

*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*

Alice Munro and the Epistolary Mode

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--RS

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## List of Abbreviations

<i>FMY</i>	<i>Friend of My Youth</i>
<i>HFCLM</i>	<i>Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage</i>
<i>LGW</i>	<i>The Love of a Good Woman</i>
<i>LGAW</i>	<i>Lives of Girls and Women</i>
<i>MJ</i>	<i>The Moons of Jupiter</i>
<i>OS</i>	<i>Open Secrets</i>
<i>SMTY</i>	<i>Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You</i>
<i>TMH</i>	<i>Too Much Happiness</i>

# 1 Introduction

Ever since Alice Munro was awarded with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013, her status as *the* main representative of the short story has been unquestioned. Now referred to as the “master of the contemporary short story” (Sterling and Brumfield 2013, online), Munro had enjoyed substantial academic attention long before her short story art was universally recognized. Already by 2007 the whole body of criticism about Munro comprised more than 20 books and hundreds of articles (cf. Moulder 2007). While there are a vast number of publications discussing Munro’s art of storytelling, her use of setting, recurring character types as well as themes, there is to date no extensive discussion of the use of letters as a narrative strategy in Munro’s short stories. In her habilitation on the contemporary Canadian short story, Löschnigg (2011: 24) notes that letters have been a striking feature especially in Munro’s recent writings, “standing as materialized items of truth (mis)constructed by language.” Similarly, Ailsa Cox, in her 2004 publication *Alice Munro*, devoted a few pages to Munro’s letters, observing that “Munro often uses letters as evidence, when she incorporates historical forms of discourse” (Cox 2004: 79). Even though Cox (2004: 89) notices that the letter is “a favourite Munro device” she then only discusses their role in the short story “Carried Away” (*OS*). Since letters, however, are prominent in many other Munro stories, they merit more extensive discussion.

Considering Munro’s *oeuvre* of more than forty years of writing, the use of letters is one of the elements which have occurred continuously throughout her line of publications. In fact, of the fourteen short story collections Munro has published so far, ten contain short stories which make use of letters in one way or another. In total, this amounts to twenty-two epistolary short stories.<sup>1</sup> What is more, while starting out with two epistolary short stories in her first collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), Munro’s interest in the potential of letters has been gradually rising. Of the thirteen stories in Munro’s second collection *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974), three are epistolary stories. *Open Secrets* (1994) as well as *Runaway* (2004) include four letter-stories each, and the title of her latest, but hopefully not last, publication, *Dear Life* (2012), again alludes to the letter form.

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<sup>1</sup> A list of all epistolary short stories by Alice Munro is provided in the appendix.

The letters, which occur in more than twenty of Munro's short stories, differ in quantity and quality in almost every story. Some of these epistolary short stories take the shape of the traditional epistolary form, designed in letters only, while Munro also moves away from this original form to more experimental ways of using letters in many of her other stories. Epistolarity in the Munroian sense is thus no longer linked to the quantity of letters in stories. On the contrary, Munro frequently uses the letter mode in addition to other narrative structures and thus attributes a new meaning to the notion of epistolary fiction.

In order to follow up on Munro's transformation of this established literary genre, I will begin with a brief historical overview of the origins and the development of the epistolary form. A theoretical discussion of relevant works by Altman, Bray, Singer, and others will follow, outlining the narratological features which distinguish the epistolary mode from other narrative forms and providing the framework for the ensuing analysis. The main section is devoted to Alice Munro's work and to an exploration of her creative exploitation of the epistolary form. By using six of her epistolary short stories, "A Wilderness Station" (*OS*), "Material" (*SMTY*), "The Jack Randa Hotel" (*OS*), "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage" (*HFCLM*), "Before the Change" (*LGW*) and "Tell me Yes or No" (*SMTY*), I will provide an insight into the wide variety of functions letters fulfill in Alice Munro's stories.

Ranging from resistance to repressive power networks, to the exploration of fantasies and parallel worlds, to therapeutic means, the letters in Alice Munro's short stories testify that the epistolary form has by no means declined. On the contrary, the creativity, innovation, and love of experimentation with which Munro uses letters in her short fiction underline that the versatile qualities of the epistolary form are still relevant in the postmodern literary world.

## 2 The Epistolary Form Throughout History

The epistolary mode has received a lot of critical attention recently. Since it is associated mainly with eighteenth century England, it is often considered to be dead or at least dated in present-day literary circles (cf. Bray 2003: 1). While the increasing number of recent appearances on the epistolary market account for the never-ending topicality of the letter-form, it is undoubtedly true that the genre underwent some decline after its eighteenth century heyday. To give a deeper insight into the rise and fall of the epistolary mode, the reasons for its loss in popularity, and to examine whether there really was a decline, a brief overview of the developments of the epistolary form throughout history will follow.

The roots of the epistolary form are found in Spain where the first epistolary novel ever, Juan de Segura's *Precesso de Cartas*, was published as early as 1548. While this might have been the first novel in letters, it must be pointed out that letters had been part of fiction for a long time. After Spain led the way for the genre's establishment, authors from many other European countries, such as Italy, France, Germany, and England followed the Spaniards (cf. Mylne 1981: 144-45; cf. Bowers 2009, online). For the purpose of this thesis, however, the history of the epistolary form in England is of primary interest. According to Bowers (2009, online), the beginnings of the epistolary tradition in English fiction trace back to the Middle Ages and Ovid's *Heroides* and the letters of Abelard and Heloise. The translation of de Lavergne de Guilleragues's *Letters Portugaises* into *The Portuguese Letters* in 1678 and the immense popularity of Aphra Behn's *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684-1687), further prompted the birth of the rich epistolary tradition in England. Among the letter novels of the early eighteenth century were Delariviere Manley's *Memoirs of the Earl of Warwick* (1707), Eliza Haywood's *Letters from a Lady of Quality to a Chevalier* (1721) and Mary Davy's *Familiar Letters Betwixt a Gentleman and a Lady* (1725) (cf. Bowers 2009, online).

As this selection of early epistolary works demonstrates, the pre-Richardsonian era of letter novels was very much dominated by women, in terms of authorship as well subject matter. These epistolary works were popular for reasons that are not necessarily connected to their value as pieces of literature. Rather, aspects such as the comparatively low complexity of these novels which suited the limited education of

women at that time may have played a role. The thereby established association of epistolary fiction with women's experience and women's topics is still a common idea nowadays. While modern and contemporary epistolary fiction has managed to detach itself from being affiliated with women exclusively, the epistolary output of the eighteenth century does indeed show a strong prevalence for the woman's domain. Recurring topics are attempts to reconcile sexual desire with religion, to withstand seduction, and to lead a respectful life beyond parents' surveillance (cf. Bowers 2009, online). When, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the newly-born American nation started to produce its own literature, which still was very much influenced by the literary tradition of their former mother country, they likewise used women-related topics such as the dangers of seduction, albeit, in an entirely different context. In the American epistolary tradition, the seduced woman came to be symbolic of the vulnerability of the young America nation (cf. Duane 2011: 37). The epistolary genre in America, therefore, had a clearly political agenda.

Even without any political associations, the 'female' topics just mentioned also play a role in the works of the key representative of eighteenth century epistolary fiction, Samuel Richardson. His immense success, however, is due to reasons beyond topic choice. Samuel Richardson used letters in a more refined and well-crafted way than any of his predecessors. His aptitude for doing so may very well come from the frequency in which he wrote letters in his personal life as well as from the fondness with which he read epistolary fiction himself (cf. Bowers 2009, online). His first novel, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740), was a huge success and popular with readers from many different backgrounds. It also shaped the formation of the cult of sensibility, which played a prominent role in English literature during the 1740s and 70s and often found expression in the form of the epistolary novel (cf. Bowers 2009, online). Richardson's second novel, *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* (1747/48), is said to not only be his masterpiece but also the greatest English novel of the eighteenth century (cf. Bowers 2009, online). In his final epistolary novel, *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753/54), Richardson then shifted his thematic focus from female to male and from sexuality to religion (cf. Bowers 2009, online).

Following the immense success of Richardson's novels, several other epistolary works appeared throughout Europe, but particularly in England. Contrary to common belief, the epistolary mode remained dominant throughout the eighteenth century. By

the mid-nineteenth century, however, the epistolary form faded into the background. That does not mean that letters disappeared entirely from literature, however. It was only the all-letter novels that gradually disappeared from the literary scene. Particularly interesting in this regard is that many novels of the first half of the nineteenth-century were in fact intended to be epistolary narratives, as we can see from their first drafts. However, then something made authors change their minds and choose a different narrative mode instead. Such was the case, for instance, in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (cf. Bowers 2009, online). Why the epistolary form lost popularity after a century of success has been of academic interest ever since. While Singer (1963: 101-2) explains its decline with a shift of public taste, namely from sensibility to terror, fear, and horror and notes that for these topics, the letter form was no longer considered suitable, Bray (2003: 1) states that it was the epistolary novel's inferiority in rendering consciousness that eventually led to its decline. Bowers (2009, online), on the other hand, refers to totally different reasons, such as the consequences of the French revolution, a growing demand for modes of narration more closely associated with men but also to the idea that Richardson's huge success might have been intimidating for some writers.

While it is difficult to narrow this development down to a single reason or factor, which would definitely oversimplify the whole subject matter, it can be said from today's perspective that the epistolary mode has actually never disappeared completely. While it is true that its use has never been as prominent and frequent as it was in the eighteenth century, epistolary writings have never ceased to exist entirely. On the contrary, letters have continued to be a popular device of mediation in literature; only the publication of all-letter novels has decreased. Rather than consisting of letters only, therefore, epistolary forms today appear alongside other narrative forms and are characterized by a variety of forms of communication that derive from the letter. These are, for instance, e-mails, text messages, and even tweets. The notion of epistolary fiction has simply become broader (cf. Bowers 2009, online).

Moreover, the common misconception that the pure epistolary mode, i.e. works consisting entirely of letters, has come out of fashion is further undermined by the increasing number of all-letter novels which have been published in recent years. To name a few, there are Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (2003), Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2010), and Mark Dunn's *Ella Minnow Pea* (2003).

Innovative variations of the letter mode which use one of the just mentioned offspring of letters are equally widespread, as Lauren Myracle’s *TTYL* (2005), Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), Lynn Coady’s *The Antagonist* (2011), and the popular e-mail novels by Austrian author Daniel Glattauer *Gut Gegen Nordwind* (2006) and *Alle Sieben Wellen* (2009) show.

Furthermore, as this thesis proves, letters have also found their way into narratives other than the novel: the short story. Henry James smoothed the way to stories in letters with his two epistolary short stories “A Bundle of Letters” (1878) and “The Point of View” (1882). Since then, numerous authors have followed his example, amongst others, Kathrine Kressmann Taylor in “Address Unknown” (1938), Stephen King in “Jerusalem’s Lot” (1978), Mark Ernest Pothier in “The Man Who Owns Little” (2013) and, above all, Alice Munro who uses letters in more than twenty of her short stories, some of which are entirely made of letters while others constitute experimental and very well-crafted variations of the epistolary mode. The example of Alice Munro’s short stories shows particularly well that today letters in fiction are used in addition to other narrative modes, constituting significant elements within the stories’ narrative structure. These short stories by Alice Munro will form the centerpiece of this thesis. Before turning to them, however, a theoretical discussion of the epistolary mode and its narratological as well as structural features is required.

### 3 The “Epistolary Mosaic”<sup>2</sup> and its Qualities

“[F]orm can be more than the outer shell of content, [...] the medium chosen by an artist may in fact dictate, rather than be dictated by, his message” (Altman 1982: 8). The epistolary form in Alice Munro’s short stories was chosen specifically and fulfills clear functions that could not be fulfilled by a different narrative frame. It will therefore be necessary to explore the intrinsic structure of the epistolary mode in order to show how it dictates a message.

The structure of epistolary fiction is indeed remarkable. Altman (1982: 169) uses the expression of the “epistolary mosaic” to describe the nature of epistolary narratives as units comprising smaller but self-contained subunits, the letters. These subunits

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<sup>2</sup> Altman (1982: 169).

constitute discourses of their own and simultaneously serve as a contextual frame for the other letters and the whole narrative (cf. Altman 1982: 167). As such the epistolary form can foreground both its continuous or discontinuous nature in various ways.

While inept to render a seamlessly continuous narrative, the epistolary form can emphasize continuity and its qualities as an autonomous literary work by limiting the story to only one single plot-line where one letter writer and one addressee exchange letters which are then ordered in a chronological manner (cf. Altman 1982: 169). Authors can also choose the midway and play with continuity and discontinuity. One way of doing so is by ordering letters written at different times one after the other. This can not only lead to nice plot twists but also creates the illusion of a continuous narrative that is really separate units strung together (cf. Altman 1982: 171-172).

Nevertheless, the true uniqueness of the epistolary form lies in its fragmentary nature and the resulting discontinuity since these qualities open up interesting possibilities for creating extraordinary, multi-layered narrative structures. Considering letters as serial installments, for instance, allows them to be used for cliffhangers and to create suspense (cf. Altman 1982: 168). Discontinuity is likewise foregrounded by rendering multiple plot strands, by ordering the letters a-chronologically, and/or by having multiple correspondents rather than one writer and one addressee (cf. Altman 1982: 170).

In addition, the fragmentary nature of epistolary works opens up opportunities for creating contradictory and allusive discourses (cf. Altman 1982: 182-83). Since the outside reader cannot help but seek unity and to identify connections, he/she is made a detective who pieces together elements of the individual letters to make sense of the whole narrative (cf. Altman 1982: 173). The potentials of the fragmented nature of epistolary works in Alice Munro's short stories will be more closely illustrated after considering Saul Bellow's *Herzog* (1964) and its innovative way of using letters.

Generally speaking, letters serve as a means of communication between two physically separated correspondents. This makes the letter form perfectly suitable for the love plot. *Herzog* (1964), however, shows that epistolary mediation can mean much more than a connection of distant letter writers. In *Herzog* (1964) the protagonist feels restless, is mentally unstable, and obsessively writes letters (generally without sending them) to people from his past life who are often already dead. By this he manages to establish a connection to his past and thereby make peace with it. Letters here no longer

serve as a medium of communication between two separate correspondents but between two time periods. Moreover, the letters thereby come to have a somewhat psychoanalytic function (cf. Altman 1982: 38). While in the beginning Herzog's obsessive letter writing is reflective of his mental chaos, it is precisely this activity that eventually brings him back to mental stability (cf. Altman 1982: 39). His final termination of writing is then a sign if not of mental health then at least of mental stability (cf. Altman 1982: 42). All in all, this novel demonstrates interesting uses of the fragmentary and discontinuous nature of the epistolary form, also because the protagonist eventually abandons letter-writing as a sign of the re-established continuity in his life.

Another interesting facet of the fragmentary nature of epistolary works is, in the fashion of Henry James, its use for rendering and contrasting multiple visions of reality (cf. Altman 1982: 176). This is particularly the case in those epistolary writings that have multiple correspondents. Since the individual characters usually present their point of view of a particular event, there is always some repetition of the same event; however, while at first this might seem to be a weakness of epistolary fiction, it is, according to Singer (1963: 80), actually one of its great strengths and indeed facilitates numerous narrative strategies. The multiple points of view can, for instance, be used for a juxtaposition of multiple perceptions of reality and thereby can call attention to the relativity of reality and to how much it is shaped by the beholder (cf. Altman 1982: 176). Thus the epistolary form steps down from imposing one universal meaning and rather renders numerous angles of one event, thereby also calling attention to underlying power structures, or what Foucault calls 'regimes of truth' (cf. Tamboukou 2011: 628). Furthermore, this unique structure of the epistolary form allows the reader to observe meaning in the making, i.e. "the process of how stories create meanings as they unfold. Narrative sense in this context emerges as an agglomeration of fragments, stories that are incomplete, irresolute or broken" (Tamboukou 2011: 628).

In summary, one of the major qualities of the epistolary form lies in its twofold structure. While any epistolary narrative is a unit of its own, it simultaneously contains smaller subunits in the form of letters which could likewise stand on their own. This tension between continuity and discontinuity allows for numerous interesting uses. In *Herzog* (1964), for instance, the fragments of the letters are reflective of the protagonist's fragmented mind; in Henry James's short stories, on the other hand, the

letters are used to provide multiple points of view. And finally, in Alice Munro's writings, as I will soon demonstrate, the fragmentary nature of the epistolary form is used in even more refined ways and becomes reflective of ontological issues such as the making of history.

## **4 A Narratological Discussion of the Epistolary Mode**

The previous chapters have provided a brief overview of the history of the epistolary genre as well as a discussion of its structural potentials. The next step is to investigate the epistolary form as a literary form and to take a closer look at the narrative mode at work. I will address the question of whether or not the epistolary mode is a first-person narrative, what distinguishes it from other first-person narratives and what the specific effects of these features are. A great part is also devoted to the role of the reader in epistolary fiction. Before turning to all these aspects, an overview of the properties of the letter as a means of communication is in order because this forms the basis for many qualities of the letter form.

### **4.1 Epistolary Communication**

To begin with, letter communication, as opposed to face-to-face communication is time-displaced, or asynchronous, i.e. there is a time lag between the production of the letter or its writing and the reception or its reading. On the assumption that a given letter triggers a correspondence so that the addressee of a letter also replies to it in a responding letter, an additional interval of time, namely that between reception and response, needs to be considered. This may seem of no further relevance for a discussion of letters in literature, but it very much is, since, as Altman observes, "[t]he writer has more time to meditate, to measure, to correct his words, to polish his style" (Altman 1982: 135). A first quality of the letter form is insinuated here, which will be discussed in greater detail below, namely that of the potential inauthenticity of a letter. Because the response is not necessarily immediate and spontaneous, the writer can monitor his output much more than in face-to-face communication. Attitudes and reactions shown in a letter do therefore not necessarily represent the writer's genuine feelings.

In addition to being time-displaced, letter communication is communication between correspondents that are in different places. Therefore, body signals like gestures and facial expressions that help interpret the receiver's reaction in face-to-face communication are not applicable in epistolary communication. Since it is written rather than oral communication, variations in tone, volume, and voice are not applicable either. Still, there are other ways of adding additional layers of meaning to the message, such as handwriting, orthography, and traces of tears on the paper (cf. Altman 1982: 135). What could furthermore complicate communication in letters are problems in its transmission. For instance, they could get lost, stolen or delayed. This could result in the messages being received in a different order than they were intended (cf. Altman 1982: 135) and thus be misunderstood. These basic properties of letter communication are often played with in epistolary fiction. In Alice Walker's *A Color Purple* (2003), for instance, we see the protagonist Celie revising her written output, crossing out words and exchanging them for other ones. We find Pamela apologizing for tear stains on the paper ("O how my eyes run—Don't wonder to see the paper so blotted", Richardson 1972: 1) and we see the disastrous consequences of a letter arriving too late in William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy, or the Triumph of Nature* (1789). All of these twists and turns, as we shall see, are also played with in Alice Munro's short stories.

## 4.2 The Epistolary Mode and the First-Person Proper

At first glance the epistolary mode seems to be an ordinary first-person narrative, however, when looking beyond the outer shell, there are significant differences between the epistolary mode and the autobiographical first-person narration seen in works such as Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* or Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. From a narratological perspective it is clear that the epistolary mode features elements that cannot be found in other first-person narratives and are therefore unique to the genre. However, when defining the actual narrative situation of the epistolary form, there are several different standpoints.

Forstreuter (1924: 53-54), for instance, differentiates between two forms of epistolary narrative, both of which he assigns to a different narrative mode. Altman (1982: 96), on the other hand, sees a resemblance between some letter writers in epistolary narratives and third-person omniscient narrators, and Romberg (cf. 1962: 7) points to the existence of several first-person narrators in epistolary fiction, which,

strictly speaking, excludes it from being classified as first-person narration. These contrasting statements raise questions, such as: Is the epistolary form a first person narrative? And if so, which features make it that and which are actually indicative of another narrative situation? In order to answer these questions one must refer to Stanzel's narrative theory which is among the most useful and insightful of all narrative theories.

To begin, Stanzel distinguishes between three narrative situations, first-person narration, third-person narration, and figural narration, based on the three aspects of mode of narration, diegetic location of narrator and characters, and perspective. Within each of these categories, he distinguishes two possibilities of mode of narration: diegetic location and perspective. The two modes of narration, according to Stanzel, are a narrator mode or a reflector mode. They are distinguished by the dominance of actual narration. The reflector-mode portrays events as reflected through the consciousness of a character and abstains from commenting on the narrative process, while an actual narrator more explicitly tells a story and is tangible as a narrating instance (cf. Stanzel 1984: 48).

The next element to be considered is the location of the narrator and the characters and whether they share this location or not. In Stanzel's own words, it is the question of "identity or non-identity of the realms of existence of the narrator and the fictional characters" (Stanzel 1984: 48). If the narrator belongs to the same world as the characters in a fictional text, the narrative situation is first-person. If, however, he/she inhabits a different world, is heterodiegetic, to use Genette's terminology, it is a third-person narrator (cf. Stanzel 1984: 48).

