

ENCLOSED SPACES IN GRACE PALEY'S AND ALICE MUNRO'S ARTIST STORIES

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For the female artist, the concept of space – signifying either a “room of one’s own,” as defined by Virginia Woolf in 1928, or, in a more recent and more professional connotation, an “office” or “studio” – stands for a personal and private place where female artists can indulge in their artistic endeavors. Privacy has always been considered tremendously important for both male and female artists, but, for the female artist, this stands out as an absolute condition of her art as it requires an appropriate space where she can create, away from her household responsibilities. In the words of Virginia Woolf, “killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (Woolf 151). The space of the house has always been considered domestic and female; by destroying “the Angel in the House,” the female artist has attempted either to endow the domestic space with a new functionality, that of an artistic space, or to leave the *space* of the house for a different one altogether. The physical space of her creation can therefore acquire a private mental aspect, which encompasses art and the act of writing.

In “Multiple Challenges: The Canadian Artist Story and Gender” (2008), Reingard M. Nischik defines the artist story as “a generic offshoot of the artist novel, a shorter piece of fiction that concentrates on a significant episode (or a few episodes) in the life of an artist rather than rendering the whole panorama of his development or life” (41). In the artist stories by Grace Paley and Alice Munro, which foreground the figure of the woman artist, the fictional woman writer strives to find in the house the privacy required by the act of writing itself. Failing to do so, she finds no other solution than to leave the space of the house, which is enclosed, confining, spiritually stifling, and ultimately impossible to accept and live in. However, Paley’s and Munro’s fictional writer characters find alternative spaces where the privacy of writing can be accomplished, either in the intimacy of a small “office” for the Canadian artist or in a larger New York setting within the Jewish community in the case of the American woman writer.

In this essay, I analyse the significance of the enclosed space of the house in a selection of stories by Grace Paley published in *The Little Disturbances of Man* (1959), *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974) and *Later the Same Day* (1985), and Alice Munro’s “The Office” from *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968). The comparative analysis of Paley’s and Munro’s female artists discussed here foregrounds the ardent need of

both women writers to escape the confinement of the family space and to enter a space of their own where they can produce their art. I also consider the social and psychological constraints placed on female artists in American and Canadian contexts, respectively. Alter-egos of the authors themselves, the fictional female artists portrayed by Grace Paley and Alice Munro, illustrate icons of artists fighting not only against femininity as a restrictive social code, but also against mental images which gender-role definitions inflict on them. Creating and writing from a socially marginalised position, either as a Jewish-American female artist or as a Canadian female artist, both North-American writers have encountered the psychological restrictions of gender conventions which have hindered their gender affirmation.

I also argue that in Paley's and Munro's artist stories, female artists face several constraints. Firstly, the artist, be that female or male, is confronted with several factors: social and cultural environment, marginalisation on account of economic factors or, in a postmodern world, by a commodified mass-consumption of art. Secondly, a female artist finds it even more difficult to express her artistic voice, feeling herself also constrained by her domestic roles as mother and wife. Her privacy and independence as an artist finds itself at a risk in a confining place like the house. Thirdly, Paley's and Munro's female protagonists are further limited by their respective Jewish and Canadian identities. In the 1960s, Grace Paley's Jewish identity impacted upon her own ability to belong to the mainstream WASP (White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant) artists, which, in turn, may have stifled her recognition as a talented writer, reflected in the character of Faith. In *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Frederic Jameson defined American postmodern culture as "the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world" (65), which underlines the domination and hegemony of American cultural goods. According to Jameson, American culture has asserted its top hierarchical position within cultural canons for a long time, setting the tone in art and culture in our era. From this perspective, being either a Canadian male or female artist can only represent a drawback and place the affirmation of one's artistic value at a disadvantage. Munro's female artist meets, in the characters of her husband and her future landlord, indifference and rejection, which reinforce the prejudice and discrimination against Canadian female artists in the 1960s.

Grace Paley and Alice Munro imagined the American and Canadian female characters as semi-autobiographical or narrator personae, whose subordinate experiences as women writers exemplified their status as "other." For instance, referring to Munro's writing, Reingard M. Nischik argues that Alice Munro's "preferred choice of female

protagonists [and] her privileging of a female perspective” and of “female themes” are among the “three main characteristics” of the Canadian writer’s work (Nischik, “(Un-) Doing Gender” 206), in addition to the regional attachments and the personal touch of her writings. Also, the preference for both feminist themes and a feminist perspective can be considered a characteristic of Grace Paley’s literary works. In the artist stories by Paley and Munro, the concept of the enclosed space of the house will reveal profoundly similar as well as highly distinct features for the woman writer’s search of her unique artistic space. Moreover, the different approaches which both female artists take to the enclosed space and the house reflect the rich and varied facets of female psychology and feminine artistry.

