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# The Countryside and the City in Alice Munro's stories "Fiction" and "Wenlock Edge"

The 2013 Nobel Prize Laureate, Canadian author Alice Munro, is widely renowned for her short stories. Munro's narratives, often set in her native county in southern Ontario, are praised for their depth and insight into ordinary life. Michael Ravitch writes in his review, "Alice Munro", that: "over and over she astonishes us by uncovering in these trivial events the deepest dramas of the inner life" (161). Further, Bosman writes in an article in *The New York Times* that Munro has "revolutionized the architecture of short stories [...] and brought a modesty and subtle wit to her work that admirers often traced to her background growing up in rural Canada" (n.pag). As a recurrent backdrop for many of Munro's stories, the countryside is the focus of the present essay, and more particularly, the contrast between country and city life. In her collection of short stories *Too Much Happiness*, two stories illustrate this contrast particularly clearly: "Fiction" and "Wenlock Edge". It is on these two stories that this essay will concentrate.

As the following discussion demonstrates, Munro's short but dense narratives demonstrate the virtues of country life. These descriptions however, are not one-sided and portray different merits in the two different environments. It is argued that Munro's rhetorical technique, which provides a multifaceted view of the countryside, identifying its advantages and disadvantages, strengthens the overall advantageous image of the countryside. The contrast between the images of country and city life shows that there is a bridge between the two lifestyles that can be difficult to cross. Moreover, the characters undergo an emotional journey as well as a physical one as they move between the city and the countryside. Based on Yi-Fu Tuan's theory, that "[p]lace is an organized world of meaning" (179), these transitions and differences will be examined.

Further, the discussion of the transitions will be connected to a discussion of the short story genre, focusing on Munro's narrative technique in particular. In the above mentioned review, Ravitch further writes that: "in a time when 'big' writers are supposed to write 'big' books with 'big' ideas, she might seem decidedly little. But in truth Munro is as big as they come: profound and original, one of the major writers of our time" (160). In the same way as the short story genre may seem inferior to the novel, so may life in the country seem to life in the city. Critics have discussed the relation and opposition between the country and the city in Munro's stories, but it is here further argued that Munro, in these two stories, advocates for the countryside specifically. Through the selected two short stories by Munro, life in the country is extolled and through the deep but economical narrative, so also is the short story as

a genre. Since these narratives are economic, words and phrases will be analyzed closely to unveil the underlying meaning in Munro's stories, which lend themselves to be scrutinized by a close reading. In this way, the oppositions between country and city life will be examined in the following two short stories "Fiction" and "Wenlock Edge". The first mainly depicts the country and its advantages, but also contains a contrasting description of the city. In the second, the city is depicted unfavorably and the two stories together give a reassuring image of the countryside. "Wenlock Edge" exclusively depicts the city, however the opposition between the city and the country is demonstrated in this story through how the protagonist is affected by her move from the country to the city.

Presented below are definitions of the terms "countryside" or "the country", "small town" and "city and country life". The *Oxford Dictionary* defines the countryside as "the land and scenery of a rural area" and "the country" as "districts and small settlements outside large urban areas or the capital" (2013). In this essay these two definitions are considered synonyms. Moreover, also small towns are viewed as pertaining to the countryside. Between these two locations, the city and the countryside, there are also cultural differences; a difference in lifestyle. Consequently, when "country life" is discussed, it is the life led in the rural environments and "city life" is led in the city.

As mentioned above, the oppositions between the country and the city will be analyzed with the help of Yi-Fu Tuan's earlier mentioned theory of place; that "[p]lace is an organized world of meaning. It is essentially a static concept" (179). Tuan argues that the concepts of space and place are "basic components of the lived world" (3) and that they are interconnected; they depend on each other for definition. These two concepts are also interconnected with movement, since space is dependent on movement from one place to another, and place requires space to be in order to exist as a place: "if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place" (Tuan 6). Pauses in movement can thus also be place, which will be demonstrated in the following analysis of "Fiction".

As Tuan examines these two terms, he puts them in the perspective of experience. Firstly, he discusses experience with focus on the child, shifting the focus throughout his text, which he finalizes with a chapter on space in connection to time. Tuan also puts forth that there are numerous ways to define place and that one of these definitions is that: "place is whatever

stable object catches our attention” (161). All places, however, cannot be discerned by the eye but are only “known viscerally” (162); literature can serve as a function to make interior expressions visible, also those of space: “[l]iterary art can illuminate the inconspicuous fields of human care such as a Midwestern town, a Mississippi county, a big-city neighborhood, or an Appalachian hollow” (162). Moreover, he argues that even those objects or places that are visible to the eye may be admired by one people but easily overlooked by another, therefore: “[c]ulture affects perception” (162). Even though Tuan refers to cultural differences between nations, there are also in some ways “cultural differences” between the countryside and the city. Margret Atwood discusses this difference in connection to Munro’s stories and poses the question, “Why are there so many crazy, demented people in a small town?” (Awano *et. al.* 93), to which she answers:

Its just that everyone knows everyone and one another’s background. Like a big, dysfunctional family. It’s that way in cities, too, but you don’t necessarily know about all of it, because you may not know the people across the street, or even next door. In small towns people are conscious of gossip, rumor, the keeping up of pretenses, and the varying gradation of social level. It can be confining (93).

