In Flight: Feminist Escape in James Joyce's *Dubliners* and Alice Munro's *Runaway*

The quest to "ascend through the roof and fly away to another country" (Joyce 43), in which a character can escape the entrapments of social constraints and craft a deeper sense of self, becomes a frequent narrative within James Joyce's early 20th-century *Dubliners* and Alice Munro's early 21st-century *Runaway.* Both short story collections represent female characters' escapes and failed escapes. I compare the feminist quests portrayed in Joyce's short story "Eveline", and Alice Munro's stories "Runaway" and "Passion", focusing on depictions of 'escape' and 'quest narratives' to analyze the various and dynamic ways in which female characters attempt to depart from crippling social expectations in search of self-knowledge and authentic identity. Escapes within *Dubliners* and *Runaway* vary, though both collections contribute to the advancement of the feminist quest narrative with focalization through female characters and representations of the imposing patriarchal restrictions that women inevitably face throughout their quests. While *Dubliners* offers significant representations of female escape, these narratives consistently end in paralysis, and characters fail to become emancipated from their oppressive environments. This paper will demonstrate how Munro's collection takes the feminist quest narrative to new heights, as while not all characters have successful escapes, they attain knowledge and acquire agency through their quests.

Escape is represented throughout *Dubliners* with both male and female characters, and while this paper focuses on the feminist quest narrative, it must be acknowledged that Joyce's collection engages with both the feminine and masculine quests. By crafting a collection that illuminates the paralysis and entrapment of both women and men, Joyce challenges the prominence of what feminist scholar Dana Heller describes as "male archetypes as universal vehicles of agency and power in narrative" (Heller 3) as Joyce focalizes women's similar desire

for “uncompromised self-sufficiency” (Heller 2). Literary critics note that western literature usually genders the quest as masculine, with the escape from the feminine embodiment of family and home. Escape and quest has conventionally excluded the female perspective and pertained to the masculine hero in literature. Joyce portrays what literary critic Omid Ghahreman notes as “romantic notions of escape and flight” (Ghahreman 160) from the “paralyzing life of Dublin” (160) through the feminist narrative “Eveline” where a nineteen-year-old girl contemplates fleeing Dublin. Eveline’s chance to escape the oppressive and abusive stronghold of her father and the pressure to assume the matriarchal role in his household is offered by a man, her boyfriend Frank’s offer of a life abroad, which retracts agency from her position. The progressive nature of the narrative exists in Joyce’s depiction of Eveline’s desire for an escape where “people would treat her with respect” and she could attain a “right to happiness” (Joyce 21). Significantly, Eveline remains in paralysis rather than escaping with a male figure which challenges the idea that a male hero would save Eveline from her position. Through Eveline, Joyce presents readers with neither a successful female escape narrative, nor one that relies on the emancipation through a male hero. Like all characters in *Dubliners*, Ghareman describes Eveline’s escape as “destined to end in frustration” (Ghahreman 162), but through this narrative Joyce focalizes the female desire to have agency over one’s life.

By offering what author and literary critic Zennure Koseman describes as “portrayals of women who are enclosed by the dominance of a rigid patriarchal society” (Koseman 587), Joyce “displays women’s tendency for being in search of selfhood and freewill behind their endeavors for emancipation” (587). As suggested by feminist scholar Heidi Machperson, in conventional literature to “escape is to run away from the embodiment of culture, the female” (38), and thus escape narratives “traditionally excluded the female as subject” (36). While Joyce’s depiction of

female quests is not always successful and continuously reinforces paralysis, he makes a significant contribution to the feminist quest narrative by acknowledging what Heller describes as women's "search for enlightened love and for self-knowledge" through their attempts to escape (Heller 22). Through Eveline's attempted escape from "the dominant rules of patriarchal society", Joyce offers a narrative that opposes the traditional theme in literature, as Heller argues, that "the cycle of the quest celebrates masculine superiority" (Heller 2) exclusively. Joyce's female quester is not successful in escaping Dublin's patriarchal social order, but Eveline does at east demonstrate the female desire for agency and identity formation.