The last crucial aspect to look at is the perspective of narration. It can either be internal or external and is closely connected to the previous element, the world the narrator inhabits. If the narrator is on the same diegetic level as the characters, his/her perspective is likely to be internal; however, as Stanzel's circle shows, the change from one mode to another is gradual so that even within homodiegetic narratives we have a scale from internal to more external perspectives (cf. Stanzel 1984: xvi). That is the case, for instance, if the narrative situation is first-person but the narrator is not the hero but merely a witness (I-as-witness type) (cf. Stanzel 1984: 48).

Imposing these categories on epistolary fiction, it can be said that the epistolary form is, first of all, characterized by a narrating rather than a reflecting mode. The

reader can clearly identify the narrating instance as a first-person narrator who, in terms of realms of existence, inhabits the same world as the other characters or, rather, is a character himself. Therefore, he/she tends to provide an internal perspective of the story. However, since many epistolary narratives evolve from more than one letter writer, the perspectives given can vary between internal and more external. All in all, the epistolary form appears to fulfill the prerequisites for a first-person narration. This seems obvious, but then again it is not. The reason is that the epistolary form is a typical first-person narrative only on the surface, but looking beyond the surface it exhibits features, that while not excluding it from first-person narration in general, clearly distinguish it from a first-person proper, i.e. the autobiographical type of first-person narration. These features are first, that the two facets of first-person narrators stand in a unique relationship, and second, the number of first-person narrators.

According to Stanzel (1984: 212) any first-person narrator has two selves: the narrating self and the experiencing self or, to use his newer terminology, the “self as narrator” and the “self as hero”. The former refers to the first-person narrator at the time of narration whereas the latter denotes the self of the story time. In other words, the “self as hero” is the one that experienced the events which are then presented by the “self as narrator”. Depending on the time gap between experience and narration of events these two selves are distinguished by more or less distance and can have a variety of different relationships, ranging from total identification to alienation (cf. Stanzel 1984: 213). In addition, according to the various forms of first-person narration, their relationship can differ in terms of dominance. The narrating self can, for instance, dominate the experiencing self and vice versa, or they can be in a balanced relationship, as is usually the case in the autobiographical type of first-person narratives (cf. Stanzel 1984: 210).

In the epistolary form, on the other hand, the relationship between experiencing self and narrating self is different. Generally speaking, there tends to be much less distance between the experience of certain events and its narration in the letter, and “[t]he shorter the narrative distance, the closer the narrating self stands to the experiencing self” (Stanzel 1984: 214). Hence, for the classification of epistolary narratives and in order to define the relationship between the two ‘I’s, it is necessary to consider “the spatio-temporal and internal, that is, psychological, distance which the correspondent attains from his experience” (Stanzel 1984: 211). The distance between

experience and narration goes along with maturity and greater knowledge. The writer of a memoir, for instance, who has had enough time to stand back from his/her experiences, writes looking back to his/her life and therefore knows how certain events in his/her life turned out. The letter writer, on the other hand, does not share this knowledge. He/She cannot evaluate the events written about from a more mature perspective but relates them from a more immediate perspective (cf. Mylne 1981: 149).<sup>3</sup>

Since the distance between experience and narration is different in every letter, we do not have just one present of narration but instead a series of presents of narration. Strictly speaking, the narrative situation therefore has to be determined for each letter individually (cf. Stanzel 1984: 211). However, I argue that as a general rule the narrative distance in epistolary narratives is relatively short, especially when comparing it to autobiographical first-person narratives or memoirs where the earliest events narrated are from early childhood, i.e. in the far past. In Richardson's *Pamela*, for instance, the longest time lag between experience and narration is seven days (cf. Stanzel 1984: 211). And after all, it was Richardson who described his style as "writing to moment", suggesting a merging of experiencing 'I' and narrating 'I' (Richardson qtd. in Bray 2003: 20).

Therefore, it can be concluded that while, strictly speaking, the exact narrative situation of epistolary fiction, especially the present of narration, needs to be determined for each letter individually, it is in all cases a first-person narration characterized by an oscillating relation between experiencing and narrating self. In comparison to the autobiographical type, the epistolary first-person mode is not as strongly retrospective, and therefore the narrating self lacks the ability to assess events and reactions from a wiser and more mature perspective. In addition, since letter writing in epistolary fiction is generally triggered by a particular occurrence rather than a means of everyday communication, the experiencing self tends to be foregrounded: "[T]he experiencing self is beginning to dominate as the narrating self withdraws" (Bray 2003: 18). In a nutshell, the peculiarities of the relationship between the two selves of first-person narrators is one of the features of epistolary fiction that clearly separates it from the first-person proper; however, there is another aspect that comes into play and further

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<sup>3</sup> Even though in letters we could have the situation that someone relates events from the distant past. This is certainly not the common type of the letter form, but it is possible.

complicates the classification of the letter mode as a first-person narrative: the number of narrators. For that to be addressed, a distinction between two types of epistolary narratives is in order.

The first type of epistolary fiction is characterized by a focus on one central character who writes letters to inform the addressee about recent events. Here the addressee is rather passive, playing little or no role in the plot. This first type is therefore more of a monologue than an actual correspondence. The full potential of the letter form is, however, only completely realized in the second type of epistolary fiction, which evolves from letter conversations by two or more protagonists who are all central to the plot. The crucial difference of this type from the former one is that rather than being a mere narration of events by one character, numerous characters are involved and the events play a crucial role in propelling the plot (cf. Mylne 1981: 150).

This typology illustrates that, depending on the type of epistolary fiction, there can be more than one first-person narrator. In the first American epistolary novel, which also was the first American novel ever, *The Power of Sympathy, or The Triumph of Nature* (1789) by William Hill Brown, there are, for instance, seven letter writers and thus seven first-person narrators. What is more, not all of these narrators are at the same time protagonists, i.e. they write from a first-person perspective about things they have not experienced themselves but rather comment on the experiences and problems of someone else. In Stanzel's terms they are "I-as-witness" characters rather than "I-as-protagonists". The "I-as-witness" narrator or the peripheral first-person narrator is not the hero of the story but rather observes and tells the events the hero is involved in while the "I as protagonist" type of narrator experiences *and* narrates the events (cf. Stanzel 1984: 205). It follows that in terms of Stanzel's third category, "perspective", both options, external and internal, are applicable in epistolary fiction. This accounts for another difference from the first-person proper, in which the perspective is either internal, as in Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, or more external, as in Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*.

At this point, it is time to consider Altman's argument that, at times, characters of epistolary fiction resemble a third-person omniscient narrator. According to Altman, this applies to super reader-characters which for one reason or another read and comment on the greater part if not all letters exchanged (cf. Altman 1962: 96). These super reader-figures are peripheral first-person narrators, and Stanzel (1984: 201) also

points out that this type of first-person narrator is, of all first-person narrators, closest to the authorial narrator. Also Singer sees a strong connection between the epistolary mode and authorial narration: “Today we are definitely accustomed to the omniscient point of view assumed by authors; the epistolary style is merely this omniscient point of view used subjectively” (Singer 1963: 92).

With respect to the number of first-person narrators, Romberg (1962: 7) notes that

[i]n any novel [...] there appear in the dialogue different ‘I’'s, which belong neither to the author nor to the narrator. A conversational rejoinder can grow into a monologue, or a lengthy exposition or an extensive story told in the first person. And yet we have no cause to speak of first-person novels in such as these. If we are to be able to apply this designation to a work of fiction, the novel must be narrated all the way along by the same narrator, i.e., that a single fictitious “I” stands as the responsible authority behind the whole work. (Romberg 1962: 7)

According to this statement, the epistolary form would not be a first-person narrative mode. However, while Romberg says at first that a single first-person narrator is necessary in order to be called a first-person narrative, he continues to say that the so-called *Briefwechselroman*, i.e. the epistolary form with multiple correspondents and hence multiple first-person narrators, is an exception (cf. Romberg 1962: 7). Unfortunately, Romberg does not further elaborate on neither of these arguments. Why he believes a single first-person narrator is required for a narrative to be classified as first-person narrative, and why for the epistolary form this rule does not apply, is therefore open. To cap it all, other scholars such as Forstreuter, do not agree with Romberg and abandon the epistolary form with multiple correspondents as first-person narrative situation. According to Forstreuter, only those epistolary forms that focus on one letter writer can be categorized under the concept of first-person narration. Epistolary narratives with multiple letter writers, according to Forstreuter, stand in-between the genres of epic and drama (cf. Forstreuter 1924: 53-54).

Numerous scholars have pointed out that there are strong affinities between drama and the epistolary form. Singer (1963: 62), for instance, notes that the didactic concern that was part of many early epistolary novels is one of the legacies of drama. Altman (1982: 47) points to the figure of the confidant which derives from drama. Moreover, discrepancy of awareness, which is a term from drama, can also play a role in epistolary fiction since the external reader, in contrast to the internal one, knows the content of all the letters. Finally, Richardson also established a connection between his epistolary novels and drama when he called *Clarissa* a dramatic narrative (cf. Singer

1963: 62).

It follows from the above that while the epistolary mode is a first-person narrative, it exhibits features that are unique to it and distinguish it from other first-person narratives. Firstly, there is a short distance between experience and narration and a tendency to foreground the experiencing 'I'. Secondly, the epistolary form with multiple correspondents opens up the unique opportunity of rendering both an external and internal perspective of the same issue. Thirdly, there are multiple presents of narrations, and unlike other first-person narratives, epistolary narratives have a clearly designated intradiegetic addressee. Finally, the number of first-person narrators in multi-correspondent epistolary narratives is the last feature that differentiates the epistolary form from other first-person narratives which generally have only one first-person narrator.

#### **4.2.1 Functions and Effects of the Epistolary Mode**

Having examined the narratological characteristics of the epistolary genre, it is important to ask what effects these characteristics have on the text itself and on the reading experience. Even if there are only few differences from the first-person proper, the impact is substantial. With respect to the reading experience, it can be said that a particular reader response is triggered. Apart from that, the narratological qualities of the letter mode allow for an interior focus and an emphasis on characterization.

To begin with, the major effect of the narrative mode of epistolary fiction is a feeling of immediacy. Since all events rendered in the letter are informed by the moment of writing and the moment of reading, there is a strong focus on the present of narration. This strongly affects the reader response. The illusion of immediacy is created. The reader is taken into the present of the writer so that he/she feels affected by the narrated events to a similar extent as the writer him-/herself and shares his/her uncertainty about future events (cf. Altman 1982: 123-124). As Romberg (1962: 43) observes: "The diary novel [as well as the epistolary novel] gives the author the opportunity to let the narrator and the reader come up against the action of the novel [or short story for this matter] simultaneously, or at least experience its future happenings with the same degree of uncertainty." In other words, the reader and the characters are in a similarly inexperienced position because of the small distance between

experiencing self and narrating self.

Singer points to the same phenomenon when he states that

[...] the mere fact that we are able, as readers, to wander at will among the characters, even when important decisions are being made, and are able to watch the processes of determination at moments of crisis adds to the poignancy and verisimilitude of the work. The thought caught on the wing [...] is thus presented to us with greater clarity and immediacy than would be otherwise possible. (Singer 1963: 84)

The illusion of the external reader becoming part of the writing and thus of the narrative process is created:

We are beside the character who is doing the writing, not only observing the results but also helping to guide the pen, to give direction to the flow of his ideas, and in the end we feel that we have a part in the play and that its conclusion is therefore logical and inevitable because we have played that play through along with the characters and have brought about the proper ending. (Singer 1963: 93)

Again, this results from the proximity of experiencing and narrating self.

It becomes even clearer when comparing the letter-form to an autobiographical type of first-person narration. Here, the events took place long before writing, and the narrator's reactions to events or his/her way of dealing with things cannot be changed any more. In epistolary narratives, on the other hand, the narrator's further actions are still open. He or she may still change his/her opinion and choose a different path. Singer therefore argues that the extent of immediacy in which thoughts are presented to the reader in the epistolary genre is not attainable in any other genre (cf. Singer 1963: 84). This immediacy in return leads to a feeling of intimacy, or as Singer puts it, "a connecting contact between writers and reader" which makes the reader feel like a "confidential friend" to the protagonist (Singer 1963: 84). As a result, the protagonist's stories have a more powerful and longer lasting impact on the reader (cf. Singer 1963: 83).

Moreover, this immediate rendering of events allows the reader to equally immediately explore the impact of the events on the narrator's psyche. It is therefore the perfectly suitable genre for an interior focus (cf. Romberg 1962: 44). This quality of the epistolary form has been exploited ever since and first and foremost by Samuel Richardson, whose success can partly be attributed to his knowledge that the epistolary form is perfect for the "revelation of the soul" (Singer 1963: 88). However, whether the epistolary form is indeed qualified to investigate the workings of the mind has met with controversy. The epistolary form is often thought to be inferior to other novelistic forms

in its ability to render consciousness (cf. Bray 2003: 1). According to Bray (2003: 1) it was this skepticism about whether or not the epistolary form does render consciousness that caused the genre's decline after its eighteenth-century heyday. While at first glance the classic examples of epistolary fiction seem to represent consciousness, some scholars have noted that its way of doing so is comparatively unrefined since the letters seem to display a spontaneous, uncensored outpour of thoughts of the protagonist (cf. Bray 2003: 1), and it is precisely this uncensored transcribing that "seems to exclude the subtle exploration of consciousness which is seen as the hallmark of the novel at its peak" (Bray 2003: 1).

However, the focus is on 'seems', for prestigious literary critics such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Ian Watt, as well as Bray himself, take the opposite stance. Bakhtin, for instance, claims that through the epistles the reader gains access to "the depths of everyday life, its smallest details, to intimate relations between people and into the internal life of the individual person" (Bakhtin 1981: 396). Similarly, Ian Watt argues in favor of the epistolary novel's ability to render consciousness when he says that the letter allows "for a fuller and more convincing presentation of the inner lives of characters [...] than literature had previously seen" (Watt 1957: 200-201). Bray (2003: 2), who considers the epistolary form as "fundamental to the novel's development of increasingly sophisticated ways of representing individual psychology", agrees and counters the negative allegations when he says that the epistolary genre is "especially well-suited to the exploration of 'the subjectivity of mind'" (Bray 2003: 7; McKeon 1987: 414). In fact, through the medium of the letter, a subjective and inward tone is automatically added to the story. As Watt (1957: 195) points out, the letter is perfectly suited for a more immediate and absolute outpouring, so to speak, of the protagonist's internal thoughts and feelings and is thus the perfect "short-cut [...] to the heart." However, while the epistolary form might be *suited* to foreground the interior of the letter writer, it needs to be considered that it does not necessarily *do* so. While these observations hold true for mental letters or letters written for the letter writer him-/herself, it is not true for other types of letters, such as business letters. Letters, after all, are a construction and quite often result in rather artificial discourses. Watt's observation (1957: 200-201) that letters allow "for a fuller and more convincing presentation of the inner lives of characters [...] than literature had previously seen" also needs to be put in context. For the eighteenth century, his statement might still be

true; however, with the emergence of modernism and the stream of consciousness technique, Watt's argument loses ground. Today, there are definitely narrative modes which are - if not more, then at least - equally suited for a representation of the mind than the letter mode.

Therefore, even if one proceeds on the basis that the epistolary form does foreground the interior of the protagonists, the question remains of how characteristic these interior thoughts and feelings are. In other words, it needs to be considered whether the imitation of experience is necessarily an authentic one or whether language in letters can also be used as a mask of individual experience. While Altman (1982: 70) argues that the epistolary mode is suited for both a faithful representation and characterization of the letter writer as well as for deception, Singer highlights the former saying that "by means of the letters the reader [...] [is] able to define the personality of the writer for himself" (Singer 1963: 83).

In terms of characterization, and because many of Alice Munro's short stories have a feminist concern, it is interesting to look at the characters' language in terms of gender. Even if it is still controversial whether "women's language or "men's language" even exists, numerous studies suggest it.<sup>4</sup> Given that there has been substantial academic interest in gender language, the questions examined in the studies can be similarly applied to the written communication in epistolary narratives so that the language used by a given letter writer can be analyzed according to whether and how it is reflective of a particular gender and position of power. In fact, power is a recurring topic in epistolary fiction. How power positions can, other than by means of language, be assumed, will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Coming back to Singer and his argument, that letter writing is characteristic of someone's personality, it has to be pointed out that while it is true that the diction of the letter can be characteristic of the letter writer and can give hints about his or her personality, gender and status, it needs to be kept in mind that the reader, whether internal or external, cannot necessarily know if the personality displayed in the letters is authentic. Emotional reactions towards a particular incident are, or rather can be, revealing of the letter writer's personality; however, it needs to be kept in mind that

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<sup>4</sup> See: Robin Lakoff, "Language and Woman's Place" (1973); Pamela Fishman, "Interaction: The Work Women Do" (1978); Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Small Insult: A Study of Interruptions in Cross-sex Conversations between Unacquainted Persons" (1983).

letter writers can also make up certain attitudes, roles, and identities and veil them by means of language.

This potential for creating deceptive epistolary identities has been exploited in one of the earliest epistolary writings, “Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy” by Giovanni Paolo Marana. As the title implies, this is an epistolary work with only one letter writer, a spy, but several addressees. The profession of a spy requires the putting on of masks, and as a matter of fact, these masks can very subtly be translated into language in the letter form. However, Nicklas (1995: 355) observes that by utilizing the letter form for the creation of several fake identities, the function of the letter is the reverse of what was to become its primary concern in the eighteenth century: the probing of the self. In “Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy” the letter writing is not a means of self-revelation but a means of self-disruption (cf. Nicklas 1995: 355). So while the letter form has become popular as a tool for self-exploration, it had been previously used for converse reasons.

What is more, Nicklas further observes that the disruption of identity which the spy experiences is similarly transferred on to the reader, not only because the reader him- or herself questions which facet of the spy’s identity is real, but because through the epistolary form the reader also experiences a disruption of identity. When reading epistolary works, the external reader constantly needs to recall the difference between him or her as the external addressee and the fictional addressee within the world of the narrative. This effect is enhanced when there are numerous fictional addressees, all of which the external reader is inclined to identify with (cf. Nicklas 1995: 357). Nicklas here insinuates how peculiar the reader position in epistolary narratives is. This will be discussed in further detail below.

To summarize, in no other genre, except for maybe the narratologically similarly structured diary novel, are the experiencing self and the narrating self so closely connected. This has significant consequences for the reading experience. First of all, the relationship between external reader and protagonist is characterized by intimacy, and secondly, the illusion of immediacy is created. Moreover, the epistolary form clearly focusses on the interior of the protagonists, is thus character-driven rather than plot-driven, and can be used for a probing of the self as well as a masking of the self.

### 4.3 The Birth of the Letter-Reader

In recent years, the reader of literature has enjoyed increased academic interest. It is, therefore, not particularly surprising that also the reader *of* and *in* epistolary fiction is given particular significance. However, while the reader-response criticism by Wolfgang Iser, Wayne Booth, Roland Barthes, and others is relevant to the study of epistolary fiction, the reader *in* epistolary fiction still deserves a theoretical discussion of its own (cf. Altman 1982: 87-88). First of all, an analysis of the role of the reader in epistolary fiction requires a distinction between intradiegetic and extradiegetic reader and needs to address the relation between these two. Secondly, it needs to be considered that in no other genre is the reader assigned such a prominent role and the reading process so foregrounded as in the epistolary genre (cf. Altman 1982: 87 – 88).

To begin with, an introduction of communication in literature is in order. Communication in narratives occurs on three levels: first, the extra-textual level of communication between the author of a text and the external reader; second, the level of fictional communication which comprises the exchange between an implied narrator and an implied reader; and third, the internal level of communication between individual characters (cf. Nünning and Nünning 2009: 104). The epistolary form, however, is distinct from other narratives in that the internal or implied reader is actually a clearly defined and designated reader rather than a merely implied one. As opposed to memoirs or autobiographies, or any other narrative for that matter, the reader in epistolary narratives is thus a tangible and material instance. Therefore, the dictum “Know your audience” in epistolary communication is not so much a guideline as it is a reality. Letters are in general written for a particular audience which, ideally, the letter writer is familiar with. Exceptions are letters with a somewhat imagined addressee, which frequently occur in epistolary fiction and will be dealt with extensively later. Other than that, however, it can be said that letter writers not only know their audience but choose it, and that makes a huge difference.

Wolff declares epistolary writings as “narrative[s] of power”, being a “literary articulation of the relation of power existing between two subjects” (Wolff 1992: 72). When it comes to exerting power, the ability of the letter writer to choose and in fact, designate its audience, is relevant: “Every narrative, of course, must affect its readers, but it is only the letter that specifically names its reader and focuses its narrative forces on that chosen object” (Wolff 1992: 72). The relationship and the forces at play can

often be deduced from the closing lines of the letters (cf. Altman 1982: 145). In Richardson's novels, for instance, the endings of letters generally summarize the correspondents' emotional situation and their feelings about the addressee (cf. Altman 1982: 146). However, Tamboukou observes that, in addition, the closing statement provides information about how the letter writer positions him- or herself against the addressee. Subject positions are created and can change so that a closing statement can, at times, reflect subjugation or agency (cf. Tamboukou 2010: 39). These shifts in power can be well-displayed in epistolary narratives. Sometimes, the very act of writing is an act of power, of revolt and of rebellion. This is the case, for instance, in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (2003) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), in which the "epistolary heroines" who are "exiled, imprisoned, cloistered, or 'shut up' [...] transform writing into means of subversion and revolt" (Kauffman 1992: 229). The external reader is then in the unique position to investigate and dissect the microphysics of power at play in the letter conversation (cf. Wolff 1992: 77). An important aspect to look at in this regard is epistolary activity and its distribution. "[W]ho writes and with what frequency, is a determinant structure" (Altman 1982: 177). A character that is merely written about without ever writing him- or herself, deserves special interest (cf. Altman 1982: 177). Similarly insightful is the juxtaposition of letters. Comparing letters of different correspondents might not only provide information about power hierarchies but also about things that individual characters share or do not share (cf. Altman 1982: 179-80). A comparison of letters by the same correspondent might also be revealing, giving an insight into his or her developments.