Atwood thus calls out a distinction between city and country life, however small, which could be regarded a “cultural difference”. Even though this distinction is not the same as cultural differences between peoples, there is, nonetheless, divergence between lives in the two places. The difference in perception that Tuan discusses becomes relevant to the analysis of the story “Wenlock-Edge” where it highly affects the main character and makes her transition from the country to the city difficult. This is, here, argued to be linked to a “cultural difference” between life in the city and life in the country.

Over Munro’s sixty-year carrier, many critics have analyzed and written about her works. Charles E. May, an expert on short stories, argues that the complexity in Munro’s stories does not necessarily mean that they are “novelistic” (172), as many critics have claimed. Instead, he argues that this complexity derives from the general characteristics of the short story itself. By arguing that Munro’s creations are Romantic, and not realistic or novelistic, he delineates Alice Munro’s “short story way” (172). He also claims that short stories “attempt to be authentic to the immaterial reality of the inner world of the self in its relation to eternal rather than temporal reality” (177).

Ulrica Skagert draws on May's ideas of the short story and analyses Munro's works from a similar point of view. In her thesis, *Possibility-Space and Its Imaginative Variations in Alice Munro's Short Stories* (hereafter abbreviated as *Possibility-Space*), she discusses the "possibility-space" created between reality and fiction within Munro's narratives. Skagert writes on how Munro draws inspiration from reality and says that: "Munro gives an account of how she understands her shift from creating fiction out of purely invented material to perceiving a scene from real life as a promising narrative [...]. This [...] is an example of how Munro is inspired to narrate; it discloses the immediate connection between fiction and reality" (16). Skagert also argues that a "possibility-space" can originate within the story where the reader and protagonist both experience a sense of hope. For example, she claims that in one story: "trust felt in time as an agent for possibilities makes a haven in the protagonist's present" (175) and a similar circumstance will be discussed in connection to the story "Fiction".

May and Skagert both discuss the complexity in Munro's stories, a feature that is also addressed by Isla Duncan. She discusses different narrative techniques and points of view in Munro's short stories. Skagert writes that "[t]he recurrent form of her stories is a return to the emergence of a past event in order to understand its bearing on the present" (12). Similarly, in Duncan's final chapter, she discusses, as she does throughout the book, that the collection *Too Much Happiness* "illustrates qualities characteristic of Munro's fiction" (148). She suggests however, that even though collocations can be found and images are reused in this volume, "Munro, as she has done consistently in forty years of publishing short fiction, continues to surprise and disarm, with new strategies and different means of disarrangement" (152). The two stories "Fiction" and "Wenlock Edge" are no exception to what Duncan argues and Munro's "means of disarrangement" are highly relevant to the present essay and will be addressed further in the following analysis.

When Munro herself speaks of her writing technique, she says that she does not attempt to say what fiction, or the short story is as a genre, but "what they are to me" (224). She explains that she never thinks in terms of a linear development, but likens her stories to a house:

"So obviously I don't take up a story and follow it as if it were a road, taking me somewhere, with views and neat diversions along the way. I go into it, and move back

and forth and settle here and there, and stay in it for a while. It's more like a house. Everybody knows what a house does, how it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way" (224).

In Munro's account, it is affirmed that her stories do not follow any conventional or linear development. As Munro's stories do surprise and disarm as Duncan claims, they consequently present "what is outside in a new way".

Another critic who also attempts to describe Munro's strategies is Lisa Dickler Awano. Awano and Munro have discussed Munro's writings over a period of nine years and as an introduction to the interview itself, Awano reflects upon her conversations with Munro: "It struck me then that our interviews share some aspects of the ways that she structures stories [...] I ask her to start by grounding us in a new book or story's setting, and she responds by connecting her story or personal history to larger events or circumstances of the time in which it takes place" (180). Additionally, Awano writes of Munro that she has "long been considered one of the foremost writers of psychological fiction" (180). Another who also comments on this is Bosman, who in the article mentioned earlier in *The New York Times*, writes of Munro and the Nobel Prize award.

