The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose Short Guide

The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose by Alice Munro

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Characters

Central to all the events in each of the stories of The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose [also published as Who Do You Think You Are?], Rose is the book's protagonist and principal character. Beginning her life in the poor western section of the small town of Hanratty, Rose, like Del in Lives of Girls and Women (1971), considers herself an outsider. But whereas Del's reaction to this feeling of isolation is to search for connections with other people, Rose endeavors to cut herself off from the culture and geographic place where she is so deeply rooted. A key strategy by which she attempts to relieve the pain of her "indigestible lump" of memories of "sad poverty" is to reshape the past through narrative.

Rose reconfigures the "various scandals and bits of squalor from her childhood" into hyperbolic stories, which, in turn, can be "performed" with great effect at cocktail parties. These entertaining yet grotesque parodies of the habits and people of West Hanratty are engaged by Rose as a means of gaining attention and, she hopes, acceptance within each new community she comes in contact with. More important, they also give her a sense of power, the ability, in her mind at least, "to queen over" academics and artists who carry a romanticized notion of what it is to have been born poor.

What Rose gradually realizes is that, like most parodies, her stories of West Hanratty are more than attempts to subvert the potency of past connections, they are also celebrations of these connections. When she returns to her childhood home to care for her aging stepmother Flo, Rose begins to understand that despite her lifelong attempts to escape the ethos of West Hanratty, she has carried it with her in her attitudes toward life, love, and the power (negative and positive) of performance.

Although Rose is central to each story, the book is, as the subtitle of both the American and British editions suggests, about two characters: Flo and Rose. Unlike her stepdaughter, who moves beyond the limitations that have traditionally defined the lives of people from West Hanratty, Flo rarely ventures beyond the geographic or social boundaries of the small community. Instead, her life becomes one of not-so-quiet desperation. At times, she attempts to establish herself in a position of cultural and moral superiority over those around her, as someone who has experience, albeit briefly and without great success, of life in an urban center, where "she worked as a waitress in the coffee shop in Union Station . . . and was followed by men on dark streets and knew how payphones and elevators worked." More often, Flo rails against what she considers the flaws and pretensions of others, using her skills of mimicry and storytelling to pass harsh judgment on individuals and lifestyles, taking center stage with performances which turn people into "monsters ... of foolishness, and showiness, and self-approbation."

Social Concerns

The title of this book was changed from Who Do You Think You Are? to The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose prior to its release in the United States, in part, because Munro's American publisher believed that the colloquial criticism "who do you think you are?" (an expression which also appears in Lives of Girls and Women) would not be familiar to American readers. Despite this change, the attitudes and cultural biases that give rise to the colloquialism remain a central concern of these ten linked stories, which trace the maturing of Rose from childhood through middle age.

Rose grows up with an ingrained sense of a society divided according to the trappings of class, a cultural assertion expressed in the organization of the town of Hanratty itself. In Hanratty proper, "the social structure ran from doctors and dentists and lawyers down to foundry workers and factory workers and draymen," whereas in West Hanratty, an area separated from the relative affluence of the main town by a river, the structure "ran from factory workers and foundry workers down to large improvident families of casual bootleggers and prostitutes and unsuccessful thieves."

What Rose comes to realize through her own ambitions and successes is that a childhood spent among the improvident in no way predestines her to a similar future; being born in West Hanratty does not mean that one can never move beyond the economic and social barriers that have traditionally defined it. Rose soon discovers, however, that her ambition brings attendant challenges, both from outside and from within the community in which she is born. Her contact with numerous "elite" groups during her life, notably her husband's wealthy family and various academic and arts communities, reiterate the same unseen barriers that stratify the town in which she was raised. Constantly aware of the intricate pattern of social codes and culturally sanctioned markers that determine where she will "fit" within the social hierarchies, Rose deliberates about her choice of such cultural "accessories" as clothing, food, reading material, and wine. Struggling to make her selections appear as casual and natural reflections of a cultivated taste, she worries that her choices will be interpreted as stigmatizing evidence of pretentiousness.

In an attempt "to align herself with towners" during a high-school lesson on nutrition, for instance, she claims, in a voice she believes to be "bold, yet natural," to have eaten half a grapefruit for breakfast one morning, a luxury virtually unknown in Hanratty.

When she is later taunted by classmates, who repeat her claim in mocking tones, the lesson is clear: "We sweat for our pretensions."

While attempting to master the grammar of social codes that determine status beyond the well-defined boundaries of West Hanratty, Rose must also contend with the opinions of her own community, where, ironically, ambition is readily misunderstood as pretentiousness. When her ability and interest in schoolwork challenge the local idea "of what a woman ought to be," namely "naive intellectually, childlike, contemptuous of

maps and long words and anything in books," her own family sees her as arrogant and as aspiring to an ostentatious move beyond her proper "place" in the social order.

