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Author(s): John Gerlach

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To Close or Not To Close: Alice Munro's "The Love of a Good Woman"

By John Gerlach

"The Love of a Good Woman" poses unusual problems for the reader at its conclusion—which is virtually no conclusion at all. Many of the best analyses of closure in short fiction, particularly those of Susan Lohafer, have dealt with very short stories; here I examine closure in a difficult case at the opposite end of the scale. Munro's story has already gained considerable attention, recent as it is; it first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1996, and later as the title story in a 1999 collection. It has been the focus of several fine articles, in particular those by Catherine Sheldrick Ross, Mark Nunes, Ildiko de Papp Carrington, Dennis Duffy, and Judith McCombs, but the implications of the ending have broad implications for how open endings in stories of different length might work and for the reader's desire for closure in any narrative.

The story centers on Enid, a practical nurse, caring for the dying Mrs. Quinn, a relatively young woman with two small daughters. It happens that Enid, a woman in her mid-thirties, still single, has known, as one might expect in a rural Ontario town, Mrs. Quinn's husband Rupert since childhood. In grade school she had been part of a group of girls who enjoyed teasing him. Later in high school, her desk in front of his, she tried in small ways to make up for that mistreatment. Rupert Quinn seems to have taken no notice of her, not when she teased him, not in high school,

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and not now as she cares for his wife, Jeannette, dying from a painful kidney disease of uncertain origin.

The story meanders, not driving toward any particular ending; a key emerging element is the possible murder of a Mr. Willens, an optometrist. Mrs. Quinn in fact tells Enid three variants of the tale, but in each case it seems clear that Rupert discovered Mr. Willens in the middle of more than a home optical examination of Jeannette Quinn, and Rupert pounded the optometrist to death. Thereafter, at Mrs. Quinn's insistence, husband and wife set about disposing of the body. Having heard this story, Enid becomes obsessed with making matters right, getting Rupert to confess. The story ends with her waiting by a river while Rupert seeks the hidden oars of a boat: "Her boots sank into the mud a little and held her. If she tried to, she could still hear Rupert's movements in the bushes. But if she concentrated on the motion of the boat, a slight and secretive motion, she could feel as if everything for a long way around had gone quiet" (141).

It's a teasingly restful conclusion, replete with what I would have called markers of natural termination in *Toward the End*: it concludes with the peaceful tableau of intensified awareness of quiet and slight motion, an image of tranquility. But Enid has gone dressed to the nines on this muddy bank, at the brink of recreating the boating scene in *An American Tragedy*: she will put herself in a position of absolute vulnerability, announcing that in truth she cannot swim and giving him the opportunity to confess—or to murder her and cover everything up. At the same time it has at least entered her mind that she could become a mother to the two Quinn girls in a way that Jeannette never was. Furthermore, during this moment of quiet, Rupert is hacking a path in the brush with a hatchet. We've reached a situation as uncertain as that nineteenth-century classic, Frank Stockton's "The Lady or the Tiger." What will happen on this boat in the middle of the river, what will happen to these two and the Quinn children even if Enid survives?

Should the reader attempt to provide an extension, imagining a continuation in order to provide a resolution, i.e., allowing thematic elements to fall into place? Does the story in fact provide any clues to a future resolution? After reviewing several possibilities, I will argue that Gary Saul Morson's concept of sideshadowing provides the most satisfactory approach; Morson draws his examples primarily from Dostoevsky and Tolstoi, but his theories fit Munro. After considering how sideshadowing

might work, I will deal with the issue of what makes this story different from two shorter stories with open endings and how sideshadowing might be related to the length of a story.

Feminist analyses provide a thematic context for this story, but focus on theme does not resolve issues raised by the ending. In 1996 the story carried the subtitle, "A murder, a mystery, a romance"; gothic and quest plots have been carefully examined in books like Alison Booth's anthology, *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, and Rachel Blau Deplessis's *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*. Romantic and Gothic plots, Duplessis argues, serve as a "trope for the sex-gender system as a whole" (285). Alison Booth has pointed out that Gothic romance ideology seems literally to sustain itself in the "consciousness and behavior" of women's lives, in fiction and out of it, like a curse internalized (45). Enid, from "Love of a Good Woman" is poised in exactly such a plot, strolling right into a Gothic murder mystery, potentially "on the verge of embracing a demon lover" (Duffy 184). So is Munro making a feminist statement about the cultural risks of entrapment, of acting out Gothic plots?

