Ildikó de Papp Carrington

Where Are You, Mother? Alice Munro's "Save the Reaper"[1]

In an interview with Geoff Hancock nearly twenty years ago, Alice Munro recognized her lifelong "obsession" with the relationship of mothers and daughters ("Interview" 104). An evolving theme in her fiction, this obsession has repeatedly been discussed by Munro critics, most recently by Robert Thacker in his introduction to *The Rest of the Story: Critical Essays on Alice Munro* (7). With a few exceptions, such as "Miles City, Montana" and a section of "The Progress of Love," all of these mother-daughter stories have been written from the point of view of a daughter. Even in "My Mother's Dream," although the mother is the central character, the first-person narrator, simultaneously a baby and an adult, is her daughter (Levene 858).

In "Save the Reaper," however, Munro introduces a new point of view, both in her choice of a protagonist and through that choice in her ironic reversal of the mother-daughter roles. For the first time, the central character is not only a mother but also a grandmother. "When I wrote 'Save the Reaper'," Munro has commented, "in my mind . . . were the changes in the lives of people like me, who are now in their sixties," with their "choices mostly made and lived with by now . . ." (Contributor's Notes 388). Eve, an unmarried grandmother and an out-of-work actress, remembers herself at many stages of her past: as her mother's child sixty years ago; as a young woman free of her mother, and also free of conventional sexual morality; and as the mother of Sophie in various periods of her daughter's life. Eve also imagines how Daisy, her three-year-old granddaughter, will remember

her when Eve is dead. Although the main action of the story occurs in one day, Munro's characteristic manipulation of narrative time through these flashbacks and flashforwards develops the constantly changing roles of four generations of mothers and daughters. But the major catalyst of Eve's change in the story is another daughter-figure, a nameless young prostitute, who maneuvers Eve into rescuing her from a sinister house where she has been sexually abused by several partying men. A somewhat similar daughter-figure appears in "Vandals," an earlier story, in which the motherless Liza, a sexually abused child, hopes in vain to be rescued by Bea, an older woman who lives with Liza's abuser in another dark and sinister house. Unlike Bea, too absorbed in her own relationship with her lover to recognize Liza's situation, let alone to be the mother whom Liza so desperately wants, Eve not only helps the prostitute to escape but also recognizes her almost as her alter ego and perhaps her potential murderer.

Eve's name and the reaper in the title combine both the Biblical connotations of Eve as the sinful mother of all mankind and the far more ancient mythological connotations of Demeter the Reaper as the "Womb-Mother-of-All" (Leeming and Page 68). W. R. Martin and Warren U. Ober call attention to Eve's name and identify the title of the story as an allusion to "Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*" (135). Munro repeatedly alludes to the poem. The initial reference occurs when Eve misquotes a fragment of the poem as she identifies a field of barley for her grandchildren (*Love* 177-78). However, the description of the golden barley field, combined with ubiquitous references to cornfields and corn, acquires mythological resonance when Munro moves us momentarily outside her story's textual boundaries to emphasize the significance of Sophie's education: she studies Greek myths as a child and later majors in archaeology (154, 150). From this metafictional context, the image of the reaper emerges as that of Demeter, the goddess who "represent[s] all women in all phases of life" (Walker 608).

The similarities between "Vandals" and "Save the Reaper" show that, as so often before, Munro is reworking earlier materials, "reconnecting, redefining" (Thacker 6).[2] What complicates the situation here is that there are two significantly different versions of "Save the Reaper." Munro often revises her stories after their initial *New Yorker* publication, sometimes retaining and sometimes rejecting the magazine's editorial revisions (Barber). The situation, here, however, seems somewhat atypical. First published in the *New Yorker* in June 1998, "Save the Reaper" was republished in the same form in *The Best American Short Stories 1999*. When it was pub-

lished in a longer and differently structured form in *The Love of a Good Woman*, Munro added an author's note: "Stories included in the collection that were previously published in *The New Yorker* appeared there in a very different form" (n. pag.).[3] In addition to "Save the Reaper," these stories are "The Love of a Good Woman," "The Children Stay," "Before the Change," and "Cortes Island." Discussing the effects of the *New Yorker*'s editorial policies on Munro's writing, Carol L. Beran cites this note, but does not comment on the differences (211). Unlike the typical, fairly minor changes in "The Love of a Good Woman" and "The Children Stay," the differences in "Save the Reaper" are major.

