) 451–5.

in their representation of the female psyche.[18] In this context, the genre provides a superlative space to leave written proof of personal and subjective experiences and observations, fragmented reproductions of inner insights into and reactions to the external male-dominated world, in which autobiography or writing the self becomes a hallmark of the format, in contrast with the "linearity, harmony, and orderliness" of male discourse.[19]

Scholars, writers, and critics have endeavoured to pinpoint the multivalence of the genre to promote its study and analysis. In any case, many seem to agree that short fiction deals with the kind of transcendental reality which is an intrinsic part of the human condition, fleeting experiences glimpsed at in timeless instants of existential and mysterious perception that belong to a reality warp.[20] Or, as aptly described by May:

> The reality the short story presents us with is the reality of those sub-universes of the supernatural and the fable which exist within the so-called "real" world of sense perception and conceptual abstraction. It presents moments in which we become aware of anxiety, loneliness, dread, concern, and thus find the safe, secure and systematic life we usually lead disrupted and momentarily destroyed. The short story is the most adequate form to confront us with reality as we perceive it in our most profound moments.[21]

Michele Morano labels this type of experience characteristic of the short story—especially in postmodern short fiction—as "fancy", a concept that fuses the author's imagination and autobiographical memory to produce a transmutation of reality that captures a "distinct shift of consciousness" and "deepening of insight" often in relation to the self.[22] Thus—and particularly relevant to Munro's form of narrative—Morano discerns a nonfictional category of short stories that "propel both writer and reader

[18] See Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield, "Introduction," in *Feminism and Autobiography*, eds. Tess Coslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield (London: Routledge, 2000), 1–22; María Jesús Hernáez, "Formas canónicas de identidad masculina y femenina en las narraciones 'oficiales': El caso de una autobiografía contemporánea de mujer," in *'Género', sexo, discurso*, eds. Ana María Vigara and Rosa María Jiménez (Madrid: Ediciones del Laberinto, 2002), 177–228; Jeanne Perreault, "Selves: Intersecting," in *Writing Selves: Contemporary Feminist Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 129–34.

[19] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices," in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 9.

[20] Michele Morano, "Facts and Fancy: The 'Nonfiction Short Story'," in *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues*, eds. Farhat Iftekharrudin, Joseph Boyden, Mary Rohrberger, and Jaie Claudet (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 35–46.

[21] May, "The Nature," 337–8.

[22] Joyce Carol Oates quoted in Morano, "Facts and Fancy," 36.

toward awareness—and meta-awareness—of the quintessential literary subject: the mind's eternal struggle to represent itself".[23]

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Spanning over a period of more than four decades, and broadly contextualised within postcolonial and postmodern literature, the autobiographical quality of Munro's writing[24] and, certainly, its emphatic female perspective have promoted the understanding of female reality and reflect the complexities and intricacies of the lives of girls and women in contemporary first world societies. Her work follows the structure of the author's own vital evolution—as admitted by the author herself, "I've always written about things at my own stage of life"[25]—so that her first collections of short stories deal with childhood and youth, the middle ones with adulthood, and the final collections with maturity, reflecting the different stages of a lifetime from a female—and implicitly feminist—perspective. Indeed, a panoramic view of Munro's work—from her first collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) to her last, *Dear Life* (2012)[26]—together with knowledge of her personal biography leaves readers with a distinct aftertaste of an autobiographical flavour,[27] where the limits between fiction and fact are disconcertingly merged.

This gives rise to the long-lasting debate in literary theory regarding the confusion between author and narrator, between the author and his/her voice that provides "the picture the reader gets of this presence",[28] further emphasised by Munro's ambiguous statements regarding this dimension of her writing,[29] and in contrast with her

[23] Morano, "Facts and Fancy," 46.
[24] See Coral Ann Howells, *Alice Munro* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Coral Ann Howells, "Alice Munro and her life writing," in *The Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro*, ed. David Staines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 79–95; Oriana Palusci, *Alice Munro and the Anatomy of the Short Story* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017); Magdalene Redekop, *Mothers and Other Clowns* (London: Routledge, 1992); Catherine Sheldrick Ross, "'At the End of a Long Road': Alice Munro's 'Dear Life'," in *Alice Munro Everlasting: Essays on her Works II*, ed. Tim Struthers (Hamilton: Guernica Editions, 2020), 31–78; Robert Thacker, "'So Shocking a Verdict in Real Life': Autobiography in Alice Munro's Stories," in *Autobiography and Canadian Literature*, ed. Peter K. Stich (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1988), 153–62.
[25] Donald J. R. Bruckner, "An Author Travels to Nurture Ideas About Home," *The New York Times on the Web*, April 17, 1990, https://www.nytimes.com/1990/04/17/books/an-author-travels-to-nurture-ideas-about-home-243990.html.
[26] Alice Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (London: Vintage Books, 2011); Alice Munro, *Dear Life* (London: Vintage, 2013).
[27] Palusci, *Alice Munro*.
[28] Claire Wilkshire, *Analyzing Voice in the Contemporary Short Story* (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2002), https://open.library.ubc.ca/media/download/pdf/831/1.0099216/1.
[29] Howells, *Alice Munro*.

introductory words to "Finale" (2012)—the quartet of stories at the end of *Dear Life* and the author's final published words—and the initially included disclaimer in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971),[30] which infer the unequivocal fictional nature of her previous work. "Finale" is introduced in the following way: "The final four works in this book are not quite stories. They form a separate unit, one that is autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact. I believe they are the first and last—and the closest—things I have to say about my own life".[31] Interestingly, her second collection of stories, *Lives of Girls and Women*, published forty-one years previously, was originally introduced similarly: "This novel is autobiographical in form but not in fact. My family, neighbours and friends did not serve as models. − A.M."[32]—these introductory statements are analysed and discussed in the third chapter of this thesis. In addition, *The View from Castle Rock* (2006) "tells the episodic history of Munro's family, from pioneer ancestors who left the Presbyterian, wind-blasted Scottish borders to Munro's own girlhood in rural Ontario",[33] based on archival facts and the fictional reconstruction of the author. The collection also includes biographical data not previously included in her work, and the author's foreword stresses that "[t]hese are stories. You could say that such stories pay more attention to the truth of a life than fiction usually does. But not enough to swear on. And the part of this book that might be called family history has expanded into fiction, but always within the outline of a true narrative".[34]

It is therefore not surprising that Magdalene Redekop declared her astonishment when listening to Munro telling a CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) interviewer that at some point she would write her autobiography, and wondering whether "she didn't realize that everything she has already written is autobiography".[35] Additionally, Robert Thacker's "'So Shocking a Verdict in Real Life': Autobiography in Alice Munro's Stories" (1988) addresses the often-claimed autobiographical nature of her narrative in terms of self-definition, "memory and imagination",[36] supported by extracts of the many published interviews of the author. For instance, when asked by

[30] Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (London: Vintage Books, 2015).
[31] Munro, *Dear Life*, 255.
[32] Thacker, Robert, *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives* (Toronto: McClelland and Steward, 2005), 211.
[33] David Mattin, "The View from Castle Rock by Alice Munro," *The Independent*, November 12, 2006, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-view-from-castle-rock-by-alice-munro-424032.html.
[34] Alice Munro, *The View from Castle Rock* (London: Vintage, 2007).
[35] Redekop, *Mothers*, 232.
[36] Howells, *Alice Munro*, 141.