Power also plays a role in epistolary narratives in another respect. Although the letter writer can, indeed, exert power over the addressee, the addressee also exerts power over the writer by influencing the writing process. While a first-person narrative of the autobiographical type can and does often disregard its reader, the epistolary narrative comes from a union between writer and reader (cf. Altman 1982: 88). The mere awareness of one's reader influences the writing itself, i.e. the content written about but also the tone and words chosen to mediate a certain message. After all, it is a letter correspondence, i.e. the sender and addressee of the letters correspond and influence one another (cf. Altman 1982: 88). This influence can even go to the point where the internal reader is in a kind of editorial position, making modifications, corrections, and suggestions (cf. Altman 1982: 91). In some cases all - or at least the

great part - of the letters are read and scrutinized by one character, making him or her something like a “Super Reader” with additional power (Altman 1982: 94). This super reader figure can also be found in Alice Munro’s epistolary short stories. In “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage” (*HFCLM*), for instance, two girls first intercept the letter exchange between one of the girls’ fathers and the same girl’s nanny and then start to write letters in the name of the father, without either of the correspondents knowing (cf. Munro 2001: 3-64). This is also a good example of how easy it is to fake an identity in letter-writing.

Another prominent reader figure in epistolary fiction is the confidant, the closest friend of the protagonist, who generally is also the main addressee of the protagonist’s letters. The confidant and the letters’ claim to confidentiality strongly shape the dynamics of epistolary fiction. Not only does it affect the content matter and the character relations but can also, for instance when confidentiality is broken, influence the whole narrative action. One issue associated with confidentiality in letter fiction is the winning and losing of confidants. While this plays a role in many epistolary writings, irrespective of the topic, it is particularly essential in its original use in the seduction novel. Any attempt at seduction is generally preceded by the seducer winning the confidence of the chosen one. The narrative then centers on an interplay between winning and losing confidence and the final realization of the seduced that she has been betrayed and that her trust has been exploited (cf. Altman 1982: 48).

The confidant also plays a role when it comes to confessions. Since the nature of the epistolary form implies that the confession is captured in a materialized letter, there is always a chance and danger that it could fall into the wrong hands (cf. Altman 1982: 59). A recurring and allegedly trustworthy confessor figure is the priest. Frequently, this religious confessor figure stands in opposition to a secular confidant, and the choice of who shall be the receiver of the confession is ideologically charged (cf. Altman 1982: 61 – 63). This opposition between the priest and a friend as confessor figures plays a role in Munro’s “A Wilderness Station” of the short story collection *Open Secrets* (1995). The short story suggests that the receiver of a confession, be it a close friend or a religious confessor figure, can also affect the trustworthiness of the confession, as shall be explored in more depth later (cf. Munro 1995: 190-225).

A similar opposition with regard to confiding is that of friend vs. lover. According to Altman (1982: 70), epistolary works centering on the question of

confidence tend to emphasize friends as confidants over lovers. In fact, lovers must become friends in order to become confidants, since with lovers there is a propensity to coquetry and deceit: “The letter has been extolled by epistolary authors for its potential both as a faithful portrait and as a deceptive mask” (Altman 1982: 70). It follows that friends not only outdo religious figures but also lovers.

In any case, the figure of the confidant and his/her relationship to the protagonist is central to the plot. The functions of the confidant range from being a passive listener, to influencing the protagonist’s action by comments referenced in the former’s letters, to being an active letter writer him- or herself (cf. Altman 1982: 50-51). A change in confidants is crucial and usually connected to a change of action. Furthermore, it is reflective of the protagonist’s own (moral) developments (cf. Altman 1982: 56 – 57).

Even more remarkable are the rare instances when the protagonist remains without a confidant and therefore writes a somewhat interior monologue to no particular addressee (cf. Altman 1982: 57). These cases signify the character’s mental isolation, who, as a means of coping with the isolation, writes or imagines writing letters to some non-existent addressee (cf. Altman 1982: 58). After frustrating attempts to send a letter to her friend, who may or may not be alive, the protagonist of Alice Munro’s short story “A Wilderness Station”, hides her letter in a publicly accessible place and adds a note saying “Finder Please Post” (Munro 1995: 208). In this particular example, this action of the protagonist is both a sign of isolation and the breaking of it. By making the letter accessible to the public, she takes a step out of her isolated domain and into the public domain. As Altman observes (1982: 106): “Any moment when letters begin to circulate among several readers marks their passage from a more private to a more public domain.” Similar to Munro’s protagonist, the main character in Saul Bellow’s *Herzog* (1964) writes letters to people who often are already dead, demonstrating his desperate need for a confidant (cf. Altman 1982: 59). Likewise, isolation, shock, and frustration have led to many other epistolary heroes, among them Richardson’s famous Clarissa, to confide to so called “shadow confidants” (Altman 1982: 59). This desire for exchange, which is very much foregrounded in the examples given above, is one of the main characteristics of the epistolary genre and the feature that distinguishes it from the diary novel (cf. Altman 1982: 89).

The great number of issues related to the reader in epistolary fiction only

testifies to its prominent role. Not only does the epistolary form have the unique ability to designate a reader, but also are there different kinds of reader figures who influence the writing process in various ways. Again, in no other genre does the reader play a role that is equally important as that of the writer (cf. Altman 1982: 88). In analogy to that, not only the writing process but also the reading process plays a crucial role in epistolary fiction, however, it is the prominence of the latter that is unique to the epistolary genre. As Altman (1982: 88) points out: “If first person narrative lends itself to the writer’s reflective portrayal of the difficulties and mysteries surrounding the act of writing, the epistolary form is unique among first-person forms in its aptitude for portraying the experience of reading.” The process of reading is sometimes portrayed as the mere reception of someone else’s letter but sometimes also in the form of re-readings and proof-readings. This is often accompanied by *anagnorisis*, a moment of revelation and new understanding of a particular subject, specifically in cases where the letter is under special scrutiny and reread numerous times (cf. Altman 1982: 92).

It is necessary to consider here that the act of (re-)reading a letter does not only refer to the letters of somebody else but also to one’s own letters. When rereading one’s own writings, the writer puts him- or herself into the shoes of the reader. A change of perspective takes place that can result in new self-understanding (cf. Altman 1982: 92). Moreover, this moment of recognition, of gaining new insights into a particular topic, is especially interesting in cases where the first and later readings of a letter are separated by substantial time spans. It is in these cases particularly, when an epistolary correspondent rereads his or her own letters from the past, that a further distinction between the different selves of the first-person narrator is called for. In addition to Stanzel’s experiencing self and narrating self, the first-person narrator in epistolary fiction can have a “reading self”. This “reading self” exhibits exactly that maturation and knowledge to evaluate his/her past attitudes, deeds, and reactions, which the narrating self in epistolary fiction lacks. As Altman (1982: 102) points out: “To reread an old letter is to measure one’s own change against a point perceived as fixed in the past. To compare today’s letter with yesterday’s is to discover the distance traveled between two temporal moments.” Again, the distance and the ability to evaluate one’s former self is dependent on the time lag between first, the experience and narration of events and second, the re-reading of the narration.

To come back to the reading process, there are yet other reasons, in addition to a

shift in perspective and to moments of recognition, that make the reading process in epistolary fiction so important, and this is where the external reader comes into play. The representation of the reading experience and reactions of the internal reader offer an explanation, even a discussion of this given letter: “Internal reading may be so important that the decoding of a message becomes part of a new message; the critique is incorporated into the work” (Altman 1982: 93). The external reader then gets both the original letter and its reverberations to form his or her own understanding, and this is a decisive aspect. The external reader has an insight into both aspects; however, when the external reader reads the original letter, he or she is in the same position as the intradiegetic reader of the letter. For a short time, the internal and external reader merge, and the boundaries between the diegetic levels blur. Other metanarrative references, such as discussions of the writing of the letter and/or of its history of publication, have the same effect (cf. Altman 1982: 110).

The merging of intra- and extradiegetic reader in epistolary fiction, or rather the transcending of the fictional frame, comes even more to the fore when epistolary writers confide to what Altman (1982: 59) calls “shadow confidants” and describes as “an ‘other’ not yet real.” This is mostly the case in the scenarios discussed earlier, when the protagonist remains without a confidant being reflective of his/her isolation. Letters that are not intended for a particular addressee promote the external reader’s assumption of that role. It is interesting that the narrative mode in such letters bears a strong resemblance to the autotelic form of second-person narration. According to Brian Richardson, however, narratives like this only look like second-person narrations because of the frequency in which “you” occurs. This “you” is yet addressed to an intradiegetic reader, which distinguishes it from the “you” in second-person narration (cf. Richardson 2006: 18).

However, in “Toward a Feminist Narratology”, Susan S. Lanser (1997: 674-693) points out that there are narratives that are in fact addressed to an extradiegetic reader, which then undermines Richardson’s argument. She argues that in feminist literature - and as I have pointed out earlier, Alice Munro’s work can be considered feminist - a distinction is necessary between private and public narration. Writings that fall under public narration are intended for a reader that is alien to the textual level, i.e. an extradiegetic reader. Private narrations, on the other hand, are those narrations, and for the purpose of this thesis, those letters, that are intended for an intradiegetic

designated reader. This difference in readership is associated with a subtle shift in voice (cf. Lanser 1997: 684). One narrative can at the same time be public and private narration; however, part of its message might only be intended for an external reader and thus be ranked as public narration, in which case this message is also only accessible to the external reader and not to the internal one. How that is possible becomes clear when Lanser specifies her idea of the addressee of public narration as an “unidentified public narratee of either sex who can see beyond the immediate context of the writer’s epistolary circumstance and read the [...] discourse as covert cultural analysis” (Lanser 1997: 683). As a result, in these cases when letters are written as public narration, the external reader becomes an important part of the workings of the narrative and the realization of its message. This will also play a role in Alice Munro’s epistolary short stories.

Now that it is clear that letters in fiction can indeed be addressed to the external reader, the requirements for second-person narration are fulfilled. As I pointed out earlier, the type of second-person narration employed in epistolary fiction is the autotelic form. It, by definition, directly addresses “a ‘you’ that is at times the actual reader of the text and whose story is juxtaposed to and can merge with the character of fiction” (Richardson 2006: 30). Nicklas’s argument (1995: 257) that the identity of the external reader of epistolary fiction undergoes disruption because he/she constantly needs to bring to mind his/her status as the not-addressed, intruding reader, is no longer applicable here. Following this argument, the external reader’s identity is no longer at stake, since in these cases he/she is actually addressed. Whether that, however, is really less threatening for the external reader’s identity, is doubtful.

To sum up, the reader assumes a peculiar role in epistolary fiction. It is peculiar because firstly, the epistolary form allows for a selection as well as a designation of its reader, making the reader figure tangible rather than implied. Secondly, the addressee of a given letter has the power to influence the plot, in particular if it is the confidant of the protagonist. Thirdly, the reading process plays a prominent role, not only because it allows for new insights into a given topic but also because it reflects and influences the reading process of the external reader:

For the external reader, reading an epistolary novel is very much like reading over the shoulder of another character whose own reading – and misreadings – must enter into our experience of the work. In fact, the epistolary novel’s tendency to narrativize reading, integrating the act of reading into the fiction at all levels [...], constitutes an

internalizing action that blurs the very distinctions that we make between the internal and external reader. (Altman 1982: 111-12)

And finally, the blurring of the boundaries between the fictional and the real world is even more foregrounded in cases where the protagonist addresses the external reader in the autotelic type of “you”-narration.

## 5 The Epistolary Mode in Alice Munro's Writings

Robert Thacker (2005: 132) considers the first-person narrative perspective as “characteristic” of Munro's fiction. Indeed, while her very first short stories, which were published in a college magazine of the University of Western Ontario, are told from an authorial narrator, she shifted away from the third-person and to the first-person perspective with the publication of “At The Other Place” in 1955 (cf. Thacker 2005: 132). This was still long before the publication of her first short story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968). Ever since, Munro has predominantly written her fiction in a first-person narrative mode (cf. Duncan 2011: 19). Within her inclination to write from a first-person perspective, she has tended to use the letter mode as one possible form of the first-person narrative situation. In fact, letters occur in ten of Munro's fourteen short story collections and twenty-two of her short stories altogether. While letters are one of the recurring elements in Alice Munro's writings, the function of the letters is different in every short story. Just like “Munro has continued to experiment with the short story form, always attempting to represent more adequately the complex layering of the way things are or rather the ways things might be interpreted from different perspectives” (Howells 1998: 9), she has continued to experiment with the letter mode, resulting in a great variety of Munroian letter forms.

## 6 Letters and Postcolonial Resistance

Postcolonialism is a term on everyone's lips nowadays. “[R]efer[ing] to the politics, art, culture, literature, and thought characteristic of nations that were once colonized” (Huddart 2007, online) it does not come as a surprise that Alice Munro, as a Canadian writer, deals with topics central to postcolonialism. Munro typically approaches the

issue from a smaller angle, using the family as a microcosm for larger developments. In two of her short stories, “A Wilderness Station” (*OS*) and “Material” (*SMTY*), letters as a narrative strategy play a central role in the realization of Munro’s criticism. Using the multi-perspectival nature of epistolary fiction, Munro highlights how historical writings are shaped by those who are in power in “A Wilderness Station” (*OS*), while addressing the issue of “writing back” in “Material” (*SMTY*).

### 6.1 The Relativity of Truth in “A Wilderness Station”

“A Wilderness Station”, collected in *Open Secrets* (1995), is one of the epistolary short stories by Alice Munro, which consist almost entirely of letters. It comprises a total of eleven letters and one article published in the Carstairs magazine *Argus*, all of which are collected by Leopold Henry, a historian from Queen’s University, Kingston. The letters, as well as the article, center around the mysterious death of Simon Herron in the woodlands of Huron County in 1852. He and his younger brother George move from Halton to Huron County in the hope of a better life. After Simon wrote to the House of Industry in Toronto, asking for a suitable girl willing to marry him, Annie McKillop, who has grown up in the orphanage, is recommended. They marry, and she moves to live with her husband and his brother to the wilderness of Huron County. This is where Simon Herron mysteriously dies. The central question is whether he died in an accident or whether he was murdered, and if the latter is the case, whether he was murdered by his brother, George, or his wife, Annie.

The reader is first told about the death of Simon Herron in the second discourse of the short story, the article entitled “Recollections of Mr. George Herron” (*OS* 191), published in 1907 in the Carstairs Magazine *Argus*. According to this version, told from the perspective of George Herron, Simon died after being hit by a branch when they were chopping down a tree in the bush (*OS* 195). A few letters later, however, a different version emerges. It is Simon’s wife Annie’s account, related by Mr. James Mullen, Clerk of Peace and reads as follows: “[...] she picked up a rock and threw it at him, hitting him on the head so that he fell down unconscious and in fact dead” (*OS* 200-1). Since this version is not considered credible, Annie first modifies her story from merely throwing a rock to smashing a big rock (*OS* 201) and later to a completely different account, according to which she discovered a cut on Simon’s head that testifies

to George having killed him (*OS* 209). These are the three possible and contradictory ways in which Simon Herron could have died. The immediate incident of the death or murder is omitted throughout the text. Instead, it is only written about from a past perspective, without ever being resolved. The reader thus slips into the role of the detective, evaluating the individual characters and their stories by means of their letters and trying to get to the center of things. A central part of “A Wilderness Station” thus is the analysis of a past event through the letters, which serve as authentic documents for the detective-like reader and build the basis for the analysis.

Contradictory accounts of one reality, such as in “A Wilderness Station”, are frequently found in epistolary narratives, as in Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* and Henry James’ “The Point of View”. Their distinctive mosaic-structure, as Altman (1982: 176) notes, renders them perfectly suitable for the production of fragmented, contrasting discourses. In fact, it is precisely this discontinuity and fragmentation that immerses the reader into the narrative and triggers the urge to solve the riddle. Altman (1982: 172) argues that “the more fragmented and disconnected the narrative appears, the more actively the outside reader seeks to discover the connections.” This is exactly the case in “A Wilderness Station”, which leaves the readers to find out themselves which story to believe. However, no matter how hard they try, they can never know for sure which version is true. According to Löschnigg (2011: 32), this is the very essence of the short story. That is to say, the main question of the story is not who the murderer is but “how events turn into stories and how delusive such stories can be, no matter how much ‘official’ support they receive” (Löschnigg 2011: 32). At the same time, “A Wilderness Station” testifies to “[...] our human need to create coherent stories, no matter how much we are forced to sacrifice a series of options for the sake of the one and only ‘true’ story” (Löschnigg 2011: 31). She thus stresses the self-reflexive quality of the epistolary form and the way it questions assumptions of historiography.

“A Wilderness Station” is a piece of “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon 1988: 5). The term was coined by Linda Hutcheon in her landmark study, *A Poetic of Postmodernism* (1988), to describe “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon 1988: 5). The epistolary form, with its numerous, contradictory discourses and a conflict that remains unresolved, emphasizes that reality depends to a great extent on the observer, and therefore, there is not only one truthful reality. The

writing of history, however, requires a reduction of the complexity of reality to only one version that is to be universally accepted as the truth. By omitting precisely this one 'true' version, Munro refuses to claim what is true and what is not and leaves the readers' need to find coherency unfulfilled (cf. Löschnigg 2011: 31).

In addition to highlighting the constructedness of historiographic writing, I argue that the character configuration and their respective epistolary activity also reflect the question of power that comes into play in the making of history. "A Wilderness Station" points to the fact that history has to choose a voice and, by doing so, automatically foregrounds a particular group and marginalizes another. Munro challenges the idea of a master narrative and, in analogy to Foucault, suggests that both truth and history are strongly subjected to power:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault 1980: 131)

Considering this, a closer look at the character configuration and the prestige of the individual characters is quite rewarding. The main characters, George and Simon Herron, Reverend Walter McBain, James Mullen, Peace of Clerk, and Annie McKillop, are subjected to a strong hierarchy. On top of this hierarchy are the clergy and the church. The resulting elevated positions of Reverend Walter McBain and James Mullen are referred to several times in the short story. The first allusion of this kind appears on the very first page of the short story, referring to Simon's letter of request for a wife: "Since your letter is accompanied by an endorsement from your minister, I am happy to reply. Requests of your sort are made to us frequently, but unless we have such an endorsement we cannot trust that they are made in good faith" (*OS* 190) (cf. Duncan 2003: 102). When Miss Margaret Cresswell then continues to describe the two potential wives, Annie McKillop and Sadie Johnstone, she first and foremost mentions their Christian descent: "Both were born legitimately of Christian parents" (*OS* 191). Similarly, Walter McBain, in a letter to James Mullen, first emphasizes Annie's religious identity and second her biological sex: "[...] a Christian, preferably

Presbyterian, female” (*OS* 189). The hegemonic position of the church and its representatives is thereby clearly asserted and emphasized by the fact that it is Reverend McBain and James Mullen, both church representatives, who “are charged with saying what counts as true” (Foucault 1980: 131) and decide on the reliability of Annie’s confessions.

Second in the hierarchy come the brothers Simon and George Herron, with George being dominated by Simon. Löschnigg (2011: 33-34) analyzes the uneven power distribution between the two brothers in great detail and observes stylistic markers which demonstrate Simon’s domineering character. Such are, for instance, the frequency of clauses starting with “but Simon/but my brother” and commanding should/must-constructions such as “He said we must put up with it so I did” (*OS* 193) (cf. Löschnigg 2011: 33-34).

The third and last position is then taken by Annie McKillop. Her inferiority to the rest of the characters is first and foremost demonstrated by her passivity when it comes to writing letters and telling the story. As Duncan (2003: 104) has pointed out, Annie’s stories are, for a long time, filtered through other characters, making use of particular types of speech. For instance, to emphasize that Annie is not speaking herself but merely spoken about, indirect discourse indicated by inquit-forms such as “she said” and “she says”, is frequently used. In addition, the reports of Annie’s speech are accompanied by judgments of the other letter writers, James Mullen and Walter McBain, on the truth of Annie’s stories, governing the external reader’s judgment before the latter has listened to the testimony first-hand (cf. Duncan 2003: 105): “This is her tale, and I do not believe it for a minute” (*OS* 201), and “His [the doctor’s] belief is that she is subject to a sort of delusion peculiar to females, for which the motive is a desire for self-importance [...]” (*OS* 205). Annie’s limited epistolary activity in comparison to the other characters is further reflective of her inferiority. Altman points out that the “distribution of epistolary activity is only one of the essential ways in which meaning is generated in epistolary narrative” (Altman 1982: 179). Annie McKillop, despite being the object of the stories and playing a great part in the incident, is the character with the most limited epistolary activity and is refused literary authority. While she is frequently talked about she is not given the “[p]ermission to [n]arrate” (Said 1984: 27) her own story until fairly late in the narrative. Only after letter number six does she speak actively and immediately without being mediated through someone

else's voice. However, even then her letter is enclosed in a letter by James Mullen to Reverend McBain, and again subjected to someone else's discourse. The penultimate letter is then finally granted solely to her, and it is only then that she is finally given voice and permission to tell the story as she perceived it. Writing letters goes hand in hand with power and the creation of truth. The marginalization of Annie's voice is thus reflective of her marginalized position within her family and society in general. However, Annie does not remain silent throughout the story but is eventually given voice, which is the key feminist quality of the short story and will be discussed in the following chapter.