In the Alice Munro Papers at the University of Calgary Library, the printer's copy for "Save the Reaper" in *The Love of a Good Woman* is a 32-page photocopied typescript that "has to the right of the title '—Munro February 28/98' in Munro's handwriting" and "varies from the published *New Yorker* text" (Steele). The June 1998 *New Yorker* version, therefore, seems to be a shortened version of the original story. Virginia Barber, Munro's literary agent, confirms this change: "The version of each of Alice Munro's stories which is 'finally approved' by the Author appears in hardcover book form. She does work with her editor at the *New Yorker*, and in the case of 'Save the Reaper,' the story was shortened with the author's approval." Omitting the metafictional references to Sophie's study of Greek myths and archaeology, this shortened version contains not only fewer but also less completely dramatized flashbacks. Its climax is less thematically explicit, and the difficult relationship between Eve and Sophie seems oversimplified by condensation and generalization. The key events in Sophie's life, summarized without dramatization, leave her "with a certain aversion to the memories of the life she's shared with Eve," an aversion that seems to spring from "some mysterious disagreement or irreparable change of heart" (121, 122). Because the causes of this transformation remain largely unexplained in the *New Yorker*'s edited version, this analysis is limited to Munro's original story in its "finally approved" version in *The Love of a Good Woman*. Here the mother-daughter relationship is fully developed to incorporate an ironic intertextualization of the archetypal Demeter-Persephone myth, already suggested in "Vandals," in which the motherless daughter seeks a surrogate mother.

In "Save the Reaper," there is a much more deeply resonant and intricately intertextual exploration of the mother-daughter theme. The relationships between Eve and Sophie and between Eve and the prostitute are

developed through interlocking associative patterns that include not only mythological parallels but also implicit and explicit references to films; to the history of art and Christianity; and, in addition to *The Lady of Shalott*, to Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale." All of these patterns combine to structure a narrative in which Munro uses ironic intertextuality in much the same way that she does in "The Children Stay," to continue, to subvert, and to expand the underlying myth (Hutcheon 96; Carrington, "Recasting" 192). The mother seeking her lost daughter finds not only a surrogate daughter seeking rescue but also herself. Where are you, mother? is therefore a question asked not only by the daughters in both stories but also by Eve herself in "Save the Reaper."

In the classical myth, Demeter, who originated in the ancient Minoan Earth Goddess, "appears in her three traditional roles as Maiden (or *kore* in Greek), Mother, and wise Crone." Worshipped "at her cult site, Eleusis," she is "the Grain Goddess of the fertility mysteries celebrated and practiced at [the shrine]. Her daughter [is] the menarcheal Grain or Corn Maiden seed of life" (Leeming and Page 66-67). Demeter loses her virgin daughter, Kore, when Hades, the Lord of the Underworld, abducts her from a flowery meadow and rapes her. Bursting out of the suddenly opened ground with "the thunder of hooves" and "the screech of chariot wheels shatter[ing] the air," he carries her off to his dark domain (69). In search of her lost daughter, the grieving Demeter, turned into a "wisdom-bearing Crone," wanders the earth (67). Initially, Kore refuses to eat anything in the underworld, but finally eats some pomegranate seeds. When Demeter eventually finds and rescues her, Kore's return to her mother can be only temporary. Because Kore has eaten "the food of the dead," she must annually return to Hades for the three months of winter. In the underworld she bears the new name Persephone, "she who brings destruction" (Graves I, 91, 93).

The destruction in "Vandals" is Liza's revenge for never being rescued. Liza and her brother, who live in their motherless, messy house "in the middle of a cornfield," are sexually abused by Ladner, a taxidermist who lives across the road (*Open* 290). In her excellent analysis of this story, Nathalie Foy describes his adroit "shape-shifting," his ability to change from benevolently lecturing the children about plants and animals to brutally raping them (157). But "shape-shifting" is also characteristic of the devil.[4] Both Ladner's wartime experiences and his sexual abuse increase his fiendishness. Burned by "an exploding shell" in World War II, he has a shiny metallic "splotch on the side of his face" (*Open* 267, 268). When he rapes Liza, she

feels "a sense of danger deep inside him, . . . as if he would exhaust himself in one jab of light, and nothing would be left of him but black smoke and burnt smells and frazzled wires. Instead, he collapse[s] heavily, like the pelt of an animal flung loose from its flesh and bones" (292). By identifying his postorgasmic slump with the animals he kills and stuffs, Liza classifies him as one of the "dead things" in hell (286).

Foy sees their abusive relationship as occurring in a "dark fairy-tale world" from which Bea, the " fairy godmother," could rescue the child (155, 156). But this world and the roles of its inhabitants can also be defined in mythical terms. When Liza crosses from her house in the cornfield to Ladner's house, surrounded not only by a marsh with "tropical threats and complications" but also by densely growing trees with "shaded and secret . . . places," she becomes Kore, abducted by Hades from the natural world of her mother and raped in the underworld (*Open* 291). When Bea Doud, a potential surrogate mother and therefore also a potential Demeter, moves into Ladner's house and bed, Liza immediately begins to love her, tries to protect her, gives her a pathetic little present, and hopes that she will "rescue" her and her brother from Ladner (293). Since Liza is thus Kore searching for Demeter in Hades, the roles of mother and daughter are reversed. But as Foy has shown, because Bea is completely blinded by her own relationship with Ladner and because Liza is incapable of communicating her terrible secret to Bea, this rescue never occurs (151, 152, 155). To revenge herself on both Ladner and Bea, the adult Liza, a recently married woman, returns to Ladner's house on the night before his death during surgery and, invading his house as he invaded her body, reduces everything to "rubble" and "broken glass" (*Open* 282).

