A STUDY ON MUSICALITY AND LANGUAGE COMPLEXITY IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FICTIONAL WORLD IN ALICE MUNRO'S RUNAWAY – CHANCE, SOON, SILENCE

Alexandra Cotoc
PhD., Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca

Abstract. This study is based on the fictional world constructed by Alice Munro in the trilogy Runaway – Chance, Soon, Silence which depicts the destiny of a woman, highlighting different essential moments in her life. The analysis focuses on the construction of the fictional world through the storytelling techniques employed by the writer in order to tell the story.

Keywords. trilogy, storytelling, poeticity, symbolic titles, similes

Preliminary Considerations

The set of stories *Runaway* was first published in the New Yorker in 2003. Reviewers advertise these stories and state that all of them depict Canadian women at crossroads moments which entail deep and long-lasting changes in their lives. What is outstanding is that they are not always aware of the significance and repercussion of the events at the time when they happen. All of them construct their destinies by exploring unbeaten paths, driven by a conscious or subconscious choice. They do not meet society's established conventions for women, going counter to the mainstream culture. Hence, the *Juliet Trilogy – Chance, Soon, Silence* follows the same pattern of a narrator presenting the life timeline of a character named Juliet starting with the character's early twenties and ending up with her middle age. The stories present the woman's family relationship constellation with her husband, daughter, mother and father. There is a special emphasis on the character's intellectual life and on her thoughts and feelings.

This analysis focuses on the way in which Alice Munro uses long lasting potential and power of poetic language (see Ventura, 2010) and it highlights the complexity of language which expresses musicality and constructs the fictional world. We also consider that Munro has an art of storytelling that is revealed by her use of language.

Outlook on the Trilogy

The first story in the trio, *Chance*, presents Julia's accidental encounter with Eric Porteous. This event will completely change the course of the character's life as she will abandon the intellectual world of classical studies to enter the family life. The word *chance* is defined by Cambridge English Dictionary as "the force that causes things to happen without any known cause or reason for doing so". Thus, the choice of title alludes at the changes brought by mere coincidences that alter our lives entirely without us being conscious of the causes and reasons that triggered particular events. The polysemy of the noun permits the reader to process different interpretations of the story: the meeting with Eric can be seen as *luck*, an *opportunity* to escape the oppression of the society in which Juliet does not actually fit, a *possibility* for positive experiences,but it can also be a *risk*, not leading to something auspicious. Hence, we can state that the word *chance* allows for an ambivalent interpretation during the reading process, introducing two opposite meanings. Moreover, the word

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chance is recurrent in Munro's work and it always activates both meanings, a risk and an opportunity (see Ventura, 2010). Also, the fact that the character takes the chance to move on in life determines her loss of past connections and preoccupations and the narrator's voice evokes an epiphany of the type evoked by James Joyce or a moment of being as encountered in the work of Virginia Wolf. The ending paragraph of the story reveals this moment of deep understanding, maturity and acceptance:

> "This is what happens. You put it away for a while, and now and again you look in the closet for something else and remember, and you think *soon*. Then it becomes something that is just there, in the closet, and other things get crowded in front of it and on top of it and finally you don't think about it at all.
>
> The thing that was your bright treasure. You don't think about it. A loss you could contemplate at one time, and now it becomes something you can barely remember.
>
> That is what happens." (Munro, 2004: 83)

Munro creates a world of of nostalgia and regret through the repetition of the sentence "This/that is what happens" which plays the role of a chorus. The paragraph starts with the demonstrative pronoun "this" which shows closeness, whereas the demonstrative "that" shows distance and oblivion of something that was essential in a different timespan. At the same time, the play with "this" and "that" indicates the fact that life is made up of insignificant and blurred events when looked at in retrospective. Moreover, the analogy with concrete things creates a strong image in the mind of the readers.

This paragraph also marks the passage to a different period in Juliet's life, a period presented in the second story of the trilogy.

The second story, *Soon*, presents Juliet in the role of a mother. In this period of her life, she lives with Eric but not as a married couple. The narrator tells the story of Juliet's visit to her parents' home. She went there together with her thirteen months old daughter, Penelope. Here, she feels rejected by the society in which she used to live because she doesn't obey by traditional beliefs and norms. She also feels her parents' disagreement with her personal choices and beliefs. The simple noun used in the title makes reference to her old, ill mother which can be happy only because she always finds relief in the thought that she will see Juliet soon:

> "But it's - all I can say - it's something. It's a - wonderful - something. When it gets really bad for me - when it gets so bad I - you know what I think then? I think, all right. I think - Soon. *Soon I'll see Juliet.*" (Munro, 2004: 83)

The use and the repetition of the word *something*, first as an indefinite pronoun and second as a noun, underlines the distance between the actual state of events and the possible encounter of the woman with her daughter. This distance is amplified by the repetitive use of the adverb *soon*. This strong need and desire to see her daughter is presented in opposition with Juliet's feelings because she has never felt the need to protect her mother or be around her and this is the third element that increases the distance between the two and leaves to uncertainty the meaning of the word *soon*.