Published ninety years after *Dubliners*, Alice Munro's *Runaway* heightens and continues to develop the representation of feminist escape narratives, which becomes apparent in many of her short stories. Significantly, Munro's collection represents escape and the feminist quest dynamically between short stories, and the physical placement of these stories suggests the developing nature of "women's awakening to selfhood" (Heller 15) that occurs throughout this collection. Comparing the physical escape narrative presented in Munro's first story of the collection "Runaway", with the dynamic escape that is depicted through the later story "Passion", it becomes evident that Munro's work is heightened in comparison to Joyce's depiction of the feminist quest.

As in "Eveline", the female quester Carla, in Munro's story "Runaway", attempts to flee her suffocating situation by escaping the physical home and the emotionally oppressive regulations within those walls. Parallel to Eveline, this attempted escape by Carla is, as Munro scholar Fiona Tolan notes, "frustrated by a return" (Tolan 162). It is clear that Carla's identity and life are dependent on her husband Clark, and this leads to the abandonment of her escape attempt. On the third bus stop away from a life "infecting her with misery", Carla realizes that

even though she ran away in "hope of recovering herself", "she would not exist" in a life that "would not contain Clark" (Munro 34). This representation of Carla being emotionally trapped, even once she has physically escaped, highlights Munro's awareness of Heller's argument that "women's social roles, which confined them physically and emotionally to the imperatives of the family, marriage, and home" (Heller 5) impact the ability for women to "over[come] feminine entanglements" even with the abandonment of home and family.

Carla's desire to "[take] charge of her own life" (Munro 34) through escape is a failure, yet as Tolan suggests "the female quest, rather than a journeying out into the world, can become a fruitful quest inward" (170). Carla's inward quest is accelerated through what literary scholar Corrine Bigot presents as the "gradual intrusion of actual or symbolic violence" (Bigot 1) that becomes inferred through the unknown disappearance of her beloved goat Flora. The looming death of Flora at the hands of Clark develops an internal conflict within Carla. Carla's internal conflict and knowledge are embodied by the "murderous needle somewhere in her lungs" that functions as "a constant low-lying temptation" (Munro 46) to reveal the truth of her situation with Clark. The awareness that Carla could reveal Flora's death by finding "a skull she could hold like a teacup in one hand" with "knowledge in the other hand" (Munro 47) presents her "quest for authentic self-knowledge" (Heller 1). This final image of Carla contemplating this truth, as Tolan suggests, "contains a foreshadowing of the journey or quest that is still to come" (Tolan 176), which is more promising than the position of the female quester in *Dubliners*. Despite the multiple barriers of escape and quest, there is a recognition by Carla "that the questing role does exist for her" (Tolan 176), even if she does not escape in the future.

Through "Runaway", Tolan proposes that Munro's collection "accepts the established exposition of the patriarchal limits of the quest" (Tolan 163) which enables her to craft narratives

that Hella indicates "work to subvert, rather than affirm, the quest pattern" (Heller 4) which has been traditionally masculine. Both Heller and Tolan suggest that this subversion of a masculine quest and the acceptance of an "alternative, feminine, quest experience" (Tolan 163) is necessary to oppose the "prescribed patterns of quest" which "appear to indicate that identity is an exclusively a masculine attribute" (Heller 4). By demonstrating "the inevitable moves forward and back that plague a female journey" (Tolan 176) Munro expands the female quest narrative by representing the necessity for escapes to fail for the development of the character. This movement, apparent in Carla as she searches for knowledge and authentic identity, demonstrates how the escape in *Runaway* differs from the escape in *Dubliners,* as even when there are physical failures the characters are advancing in their personal quests. Munro heightens the female quest narrative by impressing "the necessity of attempting the quest" (Tolan 176) in order to reinforce the female desire to challenge her position and exercise her agency.

Munro's collection is enhanced by her nuanced awareness of the patriarchal limitations imposed on women, and by exemplifying this through Carla, the development of her characters in short stories that follow become more persuasive and powerful in progressing the feminist quest narrative. A close analysis of Munro's character Grace in "Passion" exemplifies a narrative in which a female character refuses to "remain entrapped by social restrictions" or within as Heller argues: "definitions of female goodness that demand their passivity, submission and obedience" (6 Heller). While Grace is represented as passive, submissive and obedient within "Passion", her dynamic internal quest that develops throughout the short story leads to a promising ending where she is portrayed as unapologetically self-interested, unaffected by the pressures to please others and fulfill the expected roles in her world.

