

**Doctoral (PhD) Theses**

**ALICE MUNRO'S NEO-GOTHIC SHORT  
FICTION OF THE 1990s**

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## I. Aims of the Study

My dissertation proposes to read Alice Munro's fiction appearing in her volumes of the 1990s as female (neo-)gothic fiction, which proposition challenges the entrenched critical view that, except for its early phase, it is to be seen as part of the aesthetic tradition of realism. I wish to prove that her two volumes *Open Secrets* (1994) and *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998) evince a gothic vision and follow a female gothic aesthetic practice. The double aims of the dissertation thus are (1) to interrogate the critical myth of Munro's realist impulse and (2) to define the outlines of her gothic vision. Both lines of argumentation lead to claiming Munro's fiction of the 1990s for a female gothic tradition, which, I claim, it critically interrogates. The prefix 'neo-' signals this meta-gothic impulse.

Reading Munro's work as part of a female gothic tradition means the joint problematization of gender and genre. I will argue that what Munro criticism somewhat enigmatically refers to as the "Munroian" quality of her fiction originates in the use of female gothic representational strategies that take the patriarchal gender ideology at work in contemporary culture to task; at the same time, I will also demonstrate that Munro's fiction goes beyond the mere recycling of female gothic conventions by focusing on her neo-gothic challenges to some of the solutions the female gothic has found in order to rebalance gender inequities in a fictional space. Underlying my proposition is the view that the gothic as an aesthetic category cannot be divorced from its ideological determination as it was invented as a corrective to the vision of the early realist novel, which subsists on a particular understanding of the sex-gender system; it is this that the female gothic interrogates in terms of the social and psychological meanings of gender for women.

The dissertation focuses on selected short stories of *Open Secrets* and *The Love of a Good Woman*. The reason for choosing these volumes as the object of study is both theoretical and practical. (1) It is theoretical in the sense that I claim *Open Secrets* heralds a new phase in Munro's aesthetic, which *The Love of a Good Woman* continues. (2) The choice is practical in the sense that although Munro criticism has been burgeoning ever since the 1980s, most criticism focuses on her early volumes, whereas her volumes of the 1990s have not been discussed in a sustained study.

## II. Methods

My aim is to show to what extent Munro's fiction of the 1990s is gothic in its resistance to conform to several expectations in its negotiation of ideologically conceived boundaries while, with a meta-gothic impulse putting the gender ideology of female gothic

fiction also in relief. Therefore, against the background of systematic close reading the dissertation aims at a theoretically informed but rigorously text-centered focus that builds its argumentation on close engagement with the selected narratives while bringing together a range of theoretical and critical tools and sources. Close reading is privileged because (1) on account of the extreme complexity of Munro's narratives notwithstanding their shortness, I find that small, focused, local analyses are needed as well as because (2) my claims go against the grain of Munro criticism; therefore, I think my position needs to be elucidated on a closely textual basis.

The dissertation is divided into six main chapters. The Introduction is followed by Chapter 2, which outlines my understanding of the gothic and realism by juxtaposing their differences despite their common roots; I will then situate Munro within the female gothic tradition by pointing out how it shares in its vision as well as in what ways it intervenes into it. Chapters 3 to 5 provide a close reading of individual short stories grouped around major female gothic conventions. I will argue that Munro challenges these conventions in order to thematize her concern with their ideological thrust. Chapter 3 focuses on the bifurcation of the textual world into two, which creates the basic situation of the female gothic narrative. Chapter 4 investigates the erotic plot of the female gothic double plot structure, which focuses on the heroine's finding a companionate husband culminating in a happy ending, whereas Chapter 5 discusses the quest/ambition plot that is traditionally motivated by the search for a mother figure. Lastly, I sum up the results of my investigations in the Conclusion.

