

## LITERATURE

### VCE Literature 2009: Views and Values SAC: Alice Munro's 'Dance of the Happy Shades'

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Throughout her short story anthology 'Dance of the Happy Shades', Alice Munro explores the "certain restrictions of life which entrap them members of small down communities. In 'The Peace of Utrecht', Munro employs narrator Helen, whose rare capacity to break the binds which once held her so strongly to a suppressive small town life allows her to distance herself from such oppression. Maddy acts as a foil to Helen, as although Helen asks her to "take her life" and escape the confines of the small town community of Jubilee, Maddy "can't" do this; her identity is buried deep within the community and escape now seems futile and impossible. Munro obviously endorses eccentrics like Helen, who manage to break away from the expectations society places upon them. At the same time, Munro attempts to evoke empathy for Helen's parallel, Maddy, who is "caught back in the web" of "the continuing disaster" of small town life.

In 'Thanks for the Ride', Munro comments on the "judgement in some little towns". Munro condemns the reticent, secretive nature of some small towns by drawing attention to the negative effects of concealment on individuals in these claustrophobic, suffocating and structured small town communities. Munro suggests that subjectivity can force individuals to sacrifice opinions and beliefs and continues to clarify her opposition to secrecy in small towns and the pressures of society with reference to the "smell of hidden decay" within Lois' home in Mission Creek. To avoid fear of judgement, many members of small town communities conceal their true identities, establishing the sense of "decaying" individual morality that Munro obviously reprehends. In 'The Peace of Utrecht', Munro draws attention to the negative effects of "secrets" upon relationships through Aunt Annie and Auntie Lou, who "exhibit just a polished relationship" and neglect their veridical identities. It is clear to the reader that Munro abhors the superficiality of those who assume a public persona within small town communities.

In the story 'Boys and Girls', Munro's explicit disparagement of the oppression of women due to gender assumption is magnified through use of the young, naïve narrator. This impressionable raconteur echoes the voice and implements the views of society, admitting that women know "little...about the way things really [are]". Munro comments on the way in which women "inhabit a world [that men] made for them" through use of the metaphor of fox pens. Munro opposes the separation between the women's work – domestic, "dreary, endless and particularly depressing" – and the men's duties which are praised by society and considered "ritualistically important". Munro disagrees with the 1960s assumption that woman's work is trivial and frivolous in comparison to the "competitive violence" exhibited in the drudgery of men. Munro repudiates the way in which society assumes that women have "no business" in the world of men, and admits to the "barricade between" the two worlds. In 'Thanks for the Ride', Munro attempts to evoke pathos for females oppressed by social confinement through the depressingly pathetic descriptions of Lois and Adelaide, as they "agree to go out with [boys] without even looking [them] in the face". Munro's concern for women restricted by the moulds forced upon them by society is also apparent in 'The Peace of Utrecht', where spinsters remain trapped within the walls of the small town that they inhabit. Helen and Maddy are expected to care for their ill mother until her death as they are both young women adhering to domestic expectation and Aunt Annie and Auntie Lou remain cemented to Jubilee, tied as females by their singular status.

Munro feels that the assumed role of women in small town communities is degrading to their position in society. As portrayed through the mother in 'Boys and Girls' "with her bare lumpy legs, not touched by the sun, her apron still on and damp across the stomach from the supper dishes", Munro castigates the domestic standards which women submit and resign to, suggesting that these duties actively imprison them within a mould.