The last story of the trilogy, *Silence*,takes the readers to another timespan of Juliet's life. In this story, the narrator shows a woman waiting for her daughter who left her and joined a cult at the exact same age as she was when she met Eric (twenty-one years old). To take her mind off reality, Juliet returns to her books and finds a practical application to all her classical studies by becoming a TV presenter. Her relationship with Eric is over as he died years before. Nevertheless, only after reading many pages does the reader receive information from the narrator regarding the unfolding of Juliet's relationship with Eric and his death as the narrator keeps everything as secret, engaging in a narrative of secrets and only then confesses. The end of the trilogy shows Juliet as a person engrossed in her studies, a person who lost everything in life, who has gone through a long process of "moral failure"

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(Munro, 2004: 124) and who has never seen her daughter again. The title is the perfect encoded summary for what prevails in the story: *silence* determined by loss, loneliness, grief and resignation.

The Poeticity of Munrovian Short Fiction

Poeticity represents the quality of discourses and language use. The signs of a discourse function poetically when verbal processes activate nonverbal ones and a balance between the two is achieved (see Sándor, 1989). Hence, the quality of the Munrovian disourse in the trilogy emerges at the level of the language use and the cognitive processes triggered by it. The trilogy contains symbolic titles, time-shifts realised through analepses and prolepses, the use of similes, descriptions and repetitions.

The Choice of Titles

Through Munro's exceptional language use and quality of discourse in her short fiction, while reading this trilogy, the readers have the impression that they are listening to a piece of *music*. This trilogy starts in high tones (*Chance*), the sounds of music slowly fade away (*Soon*) and then the music stops in a solemn tone (*Silence*). In this respect, Munro's trilogy proves the fact that there is an essential connection between short story and music established not only by the musical composition implied by the series which communicate to one another and which are intertwined by the musical elements, but also by the rendering of human suffering through music. According to Tchekhov, the latter element evoques all the novelists' attempt to capture and describe the fragile and almost unperceivable beauty of human suffering which is difficult to grasp and describe and which can be rendered only by music (Dumouilé, 2002: 48). Thus, as we have seen above, the titles of the three short stories emphasize the power of words and they guide the reader's hermeneutics, giving rhythm to the trilogy.

Time-shifts in the Fictional World

Another important aspect of the Munrovian art of storytelling resides in the *play with time*. From the beginning of the first short story, the narrator uses a chain of analepses, announcing the year 1965 but then going back to what happened a month before ("about a month ago") and then going further back to what happened six months before. The entire trilogy is constructed using this kind of analepses, but also prolepses. The time-shift in the short story is used to emphasize the fact that the pivotal element in the short story is not what will happen, but something that has happened, and it is not revealed to the reader. This aspect of Munro's literary discourse in Juliet's trilogy contributes to the researchers' claim that the essence of the short story as literary genre is not difficult to determine because we read a short story whenever everything is organised around the questions like "What has happened?" and "What could have happened?" (Ventura, 2009).

Besides time shifts back and forth, in *Silence*, Juliet is presented as the prisoner of the past because she never got over her husband's cheating on her - "something that has happened twelve years ago - this he could not understand" (Munro, *Silence*: 140) and after his death, she continued her life recalling and thinking about him constantly:

"it is not that she failed to realize that Eric was dead - that did not happen for a moment. But nevertheless she kept constantly referring to him, in her mind, as if he was still the person to whom her existence mattered more than it could to anyone else. As if he was still the person in whose eyes she hoped to shine. Also the person to whom she presented arguments, information, surprises. This was such a habit with her, and took place so automatically, that the fact of his death did not seem to interfere with it" (Munro, *Runaway. Silence*: 146).

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Juliet, like Eve, a character in another story, "embodies the past acting itself out in the present: her present activities are a result of the way she recalls and is guided by past information and memories (Bennett, 2004: 191)

The time-shift realised by the narrator is a technique encountered in the construction of the fictional world in all three short stories and it is used in order to gain insight in the character's feelings. It is also a modality to conceptualise the fact that the three short stories provide, like the short stories in general, what Frank O'Connor in *The Lonely Voice* calls "an intense awareness of human loneliness" (2004) and a depiction of human suffering through analepses and prolepses.

Last but not least, the play with time and the constant shifts are materialised in these three short stories by the insertion of letters all along the narration (Eric's letter to Juliet, Juliet's letters to her parents and Eric). Through the insertion of letters, the narrator often seems puzzled by what he is telling, the non-linear account gives the illusion of several stories being told at once, story lying behind and beside story. The letters are "devices to explore the mystery of communication, underscoring the notion that we can never know what "really" happened, never fully understand other people or even ourselves" (Benson and Toye, 1997: 278).

