

There's Got to Be Some Wrenching and Slashing: Horror and Retrospection in Alice Munro's "Fits"

In the introduction to her *Selected Stories*, Alice Munro mentions that she does not read stories chronologically:

A story is not a road to follow . . . it's more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room and corridors relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from those windows. And you, the visitor, the reader, are altered as well by being in this enclosed space . . . You can go back again and again, and the house, the story, always contains more than you saw the last time. (xvi-xvii)

This idea of the text as house reveals many of the complicated workings within Munro's own stories. A house is an image of containment, something difficult to penetrate from the outside; however, Munro emphasizes the inability of a house to contain. Even within the metaphorical story-as-house, there is no stasis: the reader's perception of the house changes depending on shifting perspectives. Moreover, boundaries between inside and outside blur: Munro implies that the reader herself is changed inside the story. Munro's analysis of the story as a house is followed by a passage from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, that discloses the sinister side of fiction:

But mark, madam, we live amongst riddles and mysteries—the most obvious things, which come in our way, have dark sides, which the quickest sight cannot penetrate into; and even the clearest and most exalted understandings amongst us find ourselves puzzled and at a loss in almost every cranny of nature's works. (xvii)

The relation between dark riddles and reader detection features in what is arguably one of Munro's most eerie stories in *The Progress of Love*, "Fits." If Munro's fiction is a house, what kind of house is "Fits?" Because it is structured around the horrific event of the Weebles' murder-suicide and Peg Kuiper's discovery of the bodies—a gory event which occurs in the middle of her otherwise banal existence in the small town of Gilmore—"Fits" could be a haunted house, a gothic house of horrors, full of uncanny secrets and shifting spaces.

In their book, *Gothic and the Comic Turn*, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik argue that too much critical attention has been paid to unearthing in gothic fiction that which lies beneath the uncanny and that not enough attention has been paid to the surface effects themselves (2-3). In the field of Munro criticism, however, people tend to pay attention either to surface effects *or* to that which lies beneath the uncanny, but very few discuss the relation *between* surface effects and the uncanny.¹ I argue that "Fits" intricately connects the surface effect—Munro's use of retrospection—with the horrific *affect*. The narrative's shifting spaces and perspectives provide cinematic effect, but they also produce a certain affect in the reader, akin to the affect produced by contemporary horror film. According to Isabel Pinedo,

The universe of the contemporary horror film is an uncertain one in which good and evil, normality and abnormality, reality and illusion become virtually indistinguishable. This, together with the presentation of violence as constituent feature of everyday life, the inefficacy of human action, and the refusal of narrative closure produces an unstable paranoid universe in which familiar categories collapse. (9)

The world of "Fits" is similarly uncertain: violence is inserted into the everyday and—for the characters within the story and for readers outside of it—categories collapse and the familiar becomes unfamiliar. The insertion of humorous elements into an otherwise gruesome tale, one of the most compelling facets of "Fits," exemplifies the collapse of categories.²

The horrific affect produced by "Fits" is particularly unsettling because the horror disrupts the most intimate of spaces: the home. Before their marriage, Robert aligned Peg with her house and imagined her entire life contained there: "Back in Toronto, he had thought of Peg living in this house. He had thought of her patterned, limited, serious, and desirable life" (150). We are specifically told that the house in the story is Peg's; Peg owned the house before her marriage to Robert. After they wed, Robert wanted to

buy another house, and offered to do so, but Peg refused (149). This house suggests order and containment; in fact, Peg herself personifies these qualities for Robert:

Robert once told her he had never met anyone so self-contained as she was. . . . Peg said she didn't know what he meant.

He started to explain what a self-contained person was like. At that time, he had a very faulty comprehension of Gilmore vocabulary—he could still make mistakes about it—and he took too seriously the limits that were usually observed in daily exchanges.

"I know what the words mean," Peg said, smiling, "I just don't understand how you mean it about me." (147)

Significantly Robert imposes the idea of containment on Peg here because he believes that Peg's containment is endearing and desirable. But his inability either to penetrate the female, domestic space when he wishes or to control its excess ultimately haunts Robert and reveals what Susanne Becker says is a recurring theme in Munro's gothic fiction: the disruption of female containment within the domestic sphere (114). This passage especially points to the misunderstanding that exists even in the early stages of the relationship and Robert's lack of desire to resolve it. Peg neither comprehends, nor likely subscribes to Robert's vision of her containment, and the disruption of his vision leads to uncanny moments.³

Freud's use of *unheimlich* to describe the uncanny suggests the way in which every home has the potential to be unhomey. According to Freud, "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220). Freud applies Schelling's definition of the *unheimlich* as "*the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light*" (224). Freud says that the terms *heimlich* and *unheimlich* were originally understood in opposition to each other, but that they have converged to the point where they cannot be understood separately. The uncanny affect, for Freud, is implicitly linked to the process of repression and repetition. He says that this link between repression and the uncanny accounts for the convergence between the terms *heimlich* and *unheimlich*: "we can understand why linguistic usage has extended *das Heimliche* into its opposite, *das Unheimliche* . . . for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (241). Such doubling and repetition is crucial to creating the uncanny in "Fits."

