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Beyond Binary Boundaries: Gender Performativity and Taboo in Alice Munro's Short Fiction

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Abstract This study examines how Alice Munro's short fiction destabilizes heteronormative frameworks through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. The central focus lies in how Munro's characters perform gender as a fluid, dynamic process that resists the limitations of the heterosexual matrix. Through close readings of selected stories from *Runaway* (2005) and *Lives of Girls and Women* (2015), the analysis explores how Munro's protagonists subvert socially enforced norms, particularly those surrounding marriage, incest, and homosexuality. These moments of transgression illuminate the performative construction of normative gender identity and the disciplinary forces that regulate deviation. Framing Munro's narratives within Butler's theoretical model, this paper contributes to both Munro scholarship and gender studies by addressing a critical gap: the ways in which her fiction moves beyond feminist essentialism to engage with post-structural conceptions of identity. It extends existing research by showing that Munro's work not only critiques patriarchal structures but also offers a broader, more inclusive vision of subjectivity and desire, one that disrupts the binary logic underlying contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality.

Keywords Alice Munro · Judith Butler · Gender Performativity · Heteronormativity · Identity

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Introduction

This study analyzes four of Alice Munro's short stories—"Baptizing" and "Soon" from *Lives of Girls and Women* (2015), and "Chance" and "Runaway" from *Runaway* (2005)—to explore how her fiction reflects Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Each narrative highlights the fluid nature of identity and the complex negotiation of desire within heteronormative social structures. Alice Munro is known for her deep exploration of interpersonal relationships, often through the lens of everyday events in the lives of ordinary people—particularly women and girls. Rather than relying on binary oppositions to diminish masculine influence or assert a separate feminine identity, Munro presents the complexity of human interaction with nuance. She consciously avoids "otherizing" men in response, understanding that reversing the roles would simply reinforce a new cycle of domination and marginalization. As Jedrzej Burszta notes, "Munro's stories are characteristically intense and condensed character studies, intimate psychological portraits of women coming to terms with their complicated life histories, significantly embedded in the dynamic clash between individualism and society, and its profound influence on one's life" (2016, p. 24). Unlike the protagonists of traditional feminist fiction, Munro's female characters are not typically cast as individuals who openly rebel against male dominance or patriarchy. They are rarely depicted as fierce warriors engaged in a direct struggle with men to claim their independence. Nonetheless, Munro's work has "successfully captured worldwide attention to the cause of female rights and independence," offering "women-centric" narratives that provide a detailed and thoughtful "in-depth analysis of [women's] life conditions under unfair social conventions" (Keshk, 2019, p. 1). Munro's narratives diverge from the militant or oppositional tone characteristic of early feminist fiction, choosing instead to explore the subtleties of interior life—how women navigate agency, desire, and moral complexity within the fabric of everyday experience. Her form of resistance is psychological rather than overtly revolutionary, rooted in the quiet, often introspective redefinition of selfhood. In this way, Munro envisions liberation not as direct confrontation, but as a nuanced performance of identity shaped both within and against the boundaries of social expectation.

Although Munro refrains from positioning her female characters in direct opposition to men, she deftly reveals the subtle mechanisms through which gender expectations permeate everyday life. Her characters frequently embody gender identities that are fluid and evolving, pushing back against the rigid norms society often imposes. As Fiamengo and Lynch observe, "stories return to the same material— the dying mother, the guilt of the daughter, the loved but estranged father, women who need men, men in changing times, women who don't want to need men, marriages heading toward divorce" (2017, p. 7). Munro's repeated exploration of shifting emotional and relational dynamics highlights the fluid nature of gender identity in her work. By continually returning to the themes of attachment and separation, she illustrates how her characters' identities are shaped and reshaped by evolving social and emotional contexts. This narrative pattern echoes Butler's notion that gender is not a static trait but a performative process—enacted, repeated, and transformed over time. Rather than conforming to fixed gender roles, Munro's female characters frequently exhibit qualities traditionally labeled as "masculine," while her male characters reveal emotional depth commonly associated with "feminine" sensibility. Munro further critiques the foundations of marriage and sexual norms—often grounded in heteronormative ideology—by offering psychologically rich and sometimes ambiguous portrayals of her characters' inner lives. Rather than delivering clear moral judgments about freedom or transgression, her fiction becomes a space for exploring how gender identity is performed and negotiated under social constraints. This study, therefore, centers on how Munro's depictions of marriage, desire, and taboo reflect Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity: the idea that identity is produced through repeated acts that simultaneously conform to and resist social regulation. By examining how Munro's characters engage with institutions such as marriage and challenge sexual prohibitions, the

