Shifting Literacies in "Carried Away" by Alice Munro

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We usually think of literacy as the ability to write, read, understand written material, most specifically printed material. When that printed material is fiction¸ we expect to find a certain quality of coherence, such as unity of time,place, and character. Reading realistic fiction requires many literacy skills including decoding,and associations, and sometimes the arc of narration (and its sense of chronology) as well. In truth, there are many literacies. We hear today of numerical literacy, media literacy, computer literacy – all of which call for different acquired skills to navigate information needed to function successfully as a modern human being (or to engage our modern imaginations). Before these modern literacies evolved, , the literacy of orality and its conventions governed the way human beings negotiated and understood a pre-scientific world. In oral storytelling, narrators used recurring images and symbols, rather than a specific sequence of words to present mythology and folktales whose narrative arcs incorporate repetitive cycles They invoked what might be called psychological time rather than strict chronology (Roloff, 1993). Images or symbols are integral to realist genres as well, but might create different associations and ways of unfolding from what they evoke in oral literary genres. In an oral tradition, specific words (with the exception of stock phrases) are not fixed as they are in printed material. It is an image or symbol that is repeated and retold, not specific words per se. In oral cultures, "all utterances are winged, gone before they are pronounced," says scholar Ivan Illich (1991), thus estimating the fleeting worth of words and the impossibility of memory as "conceived as a storage room" to keep specific words in tact (Illich, 1991).

Even with new technologies, old media are seldom completely abandoned. Orality, manuscript, print, electronic, and wireless media co-exist in the modern world. Today's magic realism, for example, often demands that we navigate two different literacies at once: from orality, the literacy of myth and folktale (magic) and from print, the literacy of realistic fiction (realism). If we can transverse these two literacies successfully, we will have a doubly rich reading experience, though we may find ourselves in a liminal space where we are unable to come to a definite resolution or interpretation of meaning, thus leaving meaning uncomfortably (but fruitfully) open. I would like to explore the beauty and texture of shifting literacies in Alice Munro's "Carried Away."

"Carried Away" is a long short story (sometimes considered a novella) with four sections. The first three are realistic, taking place in a small fictional town (Carstairs) in Ontario, Canada at the time of World War I and the Spanish flu epidemic, specifically 1917-1919. Louisa, the town's librarian, corresponds with a local soldier fighting overseas – a young man named Jack Agnew. Although Jack is not someone Louisa knows personally, he initiated a romantic correspondence with

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her, spurred by a long-time, secret infatuation and by a dismal awareness of his probable impending death in battle. He does not, however, die in war, but when he returns to town, does not pursue the epistolary romance. Unbeknownst to Louise, Jack was engaged to someone else during their correspondence and feels he must fulfill his promise to marry his fiancé, Grace Horne. Though he survived the war, he nevertheless soon is killed, decapitated in a gruesome industrial accident in the Doud piano factory where he is working. Later, Louisa marries Arthur Doud, the owner of the factory in an odd and unsettling turn of events.

Reading Time in Tolpuddle Martyrs

The section of "Carried Away" called *Tolpuddle Martyrs* calls on us to shift to the skills of oral literacy as we read it. Though Munro's work is usually best appreciated as realistic fiction, and Munro herself would not usually be considered a magic realist, she does employ some of the conventions of magic realism in several of her stories, including this one. The reader has difficulty understanding the *Tolpuddle Martyrs* in strictly realistic terms, though by considering Louisa as old and ill and confused, some of the contradictions in the section can be logically (and realistically) explained away. The heart specialist, whom Louisa has gone to London, Ontario to consult, describes her heart as "wonky" and her pulse as "jumpy" (Munro, 1997), thus preparing us to accept Louisa's perceptions as unreliable, rather than magical. If the reader is determined to interpret *Tolpuddle Martyrs* in strictly realistic terms, he or she can rationalize that the appearance of the long-dead Jack (Louisa's former love interest) is purely a figment of Louisa's confusion. Such a reader, however, might have difficulty sorting out fantasy from fact throughout: for example, Did Louisa "really" read the newspaper story about Jack Agnew, the union spokesman from Toronto? Did someone seeming to be Jack "really" approach her? Did she "really" speak with Nancy, Jack's protégé? Were those she took at first to be the martyrs "really" Mennonites? The story does not give us enough information to answer these questions with certainty. The story does, however, give us enough provocative material to shift literacies from realism to magic, and to negotiate the questions above in another way and with another sense of time.