Munro's ability to depict ordinary life is discussed by many critics. Michael Ravitch, as mentioned, discusses this and further claims that "[t]he marvelous economy of [Munro's] language brings forth mystery from the most quotidian events" (162). As mentioned, these every-day life events often take place in Ontario, where Munro grew up and critics also address the influence Munro's native county has had on her writing. Margaret Atwood mentions Munro's connection to small towns when she writes of Munro's early influences, which were among others: "writers of stories set in small towns. Alice read Sherwood Anderson – who made her feel that maybe she could do this kind of thing – as well as Eudora Welty [...]. Having grown up in a small town herself, Alice knows them well – specifically small towns in southwestern Ontario" (Awano *et. al.* 93).

John Weaver also writes of Munro's connection to the country, but instead focuses on her stories' value as historical illustrations of rural Ontario. He argues that Munro's stories "posses settings, fantasies, genuine voices and feelings for common and domestic life that

create evocative chronicles of rural and small-town Ontario during the last forty years” (381). He further comments that the insight provided by an author who has been “long interested in the province’s past” (381), is valuable, even though it is fiction, and he concludes that “there are solid grounds – as if any were needed – for accepting Alice Munro as a remarkable interpreter of Ontario’s cultural history, in particular small-town social structure” (381). Even though Weaver’s analysis does not apply directly to the upcoming analysis, his work gives proof of Munro’s connection to and great knowledge of the countryside that she writes about, which is highly relevant to the present discussion. As is the fact that Munro has drawn inspiration from other writers who have written of small towns, as Atwood argues, and that she writes of an environment that is very familiar to her.

Martin and Ober also discuss Munro as a small town historian, but focus on the element of change, with a historical perspective, in her stories. They name Munro an “artist-historian”, who shows awareness of “the unique and delicate balance, as well as the transience, of the world of experience that the artist is driven to record and preserve” (n.pag). Further, they argue that Munro makes use of traditional genres and structures. Moreover, Martin and Ober put forth that Munro “is not confined to any view of history that ignores feelings and visions; she transfigures daily life and gives her readers universal experience”, she explores opposites in her texts and “places at risk ‘cherished’ beliefs and values” (n.pag).

Robert McGill similarly writes that even though there is a demand for fiction that “offer[s] the comfort of rural tradition, Munro chooses to bring a mirror to this desire rather than satisfy it with generic sentimentalization of the countryside” (12). McGill analyzes Munro’s story “Something I’ve been meaning to tell you”, which he argues “is an examination of rural-urban relations and the performance of place which also has implications for the acts of reading and writing place” (10). He also claims that fiction has become more important than ever as an agent to experiencing place. Munro, according to McGill, practices “a *geographic metafiction*”, by which he means that her stories “meditate on their own strategies and implications in fictionalizing place, and they pay attention to the situatedness of authors and readers, as well as to the ways in which one might come to learn about place through fiction” (10).

McGill also writes that “Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You”, starts with a guided tour “[I]ike many of Munro’s texts” (10). Awano also calls attention to something similar when

she discusses the beginning of Munro's story "Dear Life", which starts with a geographical description of Munro's childhood neighborhood. She discusses this in relation to what Munro brings in of "reality" to her story and argues that "these 'factual' introductory comments [...] are multi-layered and revealing of the author and her creative process. They throw light on underlying motifs in her oeuvre and often hold the key to a given book or story" (180). The introduction to the story "Fiction" can be regarded as similar to what both Awano and McGill mention. It is a descriptive introduction that bears underlying meaning and motif and therefore it is a "guided tour" since it prepares the reader for the story.

"Fiction" opens with the protagonist, Joyce, and a description of her drive home from work. The initial sentence reads, "[t]he best thing in winter was driving home" (Munro 32), and these first words set an affirmative tone to the introduction. The reader is thus prepared to read the upcoming description in the light of this statement. Consequently, the following line connotes feelings of well-being: "It would already be dark, and on the upper streets of the town snow might be falling, while rain lashed the car on the coastal highway" (32). Interestingly, darkness, snow and lashing rain, otherwise not favorable circumstances while driving, here create a heartfelt image. This immediate contradiction does, however, also prepare the reader for more contradictions in the following account.

As the introduction continues, a portrayal of the area follows and though it is not minute, it bears resemblance to what both McGill and Awano mention of Munro's descriptive introductions: "Joyce drove beyond the limits of the town into the forest, and though it was a real forest with great Douglas firs and cedar trees, there were people living in it every quarter-mile or so" (Munro 32). This phrase holds important information of the main character. "[B]eyond the limits", does not only denote the physical journey that Joyce undertakes, but also her emotional journey. What she leaves behind is not only the town, but also work; a job that she is not completely satisfied with: "Joyce was happy to have even that last dash to the door, through the dark and the wind and the cold rain. She felt herself shedding off the day's work, which was harried and uncertain" (33). The work is "harried" and "uncertain". This is an indication, for one, that Joyce is not completely satisfied with her work, but these words also denote an uncertainty that applies to her life in large. It is after all to be on the way home, which is "the best thing in winter". Not to *come* home, but to be *between* home and work. "Uncertain" therefore also signifies what awaits her at home, her relationship, even though the picture of home at first seems joyful and warm.

