

“Madeleine! That Madwoman!”: Gothic Tropes in Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women*

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Abstract: While works of Southern Ontario Gothic fiction attempt to distinguish themselves from their American and British predecessors, they ultimately rely on tropes from the Gothic tradition. Alice Munro’s novel *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) invokes these Gothic tropes, including the flatly characterized domestic madwoman who is debased through a zoomorphic depiction. By first emphasizing the liminality of her quintessentially Canadian setting, Munro not only subtly informs her depiction of women but also differentiates the Southern Ontario Gothic genre from its American and British counterparts.

In Graeme Gibson’s 1973 collection of interviews with Canadian authors, Timothy Findley coined the term “Southern Ontario Gothic” to categorize works of Canadian fiction that explore the “merciless forces of Perfectionism, Propriety, Presbyterianism, and Prudence” (Hepburn and Hurley). Alice Munro’s *The Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) is the narrator-protagonist Del Jordan’s account of growing up in Southern Ontario and is a notable example of this niche genre of Gothic fiction. While the genre seeks to distinguish itself from its American and British counterparts, several familiar Gothic tropes—including madness, spatial liminality, and confinement—are presented in Munro’s novel. In the opening section titled “The Flats Road,” the novel employs the Gothic trope of the domestic madwoman to reflect the liminality of the isolated setting. Thus, the novel reinforces the importance of the connection between character and setting in the Gothic tradition.

The novel portrays Del’s Uncle Benny’s home on the

Flats Road as a liminal space before presenting the Gothic trope of the domestic madwoman. The novel opens with a description of Uncle Benny's home, which is situated at the demarcation between wilderness and civilization: his home is "Away at the edge of the bush—the bush that turned into swamp, a mile further in" (Munro 4). Uncle Benny's home's proximity to the wilderness evokes Cynthia Sugars' assessment of early Canadian Gothic writings that present the Canadian frontier as filled with monstrosities and Gothic in its vast emptiness (Sugars 20). Munro further emphasizes this spatial ambiguity with the animals Uncle Benny keeps caged on his property. Between his house and the bush "were several pens in which he had always some captive animals—a half-tame golden ferret, a couple of wild mink, [and] a red fox whose leg had been torn in a trap" (Munro 4). Like the house that is situated in a space that is neither completely wild nor civilized, the descriptions of Uncle Benny's animals suggest they are neither wild nor domesticated: the ferret is "half-tame," the fox is only tame due to its debilitating injury, and the raccoons are "fond of chewing gum" (4). Munro also employs animalistic comparisons in the description of Uncle Benny, further blurring the distinction between wild and civilized in this setting: he has "fierce eyes, a delicate predatory face" (4), and he smells like "fish, furred animals, [and] swamp" (10). Both the human and animal inhabitants of the Flats Road are intimately connected to their semi-wild surroundings, and the bilateral anthropomorphic and zoomorphic descriptions reflect the spatial uncertainty of Uncle Benny's house.

Animalistic characterizations also inform the settings in literature from the Southern United States. In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), the motif of the animalistic human is invoked through Jem's description of Boo Radley: "Boo was about six-and-a-half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that's why his hands were bloodstained" (13). Like Uncle Benny, Boo's ambiguous characterization as simultaneously human and animal underscores the moral ambiguity of Maycomb County; while the community presents

itself as morally upright, the town's deep-seated racial prejudices become evident over the course of Tom Robinson's trial. The question of miscegenation in American novelist William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) elicits a similar destabilizing effect in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County by blurring the distinction between slaves, who are often reductively compared to animals, and white citizens. As in *Lives of Girls and Women*, the conflation between human and animal in these examples of Gothic fiction from the American South emphasizes the moral and spatial liminality of their settings.

While Benny's animalistic description demonstrates his connection to his liminal environment, the zoomorphic descriptions of Uncle Benny's wife, Madeleine, indicate her propensity for violence. When Benny invites Del and her brother Owen to discreetly meet Madeleine's infant daughter Diane, Owen is more interested in seeing Benny's ferret; conversely, Del is intrigued to see Madeleine, the newest addition to Uncle Benny's menagerie of captive beings. Del's mother eventually warns her children to not "go over there, never mind about the ferret, I don't want anybody maimed" (18). Rather than worry about the potential harm caused by the ferret, Del's mother zoomorphizes Benny's new wife by worrying she would leave her children "maimed." Sadly, Del's mother's warning becomes prophetic when it is later revealed that Madeleine is physically abusing her infant daughter. Del's father further dehumanizes Madeleine when he compares her to a "pack of wildcats" (19). These predatory descriptions of Madeleine follow other examples of Gothic fiction in which animalistic comparisons are used to subtly emphasize character traits. For example, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout Finch's last name emphasizes her innocence while Mayella Ewell is described as a "steady-eyed cat with a twitchy tail" (Lee 181) to underscore her deceitfulness that will ultimately cost Tom Robinson his life. Furthermore, animal comparisons are often used in conjunction with spatial confinement to emphasize the Gothic horror within a domestic setting. For example, Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic" from Charlotte Brontë's