John Metcalf about the extent to which her work is autobiographical, Munro's response is:

> Oh. Well. I guess I have a standard to this…in incident—no…in emotion—completely. In incident up to a point too of course, […] most of the incidents are changed versions of real incidents. Some are completely invented but the emotional reality, the girl's feelings for her mother, for men, for life is all…it's all solidly autobiographical.[37]

However, this acknowledged personal dimension of her writing is not without ethical and practical drawbacks, as Munro herself explains in *The Paris Review Interviews*:

> You use up your childhood (…). The deep, personal material of the latter half of your life is your children. You can write about your parents when they're gone but your children are still going to be here. And you're going to want them to come and visit you in the nursing home. Maybe it's advisable to move on to writing those stories that are more observation.[38]

The ethical implications are twofold: on one hand there is the social and public exposure of the people one loves; on the other, a degree of fraud and, indeed, distortion involved in putting into words one's personal vision and memory of fact, as Munro herself admits: "Memory is the way we keep telling ourselves our stories—and telling other people a somewhat different version of our stories".[39] This fictional deformation of the real life experiences of the author or those she knows—the adaptation of fact in an attempt to realign the public and private domains—has been described as a paradoxical way of trying to understand or come to terms with reality: "the fiction of Alice Munro is a means of apprehending truth, however obliquely and incompletely; in the process, the distinction between truth and fiction is blurred and sometimes obliterated",[40] so that it could be claimed that her fiction is based on the

[37] Thacker, "'So Shocking'," 155–6.
[38] The Paris Review Interviews, "Alice Munro: The Art of Fiction," in *The Paris Review Interviews, II*, ed. Philip Gourevitch (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2007), 395–431.
[39] In Silvia Albertazzi, "A Comparative Essay on the Sociology of Literature: Alice Munro's 'Unconsummated Relationships'," *Journal of the Short Story in English. Special issue: The Short Stories of Alice Munro*, no. 55 (Autumn 2010): 12, https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1083.
[40] Stephen Regan, "'The Presence of the Past': Modernism and Postmodernism in Canadian Short Fiction," in *Narrative Strategies in Canadian*, eds. Ann Howells Coral and Lynette Hunter (Milton Keynes: Oxford University Press, 1991), 123.

transformation—variation, modification—derived from a combination of memory and imagination "so intimately complementary in the autobiographical art that it is usually impossible for autobiographers and readers to distinguish between them in practice".[41]

But autobiographical narratives are also of an epistemological nature, since they communicate a personal knowledge of experience, which may assert certain stances on identity, gender, society, or politics which differ from the traditional or conventional perspectives of the world, promoting or developing the acceptance of these alternative visions of reality. Thus, "[t]hey […] have the potential to celebrate through countervalorization another way of seeing, one unsanctioned, even unsuspected, in the dominant cultural surround. And with shifts in vision can follow social change, even creations of new worlds".[42] Munro's impact in terms of popularity and readership has meant that her stories have been included in anthologies which "highlight women's writing, Canadian writing and postcolonial writing",[43] and she is often numbered among a generation of Canadian female writers who were part of second-wave feminism, a label which becomes particularly pertinent in relation to two stories in her collection *Open Secrets* (1994), "A Wilderness Station" and "Open Secrets",[44] reminiscent of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996)[45] and of the Australian author Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967)[46] respectively—in 1979, 1980 and 1983, Alice Munro travelled to Australia for professional and personal reasons and would subsequently turn the country into the backdrop of some of her stories.[47]

In fact, the autobiographical nature of Munro's literature has positioned her writing "at the intersection between feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern critical theories"[48] and, although the author has distanced herself from the politics and activism of feminism,[49] the female focus of her fiction advocates for women's reality, while

[41] Paul John Eakin, "Fiction in Autobiography: Ask Mary McCarthy No Questions," in *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 6.
[42] Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith, "Introduction," in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, eds. Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), xx.
[43] Howells, *Alice Munro*, 137.
[44] Alice Munro, "Open Secrets" and "A Wilderness Station," in *Open Secrets* (London: Vintage Books, 1995), 129–60 and 190–225 respectively.
[45] Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (London: Virago Press, 2009).
[46] Joan Lindsay, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (London: Vintage, 2013).
[47] Andrea F. Szabó, "Alice Munro's Australian Mirror Stories," *Brno Studies in English* 41, no. 2 (Autumn 2015): 109–19, https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2015-2-7.
[48] Smith and Watson, "Situating Subjectivity," 5.
[49] Cara Feinberg, "Bringing Life to Life," *The Atlantic*, December 1, 2001, https://www. theatlantic.com/ magazine/archive/2001/12/bringing-life-to-life/303056/.

leaving varied and sophisticated portraits of the female psyche. Thus, gender awareness becomes a further trait of her literature,[50] her incisive mapping of the inner workings of womanhood producing a mirror-like effect in female readers, so "that we catch ourselves in the act of looking".[51] However, the prism is not biased or arbitrary. Munro seems to subtly emphasise the weaknesses, insanities, and contradictions of men in contrast to the strength and vision of women, rather than stridently depict the former in her stories. She sees women as survivors, with qualities denied to the dominant male due to the very nature of the oppression: "A subject race has a kind of clarity of vision and I feel that women have always had a clarity of vision which men were denied. And, in a way, this is a gift, it goes along with a lack of power: and I valued that very much—the value to be able to see clearly".[52]