The second chapter starts by posing the question on what grounds the critical consensus about Munro's realism has been formulated. Via a discussion of the common roots of realism and the gothic as theorized by Helene Moglen and Robert Miles, I argue that both realism and the gothic are responses to the same dilemma crystallizing around the place of the human subject in the world.<sup>1</sup> But whereas realism responds with the creation of certain subjects characterized by autonomy, the gothic has traveled a different path. It was invented as a carnivalesque mode, developed in part to counter the formulating realist tradition. The question of the gothic is not whether an individual fits in or not, but whether a redrawing of the lines between the individual and the world is possible or not.<sup>2</sup> To this end, the gothic has developed a technique to destabilize the notion of the world by bifurcating it into two possible worlds at ideological odds with each other. The gothic plot is predicated on their juxtaposition

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<sup>1</sup> Moglen, Helene. *The Trauma of Gender: A Feminist Theory of the English Novel*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2001. esp. 1-12; Miles, Robert. "What Is a Romantic Novel?" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 34.2 (2001): 180-201. 180-96.

<sup>2</sup> Miles, "What" 191.

with the hero(ine) embarkig on a quest after crossing the boundary between them, here her strength of character is testad, she solves a puzzle that will answer questions about her family's history, which ultimately reinstates her into her rights in a world where a new gender economy steps into the place of the old one. This alternate possible world resolution is ideally designed to effect a shift in the reader's ideological allegiances as well—since the gothic has an educational mission. That is, readers should arrive at questioning the gender norms regulating women's position in the actual world.

In Munro's female (neo-)gothic two major revisions will be highlighted: (1) the ideological thrust of the female gothic fantasy becomes the new gothic otherworld itself; i.e., the fantasy that worthy heroines will be rewarded with a companionate husband keeps women imprisoned. (2) The heroine's relationship to other female characters is revised.

I argue that Munro metaphorically transforms the gothic convention of parallel worlds to problematize the ideology of gender as presented in the alternate possible world of the female gothic resolution. I argue that her narratives of the 1990s interrogate to what extent the female gothic resolution corroborates the upholding of the patriarchal sex/gender matrix of western societies by presenting heroines who (1) fail to be deserving heroines (Chapter 3), (2) opt out of the female gothic romance (Chapter 4), and (3) who seek connections other than the heterosexual companionate family that consists of the heroine and her adequately (re) engendered husband (Chapter 5).

The third chapter examines Munro's concerted revision of the central gothic convention of the bifurcation of the textual world, which systematically interrogates the construction of the female gothic heroine by undermining the female heroic value of irreproachability, which traditionally guarantees the female gothic romance closure (happy ending). I will point out how the revision of the convention of the two worlds affects the major female gothic topoi of "see[ing] differently,"<sup>3</sup> "conscious worth,"<sup>4</sup> and redemptive knowledge. I also argue that the intense visual quality of the narratives constructs her fiction as gothic because description does not stand in the service of realist particularization.

The fourth chapter focuses on Munro's traveling heroines. Travel in the life routes of female gothic heroines occupies a pivotal position. On the one hand, it establishes the basic situation, on the other hand, it also points to the paradoxical nature of the female gothic as both subversive and accommodating since the heroine's experiences during her travel to the

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<sup>3</sup> Wall, Cynthia Sundberg. "The Foundling as Heir." *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006. 201-230. 208.

<sup>4</sup> Radcliffe, Ann. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. 272. DeLamotte, Eugenia C. *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic*. New York: Oxford UP, 1990. 36-38.

gothic otherworld serve to convince readers that nothing can supersede domestic happiness. I will argue that Munro's neo-gothic heroines opt out of the promise of domestic bliss, the happy ending of the erotic plot in the female gothic double plot structure.

The fifth chapter focuses on motherhood. I show how Munro "writ[es] beyond the ending"<sup>5</sup> of the female gothic romance to search for adequate ways to connect female characters without recycling the underlying matrophobia of the female gothic. I argue that the "Gothic Mother" of her earlier fiction is recast as she gives her place over to three kinds of adult female figures. One of these lives out the female gothic dream of finding a deserving, i. e., sufficiently tamed, husband with whom she can form a companionate family that children would complicate beyond a tolerable extent, whereas the other two have not sidestepped motherhood, though only one of them welcomes it. I will call one type of Munro's recent mother figures as "institutional mothers" and the other as "reluctant mothers." While the former sacrifices herself at the altar of ideal motherhood, the latter consciously rebels against the institution of ideal motherhood. Her rebellion is directed at the joint institution of housekeeping—as women's only tolerable desire—and motherly self-sacrifice. I will also argue that Munro reroutes the conventional hostility of female figures and proposes a break with female gothic technologies (such as portioning out unwanted aspects of femininity among female monitory figures) by writing them into connection with one another.