The primary difficulty with applying any cultural analysis to this story, feminist or otherwise, is that so much is unresolvable. To give only one example, Jeannette Quinn has told three versions of Mr. Willens' assault. Which is true? Do we apply Peter Rabinowitz's coherence rule of "trust the last" as the most likely? (155). The last is certainly the most dramatic, the most devilish. But are any of the stories true? Or has Jeannette Quinn concocted all of them, as Catherine Sheldrick Ross suggests, "as a sort of poison pill to break up an anticipated romance between Rupert and Enid?" (5).

This sense of uncertainty, the incomplete resolution of the quiet wait by the river, intensifies rather than reduces the reader's conventional desire for resolution and thematic resolution, especially if the reader identifies strongly with Enid, rather than with Mrs. Quinn, who as a madwoman in the attic might also claim the reader's sympathy. To use James Phelan's terminology, we read character at several levels, and the relevant one here is the mimetic: part of the illusion of realistic fiction is to be caught up in characters, to see them as people, to identify with them, to care (21, *passim*): we will want for these characters what we'd want for actual people: we want to know how things turn out. In a story that prioritizes the

mimetic level we cannot, we are likely to feel, clarify the thematic issues until we know as much as we can.

We can therefore reread or reconsider to review or discover at the mimetic level clues we may have missed or were unable to keep in mind as we progressed. Munro appears to give us at the very beginning what we may have ignored as a clue: the box of the optometrist's tools; it has been preserved in a museum. Who put it there? Enid, perhaps, as Carrington points out, but perhaps one of the boys, Cece, from the story's opening section, did: "The box may have been washed out of the car through the sunroof and later been found by one of the boys, perhaps Cece. Fearing his father, Cece might have been the anonymous donor" (6). Judith McCombs develops the most convincing inference, based on the condition of the box: "Enid did survive to marry Rupert, then, and to search in all his hidden chambers till she found the dark-red telltale box where Mrs. Quinn had hid it." Furthermore, "like the first Mrs. Quinn, Enid neither threw the dark-red box into the river nor sent it to the dump; she kept it." But McCombs can read no more into the box than a series of "perhaps" conclusions about when the box appeared in the museum. As I will argue later, no thematic elements left open at the end are resolved other than the fact that Enid survives, and probably becomes the second Mrs. Quinn.

One other potential clue is Enid's circumvention of her father's deathbed wish that she not become a nurse; she's become a home nurse rather than a hospital nurse. Years later, her mother, who had no problem with Enid getting past her father's restrictions, adds a replacement wish: Enid should promise not to marry a farmer. Rupert, it will turn out, happens to be a farmer. Since so much of the story is taken up with a justifiable defiance of the father's wish, might we presume Munro is hinting that in the future Enid will appropriately defy her mother's attempted social-class restriction? If so, we have one more hint that Rupert and Enid will marry. But we gain very little from following this track: we still can't determine whether Enid and Rupert could survive the risks of such a marriage. Unresolved implications exceed whatever we would gain by trusting such hints.

Stories often do end ambiguously, and we already have the serviceable term "open ending" for such cases, but generally the choices for an open ending are primarily binary, rather than continuously indeterminate. For example, in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's story "Maria dos Prazeres," the

seventy-year-old ex-prostitute Maria, a sympathetic and discerning woman, decides that she is not, as she has believed for the last three years, about to die; at the story's end she claims to see "the error of her interpretation" of portents three years earlier when she now meets a young man who brings her home from a rainstorm (102). Is the young man a lover or is he death itself come for her? We might invent a new Rabinowitz rule here: in binary cases, the ending with the richest irony will subsume the simpler assumption—here, of taking Maria at her own word, thinking the man is a lover, not death. Such a rule would be rather the reverse of Occam's razor, where the simplest explanation suffices. The richest ending may satisfy the most because it is the most saturated, the one that best accounts for the maximum number of elements and provides an additional twist. The richer ending is to see the young lover as death come to call, after the fashion of Dickinson's famously courteous carriage driver who stopped for the speaker because she could not stop for death. Details of her first moments with him support that: "she felt she was in a strange, happy world where everything was arranged ahead of time. The driver made his way through the disorder of traffic with a fluidity that had a touch of magic" (99). Garcia Marquez is after all a magical realist, and that passage may be a sufficient hint of the nature of an experience that rational Maria cannot yet absorb. We don't have to choose between the endings, but the choices are binary: Maria has found love, or she's dying; nothing further is imminent.