Domestic space itself is the first thing to be doubled in “Fits,” as we discover that the Weebles’ house, where the murder-suicide takes place, is eerily similar to Peg and Robert’s house:

The houses on the street were originally of only three designs. But by now most of them had been so altered, with new windows, porches, wings, and decks, that it was hard to find true mates anymore. The Weebles’ house had been built as a mirror image of the Kuipers’, but the front window had been changed, its Christmas-card panes taken out, and the roof had been lifted. (151)

Even more disturbing, not just the architecture of these two houses seems to be mirrored: as the story unfolds, the internal events of the Kuiper household begin to resemble the Weebles’. Hints of past marital discord, and perhaps even abuse, build to the point that they cause uncanny moments when the repressed threatens to be revealed, such as when the Kuipers are sitting around their kitchen discussing Peg’s discovery of the Weebles’ corpses. Delighting in this discussion, Peg’s son from her previous marriage announces, “When you and Dad used to have those fights? . . . When you used to have those fights, you know what I used to think? I used to think one of you was going to come and kill me with a knife” (170). Such statements pose a constant threat of rupture as the houses of the past contain secrets that could be unearthed and disrupt the domestic stability of the present. Robert wants to believe that violent ruptures are freakish—he wishes to distance himself from them—but the more he tries to create distance between his family and violence, the closer and more everyday violence begins to seem. Referring to the murder-suicide, Robert declares, “What this is like . . . it’s like an earthquake or a volcano. It’s that kind of happening. It’s a kind of fit. People can take a fit like the earth takes a fit. But it only happens once in a long while. It’s a freak occurrence” (171). The exchange that ensues between Robert and Clayton, however, is telling:

“Earthquakes and volcanoes aren’t freaks,” said Clayton, with a certain dry pleasure. “If you want to call that a fit, you’d have to call it a periodic fit. Such as people have, married people have.”

“We don’t,” said Robert. He looked at Peg as if waiting for her to agree with him.

But Peg was looking at Clayton. She who always seemed pale and silky and assenting, but hard to follow as a watermark in fine paper, looked dried out, chalky, her outlines fixed in steady, helpless, unapologetic pain.

“No,” said Clayton. “No, not you.” (171)

Virginia Pruitt argues that this exchange reveals the “essentially benevolent character of Peg and Robert’s intimacy” and that Clayton “unequivocally

agrees” with Robert’s assertion that he and Peg do not have fits (165).⁴ I would argue just the opposite: that the hesitancy expressed by Clayton’s repetitive “no” indicates that violence might not be so extraordinary, and that at any moment the ordinary might split open and erupt into violence.⁵

In the uncomfortable convergence between the ordinary and the extraordinary, things rise up from below the surface of Robert’s consciousness. The home becomes unhomely when memories that Robert has tried to repress come back to him. He recalls, for instance, his former relationship with a married woman named Lee, where feelings quickly devolved from love to loathing. A perfectly banal (and notably domestic) conversation about whether or not silverware should be monogrammed precipitates the final confrontation between Robert and Lee:

They were having an argument about whether it was permissible, or sickening, to have your family initial on your silverware. All of a sudden, the argument split open—Robert couldn’t remember how, but it split open, and they found themselves saying the cruellest things to each other that they could imagine. Their voices changed from the raised pitch and speed of argument, and they spoke quietly and with subtle loathing. (172)

The argument quickly turns sadomasochistic, as words become a form of pleasurable violence. Particularly disturbing is just how close affectionate proclamations are to hateful ones, and how quickly Robert and Lee’s perceptions of each other change:

They laughed in recognition of their extremity, just as they might have laughed at another time, in the middle of quite different, astoundingly tender declarations. They trembled with murderous pleasure, with the excitement of saying what could never be retracted; they exulted in wounds inflicted but also in wounds received, and one or the other said at some point, “This is the first time we’ve spoken the truth since we’ve known each other!” (173-174)

Robert has a desire to repress and forget this confrontation. Speaking of past relationships, he tells Peg, ““There are things I just absolutely and eternally want to forget about”” (174). Yet he is disturbed by the realization that if he has repressed details of his previous relationships, in all likelihood so has Peg. Considering the story that she told him of her ex-husband’s leaving, Robert thinks,

A man doesn’t just drive farther and farther away in his trucks until he disappears from his wife’s view. Not even if he has always dreamed of the Arctic. Things happen before he goes. Marriage knots aren’t going to slip apart painlessly, with the pull of distance. There’s got to be some wrenching and slashing. But she didn’t say, and he didn’t ask, or even think much about that, till now. (175)

Robert cannot help but make uncomfortable connections between these relationships and his own relationship with Peg, and he must confront the possibility that potential for violence hides in every relationship.