Though there are many terms one could use to denote the time evoked in folk material of the oral literary tradition (sacred time, mythic time, nonlinear time, cyclical time), I will often use the term *psychological time* in this paper, for it suggests that the gaps in sequence and logic that one finds in folk material (as in dreams) have importance and meaning to which one needs to be attentive and are not mere whimsy. The appearance of Jack in *Tolpuddle Martyrs* is unsettling, for we know he has died. Many readers scramble to try to find a way to make sense of it. Is there a possibility that Jack never died? But no, that is preposterous. His accident and its aftermath have been detailed in previous sections with realistic precision and with virtually no room for error. Chronological time cannot reconcile his sudden appearance here with what we have been told with certitude about his accident, death, and funeral in previous sections. Is there a possibility that this union leader is not Jack? But again, No. This stranger knows about Jack's wife, Grace, his daughter, Lillian, his father, Patrick Agnew, and his secret love, Louisa. His labor union affiliation is in accordance with Jack's life (and death). Furthermore, no possible cynical reason for an imposter to deceive Louisa presents itself in the story. Scholar Miriam Marty Clark (1996) has suggested that Jack's appearance signals an eruption of energy that the story thus far has suppressed and that needs to be "read":

> The repressed and appropriated energies of revolution return to compel the narrative out of linear time, to reverse its irreversible premise, to force a rereading and a rewriting of the past. These energies are powerful enough to disrupt both realist practice and the practices that have governed reading and interpretation into the twentieth century.

The reader must go beyond chronology, then, to make sense of the non-sense prevalent in this section of "Carried Away."

Resurrection

Resurrection from death is a common occurrence in mythology and religion, and a common occurrence

on an even more personal level. Those of us who have had parents or spouses die, often find ourselves visiting with our dearly departed in our dreams. It is not too much of a stretch, then, to assume that the theological acceptance of resurrection stems from a psychological reality and a need for completion beyond what the biological sometimes allows (Roloff, 1993). Resurrection is part of what Eliade (2005) in his classical study calls "the eternal return" – that part of traditional culture's consciousness that strives to combat the vicissitudes of time with atemporal, sacred ritual and belief in order to mitigate suffering and anxiety: ". . .through the repetition of paradigmatic gestures and by means of periodic ceremonies, archaic man succeeded, as we have seen, in annulling time," declares Mircea Eliade (2005).

Jack's resurrection in the *Tolpuddle Martyrs* is described eloquently by Munro as a "radiant vanishing consolation" (Munro 1997). It has afforded Louisa with an opportunity to take stock of her life. In a relevant article, Ildikó de Papp Carrington (1993) has suggested that Jack's resurrection allows needed psychological consolation and wish fulfillment: "Louisa's hallucination fulfills her wish not only to see Jack but also to shape his life as he has shaped hers: to have him rise from his original status as she has from hers" (Carrington, 1993). Carrington's mention of status refers to Jack "becoming" an articulate union spokesperson and leader after having been a factory worker. His resurrection as an able leader suggests a kinder fate might have awaited him than that of his untimely death -- a kinder fate that Louisa would have preferred for him: not only because it would allow him to survive and flourish but also would afford him the respect of an elevated social status, paralleling her own elevated status as a rich, married woman.

After Jack's death, Louisa unexpectedly marries Arthur Doud, the factory's owner. She tells the resurrected Jack, "And it turned out to be something else that I wanted entirely. I wanted to marry him and get into a normal life" (Munro, 1997). Being forced to consider Jack again perhaps reminds Louisa of conflicting allegiances and of possibilities not realized. She remembers getting to know Arthur after Jack's death and shares her memories with Jack. On Saturday evenings, Arthur visited the library where she worked, first to return Jack's books¸ but then to bask in the calm and quiet atmosphere of the empty library, and finally to be near Louisa with whom he was falling in love. As Arthur Doud sat reading at a table, Louisa would sometimes find herself looking up from her work to stare at the back of his neck and imagine it being struck and severed, indicating that she, in part, blamed him¸ the factory owner, for the dangerous conditions that led to the terrible accident and the death of her former (and forever) "would-be" lover. Jack and Louisa never consummated their long-distance love after the war. Jack's declarations of love in his letters to Louise, spurred by his certainty that he would die during the Great War, could never come to fruition because Jack felt obligated to marry Grace Horne with whom he had been engaged before the war.