In the case of Munro, this vision blends memory, emotions, and imagination to paradoxically unite secrets and revelations, power and powerlessness, in a contradictory pursuit to control the uncontrollable past, which engages retrospection, introspection, and voyeurism in its exposition.[53] Like the visual arts, Munro's fiction immerses readers in a sensorial experience, where we become the onlookers of precisely detailed portraits shattered by an outburst of emotion contrarily out of line and aligned with the rest of the picture,[54] the fragments of the portraits belonging to different temporal spaces in contrast with the traditional narrative structure according to "clock time". The spaces intertwine in the story, and "memory, inseparable in practice from perception, imports the past into the present, contracts into a single intuition many moments of duration",[55] tallying with the Modernists' notion of epiphany, which is often open-ended and eludes closure.[56] The timelessness of the episode sometimes takes the form of misconstrued recollections from the past which climax in an epiphany or revelation that sheds new light and comprehension onto the place where "[s]omething happened […]. In your life there are a few places, or maybe only the one place, where something happened, and

[50] Howells, *Alice Munro*.
[51] Redekop, *Mothers*, 3.
[52] In Albertazzi, "A Comparative Essay," 4.
[53] Ildikó de Papp Carrington, "The Controlled and the Controllers: Humiliated Characters, Voyeurs, and Alter Egos," in *Controlling the Uncontrollable: The Fiction of Alice Munro* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), 99–183.
[54] Howells, *Alice Munro*; Thomas, "Introduction."
[55] Henri Bergson, *Key Writings*, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey, trans. Melissa McMahon (New York: Continuum, 2002), 121.
[56] Ailsa Cox, *Alice Munro: Writers and Their Work* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2004).

then there are all the other places",[57] and that place has the capacity to determine your fate and/or destroy your future; it presents, perhaps, the "paradoxical relationship between the 'real' and the 'true'",[58] only discerned or disentangled with the acuity of the present, but with roots in the past, the seemingly unhinged or disconnected elements of the image or perception countlessly revisited to signify, expand, or consolidate its knowledge.[59]

The publications in this thesis have attempted to gauge these places in Munro's literature which speak to me, from woman to woman, as milestone emotions of a female life. My conversation with Munro is not based on the recognition of events, characters, or the social context, but on the way of understanding and experiencing personal and intimate emotional truths directly linked to our femalehood, to our state of being women. These are truths connected with modes of thinking, feeling, and the body; they are not only abstract but physical, since they necessarily involve our biology, and the modes transcend individual identity to create a collective female consciousness.[60] The stories delve into the mother-daughter dyad, losing a child, and female sexuality, backstaged by the feeling of guilt so typical in women and Munro's characters.

[57] Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness* (London: Vintage, 2010).
[58] Jill Varley, *Not Real but True: Evolution in the Form and Theme in Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women, The Progress of Love, and Open Secrets* (PhD diss., Concordia University, 1997), https://spectrum.library.concordia.ca/id/eprint/354/.
[59] Hernáez, *Short Story.*
[60] See Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, "Gender and Genre: Short Fiction, Feminism and Female Experience," in *The Cambridge History of the English Short Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 286–303; Hernáez, "Formas canónicas."

2. OBJECTIVES

This thesis and its publications present an overview and literary review of the contemporary short story genre in order to contextualise and explore published criticism and scholarly analysis on Munro relevant to the themes addressed. Particular emphasis has been placed on the idiosyncrasies of brief fiction, outlining several outstanding features of the genre, such as its conceptualisation of experience and reality, its epistemological nature from a female perspective, and the kaleidoscopic quality of its portrayal of life, among others. On the other hand, consideration is given to certain literary characteristics and facets of Munro's work, with special attention given to the autobiographical dimension of her writing, rewriting the self and past from the perspective of adulthood and the present, the exploration of the female psyche, and the revisitation of certain thematic lines directly linked with the experience of womanhood.

The combined reading of the author's collections of short stories and of literary research has evidenced, as previously mentioned, a parallelism between Munro's fictional and personal chronology, which in turn triggers an interest in the places she returns to again and again, spotlighting them from different angles and slants, like crevices in a slate that need to be healed. My first published article, "Before I Say Goodbye: Autobiography and Closure in Alice Munro's 'Finale'" draws and analogy between the writer's final quartet of stories in *Dear Life* (2012)—which she introduces in semiautobiographical terms—and stories in her first two collections, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) and *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), throwing to the wind the autonomy of art, while highlighting the significance of Munro's relationship with her mother and the implications of her death.[61] The second article, "'Honey, Where Are the Kids?': Motifs of the Past, Water, and Photography in Munro's Stories Featuring Dead Children" approaches the theme of the lost child from the standpoint of Munro's personal biography, pinpointing the key elements that furnish the narratives to capture the emotion: the past, water, and photography.[62] Finally, the last article, "Female Pleasure and Car Accidents: Signifying Alice Munro's Middle Stories", approaches the

[61] Iris Lucio-Villegas, "Before I Say Goodbye: Autobiography and Closure in Alice Munro's 'Finale'," *IJES: International Journal of English Studies* 21, no. 2 (December 2021): 139–55, https://doi.org/10.6018/ijes.475711.

[62] Iris Lucio-Villegas, "'Honey, Where Are the Kids?': Motifs of the Past, Water, and Photography in Munro's Stories Featuring Dead Children," *ELOPE: English Language Overseas Perspectives and Enquiries* 19, no. 1 (July 2022): 29–40, https://doi.org/10.4312/elope.19.1.29-40.

connection between the death of children and female pleasure and desire, again consolidating the argument on the basis of the author's biographical data.[63]

This thesis is the product of a close—and perhaps obsessive—reading and interpretation of Munro's literature. My selection of the stories is based on a level of self-recognition and emotional response to the themes, which has sparked a need to research and delve deeper into the "why" and the "how" of their composition. I think I am not alone in stating that, when I read Munro, I feel that I am reading myself, but with a paradoxical combination of clarity and complexity which I obviously lack and find illuminating. Reading Munro is cathartic, in so far as it makes me feel part of a collective way of perceiving life, as well as understand better the processes of my female mind and soul. Although in academic terms the ultimate aim of this thesis has been to cement the autobiographical magnitude of Munro's fiction, on a more personal level my objective has been to convey this shared awareness successfully.

Nevertheless, and as a guide, the different sections of this thesis combine to achieve the following goals:

- to locate concepts in theory of the short story and women's autobiography, and critique on Munro that are relevant to the themes addressed;
- to order the concepts and apply them coherently to the grouping and analysis of the stories proposed;
- to describe and assess the stories in relation to significant stages or events in a woman's life in order to discern the emotions that trigger their writing;
- to reflect on the contributions of my literary analysis and outline its limitations; and
- to propose lines of future research that would supplement my interpretation of Munro in terms of female life writing.