As Awano mentions, Munro's stories open with passages that tell much of the story and often hold the key to it. Also, the contradictions in this particular introduction are typical of Munro: "We may be speaking about what seems to be a minor aspect of a story, when all at once a major theme or a complex of emotions underlying the work is illuminated. When this happens, Munro will take the idea in the opposite direction and explore its converse, just as she does in her fiction" (Awano 181). As Munro constantly "explores the converse", she also makes use of a rhetorical structure; to not create a one-sided image. McGill also comments on this when he discusses the introduction to Munro's story "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You", as mentioned earlier, when he argues that Munro does not simply depict the comfort of rural tradition (12). Similarly, Munro takes great care not to mislead her readers in this story with the embedded hints in her careful language. Even though the introduction seems idyllic on the surface, complications lure underneath. This becomes even more evident as the introduction progresses.

The forest is depicted as a "real forest", still, Joyce does not live isolated and the reader can imagine the route, sparsely lined with houses. This strengthens the picturesque image of a rural area, as opposed to a great and dark forest. The following lines further strengthen the image of this scenery as picturesque:

There were some people who had market gardens, a few who had some sheep or riding horses, and there were enterprises like Jon's – he restored and made furniture. Also the services advertised beside the road, and more particular to this part of the world – tarot readings, herbal massage, conflict resolution. Some people lived in trailers; others had built their own houses, incorporating thatched roofs and log ends, and still others, like Jon and Joyce, were renovating farmhouses (32).

Here, Munro depicts "typical" traits of country living such as "market gardens", "sheep" and "riding horses"; her husband Jon's furniture business also fits this image. Together with the advertisements along the road, this creates an image composed of elements that are expected during a drive in the country. The "generic sentimentalization", which McGill mentions, does however stop with the phrase "and more particular to this part of the world". That which follows, "tarot readings", "herbal massage" and "conflict resolution", stands out from the first part of this quotation and does not fit the idyllic countryside. Moreover, variety is also depicted in the description of houses; some "lived in trailers" and others, like them, "were

renovating farmhouses”. Munro creates a nuanced and varied image of the country, moving away from a nostalgic depiction. The protagonist, however, renovates and builds her own home in an old farmhouse. She is thus situated in a picturesque rural environment, even though the reader is enlightened that this is not the only way of life in “this part of the world”. The elements of darkness and cold outside during Joyce’s drive home, discussed previously, further serve as a contrast to that which waits at home; namely light and warmth. Joyce loves to see the patio doors when she comes home: “the two oblongs of light seemed to be a sign or pledge of comfort, of safety and replenishment” (33). This image is highly representative of what Joyce imagines her life to be during her time between work and home. Nevertheless, they only “seem” to be a sign of comfort and the word “pledge” underlines that this is her own wish and imagination. Further, these doors frame “the gutted glowing interior of their house” (33). The words “gutted” and “glowing”, emphasized by alliteration, create a forceful contrast. In the process of renovating, the interior of their house is “gutted”. As is, as the reader soon will learn, their relationship. Further, “glowing”, denotes warmth and homeliness and is emphasized by the “warm wood lit up” (33) that she sees inside, also emphasized by alliteration. The contrast between “gutted” and “glowing” stands to represent Joyce’s relationship that is in fact, as mentioned previously, “uncertain” (33). The light and warmth inside therefore denote an illusion of comfort, which the protagonist also shows awareness of herself: “scenes that beguiled her, even if she knew things would not be so special inside” (33).

Even though there are several intimations that it is not so, Munro’s character so skillfully fools herself that the reader is, together with Joyce, tempted to read this as a description of an idyllic life in the country. According to Skagert, a possibility-space is created when: “the event in itself offers a moment of release and epistemic certainty to the characters” (6). This can also be connected to what Tuan argues, as previously mentioned, of pauses in movement that create space. A place can therefore also emerge in a pause, or according to Skagert “a moment of release”. Joyce’s journey from work in town to her home in the country could be considered such a pause, or place. Skagert also says of this possibility space that “[b]ewildering or improbable as it might seem, this central paradox [...] often becomes a matter of a feeling of renewed hope for the character and the reader alike” (13). The reader is thus tempted to believe in it and want to stay in this place, together with the protagonist.

Further, McGill discusses that Munro refrains from creating an altogether sentimental image of life in the country. Here referred to as a rhetorical structure, this phenomenon is recognized by several critics and a recurrent structure in Munro's writing. This can also be connected to Martin and Ober's discussion on change in Munro's stories: "Change is in fact Janus-faced: fascinating, in that the movement and the process involved in it transfix us; dreaded, in that it places at risk 'cherished beliefs' and values" (n. pag.). These beliefs and values are questioned throughout the introduction to "Fiction", and through the rhetorical structure the story becomes more realistic and thus more persuasive. Consequently, it becomes convincing that life in the country *could* have been idyllic, had Jon and Joyce also been in a good relationship. The image of the country as an attractive place to live therefore stands strong. Also, the sense of well being connected to life in the country remains with the reader throughout the story.