In the case of "Love of a Good Woman," closure is not an either/or. As Catherine Sheldrick Ross notes, "this long-standing feature in Munro's work of resisting closure seems to be related to her own deepest feelings about the enterprise of writing itself: on the one hand it is endlessly valuable to try to get it all down, to make connections, to attend to messages; on the other hand, the patterns may be wrong, the connections mistaken, and the attempt itself a sort of betrayal" (11). In Munro's own words about how an anecdote she'd heard led to one of her stories, "If I had been younger, I would have figured out a story. I would have insisted on Mr. Black's being in love with one of my aunts . . . I would have made a horrible, plausible connection between that silence of his, and the manner of his death. Now I no longer believe that people's secrets are defined and communicable, or their feelings full-blown and easy to recognize" (qtd in Ross 8). As Ross concludes of "Love of a Good Woman," "This story—

surely among Munro's most complex and suggestive—is a garden of forking paths. It turns into an encyclopaedic reservoir of stories, the particular one realized by any single reading depending on which echo of previous Munro stories the reader hears, which detail the reader chooses to foreground, and which patterns the reader is prepared to see" (13).

We could read the story as postmodern disruption of the desire for closure, but one critic who has done so, Mark Nunes, has noted that Munro is less interested in showing how a narrative "unravels" than in focusing "on what holds the story together" (11); furthermore he observes that "although her constructive, contingent narrative approaches the 'both/and' aesthetic of a feminist postmodern, she does not engage in an overt rupture of male/monoglossic narrative" (13–14).

The best analytical tool for the story might be available in Gary Saul Morson's *Narrative and Freedom: the Shadows of Time*. In Morson's view, narrative generally "closes down time by conferring a spurious sense of inevitability" (39) but he is more interested in narrative strategies which keep time and choice open, and he has developed a term for that: sideshadowing, which relies on "time on a concept of time as a field of possibilities" (120). Put another way, "to understand a moment is to understand not only what did happen but also what else might have happened" (119).

By blocking clear extensions of the ending and by intensifying the thematic issues of motivation, Munro forces the reader into something like Morson's sideshadowing; we end with a saturated awareness of presentness, the moment of thematic possibility and choice with its backward and forward resonance. To be or not to be isn't the question—the question is what we might experience, what might be configured in different ways, as the story formally ends on the page. Closure is replaced by an intensified sense of presentness, of continuing uncertainty, particularly thematic uncertainty.

Before exploring how that might work, we should review events toward the end of the narrative in the order in which we experience them. I will foreground the thematic issue of "how to keep the world habitable" (139), which I take to be a particularly irresolvable theme. As the story comes to a close, Enid might seem to be the Good Woman of the title, the saint—patient, realistic, compassionate, unobtrusive. At the same time, as I reach the end and reflect on Enid, I can hardly dismiss Dennis Duffy's point that "Enid is celibate, sex obsessed, naïve, fussy, a master of casuistry, and as in love with death as any gothic heroine" (182).

Initially one might easily generate excuses for her decisions, because she seems to do the right things. While it's true that she seems to abandon Mrs. Quinn on the last day, she seems to do so for good reason, protecting the children from their mother's death throes. But her choices risk folly and frolic: instead of staying with the patient she bends pieces of wire to make bubble wands for the children. Even so, she tells a sort of children's sermon about the need for confession: "If a person does something very bad, do they have to be punished?" she asks (135). Death does come, and Enid seems momentarily to recover her balance, calmly staying out of the way of Mrs. Green, Rupert's sister, who means to take the children with her after the funeral. Enid is aware of how her presence might be misinterpreted, and how she will not now be needed by these children she has come to care for. She seems less self-possessed, in fact more self-deceiving as she plans to talk with Rupert: she decides that she will promise to "sit and talk to him in jail, and she will write him letters as well" (135). Her prime motivation purportedly is to give him the chance to confess, because no one could bear the burden of silence, saying nothing at all.

As Enid continues to reflect on keeping things unsaid, she recalls an incident from her early childhood, a scene where she came upon her father with a woman who had one of her "fronts", that is, breasts, "stuck in Daddy's mouth"; in remembering this, Enid at first concludes that her mother's dismissal of this story as a dream is correct. But something odder emerges shortly afterward:

The different possibility was coming closer to her, and all she needed to do was to keep quiet and let it come. Through her silence, her collaboration in a silence, what benefits could blossom. For others and herself.