[63] Iris Lucio-Villegas, "Female Pleasure and Car Accidents: Signifying Alice Munro's Middle Stories." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (December 2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/0011619.2022.2157237.

3. PUBLICATIONS

3.1. Before I say Goodbye: Autobiography and Closure in Alice Munro's "Finale"

Lucio-Villegas, Iris. "Before I Say Goodbye: Autobiography and Closure in Alice Munro's 'Finale'." *IJES: International Journal of English Studies* 21, no. 2 (December 2021): 139–55. https://doi.org/10.6018/ijes.475711.

3.2. “Honey, Where Are the Kids?”: Motifs of the Past, Water and Photography in Munro’s Stories Featuring Dead Children

Lucio-Villegas, Iris. “‘Honey, Where Are the Kids?’: Motifs of the Past, Water, and photography in Munro’s Stories Featuring Dead Children.” *ELOPE: English Language Overseas Perspectives and Enquiries* 19, no. 1 (July 2022): 29–40. https://doi.org/10.4312/elope.19.1.29-40.

(Special issue on Alice Munro.)

3.3. Female Pleasure and Car Accidents: Signifying Alice Munro's Middle Stories

Lucio-Villegas, Iris. "Female Pleasure and Car Accidents: Signifying Alice Munro's Middle Stories." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (December 2022). https://doi.org/10.1080/0011619.2022.2157237.

4. Research findings

This thesis is grounded on a literature review of short story theory and female autobiography studies together with a thorough and comprehensive investigation and assessment of previous academic work on Alice Munro. In this regard, it has considered and examined in detail most studies on the author to create a solid infrastructure of relevant groundwork that supports its findings and conclusions. These preliminary steps have been essential as a starting point of my doctorate and underpin the publications and different sections of this thesis, while providing an in-depth panoramic view of the author, vital for the configuration of my arguments and findings, which draw connections between the epistemological nature of short fiction and women's autobiographical practices, in particular Munro's.[64]

In this sense, my arguments have established how the fragmentary nature of the short story stages a prismatic and subjective understanding of the world and reality which belongs to the realms of the emotional and female experience, outside the objective and linear vision of long fiction and the male domains. In Munro, one of the most acclaimed authors of all times, this translates into a reflection on landmarks of femalehood that transcend her writing, intimate disclosures of emotional and subconscious associations and understandings of reality, of how things happened and live inside us, communicating and signifying through her female characters her incisive observation and meaningful events of her biography, intrinsically linked to the existential and genealogical bond between women.[65]

My work offers new appreciations and interpretations of Munro stories, gridding them inter- and intratextually, as well as metafictionally, to examine the self-referentiality of Munro's work, creating a mind map of Munro's psychology and, by extension, the female psyche. Although my analysis is built on a close reading of the text, rarely distancing itself from the page, it also constructs a network of hitherto jointly unexplored relationships between short fiction, autobiography, femalehood, and Munro's writing. And this is perhaps the main contribution of my work. This thesis not only adds to existing literature on the autobiographical quality of Munro's writing from

[64] Coelsch-Foisner, "Gender and Genre."
[65] Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

a novel and interdisciplinary perspective, but also advances short story theory in new directions that combine the idiosyncrasies of the genre with new concepts in femalehood and contemporary female autobiography to ultimately support and expand on the shared and collective consciousness of female life writing as an epistemological stance.[66]

[66] Coelsch-Foisner, "Gender and Genre."

5. CONCLUSIONS

As a unit, the publications in this thesis elaborate further on the closeness between Alice Munro's life and her literature, as established previously by many critics. The overall argument is moored by the author's own words on the subject, scholarly criticism on her work, her daughter Sheila's memoirs *Lives of Mothers & Daughters: Growing Up with Alice Munro,* and Robert Thacker's biography *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*,[67] but it goes beyond the factual events, themes, and characters portrayed in the stories to survey and plot Munro's emotional and fragmentary images behind the scenes,[68] which epitomise important aspects and stages of her femalehood, fashioned to iron out the "fissures of female discontinuity"[69] that prevail in her life writing as a literary artefact, effective in the configuration of a collective consciousness.[70]

Although Munro's work charts a woman's lifetime, "Before I Say Goodbye: Autobiography and Closure in Alice Munro's 'Finale'" shows a correspondence between her last quartet of stories and her first two collections.[71] This, together with the title and introduction of "Finale",[72] intimates that, to some extent, her earlier work is driven by personal experience, although the quartet also serves as a denouement to her biography and literary corpus, in which she returns to the time and space of her upbringing as well as to themes recurrent throughout her writing, with the mother-daughter dyad as "the central female connection" which "hovers in the background of everything she writes".[73] The four stories in "Finale"[74] offer a miniature scaffolding of femalehood landmarks in the process of growing up—individuation from one's mother, acknowledgement of death and the duality of human nature, sexual awakening, the unquestioning devotion to one's father—but end by placing significance yet again on

[67] Sheila Munro, *Lives of Mothers & Daughters: Growing Up with Alice Munro* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2001); Thacker, *Alice Munro*.
[68] Hernáez, *Short Story.*
[69] Shari Benstock, *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 20.
[70] See Howells, "Her Life Writing"; Smith and Watson, "Situating Subjectivity."
[71] Lucio-Villegas, "Before I Say."
[72] Munro, *Dear Life*, 255.
[73] See Eugene Benson and William Toye, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1997), 778; Elizabeth Hay, "The Mother," 178.
[74] Munro, *Dear Life*, 255–319.

the connection between daughter and the now lost mother.[75] The fact that Munro chose to leave her ill mother behind to pursue her own personal and literary life, her ensuing guilt, the impact of her mother's Parkinson disease on the family and its subsequent dynamics, her mother's early death—which paradoxically gave Munro the opportunity to write about her without her knowledge—emerge as a subject the author doggedly scrutinises, diverges from, and deserts, to conclusively acknowledge one more time in the last story in "Finale", "Dear Life",[76] in a final attempt to understand and come to terms with their relationship at the end of literary career shaped and shadowed by its obsession.[77] The subject is explicitly addressed in four stories stretching from Munro's first collection—"The Peace of Utrecht" in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968)—to her very last story and published words, with stopovers in her middle collections—"The Ottawa Valley" in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974) and "Friend of My Youth" in the homonymous collection (1990),[78] which close and open the collections they belong to respectively—and indirectly approached in many others, but Munro's oeuvre offers a diverse array of mothers which metafictionally tackle the emotional toll of the author as a mother herself, and again there is an undertone of metafictional multilayered guilt that threads the writing.