Since the reader is convinced, despite the – in retrospect – evident signs, the turn in the story still functions as an element of surprise. When Jon leaves Joyce to live with his young apprentice, Joyce moves into town. The reader is as much surprised as Joyce herself, who goes into a pragmatic state of denial. As the shock subsides, Joyce becomes depressed, and her depression becomes connected to life in the city. Joyce wakes up after a night out with new friends, with whom she drinks and discusses men in a way that is new to her, and "in the midst of all this talk Joyce feels alright" (39). But when she wakes up in the morning, she wonders where she is:

She moved to an apartment in town. It belonged to a teacher who was on a sabbatical. She woke in the night with the vibrating pink lights of the restaurant sign across the street flashing through her window, illuminating the other teacher's Mexican doodads. Pots of cacti, dangling cat eyes, blankets with stripes, the colour of dried blood. All that drunken insight, that exhilaration, cast out of her like vomit. Aside from that she was not hungover. She could wallow in lakes of alcohol, it seemed, and wake up dry as cardboard, flattened. Her life gone. A commonplace calamity (40).

The "vibrating pink light" that is "flashing through the window" creates an atmosphere of distress and alarm that illustrates Joyce's feelings; she is confused and upset. "Mexican doodads", "pots of cacti", "dangling cat eyes", also perceived by a person in a newly

awakened state, further create an image of distortion. The “blankets with stripes” which are “the color of dried blood” finalize the reiteration of unpleasant items, which altogether paints a horrid image. Dried blood is an allusion to death, which is symbolic for the relationship that has ended, but it is also connected to that the life she once knew is gone, or “dead”.

Even though many of the elements that compose this picture are inside the apartment, all are highlighted by the “vibrating pink light”, which is a quality that belongs to the city. Furthermore, these lights stand in contrast to the lights that are depicted in the beginning of the story. The warmth and homeliness connected to the light in the country stand out as preferable to the nerve-racking pink light of the city. That life as she knew it is gone, is also emphasized at the end of this quotation. She is “dry as cardboard”, more than being hungover, this also represents that the essence of her has been extracted, and she is “flattened”; she feels defeated. Finally, her life is “a commonplace calamity”. Stressed with the aid of alliteration, these words stand out and they are connected to life in the city that, for Joyce, is “commonplace”. In contrast, the relationship between Jon and his new young girlfriend is described as “not exactly commonplace” (41). Their relationship is new and the switch that has been made, even though it is not “unheard of” (41), is controversial. Furthermore, they live in the country in Jon and Joyce’s old house, which is then “not [...] commonplace”.

At the end of the story, Joyce is remarried and has moved to Vancouver. Even though she ends up in a big city, the house they live in still represents qualities of life in the country:

The grounds are large. There is croquet, if people want to play, and the disputed swing from Matt’s own childhood that he got out of the garage. Most of the children have seen only park swings and plastic play units in the backyard. Matt is surely one of the last people in Vancouver to have a childhood swing handy and to be living in the house he grew up in, a house on Windsor Road on the slope of Grouse Mountain on what used to be the edge of the forest. Now houses keep climbing above it, most of them castle affairs with massive garages. One of these days this place will have to go, Matt says. The taxes are monstrous. It will have to go, and a couple of hideousities will replace it (44).

The house used to be on “the edge of the forest”, there is a “childhood swing”, which is something uncommon that most children have never seen and “the grounds are large”. This passage indicates that what used to be rural has now changed, but some of the elements

remain. All this, however, runs the risk of vanishing altogether to be replaced by “hideousities”. There is thus, a sadness connected to the urbanization of this area and a wish for things to remain as they are. Moreover, the house is a mediator between life in the country and life in the city, which can also be connected to the phrase “the edge of the forest”; it has been in-between city and country before, and now it still is but on a symbolic level.

McGill claims that “Munro’s readers cannot read Munro’s stories without considering Toronto or New York and the symbolic function of rurality there: for example, as a reassuring repository of human life in a traditional and eternal form” (12). Consequently, the house and Joyce’s new life there posit such a “symbolic function of rurality”. Even so, Munro does not end this story in an idyllic country environment. In the light of Martin and Ober’s discussion on change in Munro’s stories, this shows again, that Munro places traditional beliefs and ideals at risk. Instead of an idyllic ending to this story, Joyce lands somewhere in a realm between the country and the city. This compromise creates a realistic story that becomes convincing to the reader, as opposed to an altogether “happy” ending. To, again, refer to Skagert’s notion of a “possibility space”, this becomes relevant here as well; the dream of an idyllic life in the country remains possible and probable to character and reader alike.