The theoretical background to the discussion of female monitory figures (such as the monstrous housekeeper and nurse) is provided by Mikhail Bakhtin's and Mary Russo's theories of the grotesque, whereas to the discussion of the mother figures Melanie Klein's, Julia Kristeva's, and Barbara Creed's theories of the maternal and mothering will be enlisted, while I will hypothesize that Munro's proposal for a reconfigured model of female-female connection is to be sought in Jessica Benjamin's intersubjective theory of mothering based on the ideals of relationality and reciprocity while also recognizing the conflicts that perpetually need to be negotiated.

### III. Results

A. Position and Significance within Scholarship: My reading of Munro's narratives as neo-gothic texts attempts to resituate Munro as a female (neo-)gothic writer. I engage with critical traditions in three ways:

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<sup>5</sup> DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985. 4.

1. *Challenging the critical tradition of Munro's realism:* I argue that notwithstanding the varied critical approaches to Munro's fiction, realism (both as an aesthetic practice and as an ideological construct) has functioned as an insufficiently problematized reference point, the reasons of which are to be sought in the histories of Munro and of gothic criticism rather than in her artistic vision and aesthetic practice. I claim that the critical framework of the gothic for the discussion of Munro's work has numerous benefits: (1) it connects many of the previous critical discussions since her gothicism explains why in most discussions she is considered as part of the canonical realist tradition notwithstanding the fact that there is a constant need felt to qualify her aesthetic practice. (2) It redraws the perimeters of her portrayal of female life by lifting it out of second wave feminist critical discourse that has proved to be an impasse while (3) it also accounts for the adaptability of her fiction for the problematization of gender and (4) for psychological-psychoanalytical interpretations of women's inner life. (5) It throws light on the intertextuality of her work. (6) Furthermore, it provides a theoretical background against which to interpret the "Munrobian" idiosyncrasies of her fiction.

2. *Widening the critical tradition of Munrobian Gothic:* I claim that gothicism is not restricted to Munro's early fiction. I wish to prove that Munro's fiction of the 1990s is gothic because it utilizes several female gothic conventions and because its ideological thrust shows kinship with the female gothic.

3. *Drawing the Outlines of Munro's Female (Neo-)Gothic:* I understand the gothic as a carnivalesque site that makes ideological resistance to patriarchal gender discourses visible through its aesthetic practices and the female gothic as a mode within the gothic tradition positioned *vis a vis* the male gothic and concerned specifically with introducing the female perspective into the contestation. I argue that Munro does not merely adopt a repertoire of female gothic conventions but by revising them she metagothically interrogates the ideological base of the female gothic mode itself also, though without discarding it altogether.

Following Miles, I take two features to be the bottom line of the gothic phenomenon: (1) it is an ideological construct in the sense that it represents the contestation of several ideologies as ideologies; and (2) it has self-consciously developed strategies and techniques that are capable of delivering the full weight of the individual being under the siege of competing ideologies in a social discursive space. This also means that the gothic is a disparate structure deliberately searching for ways to give expression not only to the multiplicity of experience but to its rejection of the unifying and centralizing efforts of a rival

mode of literature concurrent with it (the realist novel) also. As such, it should be understood within the framework of heteroglossia and dialogicity as theorized by Bakhtin.<sup>6</sup>

In my understanding of the gothic I am also indebted to David Punter's work, who sees the gothic as a fantasy discourse aimed at recuperating a psychic loss. Accordingly, I think of female gothic fiction (especially the Radcliffean tradition) as an extended and elaborate daydream that seeks to intervene into discourse about women in western society and culture at large and to reinstate a female point of view about true (wo)manhood. Munro intervenes into this fantasy discourse by highlighting the impasse, as theorized by Diane Long Hoeveler, it has led to.