analysis positions her work within Butler's framework of performative resistance. In doing so, the study argues that Munro's narratives dismantle essentialist binaries and portray gender as a fluid, evolving process of becoming—an ongoing negotiation between authenticity and conformity. Her fiction ultimately challenges the heterosexual matrix and invites new possibilities for imagining selfhood and human connection.

This study explores how Alice Munro portrays gender identity in selected short stories through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Feminism has played a crucial role in liberating women from various forms of patriarchal oppression. However, its tendency toward essentialist thinking and binary "us-versus-them" frameworks can be limiting. When one group—typically women—is elevated, men are often cast as the opposing force, locking both into a continuous struggle for dominance. Butler's theoretical perspective challenges such binary oppositions, promoting a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gender. Rather than reinforcing rigid identity categories, she advocates a humanist outlook that acknowledges gender differences without framing one as inherently in conflict with the other. Her theory of gender performativity seeks to free individuals—regardless of gender—from restrictive norms by "undoing" gender. This involves dismantling the idea of fixed, inherent gender traits and rejecting the rigid binaries that traditionally define identity. According to Butler, gender is not a stable or innate truth but a fluid and ever-changing identity shaped through repeated social performances. In her influential work *Gender Trouble* (1990), she writes, "the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated" (Butler, 1990a, p. 191), emphasizing that gender is not a fixed essence but an ongoing act—produced and sustained through repeated behaviors and stylized expressions in everyday life.

Butler also questions the rigid distinction between sex and gender that earlier feminist theories often emphasized. Traditional feminist thought typically separates sex as a biological fact from gender as a social construct—asserting that while male and female bodies are naturally different, traits such as masculinity and femininity are shaped by culture. However, Butler complicates this framework by arguing that even the notion of biological sex is influenced by discourse and social norms. Butler elaborates that both "sex" and "gender" are formed through cultural and performative processes over time: "gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive,' prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts" (1990a, p. 10). In essence, what we commonly understand as biological sex is itself embedded in cultural interpretation and cannot be regarded as a neutral foundation for gender identity. By destabilizing this long-standing division between sex and gender, Butler challenges the belief that certain gendered behaviors naturally stem from one's anatomy. Instead, she reveals how such assumptions are deeply rooted in cultural narratives and power structures.

Beyond challenging gender norms and the notion of a pre-social, biologically sexed body, Butler also critiques the system of compulsory heteronormativity that compels individuals to conform to socially approved gender identities and sexual desires. Through institutions such as the family, legal systems, and community structures, society imposes "punishing" norms that demand adherence to dominant heterosexual ideals. As Butler notes, these institutions "take identity categories as foundational and fixed," punishing those who deviate from normative expectations (1993, p. 231). The conceptual framework Butler terms the "heterosexual matrix" recognizes only heterosexual relationships and desires as legitimate, while marking all other forms of sexuality or gender expression as deviant. This matrix reinforces social taboos against behaviors and identities that fall outside its bounds—particularly same-sex or incestuous relationships—and marginalizes individuals who violate these norms by labeling them "unnatural" or "queer." Butler argues that this system is not only exclusionary but also deeply unjust, as it constrains the full range of human identity and expression.

Significantly, Butler's later work places even greater emphasis on the consequences of resisting normative gender structures. In *Undoing Gender*, she explores the concept of what it means to lead a "livable" life within oppressive social norms, warning that a rigid "normative conception of gender can undo one's personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life" (2004, p. 1). In contrast, when such constraining norms are challenged—or "undone"—new, more expansive possibilities for identity can emerge, allowing for greater freedom and personal viability. Although gender is always performed "in a scene of constraint" and is "not for that reason automatic or mechanical" (p. 1), recognizing that gender is enacted "with or for another" within a social context reveals the inherent potential for variation and change. This performative nature of gender allows for resistance, creativity, and transformation—even within limitations. Butler's insights thus offer a vital framework for understanding how individuals might subvert dominant expectations and reimagine gender in more inclusive and liberating ways.