There is consequently a sense of optimism at the end of “Fiction”, and Isla Duncan puts forth that this story stands out in *Too Much Happiness* as more hopeful than the other stories.

Duncan notes that this collection is the darkest that Munro has ever published, and they are – indeed – dark, but “[w]hile this twelfth collection unnerves, with the savage irony of the titles and the darkness of the contents, it also impresses, with its narrative ingenuity and stylistic élan” (152). Even if not the very darkest in this collection, the following story, “Wenlock-Edge”, is both darker and less optimistic than “Fiction”.

In “Wenlock Edge” a young girl who moves from the country to London, Ontario, becomes gravely disillusioned as a consequence of a traumatic experience. This experience is both absurd and eerie and depicts the dark side of man that Munro explores in this collection. This event is also the turning point in the story and a strong element of surprise. The protagonist in “Wenlock-Edge” is the narrator and thus her name is never revealed as the other characters never mention her name and she only refers to herself as “me”. Hence, the story is told from her specific perspective and experiences.

Since the narrator is not objective, Munro early in the story alerts the reader to the fact that the protagonist's perception of the world is colored by her background. Her older bachelor cousin, who also lives in London, takes her out for dinner every other Sunday: "It probably cost more than he could afford, but I did not think of that, having a country girl's notion that all men who lived in cities, wore a suit every day, and sported such clean fingernails had reached a level of prosperity where indulgences like this were the usual thing" (63). As the story is told in retrospect, the protagonist realizes that her previous beliefs, "having a country girl's notion", affected her understanding of events. Furthermore, that she notices "clean fingernails", implies that this is not something she is used to seeing in a man; in the country, the men she knows might have jobs that do not allow them to "sport such clean finger nails". The nails together with the everyday suit, to her, imply wealth, but as she recites the story she knows that this is not necessarily true. As mentioned, Yi-Fu Tuan argues that perception can be affected by culture. The protagonist's perception is here affected by her "cultural" background, which differs from the one she encounters in the city.

Her background in the country does not only affect her view on life and the people in the city, but may also determine how *others* perceive *her*. The young woman works in the cafeteria at the university campus and her roommates have warned her that this might prevent her from meeting someone; "[b]oys won't ask you out if they see you at a job like that" (65). During a Sunday dinner, the protagonist tells her cousin of her roommates' warning. He is delighted to hear that she dismissed the comment, and replies: "Honest work. Never listen to anyone who wants to put you down for doing honest work [...] Keep your pride" (65). "[H]onest work" is an insinuation to her country background and "keep your pride" implies that she might feel inferior because of it. Thus, what she hears him say is to be proud of her cultural heritage, but also, to stay as she is and not fully adapt to life in the city. The protagonist revolts against this: "This speech of his [...] roused the first doubts in me, the first gloomy suspicion that the warning, after all, might have some weight to it" (65). Even though she has little respect for her two roommates, who have abandoned their aspirations of jobs in the UN to instead focus on dates and the hopes of marriage, she starts to take them seriously. She does not want to be held in place and to be reduced to a "country girl". Consequently, she is so provoked by her cousin's reaction that she reconsiders her own judgment, and at the same time, realizes that she wants to adapt to her new environment. The cause for this reaction is the implication of inferiority connected to her upbringing, which will come to play a pivotal role in her decision-making.

Her feeling of inferiority also manifests itself when she meets her new roommate, Nina, who is described as very different from the narrator herself: “She was small, and thoughtful in her movements – she never bumped her head into the rafters, as I did” (66). Nina is depicted, or at least perceived by the narrator, as sophisticated and elegant. In contrast, she presents herself as big and clumsy. This is further emphasized by the fact that Nina wears beautiful clothes, as for example, a “Japanese kimono” while the protagonist, on the other hand, wears “a woolly bathrobe” (66). The “woolly bathrobe” represents her country culture, and in contrast Nina’s kimono reflects elegance and a person who is experienced in the ways of society (in the city).

The narrator and Nina’s acquaintance also lead up to the event in the story that is a turning point, to both the story and the development of the protagonist. One evening when Nina is ill, the main character is invited to take her place at dinner with Nina’s lover, the older and very controlling man, Mr. Purvis. She accepts the invitation since “[t]he possibility of meeting Mr. Purvis disturbed and interested [her]” (74). When she arrives, she is asked to take *all* her clothes off in the cloakroom before she meets Mr. Purvis. She is stunned and initially hesitates, but then agrees: “I took it more as a dare than as a preliminary to further trespass [...] it had more to do with the folly of pride [...] more to do with some shaky recklessness than with anything else” (77). The protagonist wishes to keep her pride even if she realizes, in hindsight, that it was foolish; “the folly of pride”.