After the Kuipers' murder-suicide, Robert discovers the potential for violence to spread from one home to another. Munro makes no attempt to confine the violence or the bloodiness to the scene of the crime; on the contrary, as Robert cannot help but notice when he looks at Peg's coat, blood seems to have spread everywhere:

He looked at Peg's lilac colored coat hanging beside Karen's red coat on the washroom door. On the lilac coat there was a long crusty smear of reddish-brown paint, down to the hemline.

Of course that wasn't paint. But on her coat? How did she get blood on her coat? She must have brushed up against them in that room. She must have got close.

Then he remembered the talk in the diner, and realized she wouldn't have needed to get that close. She could have got blood from the door frame. The constable had been in the diner, and he said there was blood everywhere, and not just blood. (159)

The most unsettling thing is that blood has entered the Kuiper home and become part of their everyday experience, which disrupts Robert's perception that their home is immune to violence.

Pinedo contends that in contemporary horror films, violence is "constituent of everyday life" (18) and that "disruption takes the form of physical violence against the body. . . . Gore—the explicit depiction of dismemberment, evisceration, putrefaction, and myriad other forms of boundary violations with copious amounts of blood—takes center stage" (18). In "Fits" blood and gore are central. In a sense the Kuipers—especially the children—revel in the description of the violent events. When they sit down to dinner the day that Peg discovers the bodies, her sons harass her for more explicit details:

"So was there?" Kevin said. "Was there blood and guck all over?"

"Ghoul," said Clayton.

"Those were human beings, Kevin," Robert said.

"Were," said Kevin. "I know they were human beings, I mixed their drinks on Boxing Day. She drank gin and he drank rye. They were human beings then, but all they are now is chemicals. Mom? What did you see first? Shanna said there was blood and guck even out in the hallway."

"He's brutalized from all the TV he watches," Clayton said. "He thinks it was some video. He can't tell real blood from video blood."

"Mom? Was it splashed?" (167)

For readers as well as for the Kuiper kids, the Weebles are not really people; they have been transformed into a story, a spectacle for our viewing pleasure. However, what we *do not* see turns out to be particularly significant.

The fragmented shifts in Munro's narrative put the reader in the position of one who looks at the spectacle, yet the retrospective gaze of the narrative puts us further away from that which we most desire and dread to see: the Weebles' bodies. The shifting narrative perspective operates cinematically, mirroring Pinedo's description of horror films. She says that although film privileges the act of showing, what is not shown is equally important and that being unable to see structures the act of looking (51). Employing Dennis Giles' argument, she shows that "The pleasure of recreational terror depends on the tension between not (fully) seeing, the pleasure of recoil, and seeing (more fully), the pleasure of the gaze" (54). Ultimately, however, "Fits" resists the gaze of the reader.

Munro creates a distance between the reader and the story, and frustrates the reader's gaze, through complex retrospective narration. It is Robert who pictures Peg's discovering the Weebles' bodies. Robert is most aptly described as the *focalizer* of the story because, as Mieke Bal argues, the term "point of view" "do[es] not make an explicit distinction between, on the one hand, the vision through which the elements are presented and, on the other, the identity of the voice that is verbalizing the vision" (100-101). *Focalization* thus refers to "the relationship between the 'vision,' the agent that sees, and that which is seen" (Bal, 104). This distinction is crucial in "Fits," because, as readers, we can view events only through Robert's recounting. As a result, we tend to take Robert's story at face value; indeed, according to Bal, "If the focalizer coincides with the character, that character will have a technical advantage over the other characters. The reader watches with the character's eyes and will, in principle, be inclined to accept the vision presented by that character" (104).⁶ Yet in "Fits," although we might trust Robert's vision at first, we quickly realize that his vision, and consequently his version of the story, is flawed. What we encounter are several layers of memory; Robert gives a retrospective commentary on second-hand versions of events: "He pictured what happened. First from the constable's report, then from Peg's" (151). His own version can only be a fragmentary piecing together of these accounts, and so Robert finds himself in the role of detective. In his work on detective and anti-detective fiction, Stefano Tani foregrounds the impossibility of the detective ever fully piecing together the past: "The detective is a scientist, but a particular kind of scientist . . . an archaeologist. In fact both

the detective and the archaeologist ‘dig out,’ and their reconstruction is only partial, limited to what is *left after* (after the end of a civilization, after a murder)” (47). Nevertheless, the detective still wants to establish some certainty in his or her understanding of what happened *before* and *during* the murder.