The introduction of "Vandals" indicates that this climactic orgy of destruction can also be read in mythical terms. In the nonchronologically narrated story, the introduction is actually an epilogue, a dream that Bea has months after Liza has vandalized the house and tricked her into believing someone else to be responsible. During a winter storm, Liza, a born-again Christian, is symbolically reborn also as Persephone: she becomes the destroyer of Ladner's house, "cold as the grave" (278). This sinister simile is linked to Bea's dream, which she describes in an unsent letter addressed to Liza. In the dream Bea goes to a place where she is given a bag full of a "little girl's bones," exhumed from a grave according to what Bea dimly recognizes as a "pagan or Christian" custom associated with Greece (263). When someone asks her, "Did you get the little girl?" she replies, "What little girl?"

(263). This dream, which she fails to understand, not only suggests a Greek background but also foreshadows what Liza wants Bea to do, rescue the little girl from the underworld of Ladner's house. Only at the end of the story when Liza remembers Bea's blind incomprehension, "What Bea has been sent to do, she doesn't see," do *we* see the full dramatic irony of her unsent letter and its nightmare (293).

In "Save the Reaper" two houses reappear, a rented vacation house "in the middle of a cornfield" (*Love* 149), with the "name Ford on the mailbox" (177), and a sinister house to which Eve is led by following the Ford pickup truck of one of the partying men. By associating the same name with both houses, Munro subtly suggests their similarity. In the flashbacks to the immediate past that establish the genesis of the main action, an explicit echo of the Demeter-Persephone myth suggests the symbolic equation of both houses with Hades. After a five-year absence from home, Sophie has returned from California with her two children by different fathers. She shares a vacation house with her mother, who hopes that this visit will mark the end of her daughter's alienation from her. Although Sophie has originally planned to spend three weeks in the house in the cornfield, and even suggests the possibility of future summer vacations with her mother, Eve suspects her of suddenly faking a phonecall from Ian, her husband, to cut the visit short. Sophie announces that he is flying in to take his family on a trip. Repeatedly mentioned (152, 158), the number three becomes symbolic when it is combined with the difficulties both children have with seeds: Philip hates caraway seeds, and Daisy has "to be watched" with cherry stones (157). Neither child will make Persephone's mistake of eating seeds and becoming committed to repeated returns to Hades. Their presence in the rented house is only temporary.

Intensely disappointed by the double change of plan, not only by this summer's truncated visit but also by the loss of joyfully anticipated future visits, Eve takes the two children for a drive while Sophie picks Ian up at the airport. This drive, the opening scene of the story, begins Munro's narration of the story's main action. In the car, the seven-year-old Philip initiates a game: he pretends that there might be "aliens" travelling to Canada from space and "translated" into people whom they have "abduct[ed]" by sucking "them out of one car into another car" (*Love* 146, 148, 147). His excited fantasy of vehicular abduction echoes Kore's abduction in the chariot of Hades. But a more modern parallel is *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the 1956 science-fiction cult classic in which "a community has been invaded by

aliens" who use cars and trucks to "take over . . . the bodies" of its population (Nash and Ross IV, 1400). In his game, Philip urges Eve to follow the Ford truck supposedly driven by an alien. Doing so, she arrives at the house where she sees the young prostitute. But before narrating that crucial scene, Munro interjects Eve's memories of various key periods in her past.

These memories define the opening scene's thematic function by introducing the multiple meanings of the word "alien" and its derivatives, "alienate" and "alienation." [5] These meanings not only structure the psychological stages of Eve's change but also define the aesthetic process of alienation by which Munro creates these stages. She defines this characteristic process of her fiction when she explains, "I want . . . 'what happens' to be delivered with . . . strangeness . . ." ("Conversation" 1). To deliver this "strangeness," she recontextualizes the familiar in such an unfamiliar way that her dislocated protagonist perceives it as something startlingly new.

To begin with, the aliens in Philip's game are imaginary extraterrestrials. In Eve's memories, however, the aliens are literally foreigners. What she recalls is full of travelling foreigners and, instead of abduction, repeated seduction. The three fathers in the story are all aliens in Canada: Sophie's father was an Indian doctor on a travelling fellowship; Philip's father was an Irishman; and Ian, Daisy's father, is an Englishman who travels from Canada to California. Although seriously involved with another man, Eve spent three "guiltless, irresistible" days with the doctor in a "swaying and rocking" roomette on a transcontinental train, where "the lovers' motions were never just what they contrived themselves" because they were "underscored by" the constant movement of the train (*Love* 155). A Christian, the doctor told her about the first-century "Christians in southern India," but the mutual seduction of the lovers on the speeding train suggests a mythological image, a modern parallel to Hades' screeching chariot (155). Philip's father was also a transcontinental traveller, "an Irish boy . . . travelling around North America trying to decide what to do now that he had decided not to be a priest" (151). Sophie tells her mother that "she seduced him" (150). For a time, even the infant Philip seemed to be an alien because he resembled not only his father but also Samuel Beckett, that "alienated Irishman" (Paglia 562).