This contrasts with when her cousin tells her to “keep her pride”, which she revolts against. The difference between these two utterances is that it is a different kind of pride that she wants to keep. In the latter episode, she “keeps her pride” by pretending that she is not bothered by this very uncommon request and situation in an attempt to not show signs of naivety connected to a “country girl’s notion”. Thus, it is quite the contrary to the first pride discussed, a pride in her origin, since she wants to conceal her naivety, and together with it also her cultural heritage. Isla Duncan argues that “Munro captures her images in an abundance of rich tropes and schemes, with a liking for contradiction” (160). These contradictions and oppositions are manifested in different ways in Munro’s texts. In “Fiction”, there are several examples and in “Wenlock Edge” the “woolly bathrobe” creates a contrast to “a kimono”. Tuan argues that literature can “interpret space and place as images of complex—often ambivalent—feelings” (7). The main character’s ambivalence is manifested here also in how the very same expression, “keep your/my pride” used on two different

occasions possesses opposite meanings; the first time to feel pride over her background and the second time to conceal the very same.

The narrator was, in fact, ingenuous and inexperienced, which is indicated as she explains the situation in retrospect: “[i]t had not occurred to me that the undressing might be a prelude to rape [...] Why had I not thought of such a thing?”. The words “shaky recklessness” also reveal this uncertainty, “shaky” in that she was unsteady and unsure. The uncertainty resulted in “recklessness” as she put herself at risk. In fact, she makes the decision to participate since she has realized that people might see her as naïve, and moreover, as a result of this – inferior. When she arrives at the house for dinner Mrs. Winner, who is the one to inform her that she must take her clothes off, says: “I hope you’re not a baby” (75). Thus, in sheer obstinacy and to disprove her inexperience, she is spurred on to act as she does.

At the end of the evening, Mr. Purvis asks the narrator to read out loud from *A Shropshire Lad* by Housman, an oeuvre she is very familiar with. She even knows a few of the poems by heart: “*On Wenlock Edge the wood’s in trouble – ’/ Familiar words and rhythms calmed me down. They took me over. Gradually I began to feel at peace*” (80). As she comes into contact with a space where she feels confident, literature, she starts to relax. McGill argues that literature functions as an important “vehicle for knowing place” (9). If literature can be a means of discovering new places, it can also be transportation to an already familiar place. The protagonist thus flees into a recognizable world. Housman, as the reader learns further on, is an English Country Poet. The poem, which is partly recited in the story, depicts famous Wenlock Edge, which is situated in the countryside. Hence, the narrator takes shelter in a familiar environment and a place that is comforting to her – the country.

The reading of Housman’s poems puts an end to the unusual dinner, and even though the protagonist was not subjected to any violence she realizes after a while that she did not walk away from this experience undamaged:

The Music Department announced that a free recital of songs composed to fit the poems of English Country Poets would be presented on a date that had now passed. I had seen this notice before, and did not have to look at it to be reminded of the names Herrick, Housman, Tennyson. And a few steps into the tunnel the lines

began to assault me.

*On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble*

I would never think of those lines again without feeling the prickles of the upholstery on my bare haunches? The sticky prickly shame. A far greater shame it seemed to me now, than at the time. He had done something to me, after all” (88).

The lines that once were a comfort to her have now become associated with an unpleasant affair. The line that recurs two times, “*On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble*”, does not only stand out because of the repetition or that it is the title of the story, but also since it stands alone apart from the text. The first time it appears, it does not only have a calming function to the character, but is also ominous and indicates that the protagonist is in trouble. Not in any physical danger, but she is in danger of change, for this experience has changed her in an unwelcome way.

The phrase, “I would never think of those lines again without feeling the prickles of the upholstery on my bare haunches?”, is both statement and question. Even though it is made clear that the narrator is older and more experienced when she tells this story, she does not know if these lines will stop haunting her. Also, she does not read the lines, she knows them by heart and they start to “assault her”. The assault, in fact, is that Mr. Purvis has taken something from her besides her innocence – her own country poets. He has destroyed the pleasure of reading them, and together with reading them, an opportunity to visit the country. The date for the recital of the songs “had now passed”; it is too late. The English Country Poets cannot give her the pleasure they had before.

When the lines “assault” her she is a “few steps” into the tunnel; she has begun a transition. She then becomes aware of “the sticky prickly shame” which is more tangible now than at the time and she wonders if she will ever be able to enjoy these lines again. At the end of the tunnel, she finally accepts that “[h]e had done something to me after all”, and she is changed. The “tunnel” is thus a metaphor for the transition from the person that she was to the person she becomes when she realizes, and accepts that this experience has changed her.