In Munro's fiction, the characters frequently confront and subvert the expectations imposed by the heterosexual matrix, particularly by challenging traditional conceptions of marriage and engaging with taboos such as incest and homosexuality. The four stories analyzed in this study each represent a distinct disruption of normative gender and sexual roles, revealing the tension between individual desire and societal convention. In "Baptizing," from *Lives of Girls and Women*, Munro portrays Del Jordan, a young woman coming of age in the small Ontario town of Jubilee, as she grapples with competing pressures related to intellect, sexuality, and social conformity. Her evolving sense of self emerges through her relationships with Naomi and Garnet French, both of which reflect the cultural expectation that women should marry. Viewed through Del's perspective, Munro critiques this expectation, as Del "reclaims an independent and metaphorically heathen self" (Purdham, 2013, p. 122). While she explores heterosexual intimacy, Del resists the prescriptive path of marriage, setting her apart from Naomi, who embraces the traditional role of bride-to-be. Betty Martin states that "upon escaping Garnet's hold, Del leaves the water 'shaking, gasping, drinking air.'" Again the denial of oxygen reflects the suffocation of Del's identity under Garnet French and his expectations of marriage and children" (1995, p. 21). This internal conflict foregrounds the tension between autonomy and cultural obligation, exposing marriage as a socially sanctioned endpoint for female identity. In "Chance," part of the *Juliet* triptych in *Runaway*, the protagonist Juliet—a Classics scholar with a fiercely independent spirit—enters into a relationship with Eric, an older, married man. Their affair leads to the birth of a daughter outside marriage, defying the moral expectations of Juliet's social environment. Her refusal to participate in the institution of marriage, despite her longing for emotional connection, exemplifies Munro's complex portrayal of female agency operating both within and beyond normative frameworks. "Soon" continues Juliet's story as she returns to her childhood home to visit her ailing mother and reconnect with her father, Sam. As memories surface, Juliet experiences conflicted emotions that blur the line between familial love and repressed desire. She "already knows the strangeness of her family [...] the visit illuminates her about her own oddities and breaks with the society to which they belong" (Akhter, 2019, p. 337). Through dream sequences and psychological nuance, Munro delicately engages with the incest taboo, presenting Juliet's longing as simultaneously disturbing and profoundly human. In doing so, the story challenges heteronormative assumptions about what constitutes "natural" desire, revealing the layered and often contradictory nature of intimacy. Finally, in the title story "Runaway," Munro focuses on Sylvia, an older widow who forms an intense, unspoken emotional attachment to her young houseguest and mentee, Carla. The narrative unfolds with quiet restraint, slowly revealing Sylvia's repressed same-sex desire through subtle moments of recognition and tension. Though never explicitly expressed, the emotional weight of this attachment is unmistakable. Munro presents Sylvia's longing as a poignant example of how societal taboos surrounding homosexuality constrain personal expression. This silent, unfulfilled desire underscores the influence of

performative heterosexual norms, while also suggesting the potential for desire and identity that exist beyond them.

Grounded in Butler's theoretical framework, this study applies the concept of gender performativity to conduct close readings and textual analyses of four selected short stories by Alice Munro. The objective is to reveal how Munro's fiction challenges normative gender roles and heteronormative expectations by portraying gender identity as fluid, dynamic, and performative. Through characters who blur traditional distinctions between masculinity and femininity, disrupt conventional heterosexual relationships, and strive for lives rooted in personal authenticity, Munro engages with the complexities of human desire and identity. Her narratives unsettle the binary opposition between "man" and "woman," resisting the idea of a fixed, essential gender truth. By employing Butler's lens of performativity, this study foregrounds Munro's literary contribution to a more expansive and inclusive understanding of gender. Her stories not only echo contemporary gender theory but also deepen it, offering powerful fictional insights into the lived realities of identity beyond the constraints of normative categorization.