Part of Robert’s difficulty in establishing what happened *before* the murder is related to his lack of understanding of Gilmore. As Ildikó de Papp Carrington astutely notes, “[T]he ‘many abominable details’ of what Peg must have seen in the Weebles’ bedroom are *doubly* distanced by being filtered through the point of view of an outsider and a second-hand observer, a witness who observes not the murder scene itself but only the bloodstained observer returned from that scene (130)” (52). Carrington goes on to argue that “The repetition of the word *watching* [throughout the story] emphasizes Robert’s role as a third-person observer” (52). The distinct tension between the language of certainty and the language of uncertainty in Robert’s narrative demonstrates that in addition to being an outsider, he is also an imperfect observer. The proliferation of various forms of the verb “to know” suggest that Robert does *not* know. His narrative vacillates between definite language—“She didn’t call; she didn’t halt again” (154)—and tentative language—“*Perhaps* they’d got up a while ago” (153); “She *must* have known then or she *would* have called” (154 emphasis added). And in the middle of the narrative we are told that not only is Robert receiving a version of events that is full of gaps, but his memory of what he has been told is faulty:

She set the eggs on the clothes dryer, and was going to leave them there. Then she thought she had better take them up into the kitchen, in case the Weebles wanted eggs for breakfast and had run out. They wouldn’t think of looking in the utility room.

(This, in fact, was Robert’s explanation to himself. She didn’t say all that, but he forgot she didn’t. She just said, ‘I thought I might as well take them up to the kitchen.’) (152)

That the third-person parenthetical voice interjects to tell us of Robert’s flawed memory adds another filter to the narrative.

Some of the editorial changes made between the version of “Fits” that was published in *Grand Street* and the final version that appeared in *The Progress of Love* accentuate Robert’s role as a faulty detective. For example, in the first version, Robert notices that the Weebles’ car is in the carport with snow in front of it, from which he infers that, “They couldn’t have been out last night. Unless they were walking. The sidewalks were not cleared, except along the main street and the school streets, and it was difficult to

walk along the narrowed streets with their banks of snow, but, being new to town, they might have set out not realizing that” (*Grand Street*, 41). In the first version, the paragraph—and Robert’s insight—ends there. In the new version, however, Munro adds the line, “He didn’t look closely enough to see if there were footprints” (*The Progress of Love* 151), which suggests that Robert is a person who does not notice things—as we see from the rest of the story, he *never* looks closely enough—and also questions the accuracy of Robert’s perception.

Munro makes another crucial change in a paragraph where, as I have already noted, Robert associates his failed relationship with Lee to Peg’s failed first marriage. In the first version, Robert realizes that a marriage does not fall apart easily, and he thinks, “There’s got to be some wrenching and slashing” (59). In the second version, Munro adds, “But she didn’t say, and he didn’t ask, or even think much about that, till now” (175). This additional phrase suggests that Robert has continued the “errors of avoidance” (174) he committed in previous relationships in his current marriage with Peg. If any epiphany is promised by the phrase “till now,” the rest of the story will frustrate that promise: Robert is a man who does not look closely enough to see footprints in the snow and who does not get close enough to people to really understand them. If our knowledge of characters and events depends on Robert’s faulty knowledge and flawed perception, the question then becomes, how can readers know anything for certain?

By constantly forcing us to interpret and reinterpret the shifting perspective of Robert—the flawed detective—Munro positions the reader as a detective who is starving for knowledge of the horrific events in the story. Our own delight in piecing together clues is matched within the story itself, as the people of Gilmore take pleasure both in trying to solve the mystery of the Weebles and in spreading the terrible news of the Weebles’ deaths. The pleasure taken here might even be described as a kind of *schadenfreude*. People have an insatiable desire to know the gruesome details. As Robert relates, mingled with this pleasure in knowing and spreading the news of the Weebles’ tragedy is the idea that to lack knowledge of the sensational event is almost shameful:

It was true that people valued and looked forward to the moment of breaking the news . . . but there was real kindness and consideration behind this impulse, as well . . . Nobody would want not to know. To go out into the street, not knowing. To go around doing all the usual daily things, not knowing. He felt himself troubled, even slightly humiliated, to think that he hadn’t known; Peg hadn’t let him know. (160)