There is sign of disenchantment even before the apparent realization, two days after the dinner: “[t]he snowstorm was over; the sky was clear; it was a bright, windless, deep-frozen day. The light hurt my eyes and the fresh snow squeaked under my feet” (85). Here, Munro

subtly indicates to the reader how the main character has been changed by the experience. “The snowstorm was over” denotes that the traumatic episode was over, and the “sky is clear” means that she is now out of harm’s way. That it is a new day, together with the words “bright” and “light” indicate insight, and this insight “hurt” her eyes; she is disillusioned and what she has realized is hurtful. The “fresh snow” represents that she is walking on new ground; she enters a new stage in her life. The new ground is not yet solid and it “squeaked” under her feet, which also suggests that it is painful.

The disillusionment reveals itself ultimately and clearly in the final sentence of this story: “people passing me on the way to classes [...] On their way to deeds they didn’t know they had in them” (92). She has discovered something within herself that she did not know existed, and she now looks at others as innocent and unspoiled and she knows that life in the city will corrupt them as it has corrupted her. Ravitch writes of Munro’s characters that they “are [...] exiles, separated from their home not by distance but by their own changes. They travel from country to city, from poverty to wealth, from ignorance to sophistication, but they are always looking backward, at what they have left behind” (164).

It is indicated that some time has passed when the narrator tells the story: “I think that in those days it would have been a four-cent stamp” (Munro 92). She thus looks back at an episode in her life that changed her, and as she remembers, there is grievance over the prize that she had to pay and what was lost in her. Further, May argues that this is typical of the short story, as opposed to the novel: “The short story more often focuses on a character who is confronted with the world of spirit, which then challenges his or her conceptual framework of reason and social experience” (May 176). The protagonist has truly been “confronted with the world of spirit” and her “framework of reason” has been challenged.

Consequently, she is disillusioned and damaged by the end of the story, and the reason is partly because she has moved to the city. Duncan writes that “‘Wenlock Edge’ far from evoking an idyllic rural setting, deals with sexual perversion and ritual humiliation in seedy urban rooms” (18). Even though this story does not evoke “an idyllic rural setting”, it gives an antithesis to the idyllic countryside, for the “urban rooms” depicted in this story are indeed “seedy”.

The sense of hope at the end of “Fiction” is not present in the same way at the end of “Wenlock Edge”. The two stories together thus create opposite images. “Fiction” mainly evokes an “idyllic rural setting”, but also depicts the city unfavorably. So does, to a high extent, “Wenlock Edge”. Subsequently, the countryside comes out more favorably in contrast to the city. This is also a result of the rhetorical technique that Munro makes use of; as she provides a multifaceted view of the countryside, she does not paint the picture of an undisputed country idyll. As a result, this creates convincing stories and moreover, a belief in that the country idyll *can* still exist. The contrast between the city and the country is shown through characters who move from the country to the city and in “Wenlock Edge” particularly, it can be seen that the transition from country to city is neither gentle nor effortless. The transitions that both characters make are also strongly connected to inner, emotional, journeys and both characters are changed in connection to these transitions.

Through these two women, Munro evokes profound questions about life and choices. Margret Atwood writes that Munro “has always insisted on the particular importance of women’s lives, insisted that the story of an unhappy housewife in middle age is every bit as important as the story of a sea captain about to undertake the search for a white whale” (Awano *et. al.* 91). The discussion on gender is always close at hand when Munro’s stories are analyzed, but unfortunately lies beyond the scope of this study. The limitations of the present essay have also affected the choice of primary material. There are several other stories in the collection *Too Much Happiness* that take place in the countryside and would be interesting to include, such as “Wood” and “Dimensions”. The latter would be interesting to include since it does, in fact, depict a tragic episode that takes place in the country, and does not contribute to a sentimental image of the countryside. The story “Wood” on the other hand is a celebration to nature and the landscape of rural Ontario.

An interesting future study would be to include more material, such as all stories from *Too Much Happiness* and from other collections as well, to see if there is a pattern in that the countryside is evoked. It would then also be interesting to analyze descriptions of houses in relation to how Munro explains that her stories are created; perhaps the images of houses serve as metaphors for stories in their entirety. A larger study would also allow analysis of characters that move from the city to the country and an expansion of the discussion on rural-urban relations and the disillusionment that an urban environment could entail. This could

also be interesting to connect to a discussion on social class and its connection to that Munro chooses, as Atwood points out, to depict “ordinary” lives and their importance.

The two lives of the “ordinary” women in “Fiction” and “Wenlock Edge”, in Munro’s world, open up to universal issues about life and the choices we make. Charles E. May borrows the words from William Blake when he describes the difference between the short story and the novel: “To see a world in a grain of sand...If you concentrate your attention on some apparently insignificant portion of the world, you will find, deep within it, nothing less than the world itself. The short story concentrates on its grain of sand, in the fierce belief that there—right there, in the palm of its hand—lies the universe” (181). The countryside, small in comparison to the city, is extolled in Munro’s two stories “Fiction” and “Wenlock Edge”. Similarly, these narratives in their short form can open up a whole world of experiences.

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