Challenging the Norms of Marriage

The heterosexual matrix is reinforced through many normative restrictions, chief among them the institution of marriage (particularly monogamous marriage), which is one of the most universal social mandates. As Judith Butler defines it, the heterosexual matrix is "that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders and desires are naturalized" (1990a, p. 208). Accordingly, "the category of "sex" is itself a *gendered* category, fully politically invested, naturalized but not natural" (p. 153). Within this framework, behaviors aligned with normative heterosexuality are labeled as "natural," while those that deviate from heterosexual norms are deemed "unnatural." This matrix is ultimately restrictive and unjust, as it confines individuals within rigid social scripts that dictate acceptable expressions of gender and desire. Under such constraints, Munro's protagonists often grapple with asserting their individuality and emotional truth in the face of societal pressure. As Michael Trussler notes, "Munro's major female characters typically find themselves struggling to create their own individuality distinct from powerful social narratives" (2013, p. 242). In her stories, Munro portrays her characters as "unnatural" yet authentic individuals who do not conform to heteronormative standards but rather pursue their genuine wants. Her characters do not fundamentally reject heterosexual love; instead, they dismiss the stringent and confining marital conventions placed on women. Although these honest identities may seem "unnatural" within the heterosexual framework, they can articulate true desire rather than being distorted or suppressed into fabricated, socially designated roles.

In the story "Baptizing," from *Lives of Girls and Women*, "Munro attempts to steer us away from a straightforward consideration of the way things are" (Frutkin, 1994, p. 46). In the story, Del Jordan examines the inequitable societal obligations imposed on women in marriage, while simultaneously maintaining her quest for heterosexual affection with Garnet French, a charismatic yet impulsive young man whose possessiveness reflects the very patriarchal norms Del strives to resist. Upon falling in love with Garnet, she becomes engrossed in the exhilaration and happiness that this passion offers, even to the detriment of the intellectual scholarship she had diligently pursued. This form of subversion is discursive and ambiguous, but it is nevertheless potent and real. Del's inquiry into the female position in marriage is not a straightforward protest; it emerges via her observation and reflection on her best friend Naomi's recent evolution into a young woman poised for marriage. In the opening pages of the narrative, Munro illustrates —through Naomi's gradual social and behavioral shifts—how a young woman can unconsciously internalize and perform the gendered expectations imposed on a future wife. These changes extend beyond the surface-level appearance, becoming evident in Naomi's speech, posture, and aspirations. She begins to mirror the mannerisms, ambitions, and restrained decorum associated with women entering domestic or clerical

roles. Once carefree and intellectually curious, Naomi gradually reshapes her identity through the repetitive enactment of socially sanctioned femininity—an embodiment of Butler's notion of gender as performative imitation. Previously, Del and Naomi were inseparable schoolmates who shared similar interests and spent much of their time together. However, their joyful friendship begins to fracture in their final year of high school, when Naomi abruptly shifts to the "Commercial" (secretarial) track, abandoning the academic path they once pursued together.

Significantly, at the outset of "Baptizing," Munro indicates her disdain for the societal maxims forced on individuals' brains. Naomi ascends to the third floor of the school, where typewriters incessantly clatter beneath the sloping ceiling, and the walls are adorned with framed aphorisms designed to equip individuals for the business realm: "Time and Energy are my Capital: if I Squander them. I shall get no Other. The effect, [...] was that of coming into cool ordinary light. the real and busy world" (Munro, 2015, p. 224). This seemingly authentic and bustling environment is, in truth, a fabrication based on established principles —a socially constructed reality. As Butler holds, such a social reality is continually created as an illusion "through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign" (1990b, p. 270). Munro's narrative voice imbues this ostensibly real environment with a sarcastic twist by designating it as "real," despite its evident contrivance. Naomi's initial foray into the adult workforce is imbued with an ironic consciousness of normative constructs.