Once people learn (or *think* they have learned) all the details of the story, they want an explanation. Here Munro plays with the concept of reason: people want to find a fixed, rational cause for the murder-suicide. And in the absence of finding a reason, people invent: “Then reasons. The talk turned to reasons. Naturally. There had been no theories put forward in the diner. Nobody knew the reason, nobody could imagine. But by the end of the afternoon there were too many explanations to choose from” (161). As Pinedo points out, however, the contemporary horror genre destroys reason itself: it eradicates rationality, coherence and temporality (17). In fact, Pinedo says, “Postmodern horror confronts us with the necessity for an epistemology of uncertainty: we only know that we do not know” (29). Similarly, Tani points to the counter-intuitive nature of the postmodern manifestation of the detective novel; because it resists a solution, Tani refers to the postmodern detective novel as *anti-detective*: “The main difference that separates postmodernism from modernism, then, is postmodernism’s lack of a center, its refusal to posit a unifying system. Postmodernism’s new awareness is the absence of a finality, a solution. This is exactly what the anti-detective novel is about” (39-40).⁸ Because the story of the Weebles resists solution, the Gilmore locals have an almost violent curiosity to find one. Observing the townspeople driving by the Weebles’ house in search of spectacle, Robert associates the spectators with a monster: “Inside those cars were just the same people, probably the very same people, he had been talking to during the afternoon. But now they seemed joined to their cars, making some new kind of monster that came poking around in a brutally curious way” (171). As readers, we are drawn in—and even implicated—in this violent curiosity. We are forced to project meaning into the gaps in the story, and, like the people of Gilmore, we take pleasure in imagining the spectacle of the Weebles’ dead bodies. (And it is not just the dead bodies that we take pleasure in imagining.)

In addition to our frustrated curiosity, the humorous elements provide yet another source of reader pleasure *and* discomfort. Munro’s irony is enjoyable because it allows us to feel as if we possess knowledge that some or all of the characters in the story do not share. For instance, after Peg discovers the Weebles’ remains, she goes to work at the store, where she is greeted by Karen’s proclamation, “It’s too cold. If there was any wind, it’d be murder” (156). This statement, although somewhat heavy-handed, leaves the reader with a snicker of delight, because we know there has been a murder. Robert’s speculation about the cause of the murder-suicide is a source of

further irony. After considering and dismissing various possibilities, the narrator says, "(Robert was right about the reasons. In Gilmore everything becomes known, sooner or later. Secrecy and confidentiality are seen to be against the public interest. There is a network of people who are married to or related to the people who work in offices where all the records are kept. . . .)" (164-165). Here, we read the parenthetical voice as ironic, because, as we learn from the Weebles' funeral, everything in Gilmore *does not* become known, least of all the reasons for the tragedy:

(. . . At the funeral on Thursday, the United Church minister . . . spoke about the pressures and tensions of modern life but gave no more specific clues. Some people were disappointed, as if they expected him to do that—or thought that he might at least mention the dangers of falling away from faith and church membership, the sin of despair. Other people thought that saying anything more than he did say would have been in bad taste.) (165)

Although allowed a self-satisfied laugh at the characters, the reader is also implicated in this scene. Like the people of Gilmore, we are being teased about our own curiosity.

Munro also teases her readers with provocative details such as having Peg serve her family a spaghetti-and-tomato-sauce dinner on the same day that she discovers the bodies. We relish such details for their black humour: after all, it is hard not to chuckle when making the gory and gross connection between the "blood and guck all over" (167) and the image of noodles with red sauce. Particularly amusing is the exchange between Peg and Kevin, where he tries to convince her that he can just eat dinner "in bed" and Peg replies "Not spaghetti, you can't" (168). Ending the paragraph as it does and juxtaposed with Kevin's question earlier in the paragraph about the Weebles' blood, "Mom? Was it splashed?" (167), this phrase sounds strangely foreboding and incites us to read meaning into Peg's choice of food. Although Hanly warns us that "modern writers, after Freud, are at liberty to play jokes on us as never before" (170), even he is tempted to read "her choice of menu for the evening meal" as a sign of denial (169). Hanly's reading is tempting and plausible; however, I would suggest that it is just as probable that Peg's choice of dinner menu is coincidental and only takes on significance through our own retrospective piecing together of events. Munro may also be playing with us by dropping such tantalizing clues and Freudian red herrings. To modify Freud: sometimes a noodle is just a noodle.⁹

