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Patterns of Entrapment and Lines of Flight in Alice Munro's "Thanks for The Ride" and "The Shining Houses"

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Abstract

I propose to read Alice Munro's "Thanks for the Ride" and "The Shining Houses" together, focusing on the fact that each story depicts an encounter that takes place in an (apparently) unfamiliar territory and highlights patterns of entrapment for the protagonists or narrator. I will show that the encounter challenges the protagonists' versions or visions of life and that both stories exude a sense of freedom in spite of the patterns of entrapment they reveal. In Deleuze and Guattari's words, these short stories are defined by an interplay of lines and organized around the question "what happened?". As the stories suggest that the encounter has "left a mark", I will consider how in these early stories Munro is already experimenting with ways to challenge traditional closure and will consider the role played by the embedded story in "The Shining Houses".

Both "Thanks for the Ride" and "The Shining Houses" by Alice Munro are "early stories: "Thanks for the Ride" was written in the winter of 1953-1954, and then published in 1957 in the *Tamarack Review*. "The Shining Houses" was written before 1956 and first broadcast on CBC radio in 1962. Munro's daughter, Sheila Munro, calls it the fictional retelling of an incident that happened to a woman they knew and which upset her mother (34). Munro wrote the story not long after the incident. It is a well-known fact

that a male friend of Munro's husband's told her the story that was to serve as the basis for "Thanks for the Ride", as documented in the interview with McCulloch and Simpson in *The Paris Review* (235). In her 1989 interview with Catherine Ross, Munro described "Thanks for the Ride" as a breakthrough story, as she explained that "the anecdote broadened out so that [she] could see its social base" (22)—the encounter between the middle class and the girl from the rural smaller town. In "1874: three Novellas or 'What Happened'?" Deleuze and Guattari posit that the short story as a genre is organized around the question "what happened?" (192). "Thanks for the Ride" and "The Shining Houses" seem to illustrate this: in "Thanks for the Ride" two middle-class boys drive into a small town to have sex with girls they pick up at a diner; in "The Shining Houses", a young woman discovers that her forays into her eccentric neighbour's territory will come to an end as her other neighbours are plotting to get rid of her old house. As these short summaries show, both stories evoke another proposal put forward by Deleuze and Guattari, that the short story is defined by lines, flesh lines, living lines (195). Both stories exude a sense of entrapment for the protagonist. Yet, something happens to each of the protagonist, although that "something" is "unknowable" (Deleuze and Guattari 294).

"Thanks for the Ride" starts with a foray into unfamiliar territory, with the two boys, who are "strangers in town" as George puts it (45), sitting in a rather dark diner, in a little town "neither of [them] had seen before" (46). The boys have gone there for two things, "bootleggers and girls" (46) so for what they can provide—alcohol and sex. "The Shining Houses" opens with the main protagonist, Mary, sitting on the back step of her neighbour's house as she listens to the old woman talking. Mary is from the new subdivision, she should be an "outsider" (22) yet she seems to possess the ability to move from her world into Mrs. Fullerton's territory, and back into the world of the modern houses again: "when Mary came out of this place she always felt as if she were passing through barricades" (22). Like the narrator of "Red Dress—1946" who ventures into Mary Fortune's "territory" only to be rescued from it (160), or the narrator of "Day of the Butterfly" who becomes friends with Myra, only to experience relief when the "barriers" of the hospital "close about Myra" and free her of Myra (110), Mary is shown *leaving* her eccentric neighbour's territory. In other words, the explorer (the verb "explored" appears in the opening paragraph) or adventurer returns home into her own familiar world after an escape.