The eventual consequence of these relationships with seducing and seduced aliens expands the meaning of "alien" to include "alienation," the estrangement of people who were once close to each other or at least believed that they were. Although Eve and Sophie share the bond of having

borne a child out of wedlock, now, after not seeing her daughter for five years, Eve painfully discovers Sophie's continued alienation from her. Eve tells Sophie about a friend who went on a three-month retreat of enforced silence during which the participants imagined themselves to be "communicating in a special way" with each other, only to experience "a big letdown" when they were allowed to speak and discovered that no such communication had ever occurred (159). Recalling Sophie's conception on the train and, a generation later, Sophie's pregnancy with Philip, during which she wryly jokes with Eve about "keeping up the family tradition of fly-by fathers" (156), Eve sadly notes that Sophie no longer makes such jokes. Married to Ian, who "doesn't believe in" living together, Sophie has become a very different kind of woman (151).

As Eve and Sophie watch *The Bridges of Madison County* in the vacation house, they react the same way to the love story of another alien, originally an Italian war bride, who gives up her lover for her husband. Watching "Meryl Streep, sitting in [her] husband's truck, . . . choking with longing, as her lover [drives] away," both women first cry, then laugh together (159). But, although both of them have had such an experience with a lover, their shared reaction does not reaffirm their common past. The scene in the truck emphasizes the reason that Streep lets her lover drive away. By staying in the truck, she gives up her life for her family. Immediately after Eve recalls this movie scene, Philip tells her that Ian calls Sophie "Big Mama" (149). This juxtaposition emphasizes Streep's character as the epitome of the self-sacrificing wife and mother. Because Sophie has now assumed this role, the two women's shared reaction to the movie is not the special communication that Eve longs for.

Sophie is the kind of person whom Munro has described in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel: anxious to forget having gone "from . . . being one sort of person to being an entirely different kind of person," Sophie has "all these rooms in [her] head that [she has] shut off . . ." ("Interview" 293). To make sure that these internal rooms remain shut off when Eve mentions a taboo subject, Sophie signals her mother with a silent smile that certain subjects "need not be gone into" (*Love* 159). These subjects are "a positive minefield": Sophie's Indian father and her fatherless childhood; her education in an "alternative school," which Eve "thought . . . was better for a child whose mother was an actress and whose father was not in evidence," but which Sophie criticizes "almost viciously"; and Sophie's single motherhood (154).

Now a securely married, conventional wife and mother, Sophie has

"grown stately, womanly, graceful, and reserved." Resembling her Indian father, with "creamed-coffee skin . . . darkened in the California sun" and eyes shadowed by "lilac crescents of . . . fatigue," she possesses a "classic beauty achieved . . . by self-forgetfulness and duty"(156). The connotations of "classic" underline the already mentioned references to Sophie's knowledge of Greek myths and archaeology, which she studies for two years while Eve assumes the care of baby Philip. These metafictional comments make it clear that when the married Sophie wants to reject her earlier lifestyle and to distance herself from her unmarried mother, she, like Liza in "Vandals," is reborn as Persephone: "[O]nce Persephone, the Maiden, eats of the fruit of the dark world—the seed-filled symbol of sexual awakening and procreation—she must live within that world for half her life, returning to her mother as wife rather than virgin" (Leeming and Page 67).

Although Sophie seduces the Irishman and bears his son, she is transformed into a wife only when Ian marries her. "Ian loves corn," she tells Eve, a comment that obviously has a double meaning (*Love* 178). This transformation is the reason that "those months after Philip's birth that Eve thought of as some of the happiest, the hardest, the most purposeful and harmonious in her life" do not mean the same thing to Sophie (154). Eve's lament illustrates what Munro has defined as one of the functions of memory in her fiction: "Memory is the way we keep telling ourselves our stories . . . . We can hardly manage our lives without a powerful ongoing narrative." The fiction writer "pok[es] at" the "big bulging awful mysterious entity called THE TRUTH" under these narratives. She examines "the way people's different memories deal with the same (shared) experience" ("Conversation" 3).

Sophie's rejection of Eve's memories not only intensifies the painful impact and the symbolic significance of Eve's memories of her own mother but also foreshadows the "awful . . . TRUTH" that Eve is finally forced to confront about her life. During her drive with her grandchildren, Eve recalls that as a young woman "in her first years free of home," she played a game with her friends: each of them answered the question of what she hated most about her mother (*Love* 162). Detesting her mother's "mistakenly possessive" attitude, her sheer flowery dresses, and the "stout and shabby" shoes necessitated by her corns, Eve always replied, "Her corns" (162). Now that she understands that *she* has metamorphosed into the possessive, hated, and rejected mother, recalling this old, familiar memory is "like touching a bad tooth" (162). The pun on "corn" delivers an unexpected jolt of pain.