Another striking example of Munro's playfulness and her use of black humour, is that the murderer's name is Walter Weeble. Besides the alliteration

and the name's absolute banality—it does not, for example, have the distinctive ring of a name like Hannibal Lecter—is the name's association with the Weeble toy. According to “The Vintage Toy Encyclopedia” website, the Weebles are a Hasbro toy from the 1950s, which were originally based on the punching bag clown from the children's TV Show “Romper Room.” Their original manifestation was as a family of four, but they have experienced several resurgences in popularity and their form has changed with each resurgence. What has remained consistent, however, is the shape of the toy: the Weebles are round and egg-shaped with heavy bottoms. The popular advertising slogan is “Weebles wobble but they don't fall down.” But of course, as we know, the Weebles in “Fits” *do* fall down, and in a pretty gruesome way. The description of Walter and Nora Weeble in this story is very Weeble-like. These characters are first introduced without names; all we know is that “The two people who died were in their early sixties. They were both tall and well built, and carried a few pounds of extra weight. He was gray-haired, with a square, rather flat face” (143). Two pages later, when we are actually provided with their name, they are associated with eggs and it is the egg lady who first speaks their name. Also, the accidental discovery of the Weebles' bodies is precipitated by Peg's delivering their eggs. Throughout the story, in fact, we keep seeing images of the Weebles' eggs.

The final confrontation between Robert and Lee again forces the reader to make the disturbing and comic connection between sex and violence, which has been building since the beginning of the story, when the Weebles narrated their tale of the sacrificial virgins in the Yucatan. After Robert and Lee's heated argument, we are told that they begin to laugh uncontrollably: “It wasn't so far from laughing to making love, which they did, all with no retraction. Robert made barking noises, as a dog should, and nuzzled Lee in a bruising way, snapping with real appetite at her flesh. Afterward they were enormously and finally sick of each other but no longer disposed to blame” (174). In this instance, laughter becomes a way to defuse the tension between them, and maybe even prevent the argument from escalating to any sort of physical violence.

Perhaps a more shocking example of black humour takes place during the public discussion of the Weebles' deaths in the local diner. As the locals contemplate the way that Walter Weeble killed his wife and himself, and the mess that resulted, one of the men says, “He shouldn't ever have used a shotgun for that kind of business,” and another replies, “Maybe a shotgun was all he had” (159-160). Although it provokes a feeling of discomfort in

the reader, this comment also provides comic relief. The insertion of humour into the horror genre is not all that unusual. Pinedo argues that “Comedy serves a double, paradoxical function in horror films; it creates both distance and proximity. Most notably, it produces the proverbial comic relief, the cessation of terror, thus providing the requisite *distance* to stave off terrorism at strategic points” (46). Comedy and terror must be in a constant tension with each other, maintains Pinedo, because too much proximity causes terrorism and too much distance causes parody (46).¹⁰

Munro complicates this relationship between distance and proximity through the shifting and layering of perspective. As Bennett and Brown argue, “in a fictional universe in which the humdrum-looking daily world may actually be one of ‘deep caves paved with linoleum,’ nothing is ‘just the way it looks on the surface’” (194). What is perfectly ordinary can, depending on perception, seem terrifying, as even the most ordinary things become unreliable. The power of shifting perception is illustrated when Robert leaves the Kuipers’ house to contemplate Peg’s story of the murder-suicide. As he walks through the landscape, he has an uncanny moment, in which the familiar becomes strange and then familiar again (177). For the first time in the story, Robert does not shy away from proximity or from looking closely, and he is surprised by “how close he had to get before he saw that what amazed and bewildered him so was nothing but old wrecks” (177). Here, it is proximity that causes relief: Robert feels like laughing when he discovers that it is just his own imagination, rather than the objects in front of him, that causes his distress (177).

Although Robert is willing to get close enough to “old wrecks” to figure out what it is about them that scares him, he seems unable, or unwilling, to get as intimately acquainted with Peg. Pruitt, however, claims that “For Peg and Robert, a greater rather than a lesser degree of intimacy seems the outcome of the ‘secrets and mystery’ explicated throughout the story”(166). In reaching this neat and tidy conclusion, Pruitt focuses on the line, “Now he felt more like going home” (177), which seems to indicate that Robert has reached some kind of inner peace. Neither the story nor Robert’s thought process ends with this line, however. “Fits” resists closure as we see how Peg’s version of the story—“I knew there wasn’t anybody but me alive in the house. Then I saw his leg, I saw his leg stretched out in the hall, and I knew then, but I had to go on in and make sure” (169)—conflicts with the version of events that Robert remembers the constable recounting:

At noon, when the constable in the diner was giving his account, he had described how the force of the shot threw Walter Weeble backward. "It blasted him part-ways out of the room. His head was laying out in the hall. What was left of it was laying out in the hall."