#### B. The major contributive findings of the dissertation:

1. I claim that Munro's fiction of the nineteen-nineties belongs to the tertiary phase<sup>7</sup> of the female gothic mode. While Munro still considers the female gothic as an ideal space for analyzing the construction of female identity shaped by ideologies of gender, she challenges and revises various conventions of the mode as she reconceptualizes the female gothic virtuous self. Therefore, her recent fiction is best approached as neo-gothic fiction.

2. I argue that the major bulk of critical writings have not discussed the gothicism of Munro's recent fiction for three reasons: (1) the times and circumstances of the canonization of her fiction, just as the critical disrepute of gothic fiction, propelled critical attention away from considering the gothic mode as a pivotal structuring force for Munro's narratives; (2) critics have identified the intense visual quality of her fiction as her interest in documentary realism rather than her investment in gothic visuality; (3) in her comments on her early novel she disowned an interest in the gothic mode, which critics have perpetuated in their own critique.

3. The convention of the gothic bifurcation of the world underlies Munro's recent fiction, which manifests itself not only as her theme of worlds alongside, but also as the juxtaposition of the present and the world of memory. I also contend that the Munrovia narrative method of intertwining parallel narratives that reflect on each other may also be interpreted as the narrative realization of the gothic bifurcation of the world, just like the growing intertextuality of her works.

4. Although Munro adheres to the inherited multi-layered texture of the female gothic as it appears in its double-plot structure, she rewrites the female subjectivities advanced by

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<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 2004. 259-85, esp. 269-73.

<sup>7</sup> Fowler, Alastair. *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982. 162.

both by experimenting with plot lines that go beyond their traditional ending. Thus, she challenges the femininity as advanced by female gothicists as well.

#### IV. Related Publications

##### A. Essays and Reviews

1. "A sötét szoba: Alice Munro Egy jóra való nő szerelme." *Árgus* (2010) (forthcoming)
2. "Munro's Auden: *Letters From Iceland*." *HJEAS – Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 14.1 (2008 Spring): 105-115.
3. "Alice Munro neo-gótikája: önéletírás." *Társadalmak, nyelvek, civilizációk*. Ed. Imre Garaczi and István Szilágyi. Veszprém: Veszprémi Humán Tudományokért Alapítvány, 2008. 170-173.
4. "Scottish Protestant Religion and the Open Text: Muriel Spark's and Alice Munro's Two Narratives." *EPONA - E-Journal of Ancient and Modern Celtic Studies* I.3 (2008). [http://www.epona-journal.hu/epona\\_languages/English/files/issue\\_0809/SzFA\\_Scottish.pdf](http://www.epona-journal.hu/epona_languages/English/files/issue_0809/SzFA_Scottish.pdf)
5. "Crossing the Border: Cross-Dressing and Transgression in Alice Munro's 'The Albanian Virgin.'" *Szabadpart* 35 (2007): <http://www.kodolanyi.hu/szabadpart/35/index.html>
6. "Alice Munro önéletrajzi elbeszélései – A beszéd mint létmód." *A nő mint szubjektum, a női szubjektum*. Ed. Nóra Séllei. Orbis Litterarum Világirodalmi sorozat. Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetem Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 2007. 241-70.
7. "Narrative Divergence and the Search for a Self: A Crazy Old Lady in Alice Munro's 'Cortes Island'". *HUSSE Papers, 2005: Proceeding of the Seventh Biennial Conference*. Ed. Jenő Bárdos. Veszprém, 2006. 173-82.
8. "The Gendering of Individual Will at the Birth of a Nation in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*." *Key Notions in English Studies* 2 Ser. ed. Jenő Bárdos, ed. Ildikó Hock Némethné and Marianna Vadnay Ötvösné. Veszprém: Veszprémi Egyetemi, 2001. 157-69.
9. Review of *Alice Munro* by Corall Ann Howells. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998.) *HJEAS – Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 6.1 (Spring 2000): 203-05.

##### B. Conference Papers

1. "Alice Munro utazó hősnői." Lecture. Társadalmak, nyelvek, civilizációk Conference. Veszprém, Pannon Egyetem. 3 December 2010.