Jane Eyre (1847), is compared to a wild animal when Jane first sees her:

In the deep shade at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell; it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal. (Brontë 293)

Like Madeleine, Bertha Mason is zoomorphized while locked in her domestic setting. In these examples from American, British, and Southern Ontarian Gothic fiction, the presentation of the supposedly violent and animalistic female raises a question of infinite regression: are these individuals entrapped because of their supposed propensities to violence, or is their violence a result of their entrapment? The motif of the domestically caged female engages the initial presentation of the setting in which there is a seamless transition between humans and animals. Like the animals on Benny's property, the women confined to their domestic settings become both animalistic grotesqueries and figures of sympathy.

The novel also explicitly invokes the motif of the Gothic madwoman through Madeleine's initial introduction and subsequent concealment. After Uncle Benny asks for Del's help in answering a classified advertisement for a wife, he quickly receives a response from Madeleine's brother. Like Bertha Mason, who is presented to Mr. Rochester by her father and shipped away from her Jamaican home, Madeleine is commodified by her brother and similarly geographically displaced when she becomes Benny's reluctant bride. Benny fails to introduce his new wife to Del's family, and Madeleine remains confined to Uncle Benny's home, much like Bertha Mason at Thornfield Hall or Mayella Ewell in her family home "behind the town garbage dump" (Lee 170). Del's mother suggests to Benny, "you'll have to bring your bride to see us" (Munro 16), yet Benny's repetitive affirmations to this suggestion paradoxically indicate his intention to conceal Madeleine. Del recalls that "Uncle Benny said he would. He said yes he sure would. As soon as she got

herself together after the trip, yes, he sure would" (16). The repetitious affirmations are ominously negated in the next paragraph that begins, "But he didn't. There was no sign of Madeleine" (16). Like the entrapped and geographically displaced Bertha Mason, who is locked away in Thornfield Hall by Mr. Rochester, Madeleine is only tentatively introduced to Del and the reader when she arrives on the Flats Road.

Munro's novel also establishes the permeable barrier between truth and fiction on the Flats Road to allow for the further debasement of the Gothically caricatured madwoman. Like Bertha Mason, whose story is told by Mr. Rochester since she is afforded no lines of dialogue in *Jane Eyre* (Atherton), Madeleine's story becomes malleable when she is no longer present. After leaving Benny unexpectedly, the memory of Madeleine gradually changes from tragic to comedic in the minds of Del and her family. Del recalls that "After a while we would all just laugh, remembering Madeleine" (Munro 27). Although Madeleine's story involves the abuse of her infant child, the people of the Flats Road remember it "like a story" that "Uncle Benny could have made up" (27). The novel relies on the thin distinction between the grotesque and the intriguing that is quintessentially Gothic—the woman that once invoked fear in Del gradually becomes a laughable distant memory. Benny uses a similar strategy when Del's mother realizes that Diane's bruises were a result of parental abuse: Benny "started chuckling [and] he couldn't stop, it was like hiccoughs" (21). Rather than address the horror of Madeleine abusing her child, the family reconfigures the memory into a comic and, therefore, manageable memory by simply remembering her as "Madeleine! That madwoman!" (27).

The descriptions of the other female inhabitants of Flats Road further emphasize the gendered Gothic debasement of women as fictional motifs. While describing the Flats Road, Del discusses Irene Pollox, one of the "two idiots on the road" (8). Del remembers Irene as a threatening figure who would "hang over her gate crowing and flapping like a drunken rooster" (9). Del also recalls that Irene was ghostlike since she is "white-haired" with skin as "white as

goosefeathers" (9). The description of Irene relies on several of the same Gothic tropes that characterize Bertha Mason and Mayella Ewell: by placing Irene behind her "gate" she is spatially confined to her property, while the figurative comparison to a rooster is a zoomorphic debasement. Irene becomes a further embodiment of the Gothic madwoman who is reflective of the unsettling space she inhabits. She is simultaneously a person and animal, a spectre and human, and a victim and villain.

While Southern Ontario Gothic literature differentiates itself from its American and British predecessors through its reliance on the inimitable Canadian landscape, it simultaneously relies on familiar Gothic motifs, including the domestic madwoman and zoomorphic character descriptions. Despite these similarities, the novel uses the spatial liminality of the Flats Road to distinguish itself within the Gothic genre. Del's description of the Flats Road, in which the distinctions between wild/civilized and truth/fiction are permeable, demonstrates the essential connection between characters and their surroundings in this niche genre of Canadian fiction.

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