While within the short story Annie's silence is justified by her classification as insane, I, without embarking on another quest for truth, would like to briefly speak for Annie's sanity and innocence before moving on to the feminist qualities of the short story. I do so in order to undermine the argument that Annie's madness is the reason Reverend Walter McBain disregards her. I agree with Carrington that Annie's confessions are contradictory and that she is double minded and therefore seems unreliable (cf. Carrington 1996: 78). However, as Löschnigg points out, there are several signs in the text that support Annie's story and speak for her reliability as a narrator. These are: the domination of Simon over George, which makes it equally likely that George killed him, George's sobriety after Simon's death, and the fact that he seems to prosper afterwards (cf. Löschnigg 2011: 33-35). Another detail which speaks for Annie's reliability is the unreasonable judgment of her case by a doctor who bases his diagnosis, namely that Annie is insane, on the following observation: "[T]he doctor lays the blame on the sort of reading that is available to these females, whether it is of ghosts or demons or of love escapades with Lords and Dukes and suchlike" (*OS* 205). Reverend Walter McBain offers a similarly biased explanation: "It may well be that so early in the marriage her submission to her husband was not complete and there would be carelessness about his comfort, and naughty words, and quarrelsome behavior, as well as the hurtful sulks and silences her sex is prone to" (*OS* 203). Even if the story is set in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and these things might have been a common belief back then, there surely is no scientific evidence supporting these arguments. A doctor basing his diagnosis on such a fallacy is thus equally unreliable as a probably abused woman who is trying to escape her phallogentric life by telling contradictory stories.

In addition to the historiographic dimension of "A Wilderness Station", Annie

McKillop's eventual breaking of her silence promotes a feminist reading of the short story. Thus, besides commenting on the process of making history, "A Wilderness Station" is "a project of [feminist] self-liberation" (Müller 2004, online) achieved by a narrative strategy which eventually gives voice to Annie McKillop. This narrative strategy stresses her rise from a silenced subaltern to a voiced self, thereby providing an alternative to and questioning of the master narrative. In this vein, I agree with Duncan (2003: 99-100), who, as opposed to Carrington's anti-feminist interpretation, argues that "A Wilderness Station" is a story about the female experience of living in the wilderness in a pioneer society in which the female protagonist is finally given authority, and with Löschnigg (2011: 36) and Howells (1998: 128), who interpret Annie's contradictory stories as a strategy of subtle resistance and survival.

The notion of the subaltern and the question of the voice of this subaltern are closely connected to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the subaltern speak?". In this essay, Spivak investigates how subaltern groups are silenced by drawing upon the example of Sati and how the accounts of this practice are influenced by colonial power. Sati is an Indian rite in which the Hindu widow, the Sati, sacrifices her life by burning herself on the pyre of her dead husband (cf. Spivak 2006: 33). In the course of colonization by the British this rite was criminalized and abolished, a case of "[w]hite men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 2006: 33). Spivak then discusses the 1926 suicide of the teenage woman Bhusvaneswari Bhadur in North Calcutta. There had been several speculations about the reasons for her suicide and many interpreted it as an instance of Sati. The young woman, however, wrote a letter in which she stated that the reason for her suicide was that being involved in the struggle for Indian independence, she was ordered to kill an English colonizer. Unwilling to do this task, she saw no other way than to kill herself. For Spivak this case clearly testifies to the woman's subaltern status and her inability to speak, since no attention whatsoever was given to this letter; instead, speculations shaped by the colonizer's perspective continued to denounce India's uncivilized culture (cf. Gutierrez Rodriguez 2008: 171).

This case and Spivak's interpretation can be very well transferred to "A Wilderness Station". The problem may not be the power inequalities between the colonizer and the colonized, but as a microcosm of colonial power structures, "A Wilderness Station" addresses these inequalities on a smaller scale as shaping the relationships between men and women. In the case mentioned by Spivak the colonizer

is in power; the colonized is the subaltern, whose perspective is not given attention and whose voice is silenced. Instead, the colonizer's perspective is foregrounded and eventually accepted as truth. In "A Wilderness Station" Annie McKillop is subaltern to the hegemony of an androcentric society.

Throughout the short story Annie McKillop is portrayed as in need of domination and protection and thus as powerless and inferior. First, she is subordinate to the will of the House of Industry, then to her dominant husband, and even later, when she is trying to escape this subordination by going to the gaol, Reverend Walter McBain feels the need to protect and dominate her and tries to track her down on her way to Walley. Moreover, each of her attempts to tell her story is either dismissed as a display of her insanity or, in the case of her last letter, not paid attention to within the textual world at all. Therefore, Annie McKillop is the epitome of woman as subaltern. However, as must be noted, her status gradually changes throughout the short story, and she at last manages to escape her subaltern status.

Initially, she is presented in a distinctly inferior position. The matron of the orphanage treats her like a commodity when she considers her a potential wife for Simon Herron. Simon Herron's wish for a wife also reduces her to her working skills: "[...] [W]e should have somebody to cook and do for us and milk a cow when we could afford one" (*OS* 194). Moreover, her silence is foregrounded by Munro almost throughout the whole narrative. While she is frequently talked about, she talks actively only towards the end of the novel. Imagining the short story as a drama, Annie McKillop would always be on stage, however, without talking. The way she is talked about further reveals her passive and inferior status. For instance, Duncan (2003: 103-4) notes that Annie is hardly referred to by her name but rather by her role as "a wife" (*OS* 194), "his wife" (*OS* 196), and "my brother's wife" (*OS* 197) and after the death of her husband, Reverend Walter McBain refers to her as a "widow and one of my congregation" (*OS* 197). "Annie is thus defined phallogcentrically, in her relation to a dead man, and in relation to a cornerstone of patriarchy, the church" (Duncan 2003: 104). In fact, this phallogcentrism runs through the whole short story.

As discussed earlier, there is a strong hierarchy underlying the short story with the two upper positions being filled by males. In addition, Annie's epistolary activity in comparison to that of the male protagonists is remarkably limited, and moreover, the quality of her letters is clearly different from that of the male correspondents. As

opposed to the previous letters written by James Mullen and Walter McBain, all of which reach the intended the addressee, none of Annie's letters reaches her friend Sadie Johnstone (cf. Duncan 2003: 99). Annie's last letter, however, is particularly distinct, as pointed out by Duncan and Carrington: "Annie's [third] letter never resurfaces intratextually. No-one ever seems to receive it, read it, or respond to it, except, of course, the extratextual readers of *Open Secrets*, and the *New Yorker*, where the story was originally published in April 1992" (Carrington 1996: 81). Carrington emphasizes that it is only Annie's very last letter that is entirely ignored and concludes that this suggests that her last letter, with her final version of Simon's death, is not to be taken seriously but rather to be read as a hoax. According to Carrington, the last letter is just another one of Annie's attempts to conceal rather than reveal the truth (cf. Carrington 1996: 81). Duncan agrees that the third letter has a distinctive quality but concludes from this distinctness that the letter needs to be read as private narration (cf. Duncan 2003: 99).

As discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.3., "private narration" is an expression coined by Susan Lanser in her essay "Toward a Feminist Narratology". She argues that feminist texts allow for a distinction between private and public narration. Public narrations are addressed to the external reader, while private narrations are addressed to the internal reader. This difference in readership is associated with a subtle shift in voice (cf. Lanser 1997: 684).

While I do agree with Duncan's and Carrington's observations about the distinctiveness of the third letter, i.e. that the third letter is totally ignored (cf. Carrington 1996: 81), I disagree with both of their interpretations. Instead, I argue that the 'outstanding' and distinctive quality of Annie's last letter is indicative of her emancipation from an androcentric society. Her life in the wilderness of Huron County serves as a microcosm for the status of women in society in general. Therefore, her last letter needs to be read as public narration.

To begin with, it is significant that Annie's final letter is no longer embedded in another letter written by someone else, thus no longer mediated by another letter writer. It needs to be furthermore stressed that Annie intentionally and consciously decides against having her letter posted by others: "When I am finished writing this, I will put it in with the curtains that I am making for the Opera House. And I will put on it, Finder Please Post. I trust that better than giving it to them like the two letters I gave them

already that they never have sent” (*OS* 215). These lines clearly demonstrate not that Annie tries to conceal something, as suggested by Carrington (1996: 81), but rather that she has gained power and knowledge and makes a first move towards her liberation. Hiding her letter in a publicly accessible place is both a sign of isolation and the breaking of it. By making the letter accessible to the public, Annie takes a step out of her isolated domain and into the public domain. As Altman observes (1982: 106): “Any moment when letters begin to circulate among several readers marks their passage from a more private to a more public domain.”

What is more, in comparison to Annie’s first two letters, there is a clear difference in length and even more so in quality. It is much longer and more elaborate and thereby reflects Annie’s increase in power and self-consciousness. After all, a longer letter inhabits more space on the printed page, and claiming space goes hand-in-hand with claiming a voice and having power. Finally, this third letter, written by Annie for the first time in the whole narrative, discusses the death of her husband, Simon Herron, from her perspective, with her voice and without being embedded in another letter. Altogether these peculiarities of the third letter demonstrate Annie’s increasing independence, her increasing agency, and her conscious liberation from domination by others. The demonstration of Annie’s liberation is closely connected to the epistolary form since it is through the segmented discourses and various first-person accounts that silence can be so subtly thematized and eventually broken.

This feminist reading of the short story is further supported when reading the letter as public rather than private narration. Duncan bases her proposition for private narration on the following differences between the third letter and the other two letters:

[T]here are certain features of Annie McKillop’s third letter that do clearly differentiate it from the other discourses [...] and that encourage one to read the testimony as private narration. It is an unsolicited, confiding account to an absent friend, in which Annie relates events following the death of her husband, Simon Herron, and the changes in her circumstances that are occasioned by the death. It is unlike all the other letters in that it is not read by any character within the text. (Duncan 2003: 99)

While I do read the letter as a confiding account, I do not agree that it is solely addressed to her friend Sadie Johnstone but rather to the larger community of external readership, for the following reasons. First of all, it is in this letter that important facts about Annie McKillop’s life in the wilderness of North Huron come to light. For

instance, there are several quotes where Annie refers to her bruises, suggesting that her husband was abusive:

- “I saw him other times what he would do to you. I saw he would knock you down for a little thing and you just get up and never say a word. The same way he did to me. If you had not have done it, some day he would have done it to you.” (*OS* 210)
- “I took off my smock and I could see the black and blue marks on my arms. I pulled up my skirt to see if they were still there high on my legs, and they were. The back of my hand was dark too and sore still where I had bit it.” (*OS* 213)

When her neighbor Mrs. Treece invites her to live with them she rejects it, not because she really preferred to live on her own but for other reasons: “I wouldn’t go because somebody might see my black and blue, also they would be watching for me to cry. I said I was not frightened to stay alone” (*OS* 214).

In addition, the way she treats her husband’s dead body demonstrates how she still fears his assaults: “I didn’t know what to do and I was afraid to go near him. I thought his eyes were watching me” (*OS* 208). “I sewed his head in first folding the sheet over it because I had to look in his eyes and mouth” (*OS* 209). The fact that she keeps having nightmares about both her husband and her brother-in-law testifies even more to the brutality she must have been subjected to: “I dreamed nearly every night that one or the other of them came and chased me with the axes. It was him or it was George, one or the other. Or sometimes not the axe, it was a big rock lifted in both hands and one of them waiting with it behind the door. Dreams are sent to warn us” (*OS* 214).

On top of all this, she admits that “when I saw he was dead I did not wish, not one minute, for him to be alive” (*OS* 211). I disagree with Carrington (1996: 82), who interprets Annie’s behavior as a case of Freudian projection, projecting on to George what she secretly desired. On the contrary, in my reading Annie’s remarks reveal that her marriage and her life in Huron County were very much shaped by a domineering and abusive husband. The assumption that it was her husband, as opposed to her brother-in-law, who was abusive is further confirmed by the fact that after George

returned from the bush with the dead body of his brother, Annie, rather than George, is the one who gives commands and decides on the further proceedings, speaking for an immediate change of power relations:

- “Help me, I said. What? He said. I said we had to turn him. So he came and helped me and we got him turned over, he laying face down.” (*OS* 209)
- “George went out and I could hear through the storm that he was doing what I said.” (*OS* 209)
- “[...] I said to George, take off your boots. Then, take off your coat. George did what I told him.” (*OS* 210)

In addition, it is noteworthy that when Annie’s and George’s relation seems to have suddenly changed she says, “Then he looked at me for the first time in a bad way. It was the same bad way his brother used to look” (*OS* 213), implying that the two of them had generally been on good terms before. That Annie’s letter and her remarks about her dead husband are a desperate articulation of her status as a woman in the wilderness rather than a devil talking (cf. Carrington 1996), is further supported by James Mullen’s comment, which hints at the hardships of female life: “It must be acknowledged that this is truly a hard country for women” (*OS* 206).

Altogether, Annie’s final letter is distinctive for its revelation of important details about her life as a woman in androcentric wilderness. These revelations are not necessarily addressed solely to Sadie Johnstone but also to the external reader, who, in this letter more than in any of the other letters of the narrative, functions as a “confidential friend” to Annie (Singer 1963: 84). The letter therefore needs to be read as public narration, because it is only through the reading of the letter by the external reader that her revelations have a chance of reaching an empathic audience. As Duncan has noted herself: In “A Wilderness Station” Munro “create[d] a narrative that centres, predominantly, on female experience of a hard, punishing pioneer life” (Duncan 2003: 99). It is in Annie’s last letter that this female experience is foregrounded, and it is directed to the external reader, who is invited to sympathize with her. Again, Duncan has observed this herself when she refers to Schweickart and encourages a reading of Annie’s letter as “an intersubjective encounter” (Schweickart 1997: 623) “in which the

audience must connect with the female writer and with a larger community of women” (Duncan 2003: 100-01). She continues to say that “In Annie’s desperate appeals to her friend Sadie [...] Munro alludes to a larger community” (Duncan 2003: 101). Sadie metonymically stands for an envisioned empathic community of readers. Thus, while Duncan at first argues for private narration, she then analyzes the letter’s impact as public narration, which is why I do agree with her analysis but not with her definition of the letter as private narration.

Reading her last letter as public narration supports even more the feminist claim of the short story as speaking and simultaneously being heard, albeit only by the external reader, Annie manages to escape the subaltern status. She does indeed rise, as is testified by the very last letter written by Christena Mullen according to which Annie moved in with James Mullen’s family to work as a seamstress and lived a happy life there (cf. Duncan 2003: 109). However, the reader still does not learn which story is true and which is not. The final letter once more reminds the reader that Annie is a storyteller and that the truth cannot be determined (cf. Löschnigg 2011: 37). Still, it offers some closure since the reader understands that Annie has been given the opportunity to finally confront George, who ironically lost his voice, completing her emancipation from subalternity. Her further deepened indeterminacy is still not to be overlooked as a minor detail. As addressed earlier, Annie’s versions about the death of her husband are highly contradictory, which has led characters within the short story as well as scholars such as Carrington to consider Annie a mad woman. Howells and Löschnigg, however, interpret it conversely: “Her ‘madness’ looks not so much like waywardness as a conscious policy of resistance to male authority and violence, where storytelling is her prime survival strategy” (Howells 1998: 128). What is more, it needs to be considered that there is a general tendency to dismiss marginalized people who speak on a par with authority figures as crazy and their discourse as “crazy talk, crazy speech” (Hooks 1989: 7; cf. DeFrancisco and Palczewski 2007: 123).

There is a strong resemblance between Annie McKillop and the female protagonist of Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996). Grace Marks similarly remains ambiguous, and thus powerful, by avoiding the center of her story, which she apparently cannot remember. Thus she gains control over her life and renders it impossible to determine whether she is the murderess or the innocent seamstress, which eventually saves her life (cf. Löschnigg 2011: 36). Similarly, Annie McKillop consciously tells

contradictory stories, not to conceal her guilt but to be accepted as a prisoner in the Walley Gaol, where she lives a better life than in the wilderness of Huron County (cf. Löschnigg 2011: 35).

Finally, while I agree with both Howells and Löschnigg with regard to Annie's deliberate indeterminacy and her similarities to Grace Marks, it is necessary point out a major difference between Annie McKillop and Grace Marks. It is remarkable that the greater part of *Alias Grace* is told by Grace Marks herself and that the whole novel centers on her and people who are interested in her story. Grace Marks is a "celebrated murderess" (Atwood 1996: 3); Annie McKillop is clearly not. She does not enjoy public interest and doctors visiting her to listen to her story. Rather, she is marginalized, and ignored, again indicating her subaltern status and her clear distinction from Grace Marks.

## 6.2 'Writing Back' in "Material"

A questioning of master discourses also plays a role in "Material", an epistolary short story collected in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974). The function of letters in this short story, however, is very different from that in "A Wilderness Station". While the latter uses the structure of epistolary fiction to provide multiple perspectives of a historical event and thus express doubt on the validity of master narratives, "Material" is primarily concerned with the act of "writing back": "'Material' [is] [...] a metafiction that encourages readers to consider the complexities bound up with the act of replying to fiction" (McGill 2007: 875). In this regard letters play a role as potential medium for 'writing back'. However, the short story presents a first-person narrator who dismisses letters as a suitable vehicle for 'writing back'. As a result, quantitatively speaking, straight letters in "Material" play a minor role. In fact, the only letter which can be found is one that comprises only a few sentences and is eventually broken off. It might, therefore, be surprising to find a discussion of precisely this short story in a thesis dedicated to letters in Alice Munro's writings. However, since the epistolarity of a given short story is not linked to the quantity of letters in that short story, the minor presence of letters in "Material" is no reason for excluding it from this thesis. Secondly, while the narrator apparently rejects the letter as a medium for her argument, there are several references that reveal the short story as a letter-in-disguise. Making the rejection of the letter part of her discourse, the narrator invites the reader to consider the

epistolary qualities of her work. The numerous direct addresses to the narrator's ex-husband, Hugo, by means of the second-person pronoun "you", is the most prominent letter-like element. It allows the narrator to force her narrative on to Hugo, "to pour [...] [her] vision into" (*SMTY* 47) Hugo's head. Treating "Material" as a letter-in-disguise, the notion of 'writing back' takes on a literal meaning. The narrator writes back to her ex-husband, Hugo, in the form of a letter disguised in a short story because it is the medium which allows her to silence Hugo and expose him to her perspective. The act of writing becomes an act of power and revolt (cf. Kauffman 1992: 229).

### 6.2.1 A Conceptualization of 'Writing Back'

The notion of 'writing back' was coined by Salman Rushdie in his article "The Empire Writes Back With a Vengeance", published in *The Times* in 1982. In this article, Rushdie calls attention to how power imbalances of colonial times continue to exist in postcolonialism: "[T]he effects of the Empire linger on. Those who were made powerful then remain [...] powerful now" (Rushdie 1982: 8). One of the ways in which the power hierarchies persist is the English language. According to Rushdie, English yet needs to be decolonized "if those of us who use it from positions outside the Anglo-Saxon culture are to be more than artistic Uncle Toms" (Rushdie 1982: 8). This appropriation of the English language is precisely what accounts for the vitality of the new literatures coming from postcolonial nations such as Africa, Caribbean, and India (cf. Rushdie 1982: 8). While similar tendencies have already occurred earlier in America and Ireland, in the 1980s the 'writing back' movement really gained momentum with writers such as Chinua Achebe, Derek Walcott and Nadine Gordimer: "The Empire is striking back" (Rushdie 1982: 8). However, as Rushdie notes, the responses of the former empire go far beyond an appropriation of the English language: "[A]bove all, what is going on is politics [...]. There are very few major writers in the new English literatures who do not place politics at the very centre of their art" (Rushdie 1982: 8). Due to immigration in the 50s and 60s these political postcolonial writings have finally had a chance to reach their former mother country and contribute to its decolonizing: "[T]oo many of the old imperial attitudes [...] still lie, just below the surface, in British culture and even in 'English' English" (Rushdie 1982: 8).