Gauging Munro's literature traces and knits semantic ideas and biographical events that are meshed to augment our, and perhaps her own, understanding of the cognition and emotions that hover deep down in the subconscious.[79] The young girl in

[75] See Bella Brodzki, "Mothers, Displacement, and Language," in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 156–9; Smith and Watson, "Situating Subjectivity."
[76] Munro, *Dear Life*, 299–319.
[77] See Margaret Atwood, "'Lives of Girls and Women': A portrait of the artist as a young woman," in *The Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro*, ed. David Staines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 96–115; Brodzki, "Mothers, Displacement"; Aida Edemariam, "Alice Munro: Riches of a double life," *The Guardian*, October 4, 2003, https://www.theguardian.com /books/2003/oct/04/featuresreviews. guardianreview8; Laura Ferri, "Crossing Borders in Alice Munro's Short Stories," in *The Short Story in English: Crossing Boundaries*, eds. Gema Soledad Castillo, María Rosa Cabellos, Juan Antonio Sánchez, and Vincent Carlisle (Alcalá de Henares: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alcalá, 2006), 359–67; Hay, "The Mother"; Howells, "Her Life Writing."
[78] Munro, *Dance*, 190–210; Alice Munro, "The Ottawa Valley," in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 227–46; Alice Munro, "Friend of My Youth," in *Friend of My Youth* (London: Vintage Books, 1996), 3–26.
[79] Ana María Fraile-Marcos, "Embodied Shame and the Resilient Ethics of Representation in Alice Munro's 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain'," in *Ethics and Affects in the Fiction of Alice Munro*, eds. Amelia DeFalco and Lorraine York (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 59–78.

"Night",[80] in "Finale", who is kept awake at night by the oppressing thought that she is capable of strangling her sister, revisits the scene in a set of stories—analysed in "'Honey, Where Are the Kids?': Motifs of the Past, Water, and Photography in Munro's Stories Featuring Dead Children"[81]—that could be ambiguously described as fratricides and sororicides,[82] connected together and to other stories, like the disjointed photographs of a memory book, by the unworded but obliquely suggested hint of parental carelessness or even culpability in the children's water-related deaths. This guilt is ubiquitous in all, but factually at the core of "My Mother's Dream",[83] the last story in *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998), Munro's literary settlement with the death of her second daughter Catherine, who passed away soon after birth and to whom she feels indebted.[84] In the story, Munro reconciliates herself with the past, offering an alternative of how things "might have been", bringing the baby to safety, merging the voices of mother and child into one consciousness and body, the uterus' water sheltering them both from harm. "[I]ntertextuality, self-referentiality and metafictional commentary" incongruently trace "the lack of 'jointedness' of experience, […] an awareness of wrongness" where the reassurance and continuity of the everyday vanished, forever leaving a darkness that cannot be removed, and embodied in the "many variations of the mother figure" and the lost child of Munro's literature.[85] Similarly factual, the girl narrator in "Miles City, Montana",[86] the opening story of *The Progress of Love* (1986), gains awareness of the physical connection between life, procreation, and death,[87] a recollection sparked in her adult self by a family photograph; however, the corporeal bond becomes categorical between mother and daughter, as the adult narrator is ominously apprehensive of her child's near drowning.

[80] Munro, *Dear Life*, 271–85.
[81] Lucio-Villegas, "'Honey, Where'."
[82] Corinne Bigot, "Ghost texts in Alice Munro's stories," *Short Fiction in Theory & Practice* 7, no. 2 (Autumn 2017): 141–52. https://doi.org/10.1386/fict.7.2.141_1.
[83] Alice Munro, "My Mother's Dream," in *The Love of a Good Woman* (London: Vintage, 1999), 293–340.
[84] See Munro, *Mothers and Daughters*; Thacker, *Alice Munro*.
[85] Coelsch-Foisner, "Gender and Genre," 301; Howells, "Her Life Writing," 155; Hay, "The Mother," 186.
[86] Alice Munro, "Miles City, Montana," in *The Progress of Love* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), 3–31.
[87] Catherine Sheldrick Ross, *Alice Munro: A Double Life* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1992).

The network is physical between mothers and daughters, "the body emerges in, disrupts, redirects narrative practices"[88] in women's autobiography and their biological makeup, with sex and its inevitable contact with men—within gender binary traditional conventions—as part of the equation. Nevertheless, there is a censurable "something" in the male intrusion to this otherwise all-female equation, which materialises in a group of stories—explored in "Female Pleasure and Car Accidents: Signifying Alice Munro's Middle Stories"[89]—that couple female desire with the traffic-related death of the protagonists' sexual partners' child, the loss of Catherine echoing through, Munro's breakup from her first husband and feelings of guilt for engaging in other relationships reverberating in the writing. The sexual lust of the female voices takes the lead to satirically portray the ridiculousness of our actions when enthralled by men in situations beyond the framework of conventional marriage, unconsciously and ironically undermined by the children's deaths in car accidents. The vehicles, a symbol of phallic power,[90] somehow fuse the yearning and disquiet of female desire with the tragic loss of a child, and, far from dissonant, it makes sense, foregrounding the mother-daughter dyad over other aspects of femalehood, the responsibility and obligations of mothers towards their daughters over the fulfilment or frustration of sexual partnerships.[91]

Munro decided early on to strive for egalitarianism in her gendered perception of self, possibly conditioned by her mother's strong character and stance, if we are to consider her initial introduction to *Lives of Girls and Women*[92] and the ending paragraphs of the homonymous story—words which actually title the collection:

> There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up until now has been their connection with men. All we have had. No more lives, really, than domestic animals. *He shall hold thee, when his passion shall have spent its novel force, a*

[88] Smith and Watson, "Situating Subjectivity," 36.
[89] Lucio-Villegas, "Female Pleasure."
[90] Mariamne H. Whatley, "Raging Hormones and Powerful Cars: The Construction of Men's Sexuality in School Sex Education and Popular Adolescent Films," *Journal of Education* 170, no. 3 (November 1988): 100–21, https://doi.org/10.1177/002205748817000307.
[91] William H. New, "Re-reading the Moons of Jupiter," in *The Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 116–35.
[92] Thacker, *Alice Munro*, 211.