As the image of the barricades suggests, the world that is depicted in "The Shining Houses" rests on contrast and divide, including social divide. This also holds true of the first pages of "Thanks for the Ride" although there are no visible

boundaries. Instead, the opening pages emphasize watching, looking out through a window pane since the narrator who is sitting in a diner watches the owner watching people outside. Thus the description of the diner in “Thanks for the Ride” evokes and *reverses* Edward Hopper’s famous painting, *Nighthawks* (1946).¹ In both the painting and the story, the street is empty, and there are very few people inside the diner. However, the diner in Hopper’s painting is well-lit and the people inside the diner are the object of the viewers’ gaze, while in “Thanks” the people in the diner are watching the people outside. This actually means that Munro’s scene exudes an even stronger sense of voyeurism than the painting. The narrator, Dick, is watching the owner watching people in the street, and more specifically, watching people like him, who have a car² and go places:

Pop? Chewing on a match, looking out at the street, not watching for anything except for somebody to trip over a crack in the sidewalk or have a blowout or make a fool of himself in some way that Pop, rooted behind the cash register, huge and cynical and incurious, was never likely to do. Maybe not even that; maybe just by walking up and down, the driving up and down, going places, the rest of the world proved its absurdity. You see that judgment on the faces of people looking out of windows, sitting on front steps in some little towns; so deeply, deeply uncaring they are, as if they had sources

1 Art Institute of Chicago.

2 Note the emphasis on the boys’ car throughout the story, clearly a symbol of their economic power and of their freedom.

of disillusionment which they would keep, with some satisfaction, in the dark. (44-5)

As the narrator points out, “you see” these scenes, since his description actually evokes small town scenes that have already been painted, most notably by Hopper. The description evokes Hopper’s *Sunday* (1926),³ which depicts an empty street, with a solitary man sitting on a curb, with a row of buildings, with dark windows, in the background. The man seems passive and the painting conveys an impression of inertia and desolation. Dick’s description conveys a similar sense of inertia, and desolation or “disillusionment”, which are even made stronger since the scene takes place on a Saturday night. A few pages later, Dick will mention the shadows of the store buildings (47), which further reinforces the sense that this is a small town scene painted by Hopper. In other words the narrator is not describing the little scene he sees, instead he reproduces something that already exists, which suggests a preconceived vision. The fact that we only see the town and its people through the prism of Dick’s limited vision is foregrounded when he describes Lois’s face: “her face had no innocence that I could see” (50). In the next pages, the description of Lois’s family and house also reveals the narrator’s prejudiced eyes, for instance he literally highlights the Niagara Falls and To Mother cushions with the “glossy” chesterfield (50), objects which are epitomes of working class taste—or clichéd representations. It is also quite obvious that Dick’s description of the little town relies on and justifies a contrast between the locals, who go nowhere (the man sitting on the steps, Pop “rooted” behind his cash register) and the boys, who “drive up and down” and “go places”.

Secondly, it is also quite clear that Dick's representation conflates moral grounds and social dimensions. Dick describes Pop as "incurious" and "cynical" while the other man is said to be "deeply uncaring", an adjective which suggests that they are unlikely to be touched by the boys' callous behaviour. The close up on Lois's mother's mouth and neck turns her into some kind of monster: "her mouth was full of blue-white china teeth, the long cord trembled in her neck" (50). The grandmother is also dehumanized as she is compared to a "collapsed pudding" (51). The narrator then "describes" a "smell of hidden decay" which he claims comes from the old woman but likens to the smell of a dead animal under the verandah. He then turns decay into evidence of moral decadence when he concludes that his family and George's family are "innocent", but that "these others are born sly, and sad and knowing" (51). Using the word "born", the narrator condemns them to a fate they cannot escape. The description of the house and its inhabitants serves to re-assert social differences, through moral justifications, and to reassert his own identity as different from "these people" (51).

In "The Shining Houses", each kind of house emblemizes its inhabitants, Mrs. Fullerton is repeatedly said to be "old" (21), suggesting she is as old as her house, while the new shining houses have been made "for people like Mary and her husband and their child" (23). One of the oppositions the story rests on is the contrast between disorder and order. The old houses are made synonymous with "disorder", when they are opposed to the new houses and their inhabitants: "here was no open or straightforward plan, no order that an outsider could understand" (22). Furthermore, it is shown that what is now permanent, final, and "impregnable" (22) was first "haphazard" (22). By contrast, order characterizes Garden Place, the new "subdivision" (an interesting word, containing the word "division"): the new houses are "set side by side in large rows" (23), and the narrator uses the word "pattern" to refer to Garden Place. Even natural elements such as the sky and the trees are seen as part of a regulated pattern: the clouds reveal a "long thin triangle of sky", and the word "symmetry" describes the pine trees (24). The emphasis on order, regularity, and the lines and divisions suggest that order and patterns can be