Brooding about this memory as she follows the Ford truck, Eve drives into a farmhouse lane where she suddenly sees some gateposts "decorated with whitewashed pebbles and . . . colored glass" that remind her of a "whitewashed" mosaic mural she saw sixty years ago with her mother (162, 163). This wall, which Eve later describes as decorated with "marvellous pictures made of colored glass, . . . a little like Chagall," is no longer there (178). But she vividly remembers brightly coloured "churches," "castles," "Christmas trees," "animals," and flowers, with "the shape of her mother loom[ing] in front of the wall" as she is "talking to an old farmer" (163).[6] Herb, the truck driver, informs Eve that the farmhouse now belongs to Harold and then, as if to insist on the legality of Harold's ownership, tells her twice that Harold had to put Mary, the previous owner, "in the Home" (166, 167). This explanation has a double function. First, it implies another meaning of "alienate," the legal meaning of changing the ownership of property. Second, the name of Mary is also meaningful. The remembered image of Eve's mother, associated with flowers, corn, farming, and the destroyed wall, and these repeated references to Mary, another mother, suggest a symbolic juxtaposition of two mother figures, Demeter and the Virgin Mary.

The significance of this juxtaposition is twofold. First, because the Greeks decorated the floors and walls of their buildings with mosaics (Baal-Teshuva 232), the mosaic mural that Eve remembers may be associated with Demeter's shrine at Eleusis. The participants in the Eleusinian mysteries "contemplated and entered into the trials of Demeter in her sorrowful quest for the lost Persephone . . ." (Angus 119). By symbolically descending with her into Hades, they ascended to a "better life" of "moral and ritual purity" (Ferguson 146). But this shrine was destroyed in 395 C.E. because the early spread of Christianity, to which Eve's lover referred, "began a system of violent persecution and vandalism of shrines" (Campbell 190). "[M]uch opposed to the Eleusinian rites because of their overt sexuality" (Walker 220), early Christians objected to "the solemn acts of intercourse" performed in darkness by "the hierophant and the priestess" (Lawson 577).

When Herb "somehow" leads Eve and her grandchildren into the house, almost as if he really were an alien abducting them, what she sees suggests the second layer of significance (*Love* 167). The names of Harold and Herb echo the names of Hades. And Herb's insistence on Mary's dispossession suggests that the house that Eve enters is perhaps similar to Eleusis as imagined by its early Christian critics. The Virgin Mary is certainly not here, but

neither is Demeter. The motherless house is no longer a shrine or even a home, but a kind of sweltering, stinking hell of "[m]assive disorder," with layers of broken old furniture "piled . . . up to the ceiling in some places, blocking nearly all the light from outside" (167). "The temperature . . . [is] about ninety degrees" (168). "[B]are mattresses and rumpled blankets" and "a smell of semen," combined with the stench of feces, sweat, and garbage, suggest a "mighty bingeing" or the sexual orgy that the Christians associated with Eleusis (167, 170). The drunken participants in this orgy seem to be all male: Harold, a "fat" man who is "entirely naked" (169); a bald man who is "as old as Eve"; "a young man with sharp narrow shoulders and a delicate neck" whom she sees only from the back; and a man who is "so heavily tattooed that he seem[s] to have purple or bluish skin"(168).

The most important aspect of the house, however, is what Eve never sees. When she initially asks Herb about the mosaic pictures, he replies, "See, if they was in the front part the house I never would've saw them because Harold, he's got the front part of the house shut off" (166). Inside the house, after he has repeated this explanation to Harold, "I told her maybe there was pictures in the front but she couldn't go there you got that shut up," Harold snaps, "You shut up" (169). Harold's demand for silence about the closed rooms echoes Eve's painful recognition that Sophie demands her silence about subjects "that need not be gone into" (159). Just as the tattooed man looks at Eve "as if she was some kind of hallucination that he [has] decided to ignore," she flees the house feeling that its "hostile" inhabitants are utterly alien to her (168, 169). But in addition to the similarity between these demands for silence, there is another disquieting parallel: the strange similarity between the tattooed man's purple skin and Sophie's lilac-shadowed complexion. And soon Eve is forced to recognize that she has been mistaken in several ways.

During her conversation with the men in the house, she repeatedly apologizes for her mistake about the mosaic mural and explains, "I was actually looking for another place" (165). But driving out of the garbage-strewn farmhouse lane, she glimpses "some fragment of a wall, to which bits of whitewash still [cling]" and thinks that she sees "pieces of glass embedded there, glinting" (171). By confirming the accuracy of her childhood memory, this broken glass emphasizes her first mistake: the alien place she has just left is the right place, after all. But the once-familiar past has been reduced to garbage and converted into hell. Its hellishness is immediately confirmed by the revelation of Eve's second mistake. The young man she has seen in

the house suddenly emerges from the roadside weeds and jumps into the car. Taking a closer look, Eve realizes that her new passenger is actually a girl. When the girl tells Eve that she has escaped from the drunken men in the house and asks for a ride, she becomes the abducted Persephone, seeking a Demeter to rescue her from Hades. She tells Eve that she has run away without collecting her pay, but protests: "I didn't know nothing about what I was getting into. I didn't even know how I got there, it was night" (172). Her androgynous appearance in Harold's vomit-stained undershirt emphasizes her role. Just as Persephone does not eat in Hades, the girl looks as if her "way of living and the style of the times" have made her lose her natural chunkiness (173). Complaining of Harold's mistreatment, she adds that he also mistreats Herb, who has "a screw loose" (173). Persephone has become an abused prostitute.