> *little closer than his dog, a little dearer than his horse.* Tennyson wrote that. It's true. *Was* true. You will want to have children, though.[93]

This statement is predictably met with some resistance on the part of Del—the metafictional young Munro—as,

> advice that assumed that being female made you damageable, that a certain amount of carefulness and solemn fuss and self-protection were called for, whereas men were supposed to be able to go out and take on all kinds of experiences and shuck off what they didn't want and come back proud. Without even thinking about it, I had decided to do the same.[94]

But this position involves an amount of conflict and an emotional weight that transcend Munro's literature, miscues in self-perception that afflict and govern her writing in relation to herself, creating feelings of wrongness where you realise you failed yourself as a woman, and by physical and emotional extension, as a daughter and mother. Men are the other, foreign subjects we need, desire, and necessarily have contact with, but the connection is uncomplicated, carries little self-recognition and, therefore, less obligation; it remains on the surface, light and relatively easy, there is no depth. Munro's guilt is gendered and, as such, rooted and pivoted in the expressions of essential femalehood that ground her stories, concealed and hidden in dark intimate areas of chimerical apprehensions and appreciations of personal truths and realities which are genealogical in their nature, shared and perceived by her woman readers,[95] creating in the process a collective knowledge and testimonial of female subjectivity.[96]

[93] Munro, *Lives*, 222,
[94] Munro, *Lives*, 223.
[95] María Jesús Hernáez, "Short-Storyness and Eyewitnessing," in *Short Story Theories: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective*, ed. Viorica Pâtea (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 173–203.
[96] See Coelsch-Foisner, "Gender and Genre"; Irigaray, *The Irigaray*.

6. CONCLUSIONES

Como unidad, las publicaciones de esta tesis refuerzan la proximidad establecida por muchos críticos entre la vida y obra de Alice Munro. El argumento principal está anclado en las palabras de la autora, en la crítica académica sobre su literatura, en las memorias de su hija Sheila *Lives of Mothers & Daughters: Growing Up with Alice Munro* y en la biografía de Robert Thacker *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*,[97] pero va más allá de los eventos, hechos, temas y protagonistas descritos en sus cuentos con el fin de sondear y trazar las imágenes fragmentadas y emocionales que quedan en un segundo plano,[98] y que encarnan aspectos e hitos importantes de su feminidad, combinadas para ordenar las fisuras de discontinuidad femenina que consolidan y conforman los aspectos autobiográficos de su narrativa en un ejercicio literario efectivo en la configuración de una conciencia colectiva.[99]

Aunque la obra de Munro proyecta el ciclo vital de una mujer, «Before I Say Goodbye: Autobiography and Closure in Alice Munro's 'Finale'» refleja una concordancia entre su último cuarteto de cuentos y sus dos primeras colecciones.[100] Esto, junto con el título y la introducción de «Finale»,[101] sugiere que, hasta cierto punto, su obra está basada en la experiencia personal, aunque el cuarteto cumple además la función de poner el broche final a su biografía y corpus literario mediante un retorno a sus raíces y niñez, así como a los temas que prevalecen en su literatura, con la diada madre-hija como punto de conexión central femenina que sobrevuela todo lo que escribe.[102] Los cuatro cuentos de «Finale»[103] escenifican momentos importantes en el proceso de maduración de una niña —la separación-individuación de la madre, el reconocimiento de la muerte y de la dualidad de la naturaleza humana, el despertar sexual, el amor incondicional al padre— pero concluyen enfatizando de nuevo el

[97] Véase Munro, *Mothers and Daughters*; Thacker, *Alice Munro*. No hay traducción oficial de estas obras, pero una traducción aproximada podría ser: «Vidas de madres e hijas: Crecer con Alice Munro» y «Alice Munro: Escribiendo sus vidas».
[98] Hernáez, *Short Story*.
[99] Veáse Benstock, *The Private Self*, 20; Howells, «Her Life Writing»; Smith y Watson, «Situating Subjectivity».
[100] Lucio-Villegas, «Before I Say». No hay traducción oficial de este artículo, pero una traducción aproximada podría ser: «Antes de decir adiós: Autobiografía y cierre en el 'Finale' de Alice Munro».
[101] Munro, *Dear Life*, 255.
[102] Véase Benson y Toye, *The Oxford Companion*; Hay, «The Mother».
[103] Munro, *Dear Life*, 255–319.

vínculo entre madre, ahora ausente, e hija.[104] El hecho de que Munro dejara atrás a su madre enferma, su consecuente sentimiento de culpabilidad, el impacto del Parkinson en la familia y en sus dinámicas, la muerte temprana de su madre —que le dio a Munro la paradójica oportunidad de escribir sobre ella sin su conocimiento— emergen como eje central que la autora examina, esquiva y abandona, para finalmente abordar una vez más en su último cuento de «Finale», «Mi vida querida»,[105] en un definitivo intento de comprensión y reconciliación que clausura una carrera literaria conformada y definida por la relación con su progenitora.[106] La relación es la protagonista explícita de cuatro cuentos que abarcan el conjunto de la obra de Munro, desde su primera colección —«La Paz de Utrecht» en *La danza de las sombras* (1968)— hasta su último relato y palabras, con paradas entre medias —«El valle de Ottawa» en *Algo que quería contarte* (1974) y «Amistad de juventud» en la colección homónima (1990),[107] que cierran y abren sus respectivas colecciones—, y está presente en muchos otros relatos, pero la autora nos ofrece además una diversa gama de madres que, mediante la metaficción, desgranan y exponen sus propios sentimientos y dolor como madre, y de nuevo hay un trasfondo de culpa que hila el conjunto.