seen as patterns of entrapment. Activities are regulated too: every Saturday the men work in their gardens and the wives organize and attend birthday parties. In Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's reading of the short story as a genre, an interplay of flesh lines, Mary's life in the subdivision can be seen as a line of "rigid segmentarity". Furthermore, during the meeting which upstages the birthday party (which evokes a play more than a party), there are indications that the men and women are trapped in their social roles. The men's words do not matter, as what matters is that they express outrage, because this is what is required of them, as husbands and fathers: "it did not matter much what they said as long as they were full of self-assertion and anger. That was their strength, proof of their adulthood, of themselves" (27).

The repeated use of modal forms such as "have to" is quite striking in the scene, suggesting inevitability. For instance Carl insists that they "*need*" the lane (27), that the old woman "*has to go*" (26), and "she *has to* get out" because the lane "*has to go through*" Mrs. Fullerton's property (27).⁴ The words "go through" and "put a lane through" are also repeated, which underlines the fact that the lane will cut through the house and garden. With the lane, yet another cut, yet another line will be made, reinforcing the pattern of rigid lines and segments.

The difference between what her neighbours see in Mrs. Fullerton's house—an "eyesore"—and what Mary sees is constantly foregrounded. Mary's neighbours only possess, as Lorraine York has it, a "shuttered, partial vision of life" (31), as epitomized by Mary's neighbour's desire to draw the drapes; on the contrary, Mary is able to see more, to see both sides of the barricades, so to speak. Mary gets to see the house, the gardens, the sheds, the discarded objects as signs of human activity and human life—smoke coming out of their chimneys, patched walls, animal sheds, and so on and so forth. She sees traces of life, as epitomized by the description of the objects on the back porch (22): someone has read the magazines, has taken baths in the bathtub, and has sat on the couch which is evoked by the couch springs. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (*L'Invention du quotidien*) Michel de Certeau proposes that ordinary objects have "hollow places in which a past sleeps" (108), which the list of objects in Mrs. Fullerton's back

porch illustrates, and that “the places people live in are like the presence of diverse absences” (108), which holds true of the house. Mrs. Fullerton’s house has been lived in, it is a living house, since, as de Certeau suggests, “haunted places are the only ones people can live in” (108). The opposition between the new subdivision that requires yet one more cut and the surviving houses is also an opposition between technology and haunted houses. For de Certeau, places that are “full of shadows” (106) are those that are haunted by stories and legends, which he calls “superfluous or additional inhabitants” (106), and can be the object of a “witch-hunt” (106) by “promoters of technical rationalities and financial profitabilities” (106). There could be no better description of what is at stake in “The Shining Houses” where the destruction of the old house is justified by words such as “property value”. At the end of the story, Mary understands that her neighbours “have to” behave like this: “it occurred to her that they were *right*, for themselves, for whatever it was they *had to be*” (29, my emphasis). Yet, de Certeau argues, the extermination of the hidden places in which the legends live can only entail one thing: “the habitable city is annulled” (106). The story both presents the patterns of entrapment and reveals its dangers.

The pattern of habitus is shown to be very strong in “Thanks for the Ride”. The situation (picking up a girl to have sex with her) has been “engineered” by George for a “specific purpose” (50), it may be something new for Dick (it was his first time) but the escapade actually fits into a pattern. The two boys merely repeat what other boys have done before them, as Lois’s remark shows: “that’s what these guys from up the beach *always* do. They [...] get a girl to go around with. They *always* do.” (54, my emphasis). The girls also fall into a pattern, which the repetitions suggest: “all winter all the girls do is talk about last summer, talk and talk about those guys and I bet you those guys have forgotten even what their names were—” (56) An (earlier) scene in the diner when George introduces Adelaide proves Lois right, reinforcing the inevitability of this pattern. As George introduces Adelaide to Dick, he gradually deprives her of her name: “Adelaide, Adeline—Sweet Adeline. I’m going to call her Sweet A, Sweet A.” (47) This is presented as a game, but the cruelty of the game is laid bare by the scene in the car, at the end of the drive back into town, as George asks Dick, “Is yours asleep? Mine is.” (57) The boy now dehumanize the girls, using pronouns referring to belongings—the girls’ objectification is fully exposed here.