The Play with Similes

A very important aspect of the language that we encounter is "the play with similes" (Ventura, 2010: 29). The dictionary defines the *simile* like a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by *like* or *as* and we consider that the association of two things which are not usually connected create more powerful images in the mind of the readers. In *Chance*, we come across a remarkable simile. The man who tried to speak to Juliet in the train and whom she rejected committed suicide, but the narration reveals this fact slowly and with mystery at the beginning of the short story: "we hit an obstacle on the track" (Munro, *Runaway. Chance*: 60). This way of revealing facts shows narrative silence and narrative reticence which allow for interpretative work and manipulate the reader into participating (see Bigot, 2010). Parallel to this event, the narrator speaks about and describes in details Juliet's monthly bleeding. While reading the minutiae of this biological event in women's life, the reader feels puzzled and intrigued at the choice of the author to write about monthly bleeding and questions the relevance that this event could have to the narration. Two pages further on, we understand the intention behind the auctorial act and become aware of the play with words which consists in bringing together the menstruation and the blood of the man who died, the *b-o-d-y* as it appears in the story: "the suicide's smashed body - would seem, in the telling, to be hardly more foul and frightful than her own menstruation blood" (Munro, *Runaway. Chance*: 64). While the menstruation is the symbol of fertility and life, the body represents death. Thus, the simile brings together life and death and evokes the idea that life has its own natural pace that cannot be fought against as life has a cycle and this cycle can only lead to death. In this way, Munro plays with reversibility, reversing life into death and death into life. This play with reversibility is emblematic for her work as she uses it in the entire trilogy, reversing waiting with picking up the thread again, reversing separation into union and, in this scene, reversing the two crucial moments in the life of the human being, the beginning and the end.

Photographic Descriptions

In order to construct the fictional world, Munro always uses detailed descriptions of people and places. Thus "reality is heightened with such clarity of remembered detail that it is, in Munro's words, 'not real but true'. Her technique is photographic realism. She achieves her vivid re-creations of places and people by complete detailing of all that the senses might register in a room, a street or

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on a person; she often lists objects, or qualifies a noun with a catalogue of adjectives that usually contains at least one surprising and satisfying oddity or paradox" (Benson and Toye, 1997: 278). Moreover, as we it can be seen in Juliet trilogy, Munro is very found of landscapes and she describes them in order to make sense of the world around and inside her because the landscape appears to be a reflection of her state of mind, feelings and thoughts. Munro herself confesses: "I love landscapes. Love isn't the word, really, because that sounds like I'm going out looking at sunset and pretty views: it's not that. It's just that it's so basic like my own flesh or something that I can't be separated from" (Howells, 2004: 5). Hence, in these three stories there are many descriptions rendered in poetic language and they construct the narrative and fictional world. Moreover, they constitute a strong visual imagery, creating impressions and setting the mood and ambiance for the readership. We mention the following descriptions:

- descriptions of landscapes. For example, she describes Whale Bay. This place emanates anguish, uncanny, wilderness, isolation from civilisation: "Nothing is much to her liking on this coast. The trees are too large and crowded together and do not have any personality of their own - they simply make a forest. The mountains are too grand and implausible and the islands that float upon the waters of the Strait of Georgia are too persistently picturesque" (Munro, *Runway. Chance*: 83).

- descriptions of rooms and houses. Some examples include Eric's house at Whale Bay, detailed descriptions of Eric's living room, her parents' house.

- descriptions of people (the man who committed suicide, Eric, Sara, Sam, Irene).

- a vivid description of one of Marc Chagall's paintings: "I am the Village". The painting shows images that overlap and the dominating theme is that of reversibility. This description is rendered at the beginning of the second story and it serves as a point of departure for the story, illustrating an encoded story of self and home within the story *Soon* (see Francesconi, 2008), being a *mise en abyme* of a symbolical story that the readers have to decipher and interpret in the context of the trilogy.

Repetitions

Another important aspect that dominates the Munrovian art of storytelling is repetition. "Quasi-conversational repetition gives the appearance of artlessness to the prose, making the narrative seem spontaneous and immediate" (Benson and Toye, 1997: 278) and gives insight to the character's states of mind. Examples from the text include:

- "little detour. A little detour" (p. 48). This is also a meta-literary device announcing the shifts of time;
- "I often think of you. I often think of you. I often think of you *zzzzzz*" (p.51);
- "chum around", "he wanted a *chum*" (p.56), "The only thing she did not reveal to him was the expression chum around" (p. 67). The obsessive repetition of the word *chum* is the expression of guilt;
- "you don't realize [...] You don't realize. You don't realize" (p. 105) which signals a cry of exasperation, engraving in the mind of the readers the impossibility of perfect human communication;
- "I don't know what I'm doing here, I should never come here, I can't wait to go home. Home" (p. 105). The repetition evokes the place where she grew up, but which is no longer the place to which she belongs;
- 'In the fall sometime. In the fall" (p. 112) is the utterance said by her father about Irene's marriage, sign of utter desolation.

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- "Soon. Soon I'll see Juliet" (p. 124) is the repetition that brings to mind the human hope which persists no matter what.

Conclusion

The trio *Chance*, *Soon*, *Silence* is a Munrovian type of narrative that focuses on the life of a woman. Munro's trilogy, like her writing in general, creates a strong connection to the readership because her stories are not only full of realism, but they also communicate authentic feelings and experiences shared by all human beings. Moreover, in Juliet trilogy, Munro's art of storytelling resides in her talent to use language: suggestive titles, musicality, the play with time, the play with similes, photographic descriptions and repetitions.

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