But suddenly her behavior changes: momentarily she seems to be both a potential seducer and abductor. Trying "to put herself and Eve on a new level of intimacy," she begins to talk in "a blurred tone of seductiveness" and to slide "her hand along Eve's bare thigh, just . . . a little beyond the hem of her shorts" (173). Eve's powerful physical and psychological reaction to this brief attempt at seduction is the initial step in her recognition of her third mistake: the prostitute is not utterly different from her, not an alien. Observing the details of the girl's "soiled and crumpled state," her stinking clothes, and her "glazed" eyes in her "blotched" face, Eve has been almost clinically detached (173). Now she sees herself as possibly dirty, too.

Even though Eve is not sexually attracted to her own gender and the girl's pass is only "halfhearted," it is "enough to set some old wires twitching" (174). In "the changes in the lives of people" of Eve's age, Munro includes their experience of "buffeting, surprising needs" (Contributor's Notes 388). Signalling such a need, Eve's reaction fills her "with misgiving" because it is alienating in the sense of suddenly forcing her to reconsider her familiar, lived-with choices in a totally unfamiliar way (*Love* 174).[7] Her mental dislocation has been subtly foreshadowed by the prostitute's reference to Herb's craziness, which introduces another meaning of "alienation," mental derangement. Eve's mental rearrangement is not as extreme; but because the prostitute has obviously just had multiple partners, Eve's retrospection now flings "a shadow backwards from this moment over all the rowdy and impulsive as well as all the hopeful and serious, the more or less unrepented-of, couplings of her life. Not a real flare-up of shame, a sense of sin—just a dirty shadow. What a joke on her, if she started to hanker now

after a purer past and a cleaner slate" (174). Trying to reject this longing for purity, Eve changes what she hankers for: "But it could be just that still, and always, she hankered after love" (174).

Eve's partial identification with the prostitute, however, soon gives way to her fear that the girl might abduct her and her grandchildren in her own car, even murder them. She imagines the girl taking "them along while she needed them, a knife against Eve's side or a child's throat" (175). But when the girl asks to be let out on the main highway to hitch another ride, Eve begins to feel ashamed of her fears. "It was probably true that the girl had run away without collecting any money, that she had nothing. What was it like to be drunk, wasted, with no money, at the side of the road?" (176).

This unspoken question is the second step in Eve's change of attitude. Her lonely hankering after love turns into something very similar to maternal love for the surrogate daughter whom she is rescuing. She cautions the girl to "[w]atch out for the traffic," gives her twenty dollars, and, most significantly, invites her to the vacation house if she does not get a ride. The wording of this dangerous invitation foreshadows the climax and conclusion of the story. "If you're stranded," Eve says, "I'll tell you where my house is" (177). The first indication of the importance of the word "stranded" is in Philip's comment after the girl has left. When Eve refuses to stop for ice cream because they have "enough . . . at home," Philip corrects his grandmother by echoing Herb's words about Harold's house and the Home. "You shouldn't say 'home,'" he insists with childish pedantry. "It's just where we're staying. You should say 'the house'" (177). Eve is literally stranded by her family's decision to cut their vacation short. "[S]ick of the house" and heartsick at the prospect of spending eighteen lonely days in it "by herself" (159), she cannot return to her city apartment because she has dispossessed herself by lending it to an unemployed male friend .

It is at this point that Eve drives past a barley field and tells Philip, "That's called barley, that gold stuff with the tails on it," and begins to recite from *The Lady of Shalott*: "'But the reapers, reaping early, in among the bearded barley–'" (177). She then changes it to "'Only reapers,'" the phrase that Tennyson wrote (28), but finally revises it to "'Save the reapers'" and concludes, "'Save' was what sounded best" (*Love* 178). Her incorrect revision changes the preposition "save" into the imperative form of the verb. Although Eve has just fulfilled Demeter's role by rescuing the prostitute, she recognizes that paradoxically she needs rescuing, too. Like the Lady of Shalott, heard only by the reapers, and "half sick of shadows" in her isolated

tower room (71), Eve is also isolated and sickened by the soiling shadows of her powerful reaction to the prostitute. Although Martin and Ober do not identify Demeter as the reaper, they suggest that "Munro's title" is "perhaps" Eve's "prayer for a release from the exigent present" because her past "life . . . now seems sordid and spoiled" (135).

When Eve returns to the house, Demeter and the Eleusinian mysteries permeate the contrast between the family dinner scene and the scene in the house that she has just left. There the men and the prostitute were bingeing on whiskey and beer, misusing Demeter's gifts of grain. Here Ian bows courteously as he presents Eve with a drink that she accepts by saying, "This is most heavenly" (*Love* 178). His elaborate formality and Eve's hyperbolic "heavenly" suggest the symbolic significance of this simple family meal, for which Sophie and Eve husk two dozen ears of corn. The Eleusinian mysteries involved both the ingestion and the ceremonial display of food plants. The participants shared "some kind of communion-meal of cereal and barley-wine" (Ferguson 146). At the climax of the mysteries, either "a grain of wheat" or "a golden ear of corn" was elevated (Campbell 193; Ferguson 146). Joseph Campbell emphasizes that these rituals defined ingestion as the consumption of a spiritually as well as physically nourishing "divine substance" and that even today "meditation" on this process can transform a meal into such a ritual if the participants are conscious of what they are doing (194, 195).

