A EULOGY TO CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN LITERATURE OR HOW I STARTED TO TEACH ALICE MUNRO'S SHORT STORIES

Cristina NICOLAESCU
Eciyes University, Kayseri, Turkey

Abstract : Literature holds a central place in education and transmission of culture, while shaping human experiences and analyzing skills of learners. The major concern is what pieces of literature and what authors should be included in the curricula of English Literature and what should be left out, and on what account. This paper aims to demonstrate that Canadian literature is both national and international, equally specific and general, taking as example a renowned author: Alice Munro. While doing research in this field you cannot help wondering why we fail to include Canadian literature in the curricula of colleges and universities, since it has proven to be beyond national borders. Munro's Nobel Prize may bring it more visibility and the rightful place in the world literature and culture. Her collections of short stories reveal all the qualities of good writing worth reading and analyzing. Besides her artfulness or "good art", Munro's fiction writing also has social implications such as: family relationships, differences between men and women, coming of age, life in the community. Despite regionalism and specificity of the setting, her characters are typologies that embody the general human characteristics. I will illustrate those particularities of Munro's work with three short stories from her first volume, Dance of the Happy Shades, namely: Boys and Girls, Day of the Butterfly and The Peace of Utrecht, with a critical approach and from a didactic perspective. This paper is the result of my doctoral research on Canadian literature and my past experience with teaching sophomores Alice Munro's fiction at the University of Athens.

Keywords: Canadian literature, curriculum development, gender, cultural approaches

In the attempt to incorporate cultural diversity, more stress is laid nowadays on cultural heritages and their contribution to the mainstream culture. Curriculum developers from other countries than the English speaking ones deal with a new challenge posed by the contemporary society in selecting the content worthy to be taught in the area of English Literature and Culture. Bridges of meaningfulness should be built between students' sociocultural experiences as they live and the knowledge they are assumed to get during a certain level of school organization by years of study. Unfortunately Canadian Literature is a subject on formal curricula in a lot less universities compared to English and American Literature for which there is a long tradition. First of all Canadian Literature is not part of American Literature and it should not be assimilated to it. In order to raise curriculum developers' awareness on this, clarifications and arguments may be brought for the distinctive identity of each. If this is not an issue anymore then literatures in English should necessarily include writes whose works have been appraised as having a special literary and cultural value, no matter their country of origin. It is not understandable why a renowned author such as Alice Munro, recently awarded the Nobel Prize for literature is still missing from most European curricula of prestigious universities. Irrespective of the reasons, it is high time we made changes in the sense of innovating content and strategies while connecting them to current learning needs and societal demands. In Romania, for example, at the University of Bucharest, Canadian literature is taught at the Master level, and also recently at the private Christian University "Dimitrie Cantemir". In Greece, at the University of Athens, Canadian

BDD-A21948 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:29 UTC)

literature is taught to sophomores. From the research I did for a year on teaching methodology and the response of the Greek students to my teaching Alice Munro's short stories, I gathered some evidence of this subject's relevance within both the English Studies and Comparative Literature departments. The themes and sub-themes identified in the texts and critically discussed during the seminars revealed a high compatibility of the content with the other cultural subjects they are studying and at the same time with the issues of their own lives as young adults. The richness of topics and ideas they were exposed to have proven to be an important step in facilitating students' understanding of parodistic intertextuality with works such as: Atwood's "The Penelopiad", Munro's "The Children Stay" and others. The broad category of 'Canadian Literature' incorporates works written in English, French and languages of the aboriginal groups or diaspora and the English translation of these texts. English and French literature in Canada is deemed to have followed separate paths though, obviously, their mutual influence is easily identifiable. National literature can be divided by language, but not history. Canadian literary histories written before had as main criterion political development as major changes in society have coincided with significant changes occurring in the broad patterns of national literary canon. The dominant forms of literary production in this country were included in four periods: the colonial, in which France and Britain were battling dominion over territories that now belong to Canada, the nineteenth century was characterized by the control of the United Kingdom and the emigration waves from Europe. In these two periods writers were tributary to the European aesthetic conventions, but there were also experiments related to the forms of ownership of the American literary phenomenon. The Period between Confederation (1867) and the 1950s marks a new stage in Canadian history and literature, and is considered a landmark for cultural nationalism. In the twentieth century, literary production became prolific, with many representatives of the modern literary canon, from 1951 to the present, and national identity emerged as a sensitive topic in all areas, threat of cultural imperialism U.S.A. being reflected in literature. It also denounced the tendency to subsume Canadian literature to American literature, a good reason for Canadian literary historians' endeavors to assert distinctiveness of Canadian literature. After becoming politically autonomous, Canada faced another difficult problem, namely the tensions between Anglophone and the Francophone citizens. As a result, in 1971 Canada became the first country to implement an official policy of multiculturalism, by the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 renewing the legislation that emphasized multiracial and multilingual nature of society, encouraging the culture of ethnic minorities. In this way the recurrent themes of migration, exile and diaspora experience in a wide proportion of the end of the twenty century literature and early twenty-first century can be explained. Canadian contemporary writers often combine poetry and fiction (Anne Michaels, Robert Kroetsch, Dionne Brand, etc.) and history with autobiography (Daphne Marlatt, George Elliott Clarke, Michael Ondaatje and so on). Lately Canadian literature has reached maturity, a fact demonstrated by the huge international success of numerous writers honored with various major literary awards, among them: Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, Yann Martel, Carol Shields, Mordecai Richler, Rohinton Mistry, Robertson Davies and Alice Munro.