Roberto Calasso's description of a mythic hero resonates as the reader considers Jack's resurrection:

> Mythical figures live many lives, die many deaths, and in this they differ from characters found in novels, who can never go beyond the single gesture. But in each of these lives and deaths all others are present, and we can hear their echo. Only when we become aware of a sudden consistency between incompatibles can we say we have crossed the threshold of myth (Calasso, 1994, p. 22).

Calasso's sentiments in this passage support the need to shift literacies from the print literacy of novels to the oral literacy of myth when trying to understand mythic "gestures," such as resurrection. His quote also calls readers to consider the "consistency between incompatibles" in all the Jacks: Jack the soldier, Jack the lover, Jack the reader, Jack the husband and father, Jack the factory worker, and Jack the resurrected union leader.

Binary Opposition

Jack's resurrection in *Tolpuddle Martyrs* sets in motion related binary opposites that further urge the reader to consider how best to read time in the story. Louisa, though she chats with the labor organizer Jack, fails to embrace his resurrected presence. As Louisa explains to Jack how pragmatic (rather than spiritual) she has gotten with age, she exclaims, "What a thing to talk to a dead man about" (Munro, 1997). Jack, however, never

admits his death, but rather calls his disappearance from Carstairs a sudden "opportunity to leave," presumably to become a union leader (Munro, 1997). Hence we have the binary opposition of death versus renewed life or even (considering the resurrection) eternal life. Binary images have been used as tools to understand folk material first by Levi-Straus (1969) and then by other structuralists in such a way that diminishes the importance of sequence and chronology, for it is the recurring pattern that these polar opposite pairs explore that reveals the significance of a folk story, more so than the linear narration. The binary opposition in *Tolpuddle Martyrs* forces us to focus on psychological time and the nature of time itself. Closely related to the pairing of death versus eternal life, the pairing of eternal love versus transitory love is presented as a point of debate. "Love never dies" (Munro, 1997) proclaims Jack. Louisa counters, "Love dies all the time" (Munro, 1997).

The psychological time ordering Tolpuddle Martyrs requires the readers of "Carried Away" (and many other modern stories) to shift literacy skills and to contemplate the nature of time itself.

Louisa has not always held such a cynical view. She, in her youth, had entered into two impossible, but potentially transcendent, relationships (one of them being with Jack) -- relationships with romantic longing and intense letter writing. Though now as a well-to-do aged widow and factory owner, Louisa sides with pragmatism and realism, she finds herself in the *Tolpuddle Martyrs* in the grips of an uncomfortable alternate reality – one in which the eternal and idealistic hold sway and youthful aspirations cannot be ignored: an old "intention" fires her "cells" as her hand rests on a chair "not far from [Jack's]," and in her mind she repeats his declaration, "*Oh, Never dies*" (Munro, 1997).

Triangle in Mythology

Just as the phenomenon of resurrection belies chronological time, but fulfills psychological time and introduces psychic opposition, so too do other mythological elements of *Tolpuddle Martyrs.* Indeed, we can assess the love triangle (Jack-Arthur-Louisa) as a type of Marxist myth – a dialectic triangle. Scholars of mythology (Patai,1972; Yair and Soyer, 2008) have noted ways in which Marxist ideology conforms to the form of myth. For example, the Hegelian-Marxist idea of dialectic (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) can be traced to the mythical idea of a magical triangle "which probably derived its significance from its correspondence to the male sexual organs" (Patai 1972), and which was considered eternal (beyond chronological time). In Marxist terms (and using Patai's schema), the *thesis* consists of bourgeois society (represented in the story by Arthur, the owner of a factory). The *antithesis* consists of the proletariat, which splits off from bourgeois society and negates it (represented in the story by Jack, a factory worker and later a trade union representative). The *synthesis*, according to Marxist theory, will occur sometime in the distant future when workers unite and take over the means of production and an ideal communist society emerges. In the story, Louisa does serve as a potential tool for synthesis in that she has loved Jack and has married Arthur: a bridge between the thesis and antithesis -- though she falls short of true synthesis to be sure, for class struggles persist as evidenced by Jack's union activity.