Munro expresses obvious concern for women who cannot escape the barriers created by gender expectations in small towns through use of the metaphor of Flora in 'Boys and Girls'. The narrator identifies with Flora, the female horse, as she too "[clatters] her hooves against the rails" that her small town society places before her. Munro sympathises with the girl's inability to "keep [herself] free" despite her best efforts to reject the constricting views of a world dominated by men. Munro equates the way in which Flora finds herself "running free in the barnyard" with the acceptance of the narrator in the world of men's work, as she initially runs free without the moral duties imposed upon other women in society. Despite this, Munro's sympathy for similar women trapped by gender restriction is confirmed as the narrator realizes that she "would not really get away, [society's expectations] would catch up with her". This despotism enforced upon women is juxtaposed with the freedom of men, as in 'Thanks for the Ride', where Munro bestows male narrator Dickie in an attempt to comment on the status of women in society. Dickie and George simply pass through the small town of Mission Creek. Munro apposes their stay, temporary and short-lived, with depressing depiction of women who are destined to remain caught in the cyclic and rhythmic nature of small town life in an attempt to arouse sympathy for women trapped within gender roles. The suggestion that men can easily free themselves from the chains and strain of expectations in small town environments is also apparent in 'The Shining Houses', where Mrs Fullerton's husband is allowed to part leave with genuine ease. Mrs Fullerton casually admits that he "[went off] down the road" and she "knew she wasn't coming back", demonstrating that freedom is much more easily obtained by men than women. Munro's criticism of her society's ignorance of the difficulties for females struggling under the oppression placed upon them by gender expectations is consistent throughout her anthology as she continues to compare the roles of women and men.

In 'Thanks for the Ride', Munro amplifies the entrapping cycle of pathetic defeat and the "rhythm of life" in small towns through use of female characters epitomizing each segment in the female experience. This foreshadowing is a common technique throughout Munro's writing, as she mirrors the fate of a young trapped character through the creation of her elders, often confined within lamentable positions. Lois' mother and grandmother appear in 'Thanks for the Ride' as metaphorical predictions of her future. The grandmother "as soft and shapeless as a pudding" has been vanquished by the ongoing cycle of the expectations the town has placed upon her. The similarly grotesque and repulsive description of Lois' mother with her "mouth full of blue white china teeth" is aimed at placing Munro's blame for the failure of women upon the cyclic structure of small town life – repetitious circles which are difficult to break from. This concept is also noted in 'The Peace of Utrecht', where Munro provides the reader, through use of older siblings Aunt Annie and Auntie Lou, with a "fascinated glimpse of Maddy and [Helen] grown old" – a future which would be implied for both sisters had Helen not succeeded in her escape from Jubilee. This portrayal of a seemingly unchanged stretch of life recurs in 'Boys and Girls', as the fate of the narrator is mirrored by her mother, entrapped within the domestic duties forced upon her and submitting to society's expectations for a woman. Munro's attempts to foreshadow the fates of each female character trapped within the confines of small towns make her fears for women already caught in these cycles obvious – Munro criticizes the rhythmic nature of small town life which instigates entrapment within small town communities.

At the same time, and almost hypocritically, Munro attempts to expose the benefits associated with tradition and consistency, as in 'The Shining Houses' where Munro condemns society's willingness to change values and speed time along through use of the young families and "new white shining houses", who neighbour Mrs Fullerton and her cluttered old house which is "savagery in [its] disorder" and is "there to stay". This metaphorical interpretation imitates society's perception of tradition and culture, as many of the 'young couples' who represent the youth and new ideals strive to overturn customs that they believe are outdated and "rundown". The obvious superficiality and ignorance exhibited by these new and youthful couples exemplifies Munro's abhorrence of significant change that is a consequence of the passage of time. Munro chastises the influence of these new, "ingeniously similar" families; a representation of the introduction of new values which may interfere with custom and culture, degrading their motives by comparing their admiration for each other's arguments with the way in which "people admire each other for being drunk". Through use of the metaphor of "bulldozers [that] had come away to clear...the brush and second growth

and great trees”, Munro expresses her disapproval towards the annihilation of tradition. Munro declares her spite for those who attempt to bring about change, resigning to their victories as “people who win”. Munro’s appreciation for tradition also resonates throughout ‘Boys and Girls’, where the narrator finds the repetition of her father’s work “reassuringly seasonal” and finds fortitude through the ritual of the daily work that she completes for her father. Munro’s support for tradition is somewhat contradictory to her views on gender roles and expectations, as such views are a concept embedded in the culture and custom of the society in which she lives, one she opposes wholeheartedly, yet her endorsement of tradition remains clear throughout her collection ‘Dance of the Happy Shades’.