The book *Infinite Horizons: Canadian Fiction in English* (2010) by Prof. Monica Bottez from the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Bucharest is the first Romanian consistent approach to the study Canadian literature in Romania and provides readers with an opportunity to become familiar with a literature that has been too little known until recently. The analysis is extended to twenty-five novels, of which mention a few: *The History of Emily Montague*, *Running Water*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Stone Angel*, *Gone Indian*, works by representative Anglophone writers, the author giving a panoramic view of the literature landscape in Canada, with a cultural approach combined with a pertinent rhetorical and

BDD-A21948 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:29 UTC)

stylistic analysis. The main literary methods are presented in relation to the specific trends in Europe: the Gothic novel, realism, modernism and postmodernism. Also, Prof. Monica Bottez translated the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, a cultural and editorial event. After this opening, Prof. Monica Bottez, Director of the Center for Canadian Studies at the University of Bucharest, the interest in the study of Canadian literature has increased significantly, more and more conferences about specific Canadian issues such as multiculturalism or cultural mosaic, immigration, national identity being presented at conferences and symposiums and may become a constant in university curricula. to examine the representation of the influence of gender on human agency in connection with their thinking and their depiction of behavior, attitudes and other components of gender identity construction. My analysis is intended to reveal the general human and Canada's specificity in this matter at the meeting point of geography, politics, economy, resulting from the tension between the particular social structures and human agency. Enriches courses by including multiple perspectives on American culture and history, reflecting various viewpoints

Short-stories represent a genre a very easy to handle for teaching, as they do not have much plot, can support a deep analysis of varied issues more densely presented than in lengthy writings like novels. On the other hand, students can do the reading and some assignments within a week either guided by essay topics or questions.

In the three short-stories that I have selected as an example there is a link in the first place by their belonging to the same volume, "Dance of the Happy Shades" (DHS): *Boys and Girls, Day of the Butterfly* and *The Peace of Utrecht.* Secondly, all of them present a perspective of gender and family relationships with different types of dramatic encounter and psychological insight.

In *Boys and Girls* the children learn about the adult world and the gender roles they are expected to perform in their future life. The girl is more attracted to the kind of work her father does outside, but she is forced to work in the house, helping her mother. In this story, for the girl, the father's image is a positive one, though towards the end of the story he tells his son about his sister, that she is "just a girl", implying that the two males should have understanding for her sensitivity and incapacity to fully understand what is outside her female horizon.

The father figure is becoming an important symbol for Munro of fun, freedom, adventure, good health, and physical strength; of the masculine side of the domestic scene, which, ironically, is more comforting to the narrator than the repressed, critical, and discontented female side. (Hooper 11)

A traditional family will adhere to the stereotypes, which is limiting, the female being generally associated with domesticity and children's raising, whereas the male has the role of family's provider or a career-maker.

Often, but not always, parents' and children's gendered behaviors are sex typed, or consistent with stereotypes about their biological sex. […] We view the dominant discourse of gender stereotyping as restrictive and problematic both for individuals and for families. (Blume 785)

The Freudian and Lacanian models of psycho-sexual development during the Oedipal complex shows girls inferior to boys, in terms of passivity and lack, which are the basis of a stereotypical image of women. is in line with the literary tradition of realism, though with clear postmodernist features in their more recent books. bring to light different perspectives

BDD-A21948 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:29 UTC)

on gender-related issues highlighting the alternation between the subjective and objective, the veridical and symbolic.