According to Yair and Soyer (2008), Marxism is predicated on two assumptions about human nature: First, that humans are creative users of tools, and second, that humans thrive when they live in harmony with nature. Harmony with nature evokes a golden age, a mythical Garden of Eden. In Munro's story, the character who comes closest to the ideal of an uncorrupted man, who would be most at home in the first garden is Patrick Agnew, Jack's father, who gardens and fishes and is described as a "lone wolf," fending for himself. Clark (1996) analyzes him in terms of pre-capitalism. In the *Tolpuddle Martyrs* section, Jack remembers his father by saying, "Sometimes I think he had the right idea" (Munro, 1997, p. 560). Louisa had passed Patrick many years before on the windy day of Jack's funeral, but they did not speak: Louisa, pensive and sad, wrapped her coat around her as she strode; Patrick, shunning conversation and focused on fishing suckers, minded his own business -- each alone in his or her own solitude, searching singular

ways to mourn.

The Marxist magical triangle, its myth of future utopia, and its primordial vision of man before capitalism can be joined with its spectacular celebrations of mythical heroes, who "live" beyond the grave (Lenin, Che, Hugo Chavez, the Haymarket martyrs, and, of course, the Tolpuddle martyrs). This reinforces a pattern of the eternal rather than the temporal, and in as much as these mythical elements are included in Munro's story, they call on readers to employ a literacy of orality when reading parts of "Carried Away."

Puddle, Muddle

The title of the section *Tolpuddle Martyrs* is drawn from actual historical events in trade union history and Tolpuddle itself is the name of a real town in the county of Dorset in southwest England where nineteenth century farm workers sought to organize for their mutual benefit. Authorities deemed their activities, which included taking a loyalty oath, illegal and arrested them. Several of the Tolpuddle "martyrs" settled in London, Ontario (the town where Louisa visits the doctor and runs into the resurrected Jack) after being released from prison in Australia where they had been deported. Their history dovetails nicely with the Marxist dialectic (the magic triangle) that Munro (1997) sets up in her story and which was discussed previously. Not only does the history and ritual celebration of the Tolpuddle martyrs inspire the last section of "Carried Away," but also, I would argue, the unusual sound of the name *tolpuddle* inspires it as well. The word itself seems fortuitously to set off at once a series of related word-images or sound images or linguistic-complexes (as Kugler, 1982 calls them) that populate the section, undermining linearity and reinforcing psychological time and psychological associations in a way not dissimilar to the way a psychoanalyst uses them. They rely upon word associations or Freudian slips to understand the neurosis of a troubled patient. The word *tolpuddle* elicits the words *mud, puddle, muddle* – three word-images repeated in this section of "Carried Away," all three emphasizing the text's purposeful lack of clarity and sequence. We have already briefly mentioned how Louisa provides a murky synthesis to the dialectic set up between Jack and Arthur. Tellingly, her children call her affectionately by her nickname "Mud" (presumably a childish mispronunciation of Mother, which has stuck for years, her son and stepdaughter now grown). Though not an ideologue, Louisa's life as a factory owner's wife has allied her with her husband's interests, though she sees her participation in his life mostly in terms of her own hard work: "We worked hard...We tried making everything we could think of... I still work...I am always thinking about the factory, that is what fills my mind" (Munro, 1997). Nonetheless, she is confused enough or interested enough in the perspective of the working class to read about and then walk toward the gathering Tolpuddle celebration; she is aware enough to mention low wages in Quebec to Jack; and she is open enough to remember her ill feelings toward Arthur after Jack's industrial accident. In general, "Carried Away" does not strive to delineate clear lines of class tension and these related word-images emphasize that point. Though this story references class issues and conflicts, it does so as a mythic backdrop to idiosyncratic characters – characters who can be read mythologically (with the literacy skills of oral tradition), but who also must be read realistically as complex characters. Both Jack and Louisa remain considerate and pliant throughout their conversation despite their different class interests, and we know from other sections of the story that profit alone does not motivate the conscientious capitalist Arthur, a character impelled by authenticity (Pruitt, 2000). Character types are not fixed in the story, and thus readers benefit from trying to understand them from shifting literacies.