Using Rushdie's article as a starting point, the Australian critic trio, Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin, developed a theoretical framework on 'writing back' in *The Empire*

*Writes Back* (1989). 'Writing Back' as a postcolonial concept has come to stand for the textual revision of the legacies of colonialism (cf. Kreutzer 1995: 208): "Geschichte muß historiographisch oder fiktional umschreiben werden, der literarische Kanon gründlich enthierarchisiert werden, das Einzelwerk der englischen Literatur neu gedeutet werden" (Kreutzer 1995: 208). Colonial texts, whether fictional or non-fictional, have for decades shaped the production of knowledge about the cultures of the colonized. It has been an imperative for postcolonial authors to revise and adjust this knowledge (cf. Gymnich 2006: 71). Literature has provided these nations with the opportunity to escape their silence and produce new discourses and counter-discourses, in which they can finally represent their own situation from their own point of view. Postcolonial 'writing back', in other words, is a form of resistance against an ongoing subversion to Western culture and a correction of the images that colonialism has produced about the colonized (cf. Gymnich 2006: 71-72).

The textual strategies of postcolonial texts expressing their resistance are vast. Gymnich (2006: 73) distinguishes between three forms of 'writing back': rewritings of (canonical) texts of colonialism, revisions of established literary genres, and finally, revisions of historical novels of colonialism. It has to be kept in mind, however, that not any rewriting is necessarily 'writing back'. Ordinary rewritings and postcolonial rewritings are both intertextual, but the intertextual quality of those rewritings that have an ideological agenda is peculiar (cf. Döring 2008: 83): "[I]t [rewriting] is best understood as a concrete strategy pointed at an explicit target, i.e. an identifiable previous text to which it responds and against which it proceeds. It repeats some aspects of this previous text so as to resist it and to redraw its premises" (Döring 2008: 83).

Returning to Gymnich's typology of forms of 'writing back', there is, depending on the type, a different relationship between the source- and the counter-text. Thus the 'writing back' discourse can either respond to a particular colonial text changing the point of view or the storyline and centralizing originally peripheral characters (cf. Döring 2008: 81), or it can respond to an entire literary genre. As a third possibility, the counter-discourse can criticize colonial ideologies at large without reacting to a particular text. In any case, however, the particular elements which are revised and counteracted in postcolonial writings need to be read metonymically as standing for the whole network of power imbalances and its implications between the former colonizer and the colonized (cf. Gymnich 2006: 72).

### 6.2.2 A Story Recounted

'Writing back' in "Material" is transferred onto an entirely different domain, making a classification under one of Gymnich's categories difficult. The narrator does not write back to a canonical piece of English literature, neither does she revise a literary genre. Told from an unnamed, female perspective, "Material" writes back to male selfishness and to unequal power relations in the narrator's first marriage. Thus 'writing back' takes on a feminist meaning. The entire short story "Material" is a counter-discourse to Hugo's and the narrator's marriage and Hugo's image as a writer. It is initiated by a short story published by the narrator's ex-husband, Hugo. The euphemistic author blurb on the book cover and his photograph remind the narrator of Hugo's egocentric personality and of how his real self differs from his image as a writer. Moreover, the protagonist of Hugo's short story is Dotty, an alleged prostitute who used to be their neighbor when they were living in Vancouver as a couple. While Hugo treated Dotty patronizingly and disrespectfully in real life, he used her to his advantage as an interesting character in his fiction. His hypocritical treatment of Dotty in his short story and the biographical description of Hugo in the author blurb make the female narrator decide to counteract the narratives and present her view about Hugo, as a person as well as his real treatment of Dotty, in the counter-discourse "Material". "Material" is highly self-referential, discussing its own origination process.

From this, Heble (1994: 83) concludes that "'Material' [is] another story about stories." However, McGill (2007: 875) convincingly argues that "Material" is also much more than an ordinary metafictional short story. It is not merely fiction about fiction, but fiction writing back to fiction. As Döring (2008: 82-83) observes, rewritings, as one form of 'writing back', are necessarily intertextual, however, it is a peculiar kind of intertextuality. Similarly, fiction writing back to other fiction is necessarily metafictional, but the metafictional quality of such texts is distinct. Even if the external reader has access only to the author blurb but not to Hugo's short story, postcolonial strategies of 'writing back' are clearly identifiable. The narrator provides an alternative perspective to Hugo as a person as well as the way he treated Dotty, and thus she views also Hugo's story in a different light. As pointed out by Gymnich (2006: 72), the elements which are criticized in the counter-narrative need to be understood as symbolic of larger injustices, in this case of Hugo's self-centeredness in their marriage.

Looking at his photograph, the narrator says "he looked [...] very much as I

would have thought he would look by now” (*SMTY* 34), but then she mocks his appearance as “[a] Rabelaisian writer” (*SMTY* 34). At this point, she addresses Hugo directly for the first time: “Do you wash, Hugo? Do you have bad breath, with those teeth? Do you call your girl students fond exasperated dirty names, are there phone calls from insulted parents, does the Dean or somebody have to explain that no harm is meant, that writers are not as other men are?” (*SMTY* 34). This is only the beginning of many more direct addresses to come, all of which are indications of her need to speak up.

All of a sudden, the narrator then admits to the irrationality of her outbursts: “I have no proof. I construct somebody from this one smudgy picture, I am content with such clichés. I have not the imagination or good will to proceed differently” (*SMTY* 35). These lines exemplify that metanarrative comments do not always foreground the fictionality of a text, as Duncan (2011: 27) seems to believe, but can also highlight the reliability of the narrator. As Nünning convincingly argues: “Metanarrative expressions do not necessarily lead to the foregrounding of fictionality of the narrated text and/or of the process of narrating; rather the different forms of metanarration can, in fact, fulfill a broad spectrum of functions” (Nünning 2004: 39). One of these functions is the “authenticating function” (Nünning 2004: 40), and it is this function which is applicable to the aforementioned lines. The narrator does not destroy the aesthetic illusion or call attention to the fictionality of the text. On the contrary, by pointing to her own fallibility she manages “to underline the supposedly documentary character” (Nünning 2004: 41) of her narrative and does not only show that there is a lot of built-up tension but also becomes a more reliable narrator. Revealing her errors rather than leaving the reader notice them on his/her own underlines her reliability and thus makes her counter-discourse more powerful than Hugo’s short story.

Nonetheless, she continues to rant and rave in a similar manner about Hugo’s author blurb which in her opinion is full of “lies, [...] half-lies, [...] absurdities” (*SMTY* 35):

*He lives on the side of a mountain above Vancouver.* It sounds as if he lives in a wilderness cabin, and all it means, I’m willing to bet, is that he lives in an ordinary comfortable house in North or West Vancouver, which now stretch far up the mountain. He has been *sporadically affiliated with various academic communities*. What does that mean? If it means he has taught for four years, most of his adult life, at universities, that teaching at universities has been the only steady well-paid job he has ever had, why doesn’t it say so? You would think he came out of the bush now

and then to fling them scraps of wisdom, to give them a demonstration of what a real male *writer*, a creative *artist*, is like; you would never think he was a practicing academic. I don't know if he was a lumberjack or a beer-slinger or a counter-man, but I do know that he was not a telephone lineman. He had a job painting telephone poles. He quit that job in the middle of the second week because the heat and the climbing made him sick. (*SMTY* 35-36)

This meta-discourse about Hugo's biographical data is an explicit act of 'writing back'. By juxtaposing her own perceptions of Hugo's life with what is written about him on the book cover, she makes a point that the label "biographical" does not account for the truth of a text. The outburst is again followed by a direct address to Hugo: "Look at you, Hugo, your image is not only fake but out-of-date. You should have said you meditated for a year in the mountains of Uttar Pradesh; you should have said you'd taught Creative Drama to autistic [sic!] children; you should have shaved your head, shaved your beard, put on a monk's cowl; you should have shut up, Hugo" (*SMTY* 36).

The counter-discourse then continues to focus on asserting an alternative perspective on Hugo as he 'really' is. Simultaneously, the narrator engages critically with Hugo's short story in order to illustrate Hugo's real personality and draws upon real-life incidents with Dotty, who is fictionalized in Hugo's short story. The narrator describes Hugo as egocentric, absorbed with himself and his writing only and ignorant of other people's needs (cf. *SMTY* 36-47; cf. Osachoff 1983: 75). Whenever Dotty's piano playing kept him from focusing on his writing, his wife, the narrator, had to make her stop: "I always did go down to the basement, of course, [...] and ask her if she would mind not playing the piano now [...]" (*SMTY* 40). The difficulty of their relationship becomes quite clear from the narrator's account anyway. Additionally, Duncan notes that the use of "of course" in the sentence above signifies "that the narrator is reluctantly accepting her role as obedient wife, ready to conciliate in a dispute" (Duncan 2011: 28).

One of the few things which the narrator and Hugo shared was their respective liking for games: "All our life together, the successful part of our life together, was games" (*SMTY* 41). Moreover, the narrator adapted to Hugo's appreciation of language as a means of art. A creative and pointed use of language was important to Hugo, and the narrator tried to please him by complying with his needs:

- "We had many phrases in common. We both called the landlady the Green Hornet [...]. Her daughter Dotty we called the harlot-in-residence. I wonder

why we chose to say *harlot*; that was not, is not, a word in general use. I suppose it had a classy sound, a classy depraved sound, contrasting ironically – we were strong on irony – with Dotty herself.” (SMTY 37)

- “‘That is a whorehouse lamp,’ I said. Afterwards I wanted to be congratulated on the accuracy of this description.” (SMTY 38)
- “I never said the word *write*, Hugo had trained me not to, that word was like a bare wire to us.” (SMTY 40)

Subsequently, the narrator turns to one particular fight in their marriage which had never been resolved. It involves Dotty, Hugo’s protagonist, and testifies to Hugo’s immense selfishness. This fight, as Duncan (2011: 27-28) argues, “reveals much about the imbalance of authority and priorities in the narrator’s marriage, and may explain her resentment and envy.” Their argument centered around a water pump that kept Dotty’s apartment from flooding in bad weather. The noise of the pump kept Hugo awake at night, so he selfishly turned it off. As a consequence, Dotty’s apartment flooded. Even though it was Hugo’s fault, he went to work in the morning without taking care of the mess and left his pregnant wife alone to deal with it. When she called Hugo at his workplace, he did not even admit to having turned off the pump but pretended that it broke (cf. SMTY 42-46).

This was too much for the narrator to take. She “wanted Hugo to crash” (SMTY 44), to punish him for his behavior, but she did not do it:

I could have told somebody, if I thought it was important, pushed Hugo out into the unpleasant world and let him taste trouble. But I didn’t, I was not able fully to protect or expose him, only to flog him with blame, desperate sometimes, feeling I would claw his head open to pour my vision into it, my notion of what had to be understood. (SMTY 46-47)

Instead, their fight “was never really resolved” (SMTY 46). With the letter disguised as the short story “Material” the narrator finally makes good for her inability to resolve the conflict. Asserting her point of view, she figuratively does what she has always wanted to do: “claw his head open to pour my vision into it” (SMTY 47).

Only after proving that Hugo’s real personality does not correspond with his

image as a writer, does the narrator turn to Hugo's actual short story. While at the beginning she mocked the literary scene in general and seemed to not take Hugo seriously as a writer, she then expresses her fondness for the short story: "[T]his story of Hugo's is a very good story, as far as I can tell, and I think I can tell" (SMTY 47). Amazed that after all these years of separation Hugo and she "still shared [...] the same bank of memory" (SMTY 48), the narrator sits down to write a letter to Hugo, apologizing for not having been supportive of his career and congratulating him on his success. What is intended to be a letter of apology and gratefulness turns out to be the opposite. She writes "short jabbing sentences that I had never planned: *This is not enough, Hugo. You think it is, but it isn't. You are mistaken Hugo*" (SMTY 49).

Osachoff reads these sentences as the narrator's accusation of Hugo that including Dotty in one of his stories cannot make up for the inconsiderateness with which he treated her: "Art is not enough; Art is not a substitute for sympathy and understanding" (Osachoff 1983: 76). Similarly, Duncan (2011: 26) observes that the reason for the narrator's anger is that Hugo used Dotty for his advantage in his fiction when in real life he was nothing but disrespectful. Likewise, McGill states that the letter suggests that Hugo's fictionalization of Dotty will not bring about redemption for his earlier behavior towards her (cf. McGill 2007: 878).

### 6.2.3 "That is not an argument to send through the mail"<sup>5</sup>: On the Inadequacy of the Letter

Particularly interesting for the purpose of this thesis is the role of letters in "Material". In quantitative terms, letters do not play a major role. While the narrator starts out writing a letter to Hugo, expressing her feelings about his short story and about her errors in their relationship, she breaks off the letter after only a few short sentences saying "[t]hat is not an argument to send through the mail" (SMTY 49). This statement raises the question of why the letter is inadequate for her purpose and what then the right medium for her argument is. I argue that by making her apparent rejection of the letter part of the short story, the narrator calls attention to the remaining epistolary qualities of her discourse. Eventually, it becomes clear that the medium for her counter-discourse is still a letter, however, it is one disguised as a short story.

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<sup>5</sup> SMTY 49.

In this regard, it is conspicuous that the narrator's initial decision to write a letter to Hugo has been well thought through: "I did think that I would write a letter to Hugo. All the time I was preparing dinner, and eating it, and talking to Gabriel and the children, I was thinking of a letter" (*SMTY* 48). Thus, to write a letter was not a spontaneous decision; to break it off, however, was. "I found a pen and got the paper in front of me, to write my letter, and my hand jumped. I began to write short jabbing sentences that I had never planned: *This is not enough, Hugo. You think it is, but it isn't. You are mistaken, Hugo.* That is not an argument to send through the mail" (*SMTY* 49). The reason for her dismissal of the letter can be found in these lines. Writing the letter, she loses control over her written output, control over her body and her hands, and thus control over her message. Control, however, is precisely what she aimed to restore by 'writing back' to Hugo. The very mode of the letter seems to account for her loss of control. Writing the letter, she writes her thoughts down immediately as they occur in her mind. She does not constantly monitor her language as she used to when she was married to Hugo. She does not think about particularly refined and pointed phrases to express her mind and about which words to use and which to abstain from. This stems from the letter mode as not only facilitating a very immediate representation of consciousness but also promoting it.

In addition to the loss of control in letter-writing, the narrator's agenda accounts for the apparent rejection of the letter. Her aim is to silence Hugo, to "shut [him] up" (*SMTY* 36). Had she chosen the form of the letter, she would have automatically invited Hugo to respond. As Altman (1982: 89) observes, one of the key features of epistolary narratives is its desire for exchange. With the narrator of "Material", however, there is no such desire. I disagree with McGill (2007: 885), who interprets her breaking off the letter as silencing herself, which by extension suggests "that patriarchy allows women only the power to silence others, not to speak themselves" (McGill 2007: 885). The narrator of "Material" does not only manage to silence Hugo, but due to her knowledge of her ex-husband she realizes that the only way to voice herself and to reach the impact she has hoped for is to get in touch with her ex-husband not by means of a real letter but by a letter disguised as fiction.

Given that the narrative is aimed for Hugo, a man of the arts, a common and inartistic letter would not be the right choice. Only the artistic form of the short story allows the narrator to beat Hugo in his own game, to "seiz[e] the language of the center"

(Ashcroft et al. 1989: 38). Redekop (1992: 31) and McGill (2007: 880) observe that the only medium qualified to convey her counter-narrative is the fictional form of the short story: “[T]he narrator has found a better vehicle for her self-expression in writing ‘Material’” (McGill 2007: 880). It is, however, a short story, which below the surface, is still a letter, i.e. it serves the purpose of a letter and enhances its effects by being disguised as a short story.

Making her counter-discourse a letter in disguise as a short story not only enables the narrator to reach Hugo but also to reverse the power relations. While Hugo used Dotty as material for his short story, he is now similarly subjected to someone else’s discourse and becomes the material for his ex-wife’s story. Moreover, the narrator considers writers to be “not as other men are” (*SMTY* 34), as having “a power in them” (*SMTY* 30). As Redekop (1992: 31) and McGill (2007: 881) point out, writing fiction herself has “appropriated her some of the power invested in Hugo the writer” (Redekop 1992: 31). To make her counter-discourse even more powerful and successful, the narrator wisely maintains those qualities of the letter that are useful for her purpose. By directly addressing Hugo several times she, similar to the way a letter would, forces her narrative onto Hugo. As Wolff (1992: 72) observes: “Every narrative [...] must affect its readers, but it is only the letter that specifically names its reader and focuses its narrative forces on that chosen object.” Thus, she literally writes back to Hugo.

Finally, combining the privacy of the letter with the publicity of a short story enables the narrator to transform private narration into public narration and thus to cunningly heighten her power over Hugo. The narrative is addressed to Hugo and would, according to Lanser’s definition, fall under private narration (cf. Lanser 1997: 684). The topics the narrator addresses in her discourse are likewise very private. Still, her narrative is intended to also be read by a non-designated readership making it public narration (cf. Lanser 1997: 684). This does not only increase Hugo’s humiliation, but it also makes her initial intention finally work out: “I was not able fully to protect or expose him” (*SMTY* 47). With a letter disguised as a short story, she is able to reach a degree of exposure that would not otherwise have been attainable.

To conclude, contrary to Heble’s (1994: 85) argument that the narrator of “Material” “has ‘something’ that she means to tell, but that ‘something’ finally remains untold, its meaning never played out”, I argue that the narrator does tell something

which has been bothering her for a long time. This something is her letter in disguise as the story “Material”. The medium she chooses might not be immediately recognizable as such, and even if it is, it might at first not seem to be the appropriate medium; however, paying attention to what upon first reading seem to be liminal details of the short story, it becomes clear that the narrator’s knowledge of her ex-husband lead to her realization that the best way to overpower her ex-husband and her ex-husband’s discourse is by means of letter fiction.

## 7 Epistolary Playfulness

Since the very beginnings of the epistolary form and the publication of “Letters Writ by A Turkish Spy” by Giovanni Paolo Marana in 1770 it has been clear that the fragmented structure of the letter form and its peculiar communication structure are perfectly suited for the production of fake identities (cf. Nicklas 1995: 353). However, since the epistolary form reached its heyday with Samuel Richardson, who demonstrated the suitability of the epistolary form for a probing of the self rather than a masking the self, this latter quality of letters has been pushed to the background and is no longer as strongly associated with the epistolary form. Nonetheless, the potential of the letter form for producing fake identities is strong and has also found its way into the writings of Alice Munro. Two of her epistolary short stories, “The Jack Randa Hotel” in *Open Secrets* and “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage” in the collection of the same name, exploit this potential of the epistolary form openly. In the former, letters constitute a space for the feminine imaginary; the latter uses epistolary games to realize two girls’ ideas of romance. In both stories letters are used in addition to other narrative modes.

### 7.1 Letters as Space for the Feminine Imaginary in “The Jack Randa Hotel”

The short story “The Jack Randa Hotel” collected in *Open Secrets* (1998) is one of the few short stories by Alice Munro which is set mostly outside Canada. The main action of this short story takes place in Brisbane, Australia. The female protagonist, Gail, who is of Russian descent but Canadian-born, travels from Walley in Ontario to Brisbane, Australia, in order to get an insight into her ex-husband Will’s new life. He left her and

Walley for Sandy, an Australian exchange teacher with whom he started an affair while still in Walley. As can be seen from this brief plot synopsis, “The Jack Randa Hotel” touches on a variety of genres: the travel narrative, romance, the quest narrative and finally, the epistolary narrative, for during Gail’s stay in Brisbane, she and Will engage in a curious letter exchange (cf. Howells 1998: 130). This letter exchange, however, is nothing like a common letter correspondence but involves tricks and pranks performed by Gail and is motivated by deeply rooted desires for knowledge and revenge. These desires are not only the reason for her journey to Brisbane but also drive her to engage in all kinds of questionable and partly illegal acts, from stealing a letter designated for Will from his mailbox to faking an identity and writing letters to Will with this fake identity (cf. Howells 1998: 131). Gail does all of this both to learn more about Will’s life (cf. Howells 1998: 133) and to restore the power dynamics in their relationship, in which she needs to have “the upper-hand” (*OS* 166).

As pointed out earlier, the genre of “The Jack Randa Hotel” is a blend of a variety of genres. It exhibits features of travel narratives, of romance, and of quest narratives and is at the same time an epistolary narrative (cf. Howells 1998: 130). Howells (1998: 130), however, points out that the allusions to travel narratives are mock-allusions, since the short story demonstrates Gail’s journey from Walley to Brisbane only on the surface. Looking beyond that surface, “The Jack Randa Hotel” may be a travel narrative, however, one that captures the protagonist’s journey not from Canada to Australia but from reality to fantasy (cf. Howells 1998: 130). Setting, therefore, plays a major role in the short story as a framework for the protagonist’s inner journey. The fact that the spatial setting of the short story is, for a great part, not Canada but the exotic Australia increases the fantastic quality of the story. As Löschnigg (2011: 20) observes, setting is one of the most recurrent elements in Alice Munro’s stories. All of her short stories except for five are set in Canada, either in the Western part in Vancouver and Vancouver Island or, even more frequently, in the Canadian East in Huron County, Ontario. Munro has spent many years of her life in both these places, which also explains the documentary and realistic quality with which she describes these places in her short stories (cf. Löschnigg 2011: 20-21). Australia, however, is comparatively unfamiliar to Munro. From what can be drawn from her biography, she visited Australia at least once, namely in 1979 when she was awarded the Canada-Australia Literary Prize (cf. Howells 1998: xiv). Even if this might not have been her

only visit, it can surely be said that she has never lived in Australia for a longer period of time. Australia, therefore, is the ideal setting for the fantasy part of the short story.