Lois tries to disrupt the pattern of the date that has been “engineered” for one very specific purpose. She does so by the sarcastic tone of her voice but also by introducing formalities that are out of place in the context of the sex date but would be right in the context of a proper date. She puts him in

the wrong by putting on the wrong clothes for this date. At first sight, there are several similarities between Lois (“Thanks”) and Mrs. Fullerton (“The Shining Houses”), as figures of resistance. Mrs. Fullerton is said to be “unaccommodating” (22), an adjective that corresponds to the narrator’s depiction of Lois—if we think of the nouns and adjectives he uses to refer to her attitude and tone: “hostility”, “contemptuous”, “scornful”, “abusive”. Mrs. Fullerton, it is noted, neither invites nor pays calls (19) and although she needs money, she refuses to baby-sit (21). One neighbour points out that she is no charming old lady, adding, “she practically spit in my face” (29). Mrs. Fullerton’s refusal to accommodate her neighbours apparently echoes Lois’s reluctance to answer Dick’s questions (55). Another striking echo is that the girl and the old woman feel the need to dress up to go out, Lois to go out on the sex date with Dick, Mrs. Fullerton, to go to her neighbours when she delivers the eggs. They do so in order to “show” these people something, to challenge the middle-class boys’ /middle-class neighbours’ preconceived visions. Mrs. Fullerton’s hair is curled, her blouse held together by a bunch of cotton flowers, her mouth painted because “she would not show herself to her new neighbours in any old woman disarray” (20). Lois has changed out of her slacks and put on a shiny dress, high heels and jewels and answers, “I wanted to *show* you guys!” (55, my emphasis) when Dick asks her why. The absence of object is striking—as if she could not even name what she is trying to show.

However, the dress encapsulates Lois’s double bind, which is revealed when the narrator compares it to Christmas wrappings (51), foreshadowing, as Beverly Rasporich puts it, her undressing: “anticipated in the description of Lois’s dress [...] is her undressing, her passive and sorry unwrapping like a Christmas gift” (97). Furthermore while Lois mentions her other “good” clothes, an imitation cashmere sweater, a fur coat she is paying on (55), as symbols of her status, and financial independence, it is difficult not to think of them as symbols of a line of rigid segmentarity—working in the factory to get enough money, to pay for a fur coat (by instalments, which is suggested by the fact that she is paying for it), in order to get a husband, in all likelihood. So at first sight, it seems that Lois herself repeats and finds solace in the pattern of entrapment.

Yet if the echo between the two scenes is striking, so is the difference. Lois wants to show something while verbs in the negative forms are used to refer to Mrs. Fullerton’s acts of resistance: she “would not show herself” in disarray (20), she “did not pay calls herself” and “did not invite them” (19), suggesting that Mrs. Fullerton’s form of resistance is refusal.

On the contrary, the verb form “I don’t have to answer you” (55) frees Lois from obligation. Lois’s position and acts of resistance are actually quite complex, and more complex than Mrs. Fullerton’s. If we turn to the scene that precedes and the scene that follows the sexual encounter, we can see that her “force” is, paradoxically, her “surrender”, and vice versa. After they have kissed, Dick discovers what he describes as “another force in her that lay side by side with her hostility” (56); there is no doubt what that “force” is, but it is the word itself that is striking, as it differs considerably from the description of Adelaide’s “aura of sexuality” (47). With the word “force” Dick empowers Lois.

Dick also reckons that there are some people “who can go very far [in the act of love], who can make a greater surrender, like the mystics” (57) and calls Lois a “mystic of love”. Lois’s surrender plays a great role in the narrator’s own feelings about the encounter, which he then describes as “that headlong journey”, a phrase which is then repeated in italics, which suggests an echo in his mind (56, 57). Ildikó de Papp Carrington argues that as an adult narrator he “grasps something that the just-initiated adolescent certainly could not have known” (108) when he calls her a mystic of love. With the image of the “headlong” journey, that is a journey at high speed, and a surrender, the sexual encounter becomes an encounter, and absolute deterritorialization, in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, is suggested: “it is because we no longer have anything to hide that we can no longer be apprehended [...] To have dismantled one’s self in order finally to be alone” (Deleuze and Guattari 197). Lois’s gift of herself and her detachment enable her to achieve deterritorialization, as she has nothing to hide or ask for anymore. Paradoxically this is when the encounter happens, as Lois’s “surrender” transforms them both.