The actors representing the Tolpuddle Martyrs, when they finally appear before Jack and Louisa, slowly "melt into a puddle" (Munro, 1997, p. 561) as Jack mingles with them and then also disappears before Louisa's eyes: "a traitor, helplessly" (Munro, 1997, p.562). It is, perhaps, the sound of and watery associations of the word *puddle* that make Louisa realize that she has gone "under a wave," that she finds herself now in a hopeless "muddle" (Munro, 1997, p.562) and that surprisingly those she once took to be the somber martyrs have transformed into or been replaced by traveling Mennonites waiting in a temporary bus station, passing out butterscotch mints. Reality itself is in flux. Any narrative momentum in this section simply dissolves, leaving the profundity of liminal space and time (space and time

between myth and reality) to prevail. What remains at the end of this section are holes and gaps and an old woman's puzzlement: her question – What place is this? – hangs in the air, begging an answer.

Upon Time

"What place is this?" is the question, then, that ends the section – but not quite. Visually on the page, after the question is asked and unanswered, we see four more paragraphs that draw the story to a close. Though technically these paragraphs fall under the section labeled *Tolpuddle Martyrs,* they serve as a coda to the entire story and conclude it, visually setting off on their own with extra space. Notably this coda not only concludes the story, but in a certain sense begins it as well, for it takes us back to the day Louisa first comes to Carstairs to live in the hotel and work in the library. This day has been alluded to previously in the narrative, but does not, in fact, begin the narrative and so is not really part of the main storyline or story sequence itself, just as Louisa's life before Carstairs has been alluded to, but seems as remote as Greek mythology before the Olympians, the time of mist and chaos.

Munro (1997) jars us with her first sentence of the coda: "On the day of Miss Tamblyn's death, it happened that Louisa was staying in the Commercial Hotel" (Munro, 1997, p.562). Who is this Miss Tamblyn? Oh, yes, we have heard that name before, mentioned briefly by Arthur as he mused one evening in the library. Miss Tamblyn was the old woman who worked as the librarian before Louisa did. She was Louisa's professional predecessor: Louisa, hearing of her death, makes a "swift decision" to secure the job for herself. She believed in, we are told, "the unforeseen intervention, the uniqueness of her fate" (Munro, 1997, p.563). But why are we learning of this long-ago day now at the end of the story? Why are we here "in this place" when we have just been in another town and never got the muddle there sorted out? Why are we being taken back to the first day in Carstairs?

Folk material often uses the stock phrase "upon time." "Once upon a time" is a way to begin a story, but it also signals something strange about how we shall consider time in that story. What does it mean to be "upon time"? In these final paragraphs of "Carried Away," the young woman Louisa is assessing the town where she will spend the rest of her life from the perspective of her third-floor room in the Commercial Hotel: She feels calm as she stares at "the snow-covered hills over the rooftops" (Munro, 1997, p.563), and the whole town stretches out before her. It is at this poignant moment as she peruses the town from above that the reader (who has already read her whole story) understands that along with the quaint town nestled in a river valley, Louisa's whole life is stretching out before her: she is "upon time": ". . . the streets were lined with mature elm and maple trees. She had never been here when the leaves were on the trees. It must make a great difference. So much that lay open now would be concealed" (Munro, 1997, p.563).

The coda in "Carried Away" may signify Louisa's death. Louisa's illness and bafflement experienced in London, Ontario in *Tolpuddle Martyrs* and her visit to the heart specialist there may foreshadow her imminent demise. One of the horse-drawn sleighs referenced in the coda might well be a hearse, carrying her in a coffin. And so it might be: In the end, the beginning. In the beginning, the end – the cyclical nature of time is the sacred, psychological time of oral literature, which has marked and enriched this complex, realistic story. The psychological time ordering *Tolpuddle Martyrs* requires the readers of "Carried Away" (and many other modern stories [*)] to shift literacy skills and to contemplate the nature of time itself.

Note

I have used the idea of shifting literacies to understand and analyze the story "Runaway" by Alice Munro, the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, the story "Bluebeard's Eggs" by Margaret Atwood, and the story "Flowering Judas" by Katherine Anne Porter. These are just four of many examples which lend themselves to such analysis. As I indicated in the opening paragraphs, shifting literacies might also be applied to much of literature categorized as magic realism.

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