Grace Paley’s short-story collections, *The Little Disturbances of Man* (1959), *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974) and *Later the Same Day* (1985) deal with the Jewish-American protagonist and spokeswoman of the Jewish community, Faith Asbury, and, specifically, with her development as a writer. Faith Asbury discovers the creative process of writing as a courageous act, emerging in a historically marginalised Jewish community where women’s voices were peripheral, if not completely silenced. In his study of women’s diasporic experience, entitled *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (1976), Irving Howe stresses the disadvantages presented by Jewish women’s education and lower social status within the Jewish community. Howe’s view is illustrated by Faith’s inferior position. A clear comparison can be drawn here with Munro’s semi-autobiographical heroine. In a meta-fictional manner, “The Office” recounts the events which Alice Munro herself experienced as a woman writer in the early 1960s in Vancouver. In this short story, included in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), the fictional woman artist relates various facets of being a female artist in a country which, according to Lionel Wilson’s statement in 1976, provides a “chilly climate for artists” (Wilson 1), and, therefore, constitutes a culturally depreciative environment for Munro’s character.

In Grace Paley’s short stories, as a woman and mother, Faith Asbury strives to provide an appropriate environment for her children, despite her unstable marital relationships. This takes place within the larger social and political turmoil during the 1960s and the 1970s. The collage of non-chronological short stories, in which Faith recreates herself with each short story, combines and correlates Jewish spiritual heritage, male-female relations and the bonding between different female characters and political activism. Again, Munro offers an apt parallel. In “The Office,” the female protagonist considers writing not as a solution which ensures a comfortable environment for her family, but experiences it as a *modus vivendi* in relation to her identity as a female artist. In

this case, the act of writing springs from a growing awareness of her audacious will to write away from her family's cozy environment. It is within the traditionally female sphere of the house that the female protagonist's idea of "having an office," so much like "a piece of self-indulgence" with "its sound of dignity and peace" (Munro 1968: 60), de-stabilises the prevailing patriarchal law. Her husband's apparent support masks his own distrust of her creative power and reduces itself to a short and conclusive answer: "[g]o ahead, if you can find one cheap enough" (Munro 1968: 61).

Though as "unconvincing" and "phony" (Munro 1968: 59) as it can be, the disclosure which the protagonist makes to herself that she is a writer establishes writing as a profession in itself. Moreover, the term "office" provides a more professional connotation than Virginia Woolf's designation of "room," which certainly indicates a progressive attitude towards writing as a profession undertaken by female artists in the twentieth century. However, the "office" this fictional character wants to work in is more of "a combination living room and office" (Munro 1968: 62), which symbolises that she has been refused entrance into the professional world of writing. In the case of the woman artist, the issue of professionalism becomes even more stringent. The term "housewife," so often associated by critics with the writer Alice Munro, brings even more doubt to the concept of the female artist as a professional artist. Also, as JoAnn McCaig (2001) has stated, "the conflict between the discourse of marriage and motherhood (selflessness, submission, woman) and authorship (selfishness, power, man) recurs throughout her work and her archive" (McCaig 68). In an interview with Harold Horwood, Munro also mentions the labels attributed to her by *The Victoria Paper* and *The Globe and Mail* at the start of her literary career, which described her as "Mother of Three" and as "a shy housewife," respectively (Horwood 128). These comments can be seen as an indirect attack on the writer's artistic value.

The female artist/housewife duality is suggestively summarised by the artist-heroine Elaine Risely in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988): "I am a painter. I even put that on my passport, in a moment of bravado, since the other choice would have been *housewife*" (15). Elaine's declaration that she is an artist seems similar to Munro's character leaving the space of the house. Going away from the space of the house stands for the female artist's unconscious attempt to get rid of the designation "housewife" and it also defines the female artist herself in more professional terms.

Paradoxically, for Munro's female artist, the house remains the territory of the powerful male artist, since this space may constitute an area where *his* creativity is recognised and therefore protected: "A house is all right for a man to work in. Everybody recognizes that his work exists. He is not expected to answer the telephone,

to find things that are lost, to see why the children are crying, or feed the cat” (Munro 1968: 60). Therefore, the meaning of the syntagm “she is the house” (60) indicates a reality which needs to be further denied so that the female artist may have a real chance to develop her still fragile artistic persona. It is not the separation from family issues and household work for the primacy of art in life which Munro wants to emphasise, but rather a new spirituality in a free space outside the enclosed family space, where she can wage her own artistic battles.