When she comes across a letter written by Will to his mother back in Canada, she suddenly realizes that if she stays in Canada she will never be able to get a true insight into Will's life, for in Canada "[t]he real scene is hidden from her" (*OS* 168). She copies his address and plans her trip to his hometown, Brisbane. Upon Gail's arrival, Brisbane and Will's neighborhood in particular are described as fantastical and exotic: "Trees unfamiliar to Gail", "ornamental air", "tropics" (*OS* 170). Nonetheless, Gail believes it to be "[t]he real scene" (*OS* 168), the source of knowledge about Will's life which she has to seize. However, she does not tell anyone about her plan. Instead, she lies about her destination and says that she is going on a longer trip, starting in Europe. This lie forms the basis of her journey and is only the starting point for many more lies to come, all of which facilitate her escape from the real world and enable her to dive into a world of fantasy in which she regains the upper-hand in her relationship with Will. The letters play a major role in that game and enable her to fully act out her fantasy in real life.

Gail seems to have been aware of the potential for letter exchanges from the beginning. The first thing she does in Brisbane is visit Will's house, and as soon as she sees the mailbox, she slips in her hand and "finds a letter there, just as she had thought it might be" (*OS* 171). Gail seems to have planned through her whole game. She has already expected a letter in Will's and his wife's mailbox and does not hesitate at all but puts the letter straight into her purse before even checking whether the letter is addressed to Will or his wife Sandy. The fact that she fundamentally changes her appearance the day before her departure underlines the idea that everything has been planned: "The night before she left, she did a transformation on herself" (*OS* 169). Gail is not primarily interested in getting back in touch with Will or starting a romance, as one might think at the beginning, but in playing a game with him, in acting out a fantasy in real life. Not only did she change her haircut and her hair color, but she also bought "a dress of a kind she would never usually wear" (*OS* 169). Even if she does not feel comfortable with her new appearance, she notes: "That doesn't matter. It is a disguise" (*OS* 169). Her appearance is, however, not the only thing she changes about herself. The roles (or rather masquerades) Gail takes on during her stay in Brisbane are diverse. She changes her name twice and her home country three times. To the taxi driver she says

that she is from Texas, to her landlord she is Mrs. Massie from Oklahoma, and her letter writer identity is Ms. Catherine Thornaby from Brisbane. This last masquerade as Ms. Thornaby is the only one that becomes a whole fake identity rather than a mere changing of some biographical facts. Ms. Thornaby is a woman Will has written a letter to in search of a friend. Since she died, however, the letter was sent back to Will and then intercepted by Gail. This letter to Ms. Thornaby, which was sent back to Will, is the letter Gail steals right after she arrives in Brisbane. Since Will could not know about Ms. Thornaby's death, Gail then pretends to be this Ms. Thornaby and answers Will's letter in her name. The game begins.

The question arises of where Gail's interest in playing games comes from and what their purpose is. From her account of their first meeting as well as their marital life together, it can be seen that Gail and Will have not only been fond of playing games with one another but also played their own games individually or rather functioned as a kind of game master for others' games. Will, interestingly enough, used to work as a director of plays, and he met Gail when asking her to produce the costumes for his play (cf. *OS* 165). Making costumes and putting on masks is thus a handicraft in which Gail is very much experienced. Will admired her for this skill ("The costumes she designed and made for him were perfect, miraculous." *OS* 166), just like she admired him as a director: "She liked to watch him at rehearsals [...]. How skilled and intrepid he seemed as a director, how potent a personality as he walked the high-school halls or the streets of Walley" (*OS* 166). As Martin and Ober (1998: 44) note, the letter game Gail plays with Will in Brisbane is "a sort of extension or development of the style of exchanges that have always been part of their relationship."

The power dynamic in their relationship seems to have been clearly defined. In Gail's view, their marriage worked out as long as "she had the upper hand" (*OS* 166), and despite the free indirect question "Was she a person who believed that somebody had to have the upper hand?" (*OS* 167), the account of their relationship and the way Munro characterizes Gail make it very clear that she most certainly was. She is presented as an insecure woman who feels she owes something to anybody who is willing to put up with her (*OS* 166). Her insecurity was so strong that it made her believe that her untied shoelace, which Will pointed out to her, was the reason why "they had crossed over into a bleak country where his disappointment in her was boundless" (*OS* 167). The only way for her to feel safe in a relationship is when she has

the upper hand. However, just when she started to feel safe, to trust Will and was not at all expecting him to be on the lookout for other women, he started an affair with Sandy, an Australian exchange-teacher who came to Canada to observe how drama is taught at schools. Theater and plays, therefore, continue to be a big part of Will's life also in Australia.

First, Gail lost the upper hand, then she lost Will. It follows that one of the reasons for Gail's interest in engaging Will in a game without his knowledge is that, through this discrepancy of awareness, she can not only act out a fantasy but also, in disguise, gain back the upper hand. The nature of epistolary communication comes in handy as it is perfectly suitable for a masquerade, due to its quality not only for a probing of the self but for a masking of the self (cf. Nicklas 1995: 355). In addition, it allows her to be one step ahead of Will. She is the one who initiated the game and has, as long as the game remains a secret, the power to control where it goes. Wolff's observation that epistolary narratives are "narrative[s] of power" (Wolff 1992: 72) is foregrounded. The letter exchange between Will and Gail (disguised as Ms. Catherine Thornaby) clearly displays the power dynamics Gail is aiming for. While her true identity as Gail is insecure and unconfident, her fake Ms. Thornaby persona is harsh, bossy, and domineering (cf. Howells 1998: 131).

Will contacted the real Ms. Thornaby hoping to have found a relative in her and a potential friend, "somebody in this country outside the theatrical-academic circle that my wife and I seem to be absorbed in" (*OS* 176). Will is not as happy with his new life in Australia as he probably hoped to be. He seeks a confidant. How desperate he is becomes clear when considering that he resorted to the Brisbane phonebook to find people with the same surname (cf. *OS* 172) in order to find potential relatives and put an end to his isolation. Gail knows all this from the letter Will sent to Ms. Thornaby and exploits his vulnerability. She deliberately denies him the comfort he is seeking: "Did you really expect me, just because I have the same surname as you, to fling open my door and put out the 'welcome mat' [...]?" (*OS* 177). She is sarcastic, cold-hearted, and rude and by all appearances feels quite comfortable in this role: "She goes out in the dark to post her letter feeling bold and satisfied" (*OS* 178). Moreover, the satisfaction she takes in this role shows in her writing skills: "Gail is surprised at how fluently she writes. She has always found it hard to write letters, and the results have been dull and sketchy [...]. Where has she got this fine nasty style—out of some book [...]?" (*OS*

178). According to Howells (1998: 131), the answer to this question is that by means of the letters and the fake identity as Ms. Thornaby, Gail managed to find a medium which allows her to voice her honest feelings about their relationship: “Gail succeeds in finding a place from which she can speak to Will through fantasizing herself as the Other” (Howells 1998: 131). The letters constitute the third space for her feminine imaginary: “Munro’s narrative method commands our attention here as the story moves from travel narrative to exchange of letters between Gail and Will, so ‘(re)discovering a possible space for the feminine imaginary’” (Howells 1998: 131, Irigaray 1985: 164). Howells here refers to Luce Irigaray and her work *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985) whose aim precisely is to “(re)discover a possible space for the feminine imaginary” (Irigaray 1985: 164).<sup>6</sup> The feminine imaginary is “the place opened up in the social world for the expression of feminine jouissance” (Klement 2010, online). This space, however, still needs to be created since the male imaginary continues to dominate our culture (cf. Whitford 1986, online). Howells (1998: 131) argues that the letters in “The Jack Randa Hotel” serve as this space for Gail on a small scale.

The content of the letters as a power struggle acted out on the page and where Gail, alias Ms. Thornaby, is clearly superior to Will shows that Gail is not seeking romance but dominance, and it is this feeling of dominance that satisfies her. In this masquerade and by othering her voice she is able to express her anger and disappointment at Will’s behavior towards her (cf. Howells 1998: 131). What she really enjoys about this game is that it affords her the opportunity to finally seek revenge and regain the upper-hand, which shows that the pleasures of the feminine imaginary go beyond discourses about love (cf. Howells 1998: 131).

Nonetheless, it has to be kept in mind that the power play takes place only in the fantasy world, i.e. is not real. Since the real world continues to exist simultaneously and influences the fantasy world, the latter is fragile and subject to crumble. Will’s letter informing Gail, alias Ms. Thornaby, about the death of his mother, Cleata, is particularly damaging to her fantasy world (cf. Howells 1998: 132): “Gail knew that Cleata would die, but somehow thought that everything would hold still, that nothing could really happen there while she, Gail, remained here” (OS 182). The next step is

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Irigaray’s use of the term “imaginary” in comparison to Lacan’s use, please see Margaret Whitford (1986). “Luce Irigaray and the Female Imaginary. Speaking as a Woman.” *Radical Philosophy*. [online]. <http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/lucy-irigaray-and-the-female-imaginary> [2014, Feb 13].

Will's realization that he is being played. He does not yet know that it is his former wife who writes in the name of Ms. Thornaby, but he does know that something is wrong, which leads to a paradoxical, funny letter: "Dear Ms. Thornaby, It has come to my attention that you are dead" (*OS* 183). This is a main source of humor since, due to a discrepancy of awareness, the reader has known that all along and for the moment enjoys his/her superiority. Gail, on the other hand, is trapped. After receiving another letter of a similar kind, she locks herself into her apartment. Instead of taking the risk that she would blow her cover and have to face reality, she puts up with odd meals and stays inside. Eventually, however, she must return to her normal life.

When one of the other tenants in her apartment complex needs a doctor and she is forced to leave the house since the man is holding on to her, Will sees her. This is quite a revealing moment to Gail. Seeing Will, she wants to jump out of the ambulance car, but since the injured man is holding on to her, as she says, she is unable to do so. She then realizes that in fact the man is no longer holding on to her. He has died at that very moment. Now she is holding on to him, to a dead man. This moment is symbolic of Gail's situation with Will. She finally understands that she has been holding onto something that was already dead (cf. Howells 1998: 132). This epiphanic moment is followed by a main turning point. Having been caught in the act, she immediately packs her suitcase and heads for the airport to return to Canada and flee from the ruins of her fantasy world (cf. Howells 1998: 132-33). According to Cox (2004: 37), however, Gail's fantasy is not yet over. The lines written in italics describing Will's knocking on Gail's door after he saw her in the ambulance are only imagined by Gail and reflective of her desire. It could be precisely her strong desire for this to happen, for Will seeking her, and the eventual disappointment about it that made her leave Australia so abruptly. In fact, Cox's observations are very likely considering the lines following what seems to be Will's speech: "Words most wished for can change. Something can happen to them, while you are waiting. Love—need—forgive. Love—need—forever. The sound of such words can become a din, a battering, a sound of hammers in the street. And all you can do is run away, so as not to honor them out of habit" (*OS* 188).

At the airport, the link between the fantasy world of Australia and real life in Canada, Gail finally returns back to reality. What has happened in Brisbane seems surreal to her (cf. Howells 1998: 133): "As if her whole time here had been a dream, something she could discard, going back to a chosen point, a beginning" (*OS* 189).

Ideally to Gail, this beginning is a renewal of the game; however, “[n]ow it’s up to you to follow me” (*OS* 189). Gail has not learned anything from the trip in spite of the “collapse of her fantasy of desire” (Howells 1998: 135). Given the difficulty Gail has with Australian tree and bird names at the beginning of her stay (“Galah birds” *OS* 179, “Jack Randa” *OS* 181), the answer to why Gail has not been able to move on lies, according to Howells (1998: 135), in one of Cleata’s comments explaining the Dark Ages: “[T]he reason the Dark Ages were dark was not that we couldn’t learn anything about them but that we could not remember anything we did learn, and that was because of the names. [...] Caedwalla, [...] Egfrith, [...] Aelfflaed” (*OS* 164-65). The inability to find closure is, as Howells (1998: 135) observes, quite telling in terms of the feminine imaginary: “So there is, *for women*, no possible law for their pleasure. No more than there is any possible discourse” (Irigaray 1985: 95).

## 7.2 Child’s Play and its Consequences in “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage”

Similar epistolary games are part of another of Alice Munro’s short stories, “Hateship, Friendship, Loveship, Courtship, Marriage“, the title story of the collection by the same name. Just like in “The Jack Randa Hotel”, a letter conversation is intercepted, and fake identities are taken on. However, unlike in “The Jack Randa Hotel” this little game, even if it is not as harsh as in “Child’s Play” (*TMH*), has severe ramifications for the lives of the correspondents and the lives of the initiators of the game. As opposed to Gail in “The Jack Randa Hotel” who realizes that writing fake letters does not change anything (cf. Howells 1998: 132), the epistolary game played by two little girls in “Hateship, Friendship, Loveship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage” has serious consequences for, in fact entirely changes, the lives of two people.

Two girls, Sabitha and Edith, intercept a letter exchange between Sabitha’s father, Ken Boudreau, and her nanny, Johanna Parry. Sabitha’s father lives in Gydnia, Saskatchewan, and stays in touch with his daughter, who is living in Ontario with her grandfather Mr. McCauley and her nanny Johanna, by writing letters. In one of these letters Ken tells his daughter to be nice to Johanna and to appreciate and be grateful for what she does for her. Reading this letter, Johanna feels flattered, seizes the opportunity to thank Ken for his kind words, and slips a thank you letter in the envelope with Sabitha’s letter. When Sabitha is supposed to post the letter, her friend Edith notices

that the envelope is too thick for the one page letter that Sabitha has written. The girls open the envelope and discover and read Johanna's letter. Then they put the letter back in and post it. When Ken's response letter arrives including only mail for Sabitha but not for Johanna, this mere interception of a letter exchange becomes a game involving fake identities, raising false expectations and the exploitation of someone else's loneliness. In order to allegedly save Johanna from the humiliation of not having received a response letter, Sabitha and Edith type a letter in the name of Ken Boudreau, faking his desperation for a friend and his interest in Johanna. After Johanna responds to the fake letter, the girls write more letters in the name of Ken Boudreau. Contrary to all odds, however, the letter forgery is not exposed, and Johanna eventually moves to Gydnia to live with Ken. They get married and have a child, Omar.

What is particularly remarkable about "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage" is that contrary to many others of Munro's short stories, for instance, "Friend of My Youth" (*FMY*) and "Hard-Luck Stories" (*MJ*), it primarily stresses not the limits of narrative but its power. This even goes to the extent that it causes other people's lives to change entirely. While the fantasy world and the epistolary games that shape it are prone to collapse by the interferences of real life in "The Jack Randa Hotel", "HFCLM" demonstrates an integration of the fantasy world as it merges with and eventually dominates real life. As Howells (1998: 132) points out, Gail in "The Jack Randa Hotel" eventually realizes the limits of her game and that writing does not change her life permanently. So did Del Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women*: "It is a shock, when you have dealt so cunningly, powerfully, with reality, to come back and find it still there" (*LGAW* 209) (cf. Howells 1998: 132). In "HFCLM" the realization is a very different one. The letter writers and in particular, Edith, are shocked about the immense consequences of their fake letters.

The course of events in "HFCLM" is definitely due to chance for a great part. As Beston (2003: 32) has noted: "Munro stresses the element of chance in human relationships." This element is already alluded to in the title of the collection and the short story. "Hateship, Friendship, Loveship, Courtship, Marriage" is a child's word game which, by means of the number of unlike letters in a girl's and a boy's names, foretells the kind of relationship these two could have, with one disparate letter resulting in hateship and five leading to marriage (*HFCLM* 28). However, besides chance, the epistolary form that Edith's and Sabitha's story takes plays a large role in the realization

of this game. The distance between sender and receiver of a letter enables the girls to take on the role of a puppeteer, or a god-like figure, as Munro herself likes to describe the role of a storyteller: “[a] god-like arranger of patterns and destinies” (Munro qtd. in Howells 2009: 178). This powerful role of a storyteller is reflected in the short story, for within its fictional world Sabitha and Edith temporarily assume this role. Their ideas, imagination, fantasy, and what they write determines the actions of at least one character in the short story, Johanna Parry. Her actions, by extension, shape the life of Ken Boudreau. Edith and Sabitha are indeed in a very powerful position. They are not aware of how powerful they are, for they did not expect that their actions would lead to “the whole twist of consequences” (*HFCLM* 54). As Franklin (2002, online) observes, fate is not the primary theme of the short story. On the contrary, “*HFCLM*” is “about the power, and the powerlessness, of the writer” (Franklin 2002, online). Howells (2009: 173) agrees, similarly saying the short story deals with “the duplicitous powers of storytelling.”

The power Edith and Sabitha as the writers of letters enjoy stems from their function, at least temporarily, as a kind of third-person omniscient narrator. As Altman (1962: 96) points out, super-reader figures, i.e. characters which read and/or comment on a great part of letters exchanged in a letter narrative, bear a close resemblance to authorial narrators. Although a super-reader figure in epistolary narratives lacks the privileges of an authorial narrator, who has an insight into characters’ minds and feelings and can foretell the future development of the plot (cf. Nünning and Nünning 2001: 116), super-reader figures can influence future events and are thus definitely more powerful than the ordinary epistolary writer (cf. Altman 1982: 94). Moreover, the peculiar nature of Sabitha’s and Edith’s super-reader identity further distinguishes them, not only from the common epistolary writer but also from other super-reader figures. As Altman (1982: 88, 91) notes, the receiver of a letter necessarily influences or exerts power over the letter writer in that the awareness of the receiver has an impact on the style, tone, and content of the letter. This influence is even stronger and more tangible in cases where the receiver makes actual corrections and modifications to the letters. A super-reader figure is such a proof-reader with the additional power of correcting not only one letter but numerous different letters by different writers (cf. Altman 1982: 94). Edith and Sabitha in “*HFCLM*” not only correct someone’s letters but assume the role of a letter writer in disguise. Moreover, they mute Johanna’s letters, the content of

which is thus never realized: “[H]er [Johanna’s] own voice is obliterated in the girls’ malicious game” (Howells 2009: 177).

The question of power in this game is particularly relevant for Edith. In her friendship to Sabitha, she is used to being the smarter one, the more powerful one: “Most of their good ideas were Edith’s” (*HFCLM* 28). She is also the one who initiates their game and who actually writes the letters, disregarding any of Sabitha’s suggestions about what to write in the letter. When Sabitha comes back after three weeks of vacation, Edith finds her entirely changed and matured. This is when Edith first feels something like envy towards Sabitha, for she herself has spent these three weeks working in her father’s shoe business. As a result, Edith becomes even more domineering in their letter game, since she realizes that this is the only domain where she is still in control of Sabitha (cf. Franklin 2002, online). However, apart from demonstrating the power of storytelling, Franklin (2002, online) observes that “*HFCLM*” also reflects on the limits of a writer’s power, his/her powerlessness. As I will discuss later, these limits are manifested only at the very end of the short story when Edith learns about Johanna’s and Ken’s life in the obituary of Mr. McCauley.

As in “The Jack Randa Hotel”, the question of the game’s purpose is inevitable. As Howells (2009: 171) notes, Munro continues her attempt to “discover a possible space for the feminine imaginary” (Irigaray 1985: 164). For the girls this space is again provided by the letters and the possibility it offers them to realize their ideas of romance. Their aim of forging these letters after all is “So then she falls in lo-ove” (*HFCLM* 31). Howells (2009: 173), therefore, reads the whole story as a metafiction, revealing women’s fantasies about romance as fabricated. While the girls are indeed faking a typical romance story, one must keep in mind that if their game had not worked out as smoothly, the fact that they made Johanna fall in love with Ken Boudreau would have been rather hurtful for Johanna. However, since their game is successful, they manage to pave the way for Johanna’s escape from her subjugated, male-dominated space in Ontario and her finding of the space for her feminine imaginary in Gydnia, Saskatchewan. It is in Gydnia that Johanna finally manages to escape male domination: “‘the feminine’ is defined through varieties of resistance to masculine constructions, as each woman seeks not a room of her own but a space of her own where she can escape the constraints of expectation imposed upon her” (Howells 2009: 171). Immediately after she has arrived at Ken Boudreau’s place, she gains agency and turns from a

suppressed, shrinking violet to an active, self-determined woman. Women's resistance to cultural expectations is a theme that figures prominently in "HFCLM". We learn that Sabitha's mother, Marcelle, was rebellious against her parents and would "slid[e] down the verandah roof to be welcomed by carloads of boys" (*HFCLM* 23). She eventually died in London while having "some female thing done" (*HFCLM* 23). When Marcelle's father, Mr. McCauley, who is Johanna Parry's boss, meditates on his parental qualities and how that might have contributed to his daughter's downfall, he concludes: "He and his wife had surely been kind parents, driven to the wall by Marcelle. [...] To Johanna Parry he had likewise been generous, and look how she too had gone against him" (*HFCLM* 23). From what can be drawn from the narrative about Mr. McCauley's treatment of Johanna, it becomes clear that while he might not have been treating her badly, he did not care very much about her and would not even recognize her on the street: "He would have raised a finger to his hat and passed her by, presumably noticing that she was his housekeeper but possibly not" (*HFCLM* 14).