Rose's stepmother Flo is an especially ironic proponent of this inverted social Darwinism. Ambitious in her own right, she is quick to deride others for what she considers to be inappropriate social climbing; she is also the first person to challenge Rose with the colloquialism that is repeated in the title of the final story and the title of the book's Canadian edition.

Techniques

The history of the prepublication revision that shaped The Beggar Maid supports the many critics who suggest readers approach the book as a story cycle, that is, as ten independent interdependent stories which invite the reader to construct and reconstruct interconnected patterns of recurring characters, images, motifs, and themes.

(Further support for this claim comes from the fact that eight of the stories were published separately in a variety of magazines prior to being collected and arranged in the cycle.) In brief, the first version of the book contained a group of third-person stories about Rose and a group of stories narrated in the first person by a character named Janet. Three of the original "Janet stories" ("Connection," "The Stone in the Field," and "The Moons of Jupiter") were dropped from the second version and later included in the collection The Moons of Jupiter (1982); the remaining first-person "Janet stories" were rewritten as third-person narratives about Rose. Then, with the book already in the early stages of printing, Munro saw the potential for two new Rose stories, "Who Do You Think You Are?" and "Simon's Luck." These two stories were added, at Munro's personal expense, to the collection for the first time.

The late addition of two stories focusing on Rose's return to West Hanratty reflects Munro's attention to the interconnectedness of the events and experiences of Rose's life. Showing Rose's attempts to claim an exaggerated past as the foundation on which to build social acceptance to be ineffective and transparently melodramatic, and her attempts to dismiss the potency of her ties with West Hanratty as misguided, Munro uses the cycle form to direct our attention to another, albeit much more difficult strategy available to Rose. What Rose comes to acknowledge, and what The Beggar Maid stresses both formally and thematically, is that she must recognize the connections and relationships that, individually and in the aggregate, are integral parts of what she has become.

There is a similar connection between theme and Munro's subtle manipulation of narrative time, a technique which gives many of her stories including those in The Beggar Maid a breadth of perspective usually considered the purview of longer literary forms. With all ten stories narrated by a third-person narrator (a perspective Munro began to explore regularly in the collection Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You, 1974) and arranged to give a sense of the chronological development in both Rose's age and character, there is an appearance of linearity to the book as a whole. But each story within this implied chronology moves freely in time. Episodes that at first appear to occur in the historical present blend seamlessly with remembrances of episodes that occurred years earlier. Munro begins "The Beggar Maid," for instance, with a remembered emotion: "Patrick Blatchford was in love with Rose." The past tense "was" provides the opening frame, as it were, for the extended story of Rose and Patrick's courtship at university, their marriage, their subsequent move to Vancouver, and, finally, their divorce. The narrative of these events, however, is an intricate interweaving of episodes in which present tense verbs are privileged and episodes in which past tense verbs and the act of remembering figure prominently. The closing paragraphs of "The

Beggar Maid" extend the narrative chronology to include Rose's memory of a moment nine years after the divorce when she sees Patrick in an airport in the middle of the night. Complicating this already elusive temporality is the reader's recognition that the next story in the cycle, "Mischief," begins three years into the marriage of Patrick and Rose, that is, more than a decade before the ending of the preceding story.

The experience of reading The Beggar Maid reflects one of the book's central themes, for just as Rose must strike a balance in her life, learning to attend to her needs in the present while remaining attentive to the influences of her past and the potential of her future, readers of a story cycle must concentrate on the story being read while remaining aware of the stories that came earlier and those yet to come.

Themes

Extending the pattern she had developed in Lives of Girls and Women, Munro uses the ten linked stories of The Beggar Maid to explore Rose's personal maturation. But whereas the structure of Lives of Girls and Women pivots on Del Jordan's first-person reflections on her efforts to establish emotional and spiritual links with the people around her, The Beggar Maid relies on an omniscient third-person narrator to provide insights into the relationships and fissures, connections and reconnections that accumulate and interweave to shape Rose's understanding of herself and her world.

Focusing on Rose's childhood and adolescence, the three stories that open the book explore the connections established early in Rose's life. In the opening story, "Royal Beatings," these links are familial. Commencing at a point in Rose's childhood when a "long truce" between Rose and her stepmother Flo has deteriorated badly, "Royal Beatings" traces the lines of tension within this family structure. Replacing the tenuous armistice is an intense "wrangle" which seems to have been "going on forever, like a dream that goes back and back into other dreams," and which culminates when Flo elicits the participation of Del's father in a ritualized act of domestic violence: "Royal Beating. That was Flo's promise." Yet it is Rose's connection with Flo, the only mother figure she has any memory of, which also proves to be the most enduring and the most complicated of these primary relationships.