What Eve is conscious of in this setting is her compulsion to protect not only Sophie and Ian but also herself. So, while husking the corn, she tells them a highly censored version of her adventure, from which she carefully omits Harold's nakedness, "the fragment of a wall" she has actually seen, and "every single thing about the girl" and about what "she herself [is] afraid of" (*Love* 179). Ironically, it is now Eve who keeps silent about taboo subjects, for her recognition of the similarity between the prostitute and herself has reached its painful climax. Under the hitherto familiar narrative of her life, Eve sees the "awful . . . TRUTH" ("Conversation" 3):

> There are people who carry decency and optimism around with them, who seem to cleanse every atmosphere they settle in, and you can't tell such people things, it is too disruptive. Ian struck Eve as being one of those people, in spite of his present graciousness, and Sophie as being someone who thanked her lucky stars that she had found him. It used to be older people who claimed this protection from you, but now it seemed more and more to be younger people, and someone like Eve had to try not to reveal how she was stranded in between. Her whole life

> liable to be seen as some sort of unseemly thrashing around, a radical mistake. (*Love* 179)

Originally descriptive of the prostitute, the word "stranded" is now applied to Eve, dispossessed of her past and displaced in the present. By momentarily almost equating the two women, the sexual connotations of "unseemly thrashing around" totally transform the image of Eve and the Indian doctor rocking together in the roomette (179). Telling her life story, Eve always attributed "the existence of Sophie and the greatest change" in her own life to "the convenience and privacy of the roomette" (155). Until this climactic moment of retrospection, that conveniently closed roomette has been like the closed rooms in Harold's horrible house, the metaphorical closed rooms in Sophie's mind, and the tower room of the Lady of Shalott. Now, however, the roomette is luridly open, and its occupants are exposed.

Because Ian is an urban geographer, his response to Eve's edited narrative is to ask her "about the breakup of older patterns of village and rural life" (180).[8] This question is charged with dramatic irony because he is unaware of the breakup of Eve's inner patterns of life. Philip, on the other hand, seems to be aware of what his grandmother's story withholds, for he looks at her with "conspiratorial blankness" (180).

Because his uncannily silent complicity recalls his initiation of the aliens game, it links the desolate conclusion of the story with its opening scene. Imagining that the girl might find some "homeless, heartless wastrel of her own age," Eve fears that, when she is alone the following night, the two young people might conspire to invade the house: she imagines the girl saying, "I know where there's a place we can stay, if we can get rid of the old lady" (180). "The old lady," a contemptuous term for "mother," is charged with tough self-mockery: Eve now rejects the quasi-maternal love that prompted her invitation. Her image of herself in the "hollowed-out house, its board walls like a paper shell around her," emphasizes her age and her own homelessness. In the middle of the "deep tall corn" making "its live noise after dark," she will be a literally exposed and vulnerable old woman (180). This conclusion seems to echo Keats's description of "the sad heart of Ruth" in "Ode to a Nightingale" "when, sick for home, / She stood in tears amid the alien corn" (66-67). In this lonely echo, three of the story's key words are combined to integrate the associative structure of the plot, to define the layers of Eve's experience, and perhaps even to foreshadow her murder. If the prostitute, like the vandalizing Liza, does return as Persephone the destroyer, "save the reaper" may be Eve's prayer for deliverance from death.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Apollonia Lang Steele, Special Collections Librarian, University of Calgary Library, for permission to quote from e-mail, and Virginia Barber, Alice Munro's literary agent, for permission to quote from a letter. I also thank Robert Thacker, former editor of the *American Review of Canadian Studies*, for helpful advice in writing this article. Finally, my thanks to the anonymous reader at *Canadian Literature* who drew my attention to the textual history of "Save the Reaper."

NOTES

1 "Save the Reaper," *The Love of a Good Woman*, by Alice Munro (1998). Used by permission, McClelland & Stewart, Ltd. *The Canadian Publishers*. Copyright (c) 1998 by Alice Munro. Reprinted by permission of the William Morris Agency, Inc. on behalf of the author.
The question in my title reverses Demeter's thrice-repeated question, "Where?," in Tennyson's poem "Demeter and Persephone" (67-72, 83).

2 See Carrington, *Controlling* 4-11, 71-98.

3 Martin and Ober cite only the *New Yorker* version (145).

4 See Carrington, "Double-Talking" 72.

5 See the multiple meanings of the title of "Carried Away" in Carrington, "What's."

6 The word "loom" echoes Munro's metafictional epilogue in one of her key mother stories, "The Ottawa Valley," in which she describes her inability "to *get rid* of" her mother because she "looms too close, just as she always did" (*Something* 246). For the origin of the mosaic wall and its connection with Munro's mother, see Sheila Munro 174-75.