In "Day of the Butterfly" the romantic impulse to imaginative transformation of reality takes the form of self-glorification by legend-making. The narrator remembers her former poor classmate Myra, a newcomer, an outsider who remained at the periphery of school life. Myra falls ill with leukemia and so, for a while, her classmates become interested in her, visit her in the hospital and bring her gifts. "We began to talk of her as if she were something we owned, and her party became a cause" says the narrator (Munro DHS 107-08). Myra offers the narrator one of the gifts she had received and hopes that this one will become her friend when she returns to school. The narrator, as an adult, thinks of Myra:

She sat in her high bed, her delicate brown neck, rising out of a hospital gown too big for her, her brown carved face immune to treachery, her offering perhaps already forgotten, prepared to be set apart for legendary uses, as she was even in the back porch at school. (Munro DHS 110)

At first, Myra was a good occasion for fun but, after getting ill, she became the occasion of a pathetic legend that aroused the good feelings of the colleagues who visited her. Unfortunately, she had no significant place in this legend. She was only transformed into a saint-like figure by illness, martyrdom, and fashionable charity. When looking back upon her childhood, with sadness, the narrator opposes her moral virtue to her self-critical resistance to the legend-making of her childhood and youth. According to Linda Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction, we understand that the legend-making comes easily.

The knowable reality of the ordinary world is called — in "The Peace of Utrecht" "the unsatisfactory, apologetic and persistent reality" (Munro DHS 197). I take the term "legend" to refer to the romantic, unbelievable type of narrative that inspires a body of stories, something important or famous. Munro portrays unfavorably the legend-making and those who participate in it. This is a strategy that makes us trust that her stories, in contradistinction, are real. So, in this way, she affects us in favor of her ostensible realism but she acknowledges the other mode of apprehending reality. Munro has sympathy for the impulse of rising above a common reality but she reveals to the reader the moral frailty of the successful broadening tale increasing our faith in her own realism. She used to indirectly comment on the tricks she makes for getting the most uncommon and spectacular fictions. So, we can find in her own story-telling the same realist device as the narrator does. Munro's stories make us balance the certitude and reality with legend. Even when sophisticated, the manner Munro's stories create the semblance of being as truthful as the narrative. The narrator steps back from her story and, in this way, self-consciously, she heightens the verisimilitude of her tale and Munro rejects simple documentary illusion. In fact, this self-reflexive attitude leads to the reverse effect by which the narrator is discredited and yet the readers trust the author's truth.

In many of her short-stories, Munro creates the reality effect. Also "The Peace of Utrecht" there is a passage in which the narrator returns to her home-town accompanied by her young daughter who, when passing by her mother's old house asks, "Mother, is that your house?" This reflection follows after such a question:

And I felt my daughter's voice expressed a complex disappointment; it contained the whole flatness and strangeness of the moment in which is revealed the source of legends, the unsatisfactory, apologetic and persistent reality. (Munro DHS 197)

BDD-A21948 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:29 UTC)

Reality disappointed her daughter as she had been told a sentimental tale, a legend. Therefore, the narrator feels the need to point out the human need and impulse to invent illusory wonders in the everyday routine for turning disappointment into a small victory, yet she refers to "my Gothic mother".

Munro's "The Peach of Utrecht" is a first-person narrative told by Helen who returns home after years, studying and making a family, while her sister was taking care of their sick mother, devoid by the freedom to see about her own life. The real story is what happens in Helen's mind, a psychological insight is given about her guilt about pursuing her freedom. She got married, had children, leaving her sister behind to sacrifice her life. What is surprising is what her great-aunts Annie and Lou tell her what her sister did with their mother, namely she forced her stay in a hospital, thus making her die prematurely. This presumed matricide is symbolic for a woman who needs freedom by all means, by separation from the maternal body. According to Carol Ann Howells, this story is a "Gothic Tale which figures primitive female fears – nothing less than fears of matricide" (Howells 23).

Nancy Chodorow's object relations theory may be compared with Kristeva's account of revaluing femininity, since they regard the relational self bound up with the mothering abilities. The theories of jouissance, abjection, the semiotic and the uncanny in psychoanalysis maintain the ambivalent view on mothering. This is a pivotal issue for psychoanalytic feminists, due to its implication in women's psychology and for understanding femininity.