2. "Spatial Gothic Studies and the Canonization of the Canadian Gothic: Understanding Alice Munro's and Margaret Atwood's Gothic." Lecture. Debrecen, HAAS8. 17-19 November 2010.
3. "Jane Eyre in Australia: Professional Femininity in a Neo-Gothic Narrative." Lecture. Veszprém, VEAB, Angol Munkabizottság. 09 December 2009.
4. "Az Alzheimer-kórrol, a vágyról és a művészet reprezentációs korlátairól Alice Munro egy elbeszélésében." Mi/Más Conference. Eger, Eszterházy Károly Főiskola. 19-20 March 2008.
5. "Alice Munro neogótikája: önéletírás." Lecture. Társadalmak, nyelvek, civilizációk Conference. Veszprém, Pannon Egyetem. 23-24 November 2007.
6. "Munro's Auden: *Letters From Iceland*." Előadás. W.H. Auden – A Centenary Workshop Conference. Veszprém, Pannon Egyetem. 9 November 2007.
7. "Crossing the Border: Cross-Dressing and Transgression in Alice Munro's 'The Albanian Virgin'." Lecture. VEAB, Székesfehérvár, 13 September 2007.
8. "John Knox and James Hogg: The Transfiguration of the Scottish Past in Two Narratives by Spark and Munro." Lecture. Hungarian Society for the Study of English ("HUSSE 8") Conference. Szeged, 25-27 January 2007.
9. "Leaving Home: Border-Crossing in Two Stories By Alice Munro" Lecture. Frontiers, Borderlines, and Frames. The Hungarian Association of American Studies (HAAS) Biennial Conference. Pécs, 6-7 October 2006.
10. "Alice Munro önéletrajzi elbeszélései: a beszéd mint lévmód." Lecture. A nő mint szubjektum, a női szubjektum. Conference, Debrecen, 7-8 April 2006.
11. "Remembering Old Women: Reading 'Cortes Island' by Alice Munro." Lecture. Hungarian Society for the Study of English ("HUSSE 7") Conference. Veszprém, 27-29 January 2005.

## V. Further Publications

### A. Essays, Reviews, Translation

1. "Anne Enright, a 2007-es Booker-díj nyertese." EPONA - E-Journal of Ancient and Modern Celtic Studies 1 évf., 2. sz. (December 2007). <http://www.epona-journal.hu>.
2. Kramer, Martin. "A Közel-Kelet egykor és ma." Transl. Szabó F. Andrea. Mediterrán Világ 3. Veszprém: Veszprémi Humán Tudományokért Alapítvány, 2007. 17-36.

3. Panofsky, Erwin. Bevezetés. Problems in Titian. Mediterrán Világ. Transl. Szabó F. Andrea. Mediterrán Világ 5 Veszprém: Veszprémi Humán Tudományokért Alapítvány, 2008. 181-204.
4. "A Contested Place: The Grand Ronde Reservation." Modern Filológiai Közlemények. 5.1 (2003): 84-98.
5. "Appropriating Left-Speech: Women Writing during the Depression." The AnaChronisT. (2002): 180-89.
6. Szabó F., Andrea és Dókus Tünde. "Great Expectations: Reflections on the 1996 Entrance Exam." NovELTy - A Journal of English Language Teaching and Cultural Studies in Hungary. 3.3 (December 1996): 68-74.

#### B. Conference Papers

1. "On Arthur Miller." Mindentudó Ház-VEAB. Veszprém Városi Művelődési Központ. 25 January 2010.
2. "Edgar Allan Poe születésének 150. évfordulójára." Lecture. Mindentudó Ház. Veszprém Városi Művelődési Központ-VEAB. 18 January 2009.
3. "Mothers and Machines: Women in Three Naturalist Novels." Lecture. Hungarian Society for the Study of English ("HUSSE 5") Conference. Eger, 2001.
4. Szabó F., Andrea and Dókus Tünde. "Great Expectations (Entrance Examinations in Higher Education)" Lecture. International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language. Conference, Eger, 1996.
5. Szabó F., Andrea és Dókus Tünde. „Media Studies in Higher Education.” Lecture. International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language. Conference, Szombathely, 1995.
6. "Heroes: A Unusual Reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's Novels and Short Stories." Lecture. Országos Tudományos Diákköri Konferencia, Debrecen, 1995.