Deleuze and Guattari’s vision of the short story as being defined by lines which constantly interfere and act upon each other, is illustrated in the story, which moves from various lines of rigid segmentarity towards absolute deterritorialization with the encounter. Yet, as is often the case, the line of rigid segmentarity pervades their lives and “always seems to prevail in the end” (Deleuze and Guattari 195): after the encounter, as Dick drives into town (the image of the line is therefore strong) distance is introduced and re-asserted as the narrator mentions “the space that had come between us” (57), which is illustrated by Lois’s position in the car, “on the far side of the carriage” (57). Eventually, as Dick drives faster and faster, the journey back

into town turns into “a kind of journey in reverse, a film running backwards, erasing intimacy”, as Catherine Lanone puts it (Bigot and Lanone 133). Emotional withdrawal is suggested through the various references to the cold as soon as they leave the barn: “Afterwards the lassitude of the body, and the cold; the separation. [...] To find our same selves, chilled and shaken” (56). For Catherine Lanone, the adjectives “chilled and shaken” “create a binary rhythm stressing the process of emotional withdrawal, freezing up” so that the Latin phrase becomes an epitaph signing the end of the encounter (133).

Yet overall the last lines convey Dick’s puzzlement, as he describes her voice as “crude” and “female”, which reasserts differences, and “forlorn”, henceforth signing off her fate as the one who is left behind, but notes that her voice was calling *after* them (58), which suggests a haunting cry. As Carrington points out, Dick “narrates Lois’s story much more than his own” (108) and Lois’s cry, as Catherine Lanone argues, conveys defiance, it is an “expression of resilience” (127), a way of having the last laugh, the last word, by playing on words. More importantly, as narrator, Dick gives Lois the last word since the final word of the story is her name.

It is therefore possible to describe “Thanks for the Ride” as a journey away from preconceived visions towards the perception of greater complexity, at the same time as it describes a movement away from and back into a line of rigid segmentarity: the boys drive away and resume their lives (George has to go back in order to go to church with his mother and resume his life as a parasitic son, begging for money). Yet an earlier scene raises the question whether the encounter might leave a mark after the boys have left (and left the girls behind after using them as other boys have done before them). Lois and Dick are in a field, when Lois notices the burrs on her skirt:

“I’ve got burrs on my skirt,” she said. She bent over, pulling them one by one. “I’ve got burrs on my dress,” she said. “It’s my good dress. Will they leave a mark? If I pull them all—slowly—I won’t pull any threads.”

[...]

She shook the skirt, tossing a burr loose. (55)

Burrs are the heads of the weed, the part that clings to people’s clothing, but the word also has a figurative meaning: something

that sticks or clings for instance, a *burr* in the throat (Merriam Webster). Lois's question, "will they leave a mark?" is therefore key to understanding the story. It is tempting to read Lois's final gesture, tossing the burrs loose, as foreshadowing the ending, with the boys leaving the girls stranded in the street, not bothering to drive Adelaide home. But the scene also suggests that burrs are resilient and recalcitrant weeds that cling and leave a mark when they are carelessly pried loose and discarded. It is no coincidence that Munro has ended a later story called "Trespases" with the image of burrs clinging to the pajamas of the main protagonist, a teenager who has just learnt the story of her adopted baby sister who died in a car accident and whose ashes her parents and the baby's birth mother have dropped in a field (Munro 2006, 235). The parents see the ceremony as a final gesture, offering them closure: "tonight [...] we're going to go out and do this. And get rid of all this—misery and blame" (233). The burrs that cling to the girl's pajamas suggest otherwise.