This was what most people knew. A simple thing that it had taken her so long to understand. This was how to keep the world habitable. (140)

Judith McCombs' inference about this scene is quite convincing:

Now the scales fall from Enid's eyes . . . and she sees clearly that the remembered scene is no childish dream, but a shocking truth: her father was toying with a woman, was

nursing for sexual pleasure in an adulterous dalliance. Celibate, self-sacrificing Enid, with her "big udders," has nursed home patients instead of ever nursing a baby with her milk, or nursing a man for pleasure. But now it is as if a fairy-tale curse had been lifted, and Enid is freed, by seeing clearly her father's sexual coarseness and her mother's silencing complicity, from the 'deathbed promise' her father had exacted. (340)

In my view, Enid's sainthood now slants into a crooked romance: she could have the family her long service as a home nurse has denied her, she could have a life with a man with whom she has fallen in love. The price of course is bedding down with a possible murderer, and even more significantly, rejecting the lesson she's taught the children that people need to be punished "because of how bad they are going to feel in themselves. Even if nobody did see them and nobody ever knew. If you do something very bad and you are not punished you feel worse, you feel far worse than if you are" (135). Are denial and secrecy the price of making the world habitable?

These concerns are in view as the story closes, but I propose now the issue is not to arrange them for closure, but to see how Enid's motivation, for example, could lead to reasonably coexisting choices, multiply reasonable future possibilities. Thinking this way leads to new considerations of thematic issues: is it possible that sainthood by its very nature is often on the verge of collapsing into delusion? We cannot realistically expect a saint, especially an intuitive, unselfconscious one like Enid, to have motives always pure. If we focus on a different issue, the possibility of simply keeping the whole matter secret (that's been the subject of a fine essay by Carrington), we reach the potential contradictions of any choice. Enid wants to build a house with no secrets, but she may be able to do so only by maintaining one, by deciding not to make Rupert confess what he knows. An explosive way to begin a marriage: but would it possibly be the best way to make a habitable world for the four of them? Is habitability itself always a deeply shaded issue? The question is then not how themes resolve, but what shading these themes might take as part of a continuing thematic dynamic.

Key terms seem to resonate rather than resolve. Exactly what, after all,

does define a “good woman”? Will silence save Enid or destroy her? My experience teaching this story recently reveals how difficult it is for readers to agree. One student, Vanessa Venditti, concluded that “Enid grows and matures while in the Quinn household, letting go of her naivety, becoming aware of the evils of the world, and recognizing her own desires; and in doing so, she gradually breaks away from her role of ‘angel’ as she simultaneously matures,” while another student, Vicki Wheatley, contended “silencing women may hold the lies together and build a façade of social acceptance but the foundation is unstable and morally corrupt.” Both students are correct: we simply don’t know anything of the consequences of this likely new marriage; threads of suppression and nurture cannot be teased apart.

As we wait with Enid at the termination of the final page, waiting in the quiet, boots in the mud, we’ve reached the limit of what we can know. We are at the verge of an expanding future—not what we usually expect of closure in a narrative, but it’s exactly where we usually are at any given moment of our lives, and it’s a form of narrative that Morson particularly values. This poised position also curious echoes the distinction D.A. Mitchell has made between the narratable and the nonnarratable. The narratable is the story we experience, with its “insufficiencies, defaults, deferrals” (272); the nonnarratable is closure, the sign that the text has been completed: most typically in the novel, death or marriage, in other words, the “beyond” that needs no narration, that closes off the tale. Narration, he suggests, can never “generate the terms for its own arrest” (274). In Mitchell’s terms we could say that Munro has refused to close with the nonnarratable. My point is that readers rarely tolerate this failure to conclude: they are going to be busy drawing their own conclusions. Better, I suggest, to engage in Morson’s sideshadowing, experiencing the story as we experience the present moment of our lives.

Two features of Munro’s narrative technique make this charged incompleteness particularly tantalizing and distinctive among open endings—first of all, the issues at stake really matter. In this story, ultimate issues, good and evil, confession and repression are stunningly irresolvable. Secondly, Munro has teased us with very traditional expectations: she has written in the mode of realism, not as a self-conscious, mocking postmodern. She has teased us with variable types of closure in the various sections of the story: part I features delay, ending with the boys not telling

about a potential murder to police Captain Tiffin (designated constable Trevitt in the book version); part II ends in mystery with the electric-wire effect of the unheard comment of Jeannette Quinn to Rupert; part III ends with the jolt of Jeannette's hotwiring Enid with a murder confession; IV ends with the irresolution of our silky heroine in muddy boots, waiting for hatched Rupert to finish his work. We've been teased in every way possible; the rhythm of delay with stunning penultimate climaxes surely must resolve itself. But it doesn't.