While they aim to disentangle femininity from maternity, and provide a critique of their conflation, they also take seriously the significance of maternity for women and for children of both sexes. Because they concede the limits of socio-cultural explanations for women's lack of standing in the social contract, and take femininity and the feminine body as points of departure for speech or writing, they have often been accused of essentialism. (Eagle 43)

Kristeva uses the concept of the maternal body which precedes the signification process, it is the source of drives that have two possible effects: either disrupting the symbolic order or forming the condition for a subject formation. Kristeva makes a distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic dimensions of language. She accepts the Lacanian account of the symbolic as the dimension of structured public meaning, in which the phallus is given a privileged position, and which is thereby governed by the Law of the Father. But she draws attention to another dimension of language and communication, the semiotic. This originates in the body and in the infant's relationship to the mother, prior to the entry into language, that is, prior to any process of splitting or separation, which is necessary to the process of symbolic articulation. Adopting the realm of the symbolic requires the repudiation of interdependence with female bodies.

Certainly, the mother-daughter relation is not always as dramatic as presented in "The Peace of Utrecht". For example Del in *Lives of Girls and Women* have a good relationship with her mother Ada up to point, from where she feels shame about the mother's unusual emancipatory attitude and advanced ideas, which, however, she eventually takes over to a large extent.

I have attached a special importance to the concept of identity, as it subsumes several other concepts such as gender and sexuality, resulting in the individualization of gender identity and sexual identity. I have shown their relation to the Oedipus complex (the boy's development in *Boys and Girls*) and the Electra complex (daughter's separation from the mother in *The Peace of Utrecht*).

Also self and subjectivity cannot be examined separately from identity, as basic components of the latter. Agency is in a direct relation to subjectivity and implicitly to

BDD-A21948 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:29 UTC)

identity as well, since only subjects can be agents in a power relationship which reveals a certain behavioral pattern, recognizable in an archetype. I have identified the archetypal pattern underlying some of Shields's and Munro's characters according to the various attributes they have in the corpus under analysis. The body helps an individual to shape his/her identity through lived experience and senses, particularly the gendered body (male/female) that has implications in the social life. Therefore, I can relate the representation of the social body to agency again and also to the contemporary trend of psychoanalysis, with its interactional and relational developments. The examination of the maternal body connects the motherhood to the Electra complex and the Medusa symbol, through the separation of the daughter from her mother. After presenting my intention on how to use the concepts above, I came to the conclusion that what I had examined as separate aspects of individuality are in fact facets of identity, ways in which this is shaped by psychological processes and external social forces.

This is one of the examples where the stereotypical images are contrasted with full effect. The narrator begins to take to pieces her mother's legend when she understands this gap in it and in this way she no longer needs to create her own anti-myth. This recognition allows her to get next to her mother in her feelings and mind. The reader has to choose if the unsentimental final passages of this story can be accepted as the story trails away without the so much awaited reconciliation like in conventional fiction. Therefore, our appreciation for the emotional benefit obtained by the narrator's demythologizing is unavoidably transferred to Munro's realism expressed mainly by her own resistance to legend-making.

The Gothic elements in Munro's writing, along with her female characters' tendency to fantasize and romanticize, projecting their repressed desires, pertain to the symbolic-allegoric mode. The psychological, social and local context of her stories is very powerful, providing particularities that are not only regional, as her early oeuvre has been qualified, but also highlighting characters' lived experience which reveals the author's understanding of human condition.

For all the qualities of good writing Munro's works deserves a place in the academic curricula, since literatures in English mean a lot more than the British and American ones. The analyses of the three short-stories - as exemplification - were intended to reveal these qualities of artfulness, but there are also the cultural meanings attached that is a very rich learning content. The extension of Canadian studies and Alice Munro's works' study can only be beneficial to students.

Bibliography:

Blume Balter, Libby &Thomas W. Blume. "Towards a Dialectical Model of Family Gendered Discourse: Body, Identity, and Sexuality". USA: *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65, 2003, pp. 785-795.

Eagle, N. Morris. *Attachment and Psychoanalysis: Theory, Research, and Clinical Implications (Psychoanalysis and Psychological Science),* USA: The Guilford Press, 2013.

Hooper, Brad. *The Fiction of Alice Munro: An Appreciation.* Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2008.

Howells, Carol Ann. *Alice Munro*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.

---. *Canadian Literature.* Vancouver: Winter 2003, Issue 179; pp. 107.

Munro, Alice. *Dance of the Happy Shades*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968.

BDD-A21948 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:29 UTC)