The two subsequent stories in this opening triad trace Rose's experiences within the established hierarchy of elementary school ("Privilege") and during the period of her transition into adolescence, an especially tumultuous time marked by the death of her father, her experiences in high school, and her increasingly acute sensitivity to the stultifying social structure of Hanratty ("Half a Grapefruit"). In each of these two stories, Rose's relationship with Flo is never far from the foreground; indeed, it becomes an increasingly complex connection, with Flo being cast and recast in a number of key roles in Rose's life, variously an audience for the stories Rose brings home from school, an injudicious commenta tor on the events and people of Hanratty, an omnipresent threat to disrupt Rose's tentative place within the school hierarchy, and a foil to her ambitious stepdaughter.

With each successive story in the book, Rose moves beyond Hanratty and the direct influence of Flo into the increasingly ambiguous world of adult relationships. In "Wild Swans," she ventures to Toronto on the train for the first time by herself, a trip which leads to her first sexual experience. "The Beggar Maid" opens with Rose in university and reflecting on her courtship with Patrick Blatchford, a young man from a wealthy West Coast family. The story reveals both the intensity and the ultimate failure of Rose's connection with Patrick, detailing their awkward courtship, marriage, and the battles leading to a bitter divorce. Opening three years into the marriage of Patrick and Rose, "Mischief" retraces and adds previously omitted details to Rose's recollections of her union, including the story of her ill-fated and unconsummated affair with the husband of a close friend. The web of connections shaping Rose's life continues to expand in the next two stories, as Rose works to redefine herself in terms of new relationships: with a

married lover living in a distant city, a "connection" which "held her new life in place"; with her daughter Anna, a precocious child with whom Rose gradually acknowledges having little in common ("Providence"); and with a man she falls deeply in love with, not knowing that he is dying of cancer ("Simon's Luck").

The final two stories of the book — "Spelling" and "Who Do You Think You Are?" — bring this theme of connection and reconnection full circle.

Returning to West Hanratty to care for an aging Flo, Rose is again forced to redefine herself, this time in terms of relationships she mistakenly believes she has moved beyond: "false connections, with a lost period of her life." A number of these links with her past are of an especially intimate nature, such as her relationship with Flo, whom Rose eventually places in the Wawanash County Home for the Aged, and with her younger half-brother Brian, whose intense memories of childhood competition threaten to rupture the calm surface of maturity. Other past connections are more casual, but, as Rose comes to understand, have been no less important in her life. Foremost among these are her brief encounters with Milton Homer, a local eccentric now living in the County Home, and Ralph Gillespie, a retired Naval Petty Officer who decades earlier had sat either ahead or behind Rose in every high school class. As the closing line of the final story suggests, although Rose knows Ralph Gillespie only casually, she is connected to him in the way that only people who share a sense of culture and place can be: "What could she say about herself and Ralph Gillespie, except that she felt his life, close, closer than the lives of men she'd loved, one slot over from her own?"

Threatening to disrupt and in some cases destroy the relationships informing Rose's life, however, is a deeprooted fear of "exposure." Life in West Hanratty teaches Rose early in her life about the potential humiliation and pain that come when a person "exposes" herself to the affections, judgment, or scrutiny of others. She is told stories of or participates in numerous events during which watching or spying, for instance, is a strategy by which one gains power and control over those being watched. Invariably, such occasions are encoded with a kind of theatricality. At times, such moments of drama reflect an almost benign innocence, as when Rose overhears her father talking to himself as he works, speaking words which "hang clear and nonsensical on the air." More often, such occasions reveal the darker side of the human condition, as when a local girl, Becky Tyde, watches as her father is beaten brutally by three townsmen or when Rose joins a gathering in the schoolyard to watch a young boy sexually abuse his sister.

Balanced against this fear of exposure and humiliation is the paradoxical need of many characters to "perform," another resonant word in these stories.

Like Milton Homer, whose "everyday looks" take on a "theatrical extremity," Rose harbors a powerful impulse to make herself into a public person who participates fully and openly in the world rather than functioning in the isolation and privacy of the shadows.

While in university, for instance, she recognizes that she wants "to perform in public" despite the fact she considers herself "too much of a coward ever to walk on stage." It is a decision that not only confirms the opinions of those who think she is "always so theatrical," but also signals Rose's first formal recognition of a desire to act which remains dormant until after her divorce.