7 A very similar situation occurs in "Eskimo." See Carrington, *Controlling* 156-62.

8 In her comment on this story, Munro has explained that the two kinds of changes, changes in the last twenty-five years in the lifestyle of country people who "aren't country people anymore" and "changes in the lives of people . . . who are now in their sixties," are combined in her story (Contributor's Notes 388).

WORKS CITED

Angus, S. *The Mystery-Religions*. New York: Dover, 1975.

Baal-Teshuva, Jacob. *Marc Chagall 1887-1985*. Cologne: Taschen, 1998.

Barber, Virginia. Letter to the author. 4 December 2000.

Beran, Carol L. "The Luxury of Excellence: Alice Munro in the *New Yorker*." Thacker 204-31.

Campbell, Joseph. *Transformations of Myth Through Time*. San Bernardino, CA: Borgo, 1990.

Carrington, Ildikó de Papp. *Controlling the Uncontrollable: The Fiction of Alice Munro*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois UP, 1989.

—. "Double-Talking Devils: Alice Munro's 'A Wilderness Station.'" *Essays on Canadian Writing* 58 (1996): 71-92.

—. "Recasting the Orpheus Myth: Alice Munro's 'The Children Stay' and Jean Anouilh's

Eurydice." Thacker 191-203.
—."What's in a Title? Alice Munro's 'Carried Away.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 39 (1993): 555-64.
Ferguson, John. "The Mystery Religions." *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology*. Ed. Richard Cavendish. New York: Crescent, 1980. 144-55.
Foy, Nathalie. "'Darkness Collecting': Reading 'Vandals' as a Coda to *Open Secrets*." Thacker 146-68.
Graves, Robert C. *The Greek Myths*. Vol. 1. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1964. cI.
Hutcheon, Linda. *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1991.
Keats, John. "Ode to a Nightingale." *The Poetical Works of John Keats*. Ed. H. W. Garrod. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1958. 257-60.
Lawson, John Cuthbert. *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion*. Hyde Park, N. Y.: University, 1964.
Leeming, David and John Page. *Goddess: Myths of the Female Divine*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994.
Levene, Mark. "'It was about vanishing': A Glimpse of Alice Munro's Stories." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 68.4 (1999): 841-60.
Martin, W. R. and Warren U. Ober. "Alice Munro as Small-Town Historian: 'Spaceships Have Landed.'" Thacker 128-46.
Munro, Alice. "Before the Change." *Love* 254-92.
__. "Carried Away." *Open* 3-51.
__. "The Children Stay." *Love* 181-214.
—. Contributor's Notes. Tan 387-88.
__. "A Conversation with Alice Munro." Behind the Books. Vintage Books. _http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/munro.html__ 27. Jan. 1999.
—. "Cortes Island." *Love* 117-45.
—. "Eskimo." *Progress* 189-207.
—. "An Interview with Alice Munro." With Geoff Hancock. *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 43 (1982): 74-114. Rpt. In *Canadian Writers at Work: Interviews with Geoff Hancock*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1987. 187-224.
—. "An Interview with Alice Munro." With Eleanor Wachtel. *The Brick Reader*. Ed. Linda Spalding and Michael Ondaatje. Toronto: Coach House, 1991. 288-94.
—. "The Love of a Good Woman." *Love* 3-78.
—. *The Love of a Good Woman*. Toronto: McClelland, 1998.
—. "Miles City, Montana." *Progress* 84-105.
—. "My Mother's Dream." *Love* 293-340.
—. *Open Secrets*. New York: Knopf, 1994.
—. "The Ottawa Valley." *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*. Toronto: McGraw, 1974. 227-46.
—. "The Progress of Love." *Progress* 3-31.
—. *The Progress of Love*. Toronto: McClelland, 1986.
—. "Save the Reaper." *New Yorker* 22 and 29 June 1998: 120-35. Rpt. in Tan 273-93.
—. "Save the Reaper." *Love* 146-80.
—. "Vandals." *Open* 129-60.
Munro, Sheila. *Lives of Mothers and Daughters: Growing Up With Alice Munro*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2001.
Nash, Jay Robert and Stanley Ralph Ross. *The Motion Picture Guide*. Vol.4. Chicago:

Cinebooks, 1986. 26 vols.
Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae.* New York: Vintage, 1991.
Steele, Apollonia. "Save the Reaper." E-mail to the author. 25 and 30 October 2000.
Tan, Amy, ed. *The Best American Short Stories 1999.* Boston: Houghton, 1999.
Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. "Demeter and Persephone." *Poems* 1373-78.
—. *The Lady of Shalott. Poems* 354-61.
—. *The Poems of Tennyson.* Ed. Christopher Ricks. New York: Longman, 1969.
Thacker, Robert. "Introduction: Alice Munro, Writing 'Home': 'Seeing This Trickle in Time'." Thacker 1-20.
—, ed. *The Rest of the Story: Critical Essays on Alice Munro.* Toronto: ECW, 1999. Rpt. of Thacker, Robert, ed. *Alice Munro Issue.* Spec. issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* 66 (1998): 1-231.
Walker, Barbara G. *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets.* San Francisco: Harper, 1983.