Open endings are of course nothing new. I've already suggested openness can be an illusion, as in the case of the Garcia Marquez story. But do open-ended stories generally lead to sideshadowing? I think not; at least one issue is the length of the story. Consider, for example, "En el viaje de novios" ("On the Honeymoon"), a four-page Poe-esque tale by Javier Marias, tightly fashioned to create a single effect rather like its longer earlier analog, Poe's "Ligeia." The story develops a single scene: our narrator stands on a balcony watching a woman below while his bride rests in bed with a "slight nausea and a slight fever" (47). The woman he watches below, in her thirties, fusses because she seems to have been stood up by her date. He is both fascinated and repulsed by her, "with her enormous old-fashioned bag and her stiletto heels and her sturdy legs and her tottering gait" (53). Aware that he is watching her, she becomes enraged and claims that he is the man who has stood her up; she's going to come up and kill him. As his wife wakes, asking what all the disturbance is, his mind goes blank, unable to cope with the anticipated catastrophe. The story ends: "We were on our honeymoon, and that is a journey on which nobody wants the intrusion of a stranger even if I was not a stranger, I think, to the person already coming up the stairs. My mind went blank and I shut the window. I got ready to open the door" (53-54).

In such a brief story Morson's sideshadowing hardly comes into play—we are more on the verge of that structural antecedent of the short story, the joke. We don't learn if the narrator does in fact know the woman below the balcony and has repressed that knowledge, or is imagining the future of his marriage, or is suffering a Poe-esque psychic collapse, or is confronting his fear of the feminine, the energy that might in fact lurk within this sickly retiring bride. These are issues of considerable moment, but they are not activated at a fully mimetic level. We are more concerned with an idea, a twist; the issues themselves are not fully activated with the

density that characterizes a Munro story, issues of the sort that I have not even touched on—the family lives of the three boys in the opening Jutland section, or the strange correspondences between Enid and Jeannette, activated by the frightening sexual dreams Enid in part attributes to Jeannette's confessions. Shortness and singleness do not activate sideshadowing, a reader's compulsion to live within continuing potential narration, facing the real choices of a future. The issue isn't simply binary: clearly there's a sliding scale that will vary with the length and density of a story, and from one reader to the next.

It is also true that endings in any fiction tend to imply more complex resolutions the more closely we look. Recent criticism has revealed that very familiar endings with what once were considered clear closural markers turn out to be little worlds spinning with hives of continuing thematic activity. Russell Reising provides, for instance, a particularly persuasive analysis of Henry James's "Jolly Corner," a story with an ending even more tranquil, more sentimental, more obviously closed on the surface than "Love of a Good Woman": Spencer Brydon rests in the maternal arms of Alice Staverton, his fear of his double, his second mercantile self, seemingly at an end. For Reising the loose ends are first of all the cultural ones of Brydon's inability to deal with mercantile America, a concern that virtually infects everything Brydon says and does. More significantly, Reising delineates the increasing empowerment of Alice Staverton herself, who despite the surface appearance of feminine docility is in control of Spencer Brydon much as Maggie is master of the Prince at the end of *The Golden Bowl*: "Staverton's machinations successfully coalesce in her own empowerment" (278), Reising claims. At some level, most endings, under careful analysis, are likely to continue to reverberate with cultural issues. Furthermore, to rely once more on Morson, the urge to prequels, sequels, and rewritings, like Jean Rhys's rewriting of *Jane Eyre*, demonstrates how much we crave to extend our most significant narratives. We want the resolution of closure, but we also want to open everything up all over again; the more significant the story is the more it's never really over. Narrative, especially developed narrative, stories that approach novella length, or shorter stories with a dense texture, do have that tension for us: they give the illusion of the inevitable, the wrapped, the apocalyptic, one of our deepest needs, but we also don't really want it to be so, we want just as deeply to experience the world alive at the brink of a new moment. "The

Love of a Good Woman" may be not so much a closural oddity as an exploration of the shadow of openness implicit in varying degrees within any completed narrative.

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