Johanna's letters to Ken Boudreau are quite revealing of her loneliness and discontent in Ontario. She writes that some people who do not know her history find her "Beyond the Pale" (*HFCLM* 29). She continues to relate her history, how she came to Canada and where she worked before she came to Mr. McCauley's house. This again suggests that she feels the urge to tell people her story and convince them of her trustworthiness. She ends the letter with "Your Friend, Johanna Parry" (*HFCLM* 30). As Altman and Tamboukou point out, the closing statements of letters are quite revealing. Sometimes these final lines summarize the writer's emotional situation and how they feel about the addressee (cf. Altman 1982: 146). In addition, the closing line is interesting when it comes to the forces at play. How a writer ends his/her letter is quite telling of how he/she positions him/herself against the addressee (cf. Tamboukou 2010: 39). Also the fake response letter by Sabitha and Edith stresses the importance of the closing lines of the letter: "[S]ometimes I ask myself, Who is my friend? Then comes your letter and you write at the end of it, Your friend. So I think, Does she really mean that? And what a very nice Christmas present it would be for me if Johanna would tell me that she is my friend. Maybe you just thought it was a nice way to end a letter" (*HFCLM* 33). Although the girls are obviously mocking Johanna's letter, it invites the reader, who may have not paid attention to the closing lines that much, to take a closer look at them. With regard to Johanna's letters, her closing lines are quite telling of her

personality. Closing her letter with “Your Friend” (*HFCLM* 30) shows Johanna’s naïveté. She calls somebody a friend whom she does not know very well and who just said a few kind words about her as a nanny. This also suggests that Johanna Parry is not very picky when it comes to calling people her friends, which testifies to how desperate she is for a friend. When Ken Boudreau (alias the girls) then changes his closing lines from friend to lover, “L-v-, Ken Boudreau”, it expresses enough affection for her to leave Ontario for Gydna and live with Ken Boudreau. What is more, from this closing line she understands that they will get married even if “marriage”, she admits to herself, “had not, in fact, been mentioned” (*HFCLM* 12). What seems to be totally naïve only shows, that being the indulgent person that Johanna is, she has succumbed to the common misbelief that what is written in the very privacy of letters is necessarily authentic and honest. Johanna believes that in a letter one necessarily lays bare their most private thoughts and feelings. Luckily, the girls’ game is never revealed, and thanks to luck, chance, or fate, she eventually does marry Ken Boudreau: “The traditional female destiny sketched out in the title is fulfilled in the narrative in unexpected ways, as a young woman goes out into unknown territory following a fantasy script through which she finds her new identity as a wife and mother” (Howells 2009: 176).

Nevertheless, it is surprising that even though Ken Boudreau does not know about the letters and does therefore not expect Johanna’s visit, he does not find the situation overly suspicious. He gratefully accepts the help offered by Johanna, even if he does not even remember her name. Only the nametag on her suitcase tells him who she is, and having discovered her promising bank book, he welcomes her presence even more. Even if “[h]e didn’t know what that was all about [...] [he] hadn’t the energy to inquire” (*HFCLM* 48). He considered her “heaven-sent, a bounty not to be questioned” (*HFCLM* 51). His need for someone to take care of him and her wish for empowerment not only make them fit perfectly together but also bring about a nice reversal of traditional gender roles: “Munro has deftly turned romance on its head, translating the dynamics of fantasy into real life while subverting the traditional gendered power relationship into celebration of a woman’s managerial capacities and a man’s gratitude for being rescued” (Howells 2009: 177).

It has to be noted, however, that there is a little inconsistency in the short story.

When Johanna arrives at the train station in Gydnia, she at first wonders why Ken is not there to pick her up and then realizes that he might not have gotten her letter in time:

When Johanna got off the train there was nobody to meet her. She did not let herself worry about that—she had been thinking that her letter might not, after all, have got here before she did. (In fact it had, and was lying in the Post Office, uncollected, because Ken Boudreau, who had not been seriously sick last winter, really did have bronchitis now and for several days had not come in for his mail [...]). (*HFCLM* 40)

While these lines explain why the letter has not reached Ken Boudreau in time, it is not clear why he did not pick up his mail even after he was well again. If he had done that, as the attentive reader would assume, the game would have been revealed, and they might not have continued living together. Since, however, he surprisingly never picks up his mail, their life turns out to be a perfect story with a happy ending. However, it is only a happy story for Johanna, Ken, and their son, Omar. For the main initiator of the game, Edith, on the other hand, who only learns about the full glory of her game when reading Mr. McCauley's obituary and realizing that Johanna and Ken are married and have a son, the story is in some way "insulting": "[I]t seemed fantastical, but dull, Also insulting, like some sort of joke or inept warning, trying to get its hooks into her" (*HFCLM* 64). She only realizes at that point how powerful she was in her role as a letter writer, and it is an amount of power she no longer finds enjoyable. As Franklin (2002, online) notes: "[T]he game mimics the act of writing fiction: the writer presides over her created world, doling out blessings and judgments as she desires. But as soon as they leave her hand, her words—be they stories, poems, letters—take on a life of their own, which she cannot govern." While Edith is the creator of these things, they are now beyond her control. She has a bizarre moment of recognition, an epiphany. As Howells (2009: 178) points out, it is another one of these moments typical of the short stories in *Open Secrets* which Foy (1998, online) calls "vertiginous moments" which "occur when characters glimpse one of the parallel narratives" that converge with their lives (Foy 1998, online). This realization causes "a tremor of subjective dislocation like a joke from the distant past that subverts any illusion of authority over the future" (Howells 2009: 178). The loss of authority is then reflected in a sentence from Horace which she has to translate as part of her Latin homework: "You must not ask, it is forbidden for us to know [...] what fate has in store for me, or for

you—“ (*HFCLM* 64). A short story that starts out as a comical one thus ends on a very different note.

## 8 Therapeutic Letters: The Power and Limits of Epistolary Narrative

In the previous chapters, a wide variety of functions which letters can fulfill in short stories has been demonstrated. In “Before the Change” and “Tell me Yes or No” the role of letters is yet a different one. Similar to Saul Bellow’s *Herzog* (1964), letter-writing in some of Alice Munro’s stories has a therapeutic effect. The protagonists write letters primarily for their own purpose. Though these letters are addressed to a clearly designated addressee, they are never posted. What makes these two epistolary short stories even more interesting is that while both of them highlight the therapeutic qualities of letters, letter therapy is only shown to be successful in one of the stories, “Before the Change”. In “Tell me Yes or No”, on the other hand, the protagonist is forced to eventually turn to more radical ways of coping.

### 8.1 “Before the Change”: A *Bildungsroman* in Letters

“Before the Change” is another one of Alice Munro’s epistolary stories which consist entirely of letters. As opposed to “A Wilderness Station”, which evolves from letters exchanged between several characters, “Before the Change” is an epistolary short story of the first type of epistolary fiction: the diary type. All letters are written by one person, a 24 year-old unnamed female narrator who, after the breakup of her engagement, moved back to her father’s house in rural Ontario. Similarly, the receiver of all letters is the protagonist’s ex-fiancé, Robin, addressed as “Dear R.”, “R.”, or “Dear Robin” (*LGW* 254, 257, 266). Their relationship began to totter when the narrator got pregnant and Robin suggested an abortion in order not to compromise his reputation as a professor at the Theological College. Instead, the female narrator decided to give her baby up for adoption. As a result, the couple broke off their engagement and continued to live separated. The narrator then goes back home to her father. Returning home, however, does not provide her with the comfort one would expect. On the contrary, the problematic relationship with her father overtakes her. Not only does she

repeatedly get into arguments with him, but she also finds out that he has been performing illegal abortions for years. These and many other unresolved difficulties with her father and Robin are the main topics in the narrator's letters. While all of the letters are addressed to Robin, they never reach him, for the narrator does not post them. The notion of epistolarity in "Before the Change" is a different one than in a multi-perspectival epistolary short story such as "A Wilderness Station" or a short story like "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage", which employs several different narrative modes in addition to the letter mode.

Having one letter writer only, the short story is closely associated with the diary form. As Romberg (1963: 44) observes, a diary usually renders the writer's thoughts and feelings about particular events of the day, only as reflection. Also in "Before the Change", the letter-writing serves for the writer's reflections and has something like a recuperative and cathartic effect. Nonetheless, it is an epistolary rather than a diary story. As opposed to a diary, which would conventionally be addressed "Dear Diary" or maybe "Dear God", the letters in "Before the Change" have a clearly designated and human addressee. Moreover, the epic situation of the letter writer in "Before the Change" is different to that of a diary writer. In addition to recording her meditations about certain events of the day, the narrator in "Before the Change" also relates imprinting experiences from the past. To be precise, the narrated time in the letters oscillates between three time levels: the difficulties with her father from her day; the letter writer's recent past, centering around her ex-fiancé Robin and her disappointment in him; and finally, her childhood and how it was shaped by her authoritative father. By means of the letter she figuratively travels back to these events trying to resolve them. Therefore, not only are there several presents of narration, as is also the case in a diary, but also is the relation between the experiencing and the narrating self different. The letters are therapeutic, supporting the narrator in her pursuit of inner peace and liberation, and they are effective. "Before the Change" is thus an epistolary *bildungsroman*, i.e. the very nature of the epistolary mode comes to function as the "narrative means to therapeutic ends" (White and Epston 1990) which plays a key role in the narrator's development and eventual liberation.

Katherine Mayberry (1994, online) has observed that many of Munro's female narrators attend to narrative in order to resolve difficulties in their lives. Usually these are young women who find themselves in a crisis brought about by a present experience

of powerlessness colliding with a still unresolved past experience which similarly characterized them in an object position. These experiences of subjugation frequently happen in the microcosm of the family. In order to arrive at an understanding of their object position and to eventually free themselves from it, they use various “narrative strategies of liberation” (Mayberry 1994, online). They aim for a reproduction of unresolved past events in narrative form in order to find closure. Whether or not the narrative strategy is successful and brings about the hoped-for relief is largely dependent on the narrative mode at stake. According to Mayberry (1994, online), those narrative modes which bear the closest resemblance to the actual experience that is narrated are most likely to be successful: “The closer a character’s narrative can come to making available this original experience, the better its chances for offering relief merely through being told” (Mayberry 1994, online).

While Mayberry (1994, online) acknowledges the difficulty of achieving an entirely faithful rendering of an experience in narrative and points out that even if the characters arrive at liberation, it “is rarely a direct dividend of the narrative act” (Mayberry 2009: 29), she refers to polyphony as the constitutive element that establishes the closest connection to the original experience possible in narrative. According to Mayberry’s argument, polyphony is the crucial element determining the success of the narration. In her view, it is only the rendering of multiple perspectives that keeps from perpetuating the power hierarchies that the narrative aims to undermine. Therefore, the only way to arrive at liberation is via a “communal re-composition of experience” (Mayberry 1994, online) since this guarantees the greatest congruence possible between experience and narration (cf. Mayberry 1994, online).

Mayberry’s observations are insightful, and I agree with her starting point. Munro’s characters are frequently trapped in subordinating power networks, and they often turn to narrative for relief. Narrating an experience is a decisive step, prompting the protagonists’ liberation. However, I disagree with Mayberry with respect to the narrative mode required for the liberation. Referring to polyphony and the communal reproduction of an experience as key elements to a successful narrative, Mayberry ignores the reality that different people experience one event in differing ways. In other words, depending on the number of people involved, there is a respective number of distinct experiences and, by extension, distinct narratives. Reconstructing an experience as a group is, therefore, not only impossible but unrewarding. Consequently, a joint

attempt at reproducing the experience of an individual will not lead to the narrator's liberation and relief. Since it is only the experience of the individual who finds him-/herself in crisis, which matters, and which needs to be narratively reproduced, the narrative mode best suited is not a polyphonic one but quite the opposite: a first-person narrative mode in the form of a letter. This is the narrative mode best suited to represent individual experience as immediately and as authentically as possible. As Watt puts it, the letter allows "for a fuller and more convincing presentation of the inner lives of characters [...] than literature had previously seen" (Watt 1957: 200-201). Similarly, Bray (2003: 7) observes that the epistolary form is "especially well-suited to the exploration of 'the subjectivity of mind'" (Bray 2003: 7; McKeon 1987: 414).

While Bray's and Watt's observations do not hold true for all letters,<sup>7</sup> they are applicable to the letters in "Before the Change", for these are personal, not to say psychological, letters. "Before the Change" thus shows that it is the epistolary mode, with its overall immediate nature and its tendency to foreground the experiencing self, which is most likely to bring about liberation, for it allows for the greatest congruence between experience and narration. Moreover, the mode of the letter enables the narrator to address her narrative to her ex-fiancé, Robin. This is relevant since the experience with Robin and her unplanned pregnancy is the present experience of subjugation which collides with her subjugated childhood experiences and drives the narrator into a crisis.

To begin with, that the narrator of "Before the Change" finds herself in a lonely, exceptional phase of her life which is characterized by estrangement and subjugation is clearly shown in her letters. She has been struggling all her life with her authoritative father. Being engaged to a professor at the Theological College, she continued to experience the pains of social constraints perpetuating women's subordination in society also in her adult life. Thus, the narrator does not only feel alienated from her father and her ex-fiancé Robin but, by extension, from society's expectations towards women as a whole. Both men who played a main role in her life forced her into an object position in which her needs and desires were subjugated to that of the men. By means of the letter, she tries to reflect on her object position to eventually escape it. It does not, therefore, come as a surprise that the main topics of her letters are the relationship with both these men, Robin and her father, and the particular events that

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<sup>7</sup> See page 22-23.

characterize her submission.

The difficulties with her father are already addressed in the first letter. When she drives all the way from Ottawa to visit him, she tries to overlook the fact that their relationship has always been distant and cold. She considers kissing him “[b]ut when my shoes hit gravel I knew I couldn’t” (LGW 255). Instead, she hugs her father’s housekeeper, Mrs. Barrie, whom she is not really fond of either. She has a hard time trying to please her father and to receive the recognition that she has been longing for: “It’s as if he’s got a list of offenses both remembered and anticipated and he’s letting it be known how his patience can be tried by what you know you do wrong but also by what you don’t even suspect” (LGW 257). Her father is distanced and obsessed with himself and does not even bother to remember people’s names. In the narrator’s view, this habit of her father’s is “more than a simple lapse of memory; it’s something like arrogance. Putting himself beyond the need to keep such things straight. The need to notice changes. Or individuals” (LGW 258). The narrator has always felt neglected and has had trouble coping with her father’s personality. The fact that he is a doctor and thus has, as she says, “authority outside of [his] own house[.]” (LGW 257) has made it even more difficult for her.

Her father’s patriarchal personality continues to trouble her in the present of the short story, when she is in her mid-twenties. Arriving at her childhood home, she does not know what else to do and keeps herself busy reorganizing her father’s ordination and the house. She wants to put everything in order, to modernize it. This need is reflective of her need to regulate her personal life. In her view, the walls need painting, the patients’ files need to be reorganized, the old magazines need to be replaced with newer ones, and the whole house needs to be cleaned (cf. LGW 257). Her father does not approve of her ideas. In the end, she only throws out some old magazines and replaces them with new ones, but even that is too much of a change for her father’s patients: “People missed looking up the jokes they remembered in the *Reader’s Digests*. And some of them didn’t like modern writers. Like Pierre Berton” (LGW 258). There seems to be a general repulsion for change. Even the narrator’s attempt to have her father and Mrs. Barrie try percolated coffee remains unsuccessful: “They prefer instant because it always tastes the same” (LGW 266). All of these disputes and arguments are related in the narrator’s letters to Robin. She wants to confront Robin with all the difficulties she has had in her life. She writes about how she learned about her father’s

illegal abortion business, how she herself assisted him in an abortion when Mrs. Barrie was sick, and about several childhood stories that explain why she has been growing further and further apart from her father. Moreover, she relates hers and Robin's story as a couple: how they met, their dates, and her devastation at his wish for an abortion. Robin, on the other hand, who is the addressee of all these stories, is silenced.

Similarly, the narrator eventually manages to silence her father and make him listen to her story. Pondering her past through letter-writing paves the way for this confrontation. She gradually settles down, and her attempts at re-decoration abate: "I try to do just about what Mrs. B. would do, in the house. No tries now at reorganization, no discussion of repairs" (*LGW* 271). Eventually she confronts her father with her story, the fact that she had a baby and gave it up for adoption to protect her fiancé's reputation and career: "I started to tell my father about myself. I hadn't intended to do this at all. [...] I opened my mouth and things began to come out of it that I heard with equal amounts of dismay and satisfaction, the way you hear the things you say when you are drunk" (*LGW* 281). She tells the story in great detail and is astonished by her father's ability to listen without interrupting her. Her surprise at being finally listened to underlines the general impression that her feelings and perspective have been silenced in the relationship with her father as well as with Robin. Writing letters to Robin without giving him the opportunity to respond and confronting her father finally gives her the opportunity to turn the tables and assert her story.

Only Mrs. Barrie puts an end to her soliloquy when she notices that something is wrong with the narrator's father. He has had a heart attack. Whether the heart attack was caused by the narrator's story, and whether he could even listen to her full story or had the heart attack right in the beginning remains unclear. The narrator and Mrs. Barrie call a doctor, who helps the narrator pull her father to the back seat of a car so that he can be taken to hospital. Interestingly enough, even when her father is unconscious, she feels his punishing vibes: "The sound of his breathing was more peremptory than ever and seemed to be criticizing whatever we did" (*LGW* 284). Then, however, she realizes that no matter how critical her father has been, at this very moment she is the one who is in control: "[T]he fact was that you could take hold of him now, and shove him around, and manage his body as you had to, and this seemed very odd" (*LGW* 284).

Nonetheless, the narrator's liberation is not completed until after her father's death and after seeing him from an entirely new perspective. The lawyer dealing with

her father's inheritance has been wondering where the narrator's father's money went. As soon as the narrator realizes that it went to Mrs. Barrie and that the reason he gave her his fortune might have been love, she finds peace: "Since that moment I have been happy" (*LGW* 291). Happiness is what she has been looking for and was the aim of her letter-writing. In her final letter to Robin she writes, "Goodbye and good luck. I send you my love. [...] Take care of yourself" (*LGW* 292). This generous statement of the narrator suggests that by having resolved the issues with her father, she is also able to forgive Robin. Her final termination of writing is, similar to the protagonist Herzog, a sign of mental stability (cf. Altman 1982: 42). The very nature of the letter mode significantly contributed to her ability to finally let go, for it is the narrative mode which allows for the most immediate recollection of events and feelings. As Mayberry (1994, online) argues, in order to make the narration successful, the narrative needs to be as close as possible to the original experience. The letter mode is the one best suited for this. The reason why the narrator writes letters is because, contrary to Mayberry's other argument, it is not the polyphonic narratives that establish the closest connection between experience and narration but the monophonic form of the letter. Writing letters enables the narrator to deviate the narration of the events as little as possible from the experience and thus arrive at an authentic reconstruction of these past experiences. This authentic reconstruction allows the narrator to relive and finally resolve the difficulties of her past that have haunted her in the present.

What is more, the letters come in handy because they preserve not only events of the past but also sentiments, mindsets, and relationships (cf. Altman 1982: 102). Therefore, writing experiences down in a letter opens up the opportunity of re-reading the letter and reliving the experience over and over again. This is then likely to lead to new insights: "[I]t already sounds quite normal to me except when I write it down" (*LGW* 259). In short, by means of the letter the narrator is not only able to reconstruct the past as authentically as possible but also to go through it as often as needed. The narrator is thus able to outsmart time and to resist the gradual decay of the experience due to loss of memory. As Mayberry observes, one of the major problems protagonists encounter in their attempts to reconstruct the past is "the failure of memory" (Mayberry 2009: 30). This also plays a role in "Before the Change", as the numerous references to memory suggest: "as you may recall" (*LGW* 256), "my father can't remember" (*LGW* 257), "This is more than a simple lapse of memory" (*LGW* 258), "they remembered"

(*LGW* 258), “if you remember” (*LGW* 259), “if you remembered me” (*LGW* 262), “Is this a memorial to you?” (*LGW* 262), “I remember the clothes” (*LGW* 264), “I remember” (*LGW* 278), “but the name of it I can’t remember” (*LGW* 278), “I forget” (*LGW* 278); it is not without reason that the story ends on the same notion: “Remember—the present King of France is bald” (*LGW* 292), a sentence which was part of the first meeting between the narrator and Robin.

Moreover, the title, “Before the Change”, indicates the importance of time in the story. In fact, it alludes to the three main time levels: the present, the past and the future. The short story takes place at the interface of past and future, it takes place before the change, and it is here that the past and the future of the protagonist collide. The narrator in “Before the Change” does not only struggle with the failure of her engagement, her giving her baby up for adoption, and her father’s distanced relationship to her, but also with societal norms, how they could change the lives of women like her for the better. “Change” in the short story has several different meanings. On the one hand, it refers to progress in regard to the question of abortion and its legal framework; however, one cannot regard the question of abortion as an isolated matter. On the contrary, abortion and the question of its legality or illegality is interconnected with topics such as a woman’s autonomy to decide over her own body. Moreover, the narrator in “Before the Change” sees a connection to her own past. Her ex-fiancé, Robin, wanted to have the baby aborted because he was worried about his reputation. Being only engaged and not yet married, they were not an eligible couple to have a baby. The narrator believes that if social constraints loosened and abortion was legalized, it would no longer be shameful for unmarried couples to have children, and lives like hers would take a different course: “[I]t could happen that you wouldn’t be ashamed to marry a pregnant woman. There’d be no shame to it. Move ahead a few years, just a few years, and it could be a celebration. The pregnant bride is garlanded and led to the altar, even in the chapel of the Theological College” (*LGW* 285).