Even more interesting is the fact that the word "burr" also means "the rough ridge left after cutting" (Merriam Webster), suggesting that they can also refer to a roughness or scar. The burrs could then be reinterpreted as traces, scars, intimating that something has happened which has left a mark, as the encounter has, long after the event. In her later fiction, Munro will often choose surprising images such as a footprint ("The Children Stay" from *The Love of a Good Woman*), marks on a tree ("Vandals" from *Open Secrets*) or imaginary traces (imaginary welts on the body in "Nettles" from *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*) as variants of the scar (the scar features in "Rich as Stink" from *The Love of a Good Woman*). The burrs in "Thanks for the Ride" may foreshadow Munro's later versions of scars that point to something that happened in the past, but whose traces can be recovered, enabling the character to remember the event.

The burrs as traces and the haunting cry are also a means for Munro to simultaneously suggest a return to patterns and resist closure. The story *suggests* that the encounter has left a mark.

In "The Shining Houses" Mary's ambivalent position, between the world of the new shining houses and the old

houses, is revealed throughout the story, with the opening lines suggesting the possibility of contact and intimacy:

And Mary found herself exploring her neighbour's life as she had once explored the lives of grandmothers and aunts [...]. She had almost forgotten that there are people whole lives can be seen like this. She did not talk to many old people any more. Most of the people she knew had lives like her own [...]. (19)

At first sight the emphasis is on the differences between Mary's present life and her former life, which is relegated to the distant past ("once", "did not anymore"). However, the adverb "almost" changes everything: "she had *almost* forgotten" shows that although Mary is starting a new life, away from her family, she has not really let go of the past. Mary finds connections with her former life and her own familiar world in her neighbour's house. What she finds is part of herself, and it is tempting to say that she *finds herself* when she finds herself exploring her neighbour's life. This is the reason why the description of the old houses on the side of the mountain clearly evokes the description of houses in other stories that take place in Southern Ontario. The echoes between the description of the old houses in "The Shining Houses" and the houses in "The Time of Death" are striking:

[...] thick smoke coming out of their chimneys, walls unpainted and patched and showing different degrees of age and darkening ("The Shining Houses" 24)

[...] the other wooden houses that had never been painted, with their steep patched roofs and their narrow, slanting porches, the wood-smoke coming out of their chimneys ("The Time of Death" 99)

The description of the surviving houses on the side of the nameless mountain turns them into houses from the past, and from another region. This also explains why the place matters to Mary, and why she fails to find words and arguments when it comes to defend Mrs. Fullerton: "she had no argument. She could try all night and never find any words to stand up to their words, which came at her now invincibly from all sides: *shack, eyesore, filthy, property, value.*" (27) This is precisely because the value of Mrs. Fullerton's place cannot be measured by the standards of property value—its worth is elsewhere, in its "memorable things" (de Certeau 105),

its objects that “have hollow spaces in which a past sleeps” (de Certeau 108), its “dark” spaces and shadows where the stories and legends that haunt it hide. Its worth is immaterial but real to people like Mary who can be tempted to listen to stories and explore ordinary people’s lives.

If we think that Mary finds something of herself and finds something of her former life when she goes to Mrs. Fullerton’s place, her powerlessness is all the more tragic at the end. She, who used to be able to penetrate into Mrs. Fullerton’s territory and go back into her own world, now stands alone, desolate, as if she was cutting herself from both her community and the other world: “there is nothing you can do at present but put your hands in your pockets and keep a disaffected heart”(29). Her disaffected—empty?—heart underscores the cost of her silence and powerlessness at the same time as she is aware that she is betraying and losing something that is close to her own past. And as in “Thanks for the Ride” there is the suggestion of an emotional withdrawal: “And Mrs. Fullerton was old, she had dead eyes, nothing could touch her.” (29) The verb “touch” clearly evokes the figurative hands in her pockets, which emblemizes Mary’s own attempt not to be touched. Mary is justifying her betrayal and emotional withdrawal by deciding that Mrs. Fullerton is the one who cannot be touched by anything.

At the end of “The Shining Houses” a sense of inevitability prevails, or in Deleuze and Guattari’s words, the line of rigid segmentarity prevails, as in “Thanks for the Ride”. Yet I would argue that “The Shining Houses” resists closure in spite of its ending, thanks to the embedded story which Mary gets to hear. By contrast, in “Thanks for the Ride” Dick does not hear much of the story Lois’s mother tells him (51), the truth being that he does not wish to listen to it. The reader does not get to read much about it either, except that the head of Lois’s father was cut off and that his coffin was closed. The embedded story also exudes a sense of something final. By contrast, the embedded story of Mr. Fullerton’s disappearance introduces a gap in Munro’s story, a line of flight, as an event that keeps repeating itself.