Not a leg. Not the indicative leg, whole and decent in its trousers, the shod foot. That was not what anybody turning at the top of the stairs would see and would have to step over, step through, in order to go into the bedroom and look at the rest of what was there. (178)

Readers are unable to feel any sort of cathartic purging: we are left on the verge of uncertainty. Left with only a partial vision of the events, we are unable to reconstruct the very incidents which would enable us to come up with a solution. We are left with a host of conjectures: Did the constable get the story wrong? Did Robert misinterpret the constable's story? Is Robert's faulty memory acting up again? Did Peg either participate in the murder or do something strange and gory with the bodies? Did Peg touch the bodies? If so, why? Because we have access only to unreliable fragments of the past, we can never know and again find ourselves in the position of the thwarted detective.

Most critics identify an important relation between time and the detective genre. Tani argues,

The traditional detective novel presents a reconstruction of the past and ends when this reconstruction has been fulfilled. To reconstruct the past is to go back to a point (the one of the crime) about which the detective is concerned. There must a fixed point; otherwise the regression in time would be infinite. So to go back in time is equal to finding a criminal, to unraveling a mystery. (45)

The crucial difference between the traditional detective novel and the anti-detective novel, says Tani, is that the anti-detective novel fails to provide the reader with the access to the past that he or she would need to solve the mystery: "By contrast, in the deconstructive anti-detective novel, the inanity of discovery is brought to its climax in the nonsolution, which unmask a tendency toward disorder and irrationality that has always been implicit within detective fiction" (46). Bennett and Brown maintain that the distorted sense of time in Munro's stories resists ordering: "it is much harder to restore order when time is as dazzlingly disordered as it is in many Munro stories" (190). With its layered, schizophrenic sense of time, "Fits" perfectly exemplifies the anti-detective fiction that leaves us feeling as if the world is a disordered, irrational kind of place.¹¹ The "nonsolution" of the story is also complicated by the primary detective in "Fits"—Robert—who proves to be no detective at heart. Bennett and Brown argue that every detective story has

“two time sequences,” past and present and, they argue, “The narrative of the present seems transparent, but the narrative of the past is obscured, fragmented, perhaps invisible. It is supplied neither by the narrator [n]or a character but must be constructed, first in the mind of the detective and ultimately in the mind of the reader” (187). They go on to say that the narrative of the past is the one that “causes the mystery” and “disrupts the present” (187), whereas “The narrative of the present shows how that disruption [is] being dealt wit[h]—by recovering or reconstructing the past” (187). However, in “Fits,” although Robert initially begins to reconstruct the past, he ultimately realizes that he really has no desire to reconstruct it fully, and he believes that there is “One discrepancy, one detail—one lie—that would never have anything to do with him” (176). Although he eventually brings himself to the point where he can return home, there is little indication that he will resolve the “errors of avoidance” (174) that have plagued all of his relationships.

So the question remains: if we are left with so much uncertainty, why do we, as readers, enjoy “Fits” so much? What is it about horror and unsolved mysteries that delights us? Pinedo says that horror enables us to confront our worst fears in a safe way: “Horror is an exercise in recreational terror, a simulation of danger not unlike a roller coaster ride . . . Throughout, the element of control, the conviction that there is nothing to be afraid of turns stress /arousal . . . into a pleasurable sensation. Fear and pleasure comingle” (39). Besides enabling us to confront our fears, Pinedo says that “horror exposes the terror *implicit* in everyday life: the pain of loss, the enigma of death, the unpredictability of events, the inadequacy of intentions” (39). In reading “Fits,” then, we might not be able to purge our fear completely, but fiction allows us a contained form in which to face temporarily our discomfort and then repress it once more. We enter Munro’s house of horrors with the expectation that we can leave its recreational terror behind at any time. However, if Munro is correct in saying that we are altered by every house of fiction that we enter, perhaps we leave “Fits” with a foreboding sense of the real terror and the “periodic fits” that may await us outside.

NOTES

I would like to thank Tracy Ware and Sean Burgess for their meticulous proofreading, insightful suggestions, and support, and Jeremy Lalonde for his generosity in sharing sources on Munro and detective fiction.