Due to the characters’ different personalities and experiences, from where they draw their inspiration, the artistic, spiritual space for which the two female artists search has almost divergent connotations. For the New Yorker Faith, the space of “the office” coincides with the large area of the public parks, streets and playgrounds in Brooklyn and Bronx, where she meets her female friends and takes care of her two boys, Richard and Anthony. These spaces become the only medium through which Faith’s art can be expressed. Her chosen artistic space is a larger area than simply her house, which corresponds to a freer spiritual inwardness than Munro’s female character. Faith Asbury constantly needs human interaction and the public space of New York Central Park and Greenwich Village turns out to be the right contact zone where all sorts of spiritual attachments are mediated. In Eckstein’s words, “Paley’s women move from bedrooms and kitchens to meeting rooms and city streets” (139). In a large New York City area, Faith’s stories, similarly to Paley’s short fiction, “are a kind of New York chamber music in which the instruments are the voices of the city – Greenwich Village, more specifically, 11th Street between Sixth and Seventh” (Remnick 131). In contrast to the Canadian woman writer, Faith does not look for a fixed, definite place to write, but her search for art and inspiration emerges very naturally within the space of her family, community and city.

Another distinction that sets apart these creative journeys from the family enclosed spaces of the two protagonists lies in their relation to the concept of motherhood. As fictional representations of the woman artist, Faith and the Canadian female artist exemplify the female artist/housewife dichotomy, since the women artists are often labelled and associated with the notion of the housewife. Faith’s motherhood overlaps in many respects with her artistic endeavours. Paley does not hesitate to articulate the difficulties and obstacles faced by women writers who are also mothers. She expresses the difficulty of raising her kids “with one hand typing behind my back to earn a living” (Paley, “Two Short Sad Stories” 91). However, she manages to combine bringing up Richard and Anthony with writing. Moreover, the warm company of her children and the fellowship of her female friends and even of the strangers whom she

meets in parks and playgrounds give Faith energy, strength and a fresh outlook on life. All this experience will eventually be reflected in her own writing.

The relationship between mother and child is not foregrounded in Munro's artist story, thus implying the lack of impact her children and family have on her art. This sets her apart from Faith. In Robert Thacker's words, "[the Canadian artist] has an interest that takes her away – mentally if not physically – from [her] marriage and children" (173). For Faith, her children link her to the public sphere – the parks and neighbourhood – from which she draws inspiration for her writing. Conversely, the Canadian female artist regards family as an obstacle to her artistic talent. Although for the two female artists, the artistic space has two different connotations – the place of communion and a more professional space of the "office" – the necessity to escape from the area of the house/family is imperative.

Both female artists start their creative journeys from modest positions. The masculine/feminine binary opposition, which has tremendously challenged the Western feminist mentality, retains a similar relevance for both Munro's writer and for Faith. The female writer in "The Office" detects in her husband's response to her renting an "office" a lack of credit, moral support and scepticism. However, she also senses a trace of unconcern and ignorance: "[My husband] is not like me, he does not really want explanations. That the heart of another person is a closed book is something you will hear him say frequently, and without regret" (Munro 1968: 61). The slight but disappointing discouragement in her husband's attitude pales in comparison to the more strenuous opposition of the landlord, Mr Malley, whose damaging effect on her own work leads to her giving up the rented "office." The presents which Mr Malley offers her, such as a house plant, a flowery teapot or a cushion, suggest that she is viewed not as a writer but as a hobbyist like himself, who can only feel comfortable in the cosiness of a home environment. Thus, Mr Malley's behaviour illustrates the fact that the artist generally tends to be viewed as a hobbyist rather than a professional.

Mr Malley's outburst against the protagonist is closely related to her femininity, which apparently should exclude any artistic activity: "That's not a normal way for a person to behave. Not if they got nothing to hide. No more than it's normal for a young woman, says she has a husband and kids, to spend her time rattling away on a typewriter" (Munro 1968: 70). Mr Malley, whose name has sound resonances with words like "male" or "maleness," stands for the voice of patriarchy which ascribes an inferior role to women, epitomised by Mr Malley's attitude towards Munro's female character. Despite the 1960s' Canadian artistic upsurge and the prominence of the woman artist in the whole process of the Canadian Renaissance, Mr Malley exemplifies

the still immature Canadian conceptualisation of the artist in general and of the woman artist in particular: “I have heard things about writers and artists and that type of person that didn’t strike me as very encouraging. You know the sort of thing I mean” (Munro 1968: 69). The very fact that Munro’s woman artist remains unnamed signals stereotypical representations of the Canadian woman artist in the early 1970s when the first Canadian artist stories were published.