Calibrar la literatura de Munro supone rastrear y fundir ideas semánticas y eventos biográficos que, unidos, aumentan nuestra comprensión, y quizá la suya, en cuanto a los procesos cognitivos y emocionales ocultos en las profundidades del subconsciente.[108] La niña de «Noche»,[109] en «Finale», que no puede conciliar el sueño puesto que le persigue el pensamiento de que es capaz de estrangular a su hermana, se hace presente en una serie de cuentos —analizados en «‘Honey, Where Are the Kids?’: Motifs of the Past, Water, and Photography in Munro’s Stories Featuring Dead Children»[110]— que podrían ser ambiguamente descritos como fratricidios y sororicidios,[111] relacionados entre sí y con otros relatos, como fotografías inconexas de un álbum, por la insinuación

[104] Veáse Brodzki, «Mothers, Displacement»; Smith y Watson, «Situating Subjectivity».
[105] Munro, *Dear Life*, 299–319.
[106] Véase Atwood, «‘Lives of Girls’»; Brodzki, «Mothers, Displacement»; Edemariam, «Alice Munro»; Ferri, «Crossing Borders»; Hay, «The Mother»; Howells, «Her Life Writing».
[107] Veáse Munro, *Dance*, 190–210; Munro, «The Ottawa»; Munro, «Friend».
[108] Fraile-Marcos, «Embodied Shame».
[109] Munro, *Dear Life*, 271–85.
[110] Lucio-Villegas, «‘Honey, Where’». No hay traducción oficial de este artículo, pero una traducción aproximada podría ser: «‘Cariño, ¿dónde están los niños?’: Motivos del pasado, el agua y la fotografía en los relatos de Munro que incluyen la muerte de un niño».
[111] Bigot, «Ghost texts».

o sugerencia de indicios de descuido o incluso culpabilidad parental en muertes de niños que involucran el agua como instrumento letal. La culpa es ubicua, pero encuentra su esencia en «El sueño de mi madre»,[112] en *El amor de una mujer generosa* (1998), que supone un ejercicio de reconciliación de la autora con la muerte de su segunda hija, Catherine, horas después de nacer.[113] En el relato, Munro se encuentra con su pasado y nos ofrece una alternativa de la realidad, en la que el bebé no muere, confluyendo en el proceso narrativo las voces de madre e hija en un único cuerpo y consciencia, el agua del útero proporcionado la protección necesaria contra el peligro que acecha. La intertextualidad, la autorreferencia y la metaficción delinean incongruentemente la coyuntura desarticulada de la experiencia, la percepción de que algo está mal, el momento en el que la seguridad y continuidad de lo cotidiano desapareció, dejando tras de sí una oscuridad que es imposible eliminar, pero que toma forma en las muchas variaciones de la figura materna y la niña perdida que se pueden encontrar en la literatura de Munro.[114] También basado en un hecho real, la narradora infantil de «Miles City, Montana»,[115] en *El progreso del amor* (1986), toma conciencia del nexo entre la vida, la procreación y la muerte[116] y, años más tarde, siendo ella ya madre, una fotografía del álbum familiar desencadena su memoria del momento; sin embargo, el nexo físico se hace categórico entre madre e hija cuando la narradora adulta presagia a tiempo el ahogamiento de su niña.

El vínculo entre madres e hijas es físico; el cuerpo emerge, desborda, interrumpe y desvía las prácticas narrativas del proceso autobiográfico femenino,[117] así como la composición biológica de las mujeres, en las que el sexo y su inevitable contacto con los hombres —dentro de las convenciones de género binario tradicionales— forman parte de la ecuación. Pero parece haber algo censurable en la intrusión masculina en esta ecuación femenina, tal y como se manifiesta en un grupo de relatos —analizados en

[112] Munro, «The Love of».
[113] Véase Munro, *Mothers and Daughters*; Thacker, *Alice Munro*.
[114] Véase Coelsch-Foisner, «Gender and Genre», 301; Howells, «Her Life Writing», 155; Hay, «The Mother».
[115] Munro, «Miles City».
[116] Ross, *A Double Life*.
[117] Smith y Watson, «Situating Subjectivity».

«Female Pleasure and Car Accidents: Signifying Alice Munro's Middle Stories»[118]—que combinan el deseo de las mujeres con la muerte por accidente de coche de un hijo de sus parejas sexuales, la muerte de Catherine y los sentimientos de culpa de Munro por romper su primer matrimonio y entablar otras relaciones de trasfondo, resonando desde el pasado e irrumpiendo en la narración. El deseo sexual de las voces femeninas toma la iniciativa para reflejar satíricamente lo ridículo de nuestras acciones bajo el hechizo de los hombres en situaciones fuera del marco convencional del matrimonio, irónica e inconscientemente socavadas por las muertes de los niños en accidentes de coche. Los vehículos, símbolos de poder fálico,[119] de alguna manera fusionan el anhelo e intranquilidad del deseo de las mujeres con la trágica pérdida de un hijo; y no resulta disonante, tiene sentido, puesto que destaca la diada madre-hija sobre otros aspectos de nuestra naturaleza, situando en primer plano la responsabilidad y obligaciones de las madres hacia sus hijas, por encima de la satisfacción o fracaso de las relaciones sexuales.[120]

Munro se decidió pronto por el igualitarismo en su percepción propia de género, posiblemente condicionada por el fuerte carácter y posicionamiento de su madre, si hemos de tener en cuenta la introducción de *Vidas de las mujeres* y los párrafos de cierre del relato homónimo —palabras que, de hecho, titulan la colección—:

> Creo que va a haber un cambio en la vida de las niñas y las mujeres. Sí. Pero depende de nosotras que se produzca. Todo lo que las mujeres han tenido hasta ahora ha sido su relación con los hombres. Eso es todo. No hemos tenido más vida propia en realidad que un animal doméstico. «Él te abrazará cuando su pasión haya agotado su fuerza original, un poco más fuerte que a su perro, con un poco más de cariño que a su caballo», escribió Tennyson. Y es cierto. Pero tú querrás tener hijos.[121]

Predeciblemente, Del —la joven Munro en términos de metaficción— recibe esta declaración con cierta resistencia como,

[118] Lucio-Villegas, «Female Pleasure». No hay traducción oficial de este artículo, pero una traducción aproximada podría ser: «El placer femenino y los accidentes de coches: Significación de los relatos intermedios de Alice Munro».
[119] Whatley, «Raging Hormones».
[120] New, «Re-reading».
[121] Alice Munro, *La vida de las mujeres*, trad. Flora Casas (Barcelona: Lumen, 2013), 260.