- 1 In his analysis of Munro’s early fiction, Robert Thacker, for example, astutely argues that her retrospective style is “the catalytic factor in Munro’s substantial art” (37). Citing an oft-quoted passage from her story, “Material,” he goes on to say that “Munro’s narrative

dialectics . . . , by balancing one point of view against another, allow her to create her own 'clear jelly,' which presents a comprehensive understanding to her readers" (58). Clear jelly is not exactly clear, however; jelly is a distorting kind of filter through which to view the world. Coral Ann Howells demonstrates her understanding of this distortion when she employs Munro's comparison between fiction and houses in order to demonstrate how the shifting spaces and shifting perspectives in Munro's fiction operate to create an "art of indeterminacy" in which "her narratives evade any single meaning but allow room for the interplay of shifting multiple meanings and of multiple human interests" (85-86)

- 2 As Zlosnik and Horner argue, humour in the gothic genre is actually the result of the "juxtaposition of incongruous textual effects" (3).
- 3 Becker calls Munro's technique one of "radical domestication," which leads to "excessive realism." In explaining the effect of this excessive realism, Becker refers to Magdalene Redekop's argument that Munro's domestication is so radical that it becomes unhomely, or *unheimlich* (Becker 104).
- 4 In Charles Hanly's Freudian reading of "Fits," sexual violence does not seem extraordinary for Peg or Clayton because it is linked to primal scene phantasies that we have all experienced as children. Although I find his article compelling in its understanding of the link between sexual violence and childhood repression, and in his analysis of Robert's denial, I think that Hanly overestimates the extent to which we can psychoanalyze Peg precisely because he projects certainty into the central gap of the story. Hanly asserts that we can view Peg's account of her discovery of the Weebles' corpses as a demonstration of her denial, but since we can never know what Peg actually saw, it is impossible to determine whether or not she is in a state of denial. On this point, Hanly neglects the fact that the story is told through Robert's focalization and that it is Robert who asserts that Peg has lied about what she saw. (169)
- 5 James Carscallen argues that Munro's wordplay evokes the doubling of the Weebles' and the Kuipers' relationships:

[W]e have to see that the two facing houses of the story are the same house, the two facing marriages the same marriage; and when Peg's son says that an earthquake is just a 'periodic fit' (126) . . . we have to see what is implied in Munro's typical play on the word 'fit.' . . . A 'periodic fit,' after all, is at once a disruption and a regular part of a cycle. (230)

- 6 The cinematic effect of this story is another reason that focalization is an effective term to use in this context because, as Bal notes, the term focalization is a technical term that derives from photography and film (102).
- 7 Indeed, even the third person narrator is uncertain about some of the details. For example, in describing Peg's son, the narrator says, "Kevin was taller already than Clayton or Peg, *perhaps* taller than Robert" [my emphasis] (460).
- 8 Tani does not posit a rupture between modern and postmodern detective fiction. Despite its emphasis on rationality, Tani says that even in Poe's fiction there remain seeds of doubt: "The restoration of order and rationality is never complete in Poe's fiction—or in his life, for that matter—because each term inevitably evokes its opposite" (7).
- 9 I found myself in the role of thwarted reader-detective-psychoanalyst when, while comparing the two versions of "Fits," I noticed that in the *Grand Street* version, Peg's "usual lunch" is described as "a crusty roll with ham and cheese" (47) and the stain of blood on her coat is described as "a long ugly smear" (47) whereas in the *Progress of Love* version,

the sandwich is “a roll with ham and cheese” and the blood on Peg’s coat is “a long crusty smear” (159). After trying to read Freudian or even metonymic significance into the editorial change, I came up with no further insight than that Munro made an aesthetic decision to use “crusty” to describe the blood instead of the ham-roll.

10 It is important to make a distinction between Pinedo’s use of the word terrorism and our post 9/11 understanding of and sensitivity to the term. Pinedo herself distinguishes between *terror* and *recreational terror*. She says that her understanding of the function of recreational terror is akin to Freud’s understanding of the function of dreams (39). Containment is the key to both dreamwork and recreational terror, because, Pinedo argues, “Much as the horror film is an exercise in terror, it is also an exercise in mastery, in which controlled loss substitutes for loss of control” (41). I would say that for Pinedo, terrorism is akin to feeling *terrorized*; in other words, terrorism is a profound, unsettling and uncontrollable feeling of fear that is distinct from the controlled feeling of fear that *recreational* terror creates.

11 Strangely enough, Munro does not believe in leaving it to the reader, as Bennett and Brown demonstrate by quoting Val Ross’ article about her interview with Munro:

Writing in the *Globe and Mail* about the ‘unsolved murder’ in “Open Secrets,” Val Ross commented: ‘It is only unresolved to the community,’ and adds that Munro has told [her]: ‘I meant to indicate that Theo is probably the murderer.’ Ross adds—surprisingly some may feel—that Munro ‘takes a dim view of the postmodern tendency to drop responsibility for the story in readers’ laps.’ [She] quotes Munro again: “‘I think it is incumbent on the author to know who did it. If an author doesn’t know, the story is just trickery.”’ (198)

Bennett and Brown go on to argue, “Such a story makes [us] want to return once more to “Fits,” to look again for clues [we’ve] missed. But then [we] notice that she only says the author needs to know the answer—and not that she needs to reveal it to the reader” (198).

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