The voice of patriarchy also makes its presence known in Paley’s artist story. Paley’s short fiction provides a much more conspicuous dividing line between male and female liberties in pursuing an artistic career than in Munro’s “The Office.” In “Friends” (*Later the Same Day*, 1985), Faith’s first husband, Richard, goes to Spain so that he can focus on his writings. This event leaves deep spiritual marks on Faith, the aspiring writer. As a writer and mother, Faith feels compelled to remain at home with her boys and take care of the family instead. In “Listening” (*Later the Same Day*, 1985), the shadow of patriarchy once again defies Faith’s own attempt to freely exercise her right to a literary career. On much the same account, her second husband, Jack, leaves the family home for Arizona to clear his mind and have, according to Faith herself, a last love affair.

The private artistic spaces in which the (fictional) writers find themselves provide them with inspiration for their writing. It is only by living and creating in their own artistic spaces – such as “the office” and New York public space – that the female artists eventually learn about their artistic paths. For Faith, the act of writing is a natural outcome of the inspiration which she gets from communicating with different people; in the case of the Canadian female artist, inspiration is found in the very act of indulging in privacy. Here, in this huge public space, Faith finds the courage to speak for the community of women which needs to be constantly defined and re-invented. She is surrounded by female friends who support one another, enjoy life or experience sorrow together. Faith becomes the spokeswoman for the entire community of friends and mothers who raise their children together. Her identity as woman and writer becomes closely tied to a long-standing Jewish female mentality. She feels the responsibility of making a chronicle of her friends’ lives and deaths, for instance by writing “her-stories” of Selena’s life and death from cancer, or by commemorating Abby’s strange and sudden death. Faith feels that it is both her “debt” (Paley, “Debts” 133) and duty to “save a few lives” (Paley, “Debts” 133) by writing “a report on these private deaths and the condition of [their] lifelong attachments” (Paley, “Friends” 89). “Friends,” for instance, represents a multi-layered narrative interplay of women’s voices who tell their own different stories with subtle irony, “shtetl” (town, community) speech modes infused

with the liveliness and vigor of “mame loshen” (mother tongue). With regard to her portrayal of women and children in her short stories, Grace Paley herself stated in an interview from August 1980, “I can never repay the debt that I have to the community of women with whom I raised my kids. I owe them a lot, and they owe me” (Gelfant 24).

Art is an *exegi monumentum*, operating as a substitute for real life and drawing common stories out of ordinary people’s lives. For Faith, “knowing” and “telling” (Paley, “Debts” 132) from experience, or invention and re-invention, constitute her natural spiritual duties of telling her friends’ stories, instead of being emotionally crushed and heart-broken by her husband’s infidelities and irresponsible behaviour. Faith becomes suddenly aware of the inner need to concentrate on revealing female identity and homosexual relationships or “woman and woman, woman-loving life” (Paley, “Listening” 210), which can also become the foundation of her future writing. Faith even expresses her special insight into female psychology in a discussion which she has with Jack. The reason why she chooses not to tell Jack about her women friends’ stories comes from an inner impulse to preserve the secret of femininity. Consequently, all Faith’s stories are based on female experiences as she tries to understand the depths and idiosyncrasies of femininity, as if searching into a feminine soul archive. Faith has “faith” in the “stories told by women about women” and thus she sees herself as the repository of female wisdom and sensitivity (Paley, “Listening” 203).

In the Canadian artist story, Munro’s female writer intends to write stories, but it is not until the end of Munro’s “The Office” that readers realise that whatever she wishes to write will be “her-story.” These stories spring not from an innate need to deeply search into femininity’s soul archives like Faith, but as a natural outcome of her frustrating experience of having to give up her rented “office” after Mr Malley’s constant intrusions. In Munro’s own words, “The Office” focuses on “a woman’s particular difficulties in backing off and doing something lonely and egotistical” (Munro, “On Writing the Office” 194). Leaving the space of the house and entering an entirely-her-“own” “office” serves as a symbol of her budding independence and increased gender-awareness. Most importantly, however, the painstakingly sought-after topic for her writing ultimately resides in her negative experience. The loss of the office – that supposedly creative personal space – paradoxically turns out to be the perfect inspiration, compensating for her former unaccomplished writing attempts. Thus, the former uncreative physical space of “the office” becomes a highly creative textual space.

In Munro’s artist stories, the female artist paradoxically achieves her creative potential through unforeseen, unexpected and unwanted events (Mr Malley’s alarming

behaviour and her own temporary lack of creativity). In utter isolation and silence, her creative power strongly contrasts Faith's keen insight into the Jewish female community, represented by the chorus of characters' voices from which she draws her inspiration. In this respect, Faith's individual identity as a woman and a writer is established only after she acknowledges her communal identity, whereas the Canadian female artist's act of writing grows out of her achievement of personal autonomy, albeit appearing a bit selfish, and is directly intended to establish her as a writer. Ultimately, Munro's character, writing her own experience after leaving the "office," and Faith, writing "her-stories," both signify victories in the female writers' personal and social battles against patriarchal influence during the 1960s.

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