Complicating this tension between exposure and performance is the fact that, at times, the physical and psychological distance separating observer and observed collapses. Rose often catches herself during moments when she is at once actor and audience, as when she stares at her own reflection in mirrors or windows, or when she examines in snapshots the details of her own image. At other times, this disconcerting fusion of perspectives occurs in Rose's mind's eye, as when she thinks back on the "royal beatings" administered by her father and wonders whether the domestic brutality had "to be carried out, in the end, partly for the effect, to prove to the audience of one . . . that such a thing can happen." Similarly, she frequently "looks back" and "sees" herself "sitting beside Patrick, in her low-cut black blouse and black velvet skirt which she hoped would turn out to be the right thing to wear." On these occasions Rose also recalls "wishing they were just going to the movies," thereby guaranteeing herself a single and comfortable perspective as watcher of someone else's performance.

Key Questions

With their formal and thematic emphasis on the inevitability of interconnectedness in the lives of the central characters, the stories in The Beggar Maid provide excellent opportunities for discussion of character development. A good line to pursue, for instance, is to examine how the events and experiences of Rose's past bear on her life as she matures and whether readers believe Munro's assertion of the strength of these past connections.

This is an assertion that, in one sense, raises an interesting challenge to the western cultural belief that through hard work and dedication anyone can achieve success in any area of endeavor they choose to focus on.

The book also reflects Munro's attention to recurring patterns of image, motif, and theme, especially as they are revealed in the lives of her female characters. Groups may begin by discussing, for example, the patterns Munro establishes to emphasize the importance of "domestic" space in these stories (such as kitchens) or those which focus attention on the double bind of female sexuality.

1. Munro's prepublication revision of The Beggar Maid was the result of her decision to excise all first-person narrators, either by excluding the story in question or by rewriting it from a third-person perspective. What effect did this decision have on the final version of the book as a whole? In other words, how would the inclusion of a single story or a group of stories written from a first-person perspective alter the book? How could these firstperson narratives have been integrated into the book — as a separate grouping or in accordance with the implied chronology of Rose's life?

2. The story "Privilege" was published prior to its appearance in the book in Ms. magazine (September 1978) under the title "The Honeyman's Daughter." Given that titles often signal to readers how to approach a work of literature, influencing, on first reading at least, what characters, details, or elements of setting we should pay particular attention to, how does this change in title influence our understanding of the story and its meanings?

3. How does changing the title of the book from The Beggar Maid to The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose affect the reading experience?

4. Does the fact that the settings of many of these stories are explicitly Canadian influence a reader's understanding of the book? If so, how? If not, why did Munro specify the "Canadianness," as it were, of her work in this way? Why did she choose to specify that her fictional small town of Hanratty is in Ontario and that when Rose moves she goes to the Canadian cities of Kingston, Toronto, and Vancouver?

5. In her influential essay "Writing Short Stories," Flannery O'Connor suggests that "[t]here are two qualities that make fiction. One is the sense of mystery and the other is the sense of manners. You get the manners from the texture of existence that surrounds

you." Consider how Munro develops this "texture" in her fiction, remembering that "texture" is a word that she herself often uses to describe her own writing.

6. Some critics suggest that The Beggar Maid — like Lives of Girls and Women — can be read as either a cycle of independent interdependent stories or as a novel. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

7. Does Rose experience the sexual encounter on the train in "Wild Swans" or is her encounter imagined?

Literary Precedents

Most critics consider The Beggar Maid to be an important addition to the catalogue of exceptional story cycles produced by Canadian writers since 1896, when Duncan Campbell Scott's In the Village of Viger established the cycle form in Canada; indeed, one critic has suggested that since Scott's book the cycle has become "something of a subgenre" within Canadian literature.

With its formal and thematic emphasis on the interdependence of its constituent stories, Munro's book shows a formal and general thematic relationship with such notable Canadian works as Stephen Leacock's Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town (1912) and Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich (1914), George Elliot's The Kissing Man (1962), which shares a sense of place and historical time with Munro's book, and Margaret Laurence's A Bird in the House (1970).

In an international context, The Beggar Maid reflects to varying degrees the creative ingenuity of early and contemporary contributors to the cycle form, including such diverse and notable authors as Ivan Turgenev (A Sportsman's Sketches, 1852), James Joyce (Dubliners, 1914), Sherwood Anderson (Winesburg, Ohio, 1919), William Faulkner (The Unvanquished, 1938 and Go Down, Moses, 1942), as well as two writers whose names often figure prominently in discussions of Munro's style and technique: Eudora Welty (The Golden Apples, 1949) and Flannery O'Connor (Everything That Rises Must Converge, 1965).

Related Titles

Given the complicated prepublication history of The Beggar Maid it is possible to consider any or all of the ten stories in the book as related to the three stories that were dropped from the second version. Each of these excised stories explores the central theme of "connections," with female characters experiencing insights and participating in events that reinforce their links to other people, other places, and other times. Also related to the book, both structurally and thematically, is Lives of Girls and Women, in which Munro explores the development of another strong-willed female character, Del Jordan.

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