Coming from a lower-class position, Grace is characterized as independent and intellectually driven through her desire to "learn everything you could learn for free" (Munro 166). Her distaste towards the expectation of women to be "beautiful, treasured, spoiled" and inevitably "fallen in love with" (Munro 168), contrasts the "internalized image of [women] as passive objects" (Heller 6). On the surface, action level, Grace appears accepting and submissive, although her internal dialogue represents a developing quest that resists social expectations. Grace does not seem convinced about a future with her boyfriend Maury and the promise of "a whole lifetime of comfort" (Munro 162). Despite the financial benefits for a girl in a disadvantaged position, marriage does not seem appealing to Grace which is flagged in her contemplation: "did she believe, or even wish, that it would happen?" (174). As she internally contemplates the stifling and simplistic comforts of Maury, Grace's rejection of her own passivity becomes increasingly apparent.

Grace welcomes an opportunity to escape the "limits of an enclosed space" (Heller 10), as she passively goes along with Neil, Maruy's older brother, for a spontaneous drunken drive. Consistent with her characterization throughout "Passion", Grace remains soft spoken and reinforces the "imperatives of nurturance and service" (Heller 20) to Neil, although through this brief physical escape from Maury, Grace's internal quest is accelerated immensely. Reflecting on the oddity of her situation with Neil, she realizes marriage to Maury would be a "treachery to herself" (Munro 190). Resisting social ties to family and attachment, Grace notes that through her adventure with Neil, "Maury and Mavis and the rest of the family were wiped from her mind" (Munro 183). This internal quest demonstrates Grace's desire, that Heller notes as "discovering authentic selfhood, and for claiming the right to take her journey out into the world" (Heller 13). After Neil passes out and through his alcoholism fails to fulfil the narrative

of a masculine hero, Grace takes control and drives them home which opposes the traditional masculine and feminine heroic roles that are prominent in escape literature. After Grace's escape has experienced a return, her unapologetic nature towards Maury and his family represents the heightened level of agency and self-interest Grace embodies. As Heller explains, "women's quests that seek resolution through marriage often signal the female protagonist's recognition that individual aspirations and desires are impossible to achieve" (11), a perspective that is significantly opposed through Grace's rejection of marriage.

Through the short story "Grace", Munro weaves powerful dimensions that challenge the feminist role of escape that has been previously represented in Joyce's works and Munro's own story "Runaway". Closely examining this progression, Munro not only pushes the development of the feminist escape narrative forward with her collection as a whole, but this progression is noticeably developed from the first story of her collection to "Passion", which is in the final half of the book. The characterization of Grace challenges the feminist quest that is depicted in both "Runaway" and "Eveline" through the agency and unapologetic nature that Grace presents. This dynamic, which can also be noted in other characters in Munro's collection, is expansive and productive when considering the feminist escape narrative. Grace rejects the comfortable life that she could attain through Maury, which demonstrates the argument by Heller that Munro crafts "female characters who refuse to accept the roles accorded them by restrictive social norms, even if it means sacrificing themselves in the name of rebellion" (Heller 15).

Considering the representations of escapes in Joyce's *Dubliners* and Munro's *Runaway* illuminates how both collections focalize the female escape and quest narrative to make substantial additions to escapist and quest literature. The representations of escape within *Dubliners* and *Runaway* vary, though they both contribute to the advancement of the feminist

quest narrative with the focalization of female characters in their attempted escapes and the awareness of imposing patriarchal restrictions that women inevitably face throughout their quests. Heller states that "a number of revolutionary texts have come into existence over the last forty years, all of them working to redefine the literary portrayal of American women's quests" (14) and considering the rich and powerful development of both Joyce and Munro, this statement can be expanded to consider the changing dynamic of female quests in Canadian and European literature as well. Through their respective collections, Joyce and Munro present the acknowledgement of women's desire to "transcend the limits of an enclosed space" (Heller 10) both physically and emotionally as they establish their preferred role in the world as independent agents. The establishment of these narratives, and the traditional roles they challenge and rewrite are substantial in the development and expansion of future literature pertaining to the complex dynamics that the feminist quest narrative encompasses.

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