The image of the “dead eyes” on the final page echoes the opening scene in the garden, where Mrs. Fullerton’s eyes were described as “black as plums, with a soft inanimate sheen” (20), and where attention was drawn to her nose and mouth: “The life in her face was all in the nose and mouth” (20), which serves as a reminder that Mrs. Fullerton is a storyteller. In the

opening pages, Mrs. Fullerton comes alive and comes across as a consummate storyteller, punctuating her story with striking sentences such as “He’s no more dead than I am” (20). For her part, Mary is shown to be the listener par excellence, as demonstrated by the incipit: “Mary sat on the back steps of Mrs. Fullerton’s house, talking—or really listening—to Mrs. Fullerton, who sold eggs.” (19) Mary is first described as “talking” and then a dash introduces and sets off three words that apparently qualify “talking”, but due to its position, the adverb “really” can also mean very much, showing that Mary was [really listening] to Mrs. Fullerton, and to her story.

The story of Mr. Fullerton’s disappearance rests on the contrast between the details that add verisimilitude—the pie to be made, the clothes to be hung, the ripe black cherries, the pail full of cherries, the hat, the brown jacket, and his back—and the mystery surrounding the man. Not only is his fate mysterious (no one knows where he went, why he went, whether he will return) so is his existence as he is made to suddenly “come upon the scene” in the post office scene. This is what the clever position of the phrase “came upon the scene” achieves: “I had this place [...] before ever Mr. Fullerton came upon the scene. Why, one time down at the post office we was standing together by the wicket” (20). The man’s existence, from his first appearance to his disappearance, is an enigma that can only prevent closure.

Furthermore, each mention of his story pictures him as going and not only gone: “the broad blith back of Mr. Fullerton, disappearing down the road on a summer day” (19). The play on sounds, the alliterations, three /b/ sounds one after the other, an explosion of short words, and three /d/ sounds, in the next part of the sentence after the comma, that are far apart, can evoke the sound of the man’s retreating footsteps. A few pages later, Mrs. Fullerton describes him as going, using a present tense: “So off he goes down the road, walking down to where the old tram went” (21). The man keeps disappearing, creating the line of flight in the story that prevents closure and counterbalances the sense of an ending that the final lines evince.

The opening pages also suggest that stories need to be repeated in order to stay alive, which is what happens with this story. Mary smiles, asks a question, and encourages Mrs. Fullerton to say more. A dash highlights Mary’s strategy:

[...] as she had once explored the lives of grandmothers and aunts—by pretending to know less than she did, asking for some story she had heard before; this way, remembered episodes emerged each time with slight differences of content, meaning, colour, yet with a purer quality that usually attaches itself to things which are at least part legend. (19)

The dash draws attention to this key passage that defines stories and storytelling. Stories get richer and truer each time they are told, which underlines how necessary it is to *tell* these stories, in order for them to become legends. Stories never end, and are never exhausted since they get richer and truer each time they are told and changed. The opening page eerily echoes one of Eudora Welty's stories from *The Golden Apples*. "A Shower of Gold"⁵, opens with the mention of a husband who left his house one day never to return: "Her husband walked out of the house one day and left his hat on the banks of the [...] river" (Welty 9). Welty's King McCain becomes the object of rumours and stories, people claim to have seen his back (15), and through the years people would hear about him "here or there" (17). By incorporating this element from Welty's plotline into her own story, Munro further underscores the role of storytelling as retelling and recycling stories, which further prevents them from stopping to be told.

The endings of both stories apparently suggest that the protagonist's encounter with someone who does not belong to their world is cut short. Yet in "Thanks", Lois's haunting cry turns the story into a haunting story, suggesting reverberations long after the encounter. "The Shining Houses" is more pessimistic in this respect: Mary found echoes of her former life when she ventured into Mrs Fullerton's territory, a space where she could escape from the patterns of entrapment, which is going to be denied to her when the house is gone. However, the embedded story of the man who keeps walking down the lane provides an opening, a line of flight that contradicts the sense of closure.

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