

DELINEATION OF WOMAN SUFFERING IN ALICE MUNRO'S *RUNAWAY*

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The stories of the collection *Runaway* are very much concerned to women's emotions and thoughts about themselves and their circumstances. They keep an eye on the unsteady progress of those thoughts and feelings with great subtlety and accuracy. In the broadest sense, each of the stories is about a woman picking up knowledge, about the consequences thereof and about knowing herself. Some women characters of Munro are young adults, some are mature individuals flashing back on their past. Indeed, with a single partial exception, the stories are narrated entirely different from the perspectives of women. The usual subject matter in the stories is about love, most often between a woman and a man, occasionally between parents and children. Munro delineates her characters' inner and outer lives with delicacy and nuance, always sympathetically, but with a strong sense of irony and dryness which shades sometimes into a apathy which is almost ferocious. She does not hesitate from revealing her characters to the most painful thoughts and revelations.

Rarely men are in focus in this collection. Most of the male characters are not especially attractive individuals and they are seen only through women's point of view. The absence of fully-developed male protagonists might be seen as a limitation in Munro, but it is perhaps a simple matter of artistic choice on her own part.

The characters and their circumstances are most meaningful in and of themselves, requiring no external interpretation. She is an evocative and complex writer so one feels a near compulsion to talk, to explain and to share. The initial story in *Runaway* is probably one least likely to be seriously reduced by comment and analysis. It also introduces themes, perspectives and approaches which Munro develops in different ways within the following stories

The pivot character in the story *Runaway* is Carla, a young lady fixed in a relationship with a moody, rather threatening lover named Clark. She is one of the least beneficent of the women delineated in this short story collection, with her miseries, her incapacity to see herself clearly or manage her emotions. She is delineated as if she sees herself as captive to Clark and, again, in a scene of crisis, as someone with no existence separate from him. Carla is quite young, so her under-age excitement and shallow sense of self have not yet undergone.

“This was the summer of rain and more rain,”¹ the narrative voice asserts us at the starting of the story, speaking certainly for Carla. Continue rain sets a pervading atmosphere of suspicion and strife. The confliction that Carla and Clark’s boarding and riding stable had will fail for lack of customers. Clark’s plan to blackmail their neighbor, Sylvia creates this discord. The rain seems to function as atmosphere and symbol, but when it finally breaks, the relief is illusory. Feelings of resolution and renewed happiness for the couple, which the sun brings with it, prove frivolous and certainly temporary. It may be that Munro is quietly commenting here on the writer’s art, suggesting that symbols can be too harsh and misleading a guide to understanding.

Munro depicts her characters without illusion as to their weak points. All have certain weak points, although Carla appears particularly so, perhaps because only she is at the center of Munro’s consideration. In an attempt to satisfy Clark and to stimulate their sexual life, Carla has developed a short and fictitious story about how the dying Mr. Jamieson has been stimulated by her and sought her sexual favors during her visits to help with the housework. Carla is now entrapped in her lie, being unable to tell Clark the truth – that she was never even once alone with Mr. Jamieson – even as he forces her to re-visit Sylvia after the death of her husband to set the groundwork for his scheme to blackmail Sylvia into giving him money to maintain her well-known poet husband’s prestige and name seamless.

This rainy summer’s suffering for Carla is the absence of her pet Flora, a cute and beautiful white goat to which Carla has developed a strong affection, maybe as a counterweight to her increasing uncertain relationship and anguish with Clark. Flora has fled away from the stables, adding to Carla’s demur and discomfort in her life. Carla dreams of Flora, a creature which can be seen as representing Carla’s earlier, happy, carefree state with Clark or as an object of support or even self-awareness in Carla’s apparently shattered life. Flora is described as looking at Carla:

With an expression that was not quite sympathy—it was more like comradely mockery. She was quick and graceful and provocative as a kitten, and her resemblance to a guileless girl in love had made them both [Carla and Clark] laugh. . . . but the comradeship with Flora was quite different, Flora allowing her no sense of superiority.²

The moment when the plot makes a sudden shift to Sylvia, we understand that she, having developed an infatuation with Carla’s irresponsible and rapturous personality. But that visit goes very differently than expected for both Sylvia and Carla. Carla breaks down under the stress of what Clark expects her to do. Although she avoids telling the older woman about the blackmail scheme, she does, amidst much weeping, tell Sylvia about the loss of Flora and, when pressed, about her bitterness with Clark. Sylvia takes control of the situation, urges Carla to separate from Clark. Affected, perhaps, by the wine and food which Sylvia has provided, Carla brightens up, agrees to the plan and accordingly boards a bus for Toronto. So, Carla appears to be headed for a new, more self-examined, independent life, and it seems important that Flora’s absence no longer appears her thoughts.

An antithesis occurs immediately. While Sylvia is thinking over the day’s events, Carla’s new-found composure is coming unglued on the bus. As she reaches the third stop she has run through a series of memories and feelings, including a regretting acknowledgment that she has adapted truth somewhat with Sylvia in order to live up to what she imagined to be the latter’s expectations of her, as well as increasing self-doubts and an increasingly bitter feeling that she is unable to live without Clark. She gets off the bus and makes a call to Clark to come.

Now the situation makes a different turn. The sun comes out; the summer is saved for the riding stable; Clark and Carla are in love again; the sex is good. Even a trip which Clark makes to Sylvia's house, apparently to return clothing which Sylvia had given to Carla, but indeed, one doubts, to bully and threaten Sylvia for having urged Carla's attempt at flight, doesn't turn out badly. Just as Clark's presence and talk seems most threatening to Sylvia, Flora reappears all of a sudden in a kind of magical dance, as highlighted in the fog by a passing car's headlights. The mood shifts; Clark is deflected and gives up any plans he might still have been nurturing about blackmailing Sylvia.

The narrative turns yet again in the final section, however. We come to know that Clark did not bring Flora home. In fact, he never told Carla about the goat's appearance at Sylvia's. Carla is taken aback, therefore, when she gets a letter from Sylvia concerning Flora's return. Still, she doesn't act. She is speechless and blank.

At night when Clark put his arms around her—busy as he was now, he was never too tired, never cross—she did not find it hard to be cooperative, but it was as if she had a murderous needle somewhere in her lungs, and by breathing carefully, she could avoid feeling it. But every once in a while she had to take a deep breath, and it was still there.³

After returning from Sylvia's, in bed with Carla, Clark tells her: "When I read your note, it was just like I went hollow inside. It's true. If you ever went away, I'd feel like I didn't have anything left in me".⁴ As one reads it, he is compelled to believe in these words positively, as one more nice effect of the sun's coming out. But, upon reflection, it's clear that Clark could just as well be lying to Carla or even threatening her. Munro leaves the meaning obscure. And the concluding words of the story are ambiguous as well. While we may realize strongly that Carla is foolish and self-deceived to hold out against temptation, *i.e.*, to seek the knowledge of Clark's motives and her own that might come from finding Flora's bones in the woods, and that she is easily making herself pregnable to some future abuse from Clark once their new sexual high is over, it is also true that we cannot predict for sure. Carla, like anyone, may eventually find an occasion to find the truth and to liberate her with self-awareness and self-sufficiency.

Finally, what are we to think about Flora? The beautiful white goat is apparently meant to be a symbol in this story. But almost too probably so, it appears. Once again it is hard not to suspect an artist's irony on Munro's part. Symbols are fun, she seems to imply, without ever putting it in words, but once again they are a poor guide to understanding.

References

1. Munro Alice, Run Away (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004) p.4.
2. Ibid., p. 9.
3. Ibid., p. 46.
4. Ibid., p. 42.