“Yet we don’t want everything—not the whole story—to be dictated from outside. We don’t want what we are, all we are, to be concocted that way” (*LGW* 285-86). These lines perfectly summarize the narrator’s burdens. She was not in control of her own life, of her own story. It was dictated from outside. This past keeps haunting her in the present, and her way of coping with it is to write letters. By writing her story in letters, she aims to gain control over her story. She writes it down as she experienced

it; she makes it 'herstory'. Thus, there is yet another meaning of change: the narrator's own change and development. "Before the Change" is an epistolary *bildungsroman*. As such, the protagonist's own maturation is foregrounded. This maturation was facilitated, for a great part, by her constant reflections on her history and her relationships through letter-writing. Due to the peculiar qualities of the letter mode, such as the immediacy of narration, the first-person perspective, and the merging of experiencing and narrating self, the aim of the narrative, the narrator's liberation, was successfully achieved. The letters successfully served a therapeutic function, enabling the narrator to organize her life, cope with her past, and eventually free herself from the constraints imposed on her by her father and her ex-fiancé.

## 8.2 The Limits of Epistolary Narrative in "Tell me Yes or No"

The short story "Tell me Yes or No" from Munro's third short story collection *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974) is similar in its narrative mode to "Before the Change" (LGW). Again, there is an unnamed, female protagonist who addresses her ex-lover in the form of a letter which is not meant to be sent. However, in this case, the letter itself is not recognizable as such at first glance. Not only does it lack the structure that is expected of a letter, i.e. the greeting formulas, but neither are there any signs suggesting that the narrative is written down, which, strictly speaking, would also be expected from a letter. Still, I agree with Ajay Heble, who argues that "[t]he story takes the form of a kind of unwritten letter" (Heble 1994: 80). I, too, will treat the narrative as a letter since it is addressed to a clearly designated 'you', the narrator's ex-lover, which is a significant feature of letters. Secondly, it needs to be considered that the relationship between the narrator of "Tell me Yes or No" and the addressed 'you', which is the main topic of the short story, has been strongly shaped by letters. Living in different cities, the exchange of letters was the only way for them to keep in touch. It is, therefore, only reasonable that the narrative "Tell me Yes or No", in which the narrator contemplates her relationship, also takes the form of the letter. However, it is an unwritten letter, which only exists in the mind of the female narrator.

This has a particular purpose for the narrator. She is a divorced mother who started an affair at college with a journalist, when she, just like her lover, was still married. After he left college to work for a magazine, they kept in touch by exchanging letters and met in person only a few times. The short story relates the beginning of their

affair, the few meetings they had, and the narrator's pain at being separated from her lover. The centerpiece of the narrative is the narrator's attempt to come to terms with the death of her lover, the way she learned about it, and the final revelation that she had not been his only affair. Thus letter writing in "Tell me Yes or No" is, similar to "Before the Change", closely associated with a therapeutic function.

Nonetheless, letters in "Tell me Yes or No" do not only play a role as the narrative mode at play but also as vestiges from the past. Since the relationship between the narrator and the addressee of the story was based on letters for a long time, these letters carry special meaning and continue to have a strong impact on the narrator's life long time after they were sent. For the female narrator, the letters from her (ex-)lover are much more than an exchange of information and a medium of communication. They are the cornerstones holding their relationship together, and as such, the narrator attributes an immense value to them. This value showed in her habit of keeping the latest letter from her lover in her purse and reading it whenever she felt like it, but also in the fact that she neatly collected all the older letters in a box (cf. *SMTY* 110). The great importance she places on these letters made her vulnerable. The time between her sending of a letter and the arrival of a response letter was a time of great pain and uncertainty, never being entirely sure whether there will even be a response and if so, when. Often the uncertainty made her "grow to dislike the sight of it [the letter in her purse], folded and dog-eared, reminding me of what weeks, what months, I have been waiting for the new letter. But I leave it there, I don't put it in the box, I don't dare" (*SMTY* 110-11).

After the narrator, by pure coincidence, learns about the death of her lover from a newspaper, what seems to have been an ordinary appreciation of the letters turns out to have been an obsession: "Everyday when I come back from teaching I see the mailbox and to tell the truth I experience something pleasant, a lack of expectation. For two years that tin box has been the central object in my life, and now to see it go neutral again, to see it promise and withhold nothing very much, that is like feeling a pain gone" (*SMTY* 111). The protagonist's appreciation of the mailbox and the letters goes far beyond their pragmatic purpose. The narrator of "Tell me Yes or No" is one of Munro's letter writers who are "carried away" by letters (*OS* 18). Similar to Louisa in "Carried Away" (*OS*), and Gail in "The Jack Randa Hotel" (*OS*), the letters open up a parallel universe in which the protagonist's feelings run wild. The closest resemblance

to the narrator, however, can be found in the short story “How I Met My Husband” (*SMTY*). Here, too, a young woman, Edie, desperately waits for a letter from her lover and gets sadder and sadder everyday that no letter arrives for her (cf. *SMTY* 68).

Similar to “How I Met My Husband”, the letters in “Tell me Yes or No” are inscribed with great expectations, with memories of what the narrator’s life used to be like and with the hope that it might become like that again. They are not merely symbols of their relationship; they metonymically stand for it. No letters, therefore, means no relationship. This, according to Milne (2003, online), is a common epistolary convention:

[T]he materiality of the letter is made to stand for the correspondent’s body. Due to its physical proximity or contact with its author the letter can work metonymically; a function most obvious in amorous epistolary discourse where the letter is kissed, held, cried over or adored in place of the lover’s body. In this way, the gap between the letter writer and the reader seems bridged. (Milne 2003, online)

It is then not very surprising that as an attempt at reaching closure, the narrator stores away all the letters, also the last one, which she used to carry with her at all times: “I go home and remove this last letter, from my purse, put it with the others and shove the box out of sight. Deliberately, almost painlessly I do this, having thought the act out beforehand. I make myself a drink. I continue with my life” (*SMTY* 111). Storing away the letters is her way of dealing with her loss. It is a ritual marking the end of their relationship. However, this ritual does not seem to be successful, and neither is the letter writing in itself. What has brought about relief and liberation for the narrator of “Before the Change” does not work for the narrator of “Tell me Yes or No”, for she is forced eventually to turn to a more radical way of coping: repression.

“Nobody knows I have lost anything, nobody knew that part of my life, except in a general rumoured way; when you came here we did not see people. So I am able to continue, as if it never happened, you never happened” (*SMTY* 111). It is here that the meaning of not telling is played out for the first time. Heble (1994: 79) suggests that while Munro’s earlier short story collections have focused on the rewards of telling, *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974), the collection “Tell me Yes or No” is in, shows a shift to *not* telling and how it can similarly give individuals power. In “Tell me Yes or No” the fact that the affair between the two protagonists has been a secret, that they have not told anyone about it, awards the narrator the ability control her past as

well as her future. It is up to her alone to decide whether she wants to confront what she has been going through or not. If she had told someone about it, they would have started influencing her decisions and would have given her advice that she is unwilling to take. Her colleague and lover, Gus Marks, is a good example for this. After she tells him her story, supposedly in order to comfort him since he has been going through a break-up too, he suggests that she should see a doctor, “[t]o talk” (SMTY 111). Even though she politely replies “I’ll consider it” (SMTY 111), she thinks “[b]ut I laugh at him to myself, for I am absorbed by another plan” (SMTY 111).

Her plan is to travel to her ex-lover’s hometown and visit his grave. Arriving at his hometown, the narrator, rather than visiting her ex-lover’s grave, repeatedly visits the bookstore of his widowed wife. His wife eventually figures out who she is and hands her a sack full of what she thought were the narrator’s letters to her dead husband. It turns out, however, that these letters were not written by the narrator but by another one of her lover’s affairs named Patricia. Patricia found and probably still finds herself in the same crisis as the narrator did, desperately waiting for letters to arrive, for him to give her a definite answer about whether he loves her or not: “please, please, tell me yes or no” (SMTY 122). Instead of finding closure, the narrator is yet again disappointed. He did not love her, even if he was “*the one who said it first*” (SMTY 124). It is here that her disappointment and her pain peak and that the short story takes a major turn.

While the whole story is in itself already rather complex and multilayered, jumping randomly back and forth between the present and various events in a more recent and a farther past, the very last lines of the short story add an entirely new level which undermines everything that the reader has so far believed to be true:

Never mind. I invented her. I invented you, as far as my purposes go. I invented loving you and I invented your death. I have my tricks and my trap doors, too. I don’t understand their workings at the present moment, but I have to be careful, I won’t speak against them. (SMTY 124)

With these lines the short story ends, leaving the reader entirely in the dark about what to believe and what to dismiss as an invention. Ending the short story with these cryptic lines leaves the reader somewhat unsatisfied. He/She cannot find closure either as he/she persistently tries to make sense of the story and figure out whether or not it is an invention, and if so, why the narrator invented it.

Indeterminacy is a recurring topic in Alice Munro’s short stories. Many literary

scholars, but in particular Coral Ann Howells, credit Munro for what Howells calls her “art of indeterminacy” (Howells 1998: 85). It is an art because “her narratives evade any single meaning but allow for room for the interplay of shifting multiple meanings and of multiple human interests” (Howells 1998: 85-86). Similar to “A Wilderness Station”, “Tell me Yes or No” is totally ambiguous. Even though the question is not about finding a murderer, it is also about finding truth and about the impossibility to do so. There are hints in the short story giving evidence for both options.

On the one hand, there are several metanarrative comments, revealing the narrator as self-conscious and speaking for the short story as an invention. Even if, as Nünning (2004: 39) points out, metanarrative comments do not necessarily foreground the constructedness and fictional quality of a text, the metanarrative comments in “Tell me Yes or No” clearly do so. They question the reliability of the narrator and invite the reader to distrust the narrative. “The things we old pros know about, in these fantasies, is the importance of detail, solidity” (*SMTY* 110). These lines make the reader suspicious, especially because she calls herself an “old pro[...]” (*SMTY* 110), being short for professional and implying that she is an experienced storyteller. Heble (1994: 81) moreover notes the very deliberate use of the word “fantasies” (*SMTY* 110) which calls attention to the constructedness of memory and thus questions whether memory and the immediate experience really are as closely connected as the short story initially makes us believe (cf. Heble 1994: 81). The gap suggested here between the experience and its narration would also account for the failure of the reconstruction to bring about the liberation the narrator longs for.

The second metafictional remark, “A heart attack, that will do” (*SMTY* 110), similarly points to the narrator’s experience as a storyteller, knowing exactly whether a heart attack makes for a good enough cause of death to satisfy her audience or not. Furthermore, since many of Munro’s protagonists are notorious storytellers, it appears likely that the narrator of “Tell me Yes or No” is one, too. Ventura (1992: 105-106) argues that “Tell me Yes or No” takes place in two different worlds, the factual and the fantasy world. These two worlds can be distinguished from one another by the use of tense. Everything in the past tense is the real world, while everything written in present tense marks the fantasy world: “[T]he former claims to be situated in existential reality whereas the latter occurs in the narrator’s fantasy” (Ventura 1992: 106).

Even if it is impossible to determine whether Ventura is right or not, the narrator

does indeed have a motivation for making up stories, namely to entertain herself, to escape from her rather boring daily routine. She describes her life as a married mother as tedious, monotonous, and tiring, with reading being the only exciting thing that she still manages to do at the end of the day. Even sexuality was gradually becoming more of an errand, a “brisk, unvarying, satisfactory, localized exchange” (SMTY 108). Her statement “I felt nothing so definite as dissatisfaction” (SMTY 108) poignantly summarizes her state of mind. Moreover, at the beginning of the short story, she expresses her discontents about not having had such a blithe, adventurous youth as girls have today: “At the age when girls nowadays are growing their hair to their waists, travelling through Afghanistan, moving – it seems to me – as smoothly as eels among their varied and innocent and transitory loves, I was sleepily rinsing diapers, clad in a red corduroy dressing gown, wet across the stomach” (SMTY 107).

The images the narrator uses to describe the lives of girls and women nowadays, reappear in the later recollection of her life after her divorce. She has a one-night stand with Gus Marks, her colleague, and with many other men, and she “buy[s] some fashionable sunglasses, some new, light clothes” (SMTY 111) as she impatiently awaits the trip to her ex-lover’s hometown. Moreover, her choice of books is quite telling. At the time when she was in college and still married, she spent a lot of time reading. She read Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* and meant to read Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, which is also known under the title *In Search of a Lost Time*. This title nicely captures what the narrator herself has been doing. From what she relates, her life has taken a different course than she had wanted. She never experienced any of the adventures she wished for. That she therefore starts to make up stories in her mind, stories of how exciting her life could have been, can thus not be precluded. On the contrary, it is as likely as the second option, namely that her remarks about her story being invented are a way of dealing with the disappointment. As Heble (1994: 80) puts it, the “invention may be motivated by a deep psychological need or desire.” When considering that this remark comes immediately after she found out about her lover’s affair with yet another woman, this option seems even more reasonable: “What is important about this particular story is that it has been fashioned in response to the narrator’s pain” (Heble 1994: 82). In this regard, the advice of one of her friends is significant: “Since pain was only possible if you looked backward to the past or forward to the future she had eliminated the whole problem by living every moment itself; every

moment, she said, was filled with absolute silence” (*SMTY* 118). This further supports the option that the narrator pretends to have invented the story in order to stop her past haunting her and to be able to live in the present.

At the end of the day, however, it remains impossible to determine for certain whether the narrator is another one of Munro’s infamous storytellers, or whether these lines are her affective reaction to the shock she has been experiencing. “Whether she turns her experience of life into a story in order to cope with rejection or whether she does so out of a kind of wish-fulfilment, the narrator’s transformation fails to distinguish between the real world and the world of her imagination” (Heble 1994: 83). All we can know for sure is that the narrative is a story; whether it is an invented one or not remains open.

Not being able to narrow something down, to tell yes or no, has served many of Munro’s characters as a source of power. In “A Wilderness Station” the protagonist, Annie McKillop, tells contradictory stories which led to many scholars dismissing her as mad. Howells, on the other hand, rightly identified “storytelling [as a] [...] prime survival strategy” of Munro’s protagonists (Howells 1998: 128). In “Tell me Yes or No” it is not the storytelling per se that enables the protagonist to survive but the final perversion of the story. This perversion, however, is only possible because the narrator has not told her story. It has to be kept in mind that the two protagonists were involved in an affair. This secrecy of their relationship is what makes the narrator’s final distancing from the story possible. Capturing the end of their story equally in a letter enables her to maintain the same privacy that formed the basis of their relationship. By keeping from putting it to paper she even goes a step further in keeping their affair a secret. There is no real addressee of her story, except for herself and her dead boyfriend. When Altman (1982: 106) points out that an increase in readership of a letter marks its passage from a private to a more public sphere, this further limitation of readership, from one addressee to no addressee, works along the same lines. It marks the story’s passage from the private sphere to the even more private sphere of which only she herself is part and eventually to denial. Not telling in “Tell me Yes or No” is a source of power that affords the narrator the opportunity, which she eventually also seizes, to deny the past: “Love is not in the least unavoidable, there is a choice made” (*SMTY* 111). She eventually chooses not to tell, not to love, and not to confront.

## 9 Conclusion

“Any attempt to analyze the secrets of her [Alice Munro’s] storytelling [...] is likely to end something close to a ‘Well,’ [...]” (Howells 2009: 175). This is how Howells reasons her difficulties in drawing straightforward conclusions from Munro’s fiction. Well, I could not agree more. Munro’s stories are too multilayered, too complex, and too ambiguous for a simple conclusion, and any attempt to do so runs the risk of oversimplifying Munro’s craft. The same holds true for the use of letters in Munro’s stories. To end this thesis with the conclusion that letters in Munro’s stories fulfill the functions x, y and z would be sheer nonsense, for the spectrum of letter functions is as versatile as Munro’s writings as a whole. The aim of this thesis, therefore, was to give an insight into the versatility of potential functions of letters in Munro’s fiction, rather than prescriptively subsuming all of her epistolary short stories under one of their multiple functions.

The first short story discussed in this thesis was “A Wilderness Station” (*OS*). It is one of Munro’s more traditional all-letter stories. Here Munro created a cunning interplay between the narrative and the meta-narrative level which both reflect and challenge one another. She uses the multi-perspectival structure of epistolary fiction, in its traditional way, for a contrast of different realities, thus highlighting how strongly reality depends on perspective and, by extension, how subjective historiographic writing is. The underlying power struggle of the protagonists emphasizes the mechanisms of power that come into play in history-making. As I see it, Munro deliberately silences the female protagonist, Annie McKillop, until fairly late in the narrative to illustrate the onesidedness of history and to highlight that traditionally only one perspective is chosen to be the master narrative. Munro’s feminist concern surfaces when she finally breaks Annie’s silence. Similarly, “Material” (*SMTY*), a more experimental epistolary short story, has an underlying feminist agenda. Presenting a female narrator who writes back to her ex-husband’s selfishness in a disguised letter, Munro transposes a topic central to postcolonialism to the microcosm of the family. The short story foregrounds the quality of letter narratives as “narrative[s] of power” (Wolff 1992: 72) as the narrator’s letter-in-disguise becomes a longly suppressed assertion of her perspective on the failures in their marriage. “Material” moreover plays with the double readership of letter fiction. Combining the privacy of a letter with the publicity of a short story, the letter-in-

disguise enables the narrator to reach a degree of humiliation for her ex-husband that would otherwise not be attainable.

“The Jack Randa Hotel” (*OS*) and “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage” (*HFCLM*), which I have discussed in chapter seven of this thesis, are two epistolary short stories which make use of the peculiar communicative structure of epistolary fiction in a curious and rather comical way. In both of these stories, the displacement of sender and receiver is used to create deceptive epistolary identities and, by extension, to initiate games. The letters create a third space in which these games, which are an expression of the initiators’ desires, are able to be realized. In “The Jack Randa Hotel” the focus is on the letters as the space for the feminine imaginary, in which the protagonist’s innermost desires find their expression. The nature of epistolary communication plays a major role, since it enables the protagonist, Gail, to imagine herself as the Other and voice her honest feelings (cf. Howells 1998: 131). In “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage” the letters constitute the space in which the pubescent girls are able to act out their ideas of romance. Like writers of fiction, they arrange their characters and the plot and are astonished at the consequences of their game. Altogether, in “The Jack Randa Hotel” as well as “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage” letters constitute a space of power for the protagonists, initiating fantastical games in which the restrictions of real life are no longer applicable.

Finally, “Before the Change” (*LGW*) and “Tell me Yes or No” (*SMTY*) focus on letter-writing as a curing activity. Reminiscent of Saul Bellow’s *Herzog* (1964), these short stories foreground the therapeutic effect letter-writing can have. As the narrative mode which guarantees the greatest congruence between the experience of an event and its narration, letter-writing should help the protagonists resolve difficulties of their pasts which haunt them in the present. While the protagonist in “Before the Change” manages to verbalize her traumatic experiences in the form of letters and arrives at liberation, the narrator of “Tell me Yes or No” is less successful. Trying to get an understanding of the failure of her relationship with a married man, she narrates her experience in the form of an imagined letter to her ex-lover. This, however, turns out to be the wrong coping mechanism for her, since she eventually must to repress her history and dismiss it as an invention in order to cope with the pain.

As this thesis has shown, Munro utilizes the potentials of letters for her narratives in creative and experimental ways. The selection of six out of twenty-two

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short stories shows that Munro is not only the “master of the contemporary short story” (Sterling and Brumfield 2013, online) but also a master of the letter craft. Not only do the letters add a level of immediacy to her short stories that would otherwise not be attainable, but their functions in the short stories are also innovative and rewarding. Munro thus testifies to her never-ending creativity and expertise as a short story writer and stresses that even a literary genre as established as the epistolary form can be successfully transformed to contemporary taste.

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## Appendix

### Alice Munro's Epistolary Short Stories

*Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968): "Sunday Afternoon", "Postcard"

*Lives of Girls and Women* (1971): "The Flats Road"

*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974): "Material", "Tell me Yes or No", "The Spanish Lady"

*The Progress of Love* (1986): "A Queer Streak"

*Open Secrets* (1994): "Carried Away", "The Jack Randa Hotel", "Vandals", "A Wilderness Station"

*The Love of a Good Woman* (1998): "Before the Change"

*Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001): "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage"

*Runaway* (2004): "Runaway", "Chance", "Soon", "Powers"

*The View from Castle Rock* (2006): "The View from Castle Rock"

*Too Much Happiness* (2009): "Dimensions", "Deep-Holes", "Child's Play"

*Dear Life* (2012): "To Reach Japan"

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