> consejos que se daban a las mujeres, a las niñas, consejos que partían de la base de que ser mujer te hacía vulnerable, que era necesario cierto grado de cautela, seria inquietud y autoprotección, mientras que se suponía que los hombres podían salir y vivir toda clase de experiencias, desechar lo que no querían y volver orgullosos. Sin pensarlo siquiera, yo había decidido hacer lo mismo.[122]

Pero este posicionamiento conlleva dosis de conflicto y una carga emocional que trascienden la literatura de Munro, lapsus de autopercepción que afligen y conducen su escritura, que crean sentimientos de erroneidad en los que reconoces que te has fallado como mujer, y por extensión física y emocional, como hija y como madre. Los hombres son el otro, sujetos extraños que necesitamos, deseamos y con los que tenemos contacto, pero la conexión no es compleja, carece de autorreconocimiento y, por tanto, implica menos obligación; se mantiene en la superficie, ligera y relativamente fácil, no tiene profundidad. La culpa en Munro reside en su género y, como tal, enraíza y esencia expresiones de feminidad que encallan sus relatos, ocultas y escondidas en áreas de oscura intimidad donde tienen lugar entendimientos y apreciaciones quiméricas de realidades y verdades personales, de naturaleza genealógica, compartidas y percibidas por sus lectoras,[123] creando así un conocimiento colectivo y testimonial de la subjetividad femenina.[124]

[122] Munro, *La vida*, 261.
[123] Hernáez, «Short-Storyness».
[124] Véase Coelsch-Foisner, «Gender and Genre»; Irigaray, *The Irigaray.*

7. LIMITATIONS AND LINES OF FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitations of this work are many. It has concentrated on specific levels of femalehood and argued their origin in Munro's biography but has left out other aspects of her work which could also be considered autobiographical, as researched by many critics. In this regard, the contextual setting of her stories in rural Southwestern Ontario, her feeling of isolation growing up in one of its small communities, the romantic and social dynamics of her relationship with her first husband, or the difficulties involved in writing while raising a family deserve special mention—without being exclusive—and have been the subject of thorough research.[125]

On the other hand, this thesis has employed excerpts from Munro interviews and stories to fundament its hypothesis, but again has been selective in its choice, so that future research could encompass and contrast all the author's words—metafictional and "real" —that point to the nature of her work as life writing.[126] This would entail a close re-reading of her entire corpus, since all her collections include stories where events or statements of the female protagonists more or less ambiguously or directly infer the autobiographical dimension of Munro's literature.

On another level, the mother figure in different forms, as previously mentioned, is omnipresent in Munro's oeuvre, and this has become the subject of several works on the author.[127] This doctoral thesis has only dealt with those stories which were considered

[125] See Brenda Pfaus, *Alice Munro* (Ottawa: The Golden Dog Press, 1984); Cox, *Alice Munro*; Howells, *Alice Munro*; Rowena Fowler, "The Art of Alice Munro: *The Beggar Maid* and *Lives of Girls and Women*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 25, no. 4 (1984): 189–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.1984.9937801; Vanessa Guignery (ed.), *The Inside of a Shell: Alice Munro's Dance of the Happy Shades* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015); Munro, *Mothers and Daughters*; Palusci, *Alice Munro*; Ross, *A Double Life*; Thacker, "So Shocking"; Thacker, *Alice Munro*; *The Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro*, ed. David Staines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); among many, many others.

[126] For example, see Lisa Allardice, "Nobel prizewinner Alice Munro: 'It's a wonderful thing for the short story'," *The Guardian*, December 6, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/dec/06/alice-munro-interview-nobel-prize-short-story-literature; Lisa Dickler Awano, "An Interview with Alice Munro," *VQR: A National Journal on Literature & Discussion* (Spring 2013), https://www. vqronline.org/vqr-portfolio/interview-alice-munro; Book Browse, "An Interview with Alice Munro," accessed February 28, 2023, https://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_ number/1071/alice-munro; Cressida Connolly, "Interview with Alice Munro," *Literary Review*, March 1987, https://literaryreview.co.uk/interview-with-alice-munro; Deborah Treisman, "On 'Dear Life': An Interview with Alice Munro," *The New Yorker*, November 20, 2012, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/on-dear-life-an-interview-with-alice-munro; among many others.

[127] See, for example, Teresa Gibert, "La maternidad en Alice Munro," *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 27 (November 1993): 193–5, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332448203_La_

pertinent to support my reasoning, although it is worth noting that their positioning in terms of the author's corpus and within the actual collections is perhaps not coincidental and certainly sets the tone. "The Peace of Utrecht" is the first story in which Munro plainly broaches the subject of her mother's illness and death, so that the theme is present from the very beginning of her writing. "The Ottawa Valley" ends *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, while "Friend of My Youth" opens the collection of the same name. It is also worth mentioning yet again that "Dear Life" is the full stop in the author's literary career, and that the closing paragraph is solely dedicated to her mother's death and her feelings about her own behaviour. In terms of stories that factually reflect Munro's role as a mother herself, "Miles City, Montana" and "My Mother's Dream" again open and close respectively the collections *The Progress of Love* and *The Love of a Good Woman*.[128] Further research could perhaps trace and map in detail the locations in which the author returns to the theme in order to determine a coherent order of cognitive association, in a similar fashion to James Carscallen's *The Other Country: Patterns in the Writing of Alice Munro*.[129]

Finally, this doctoral thesis has only analysed the sexual voice of Munro protagonists in conjunction with children's death, but female pleasure and desire is a recurrent theme in many other of her stories, and would prove an interesting line of investigation due to the authenticity of her narrative and prose, which incisively project this aspect of female nature. In relation to children's deaths, my initial reading of Munro's collections noted a further seven stories that have been left out of my literary analysis, but which I intend to assess in future work. These are, in chronological order of publication, "Pictures of the Ice" in *Friend of My Youth* (1990), "Open Secrets" and "Vandals" in *Open Secrets* (1994), "The Hired Girl" in *The View from Castle Rock*

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maternidad_en_Alice_Munro_Revista_Canaria_de_Estudios_Ingleses_26-27_abrilnoviembre_1993_193-195_ISSN_0211-5913; Hay, "The Mother"; Deborah Heller, *Daughters and Mothers in Alice Munro's Later Stories* (Seattle: Workwoman's Press, 2009); Margaret Hilly, "Alice: Examination of the Mother-Daughter Relationship" (PhD diss., Western Sydney University, 2017), https://research direct.westernsydney.edu.au/islandora/object/uws%3A47364; Redekop, *Mothers*.

[128] See Munro, *Dance*, 190–210; Munro, "The Ottawa"; Munro, "Friend"; Munro, *Dear Life*, 299–319; Munro, "Miles City"; Munro, "The Love of."

[129] James Carscallen, *The Other Country: Patterns in the Writing of Alice Munro* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1993).

(2006), “Dimensions” and “Wenlock Edge” in *Too Much Happiness* (2009), and “Amundsen” in *Dear Life* (2012).[130]

[130] Munro, *Friend*, 137–55; Munro, *Open Secrets*, 129–60 and 261–94 respectively; Munro, *The View*, 227–54; Munro, *Too Much*, 5–31 and 62–92 respectively; Munro, *Dear Life*, 31–66.

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