Munro's satirical suggestion on the deceptive nature of this normative world serves merely as an introduction to her critique of the limitations placed on women by the institution of marriage. From the outset, this study does not propose that women have historically "otherized" men; rather, it emphasizes that Munro avoids reversing patriarchal binaries. Instead of positioning men as the new "others," she exposes how both genders are constrained by the same cultural narratives that perpetuate inequality. Munro's fiction, when read through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, reveals how identity and desire are shaped through social repetition and how these norms may be subtly undone through acts of resistance. Through the portrayal of Naomi's assimilation into Jubilee's social milieu—and Del's astonished reflections on that assimilation—Munro critiques the constrictive and detrimental consequences of marital expectations. Upon entering the workforce, Naomi subsequently aligns herself with heteronormative ideals by pursuing a romantic partner and planning for marriage. Naomi becomes estranged from Del after commencing her employment, forging new friendships with her colleagues. Their relationships with each other, "though full of scandalous confidences, were yet hedged about with all kinds of subtle formalities, courtesies, [and] proprieties" (Munro, 2015, p. 226). When Naomi converses with Del today, her dialogue is dominated by mundane every day activities—dietary trends, skincare routines, hair-care techniques, apparel, and similar topics. She increasingly allocates nearly her entire income to household stuff, purchasing everything from cookware to linens in preparation for establishing a marital residence. Although Naomi herself is excited by all these housekeeping preparations, Del is "amazed and intimidated by her [...] boring and preoccupied new self" (Munro, 2015, p. 230). Del's response to Naomi's newfound domestic fixation clearly illustrates her contempt for the societal and normative pressures imposed on women through marriage. Del "signals her rejection of patriarchal language and modes of thought which trap and negate her female identity" (Martin, 1995, p. 3). Del's contempt becomes increasingly evident in his personal contemplation of what constitutes a "normal life"—the type that Naomi professes to desire:

> What was a normal life? It was the life of the girls in the creamy office, it was showers, linen and pots and pans and silverware, that complicated feminine order; then, turning it over, it was the life of the Gay-la Dance Hall, driving drunk at night along the black roads, listening to men's jokes, putting up with and warily fighting with men and getting hold of them, getting hold — one side of that life could not exist without the other, and by undertaking and getting used to them both a girl was putting herself on the road of marriage. There was no other way. (Munro, 2015, p. 245)

Society prescribes that a woman's "normal life" should encompass domestic management and submission to her spouse. This alleged normalcy is intrinsically foreign to Del; it does not represent a genuine style of existence. Butler asserts that this "normal life" is a creation of prevailing social conventions and ideologies, a notion that society perceives as true. The perception of anything that deviates from these traditions as unusual makes it easy to yield to their influence. Despite the obstacles, Butler supports the denaturalization of the heterosexual matrix. Although dismantling these ingrained conventions is arduous, it is achievable to some extent.

Similar to Del, Juliet, the protagonist of *Runaway*'s stories "Chance" and "Soon," also contravenes the conventions of marriage. Juliet opts for single motherhood, challenging traditional marital norms; however, she remains steadfast in her aspiration to date a man. Her liaison with a fisherman is regarded as a scandal in a small village where social conventions, especially matrimonial regulations, are rigid. It compels her father to sell vegetables to sustain their livelihood, resulting in the loss of his prestigious position as a schoolteacher. As Juliet bitterly observes, "what a disgusting place this is to live in" (Munro, 2005, p. 105). Juliet has already recognized the folly of people who conform to these societal conventions in her vicinity. In "Soon," Munro portrays Juliet, an intellectually gifted young woman from a small town, whose academic ambition and emotional independence stand in tension with the prevailing social expectations surrounding marriage and domesticity. When Juliet returns home to visit her ailing mother, she is met with her parents' subtle yet persistent suggestions that she should embrace a more conventional path—specifically, by marrying and settling into a respectable domestic life. Through this encounter, Munro reveals how small-town morality and social surveillance function as mechanisms that regulate women's choices and reinforce conformity. As Butler observes, "hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations" (1993, p. 125). This insight offers a useful lens for understanding the societal structure that frames Juliet's experience. Hegemonic heterosexuality upholds marriage as a cultural norm, one perpetually sustained by individuals striving to embody its ideals. Historically, this framework has positioned men as primary providers and women as caretakers, often discouraging women from pursuing higher education or professional advancement. Access to the public sphere—along with its privileges and "bonuses"—has been assumed to belong more rightfully to men, even when women display equivalent or superior capability. These gendered expectations, reinforced over time, become so deeply embedded that those who deviate from them are often met with suspicion or social penalty. Juliet's depiction as a highly educated woman —holding both a B.A. and an M.A. in Classics and working toward a Ph.D.—thus becomes a quiet form of resistance against this hegemonic order. Though her professors praise her aptitude and passion for ancient languages, they simultaneously express concern for her future, implicitly framing marriage as a more "suitable" path. Their unease underscores Juliet's broader dilemma as a woman navigating a world where personal ambition and social acceptance remain uneasily aligned. The narrative states:

> If she got married [...] she would waste all her hard work and theirs, and if she did not get married she would probably become bleak and isolated, losing out on promotion to men (who needed them more, as they had to support families). And she would not be able to defend the oddity of her choice of Classics, to accept what people would see as its irrelevance, or dreariness, to slough that off the way a man could. Odd choices were simply easier for men, most of whom find women glad to marry them. Not the other way around. (Munro, 2005, p. 53)

Regardless of Juliet's marital status, her significant academic accomplishments are perceived as a liability by her teachers. The societal norms associated with marriage inhibit women's opportunities to surpass males beyond the home realm. Women are denied the autonomy to make unusual decisions akin to males, as they are perceived as the passive participants in the institution of marriage. When men violate the rules of this game, they may often rationalize their deviation or misconduct and receive societal forgiveness; nevertheless, if women engage in similar behavior, it can irrevocably damage their life. These double standards in marital customs are egregiously unjust and inherently erroneous.

Juliet is perceived as a problem not only by her instructors but also by her neighbors and her parents. In their view, she has excessively engaged in her intellectual endeavors, transforming herself into an eccentric and troubled individual. She fails to meet her community's expectations of a young woman, who is anticipated to ultimately marry and establish a household. In the village of her upbringing, Juliet's remarkable intelligence is perceived as "a limp or an extra thumb" (Munro, 2005, p. 53), an unusual flaw rather than a benefit. They are swift, even zealous, to highlight her shortcomings in domestic abilities—such as her incapacity to operate a sewing machine correctly or to package items neatly—and they openly express concern regarding her future as a wife. Juliet's provincial neighbors regard her brilliance not as a point of pride, but rather as a source of shame for its bearer; conversely, her inability to fulfill conventional housewife criteria distinctly identifies her as different and inadequate in their perspective. Juliet, however, is indifferent to the opinions of these people. She believes that the criteria established for a "proper" girl are entirely foolish and nonsensical. Juliet once perceived her parents, Sam and Sara, as more open-minded than their neighbors and unlikely to hold such restricted perspectives. To her astonishment, even her parents, who take pride in her intellectual achievements, have their own boundaries. Her mother discreetly hoped that Juliet would attain greater popularity, even urging her to engage in skating and piano playing to assimilate (things Juliet neither embraced nor excelled in), while her father only desired her to conform: "You have to fit in," he told Juliet, "otherwise, people will make your life hell" (Munro, 2005, p. 54). Despite their relative pride and open-mindedness, her parents experience pressure to adhere to community norms, fearing that any deviation by Juliet or themselves could result in social ostracism that would devastate their life. They opt for conformity to the town's regulations rather than risk being perceived as divergent or foreign. Juliet, meanwhile, declines to be integrated. She scorns the ridiculousness of the matrimonial constraints and is resolute in her refusal to accept or adhere to them.

Although Juliet sees the absurdity of these social expectations, she continues to long for intimacy and emotional connection within heterosexual relationships—revealing that her rejection of marriage is not a rejection of love itself. She lives according to her own aspirations and takes pride in her identity as an unmarried mother who is accountable solely to herself. Her subversion of marriage conventions does not constitute a drastic repudiation of love or intimacy; rather, it is a subtle yet powerful refusal to be constrained by such rules. Munro's female characters, like Juliet, possess the wisdom to avoid opposing marriage at the cost of their own happiness. They choose an ostensibly indirect or discursive approach to safeguard their right to a full existence, simultaneously evading victimization by the constraints of social norms.

In "Chance," Munro continues Juliet's story, further tracing her path toward self-determination. At this stage, Juliet undertakes a long train journey to reconnect with Eric, a man she had met years earlier—who, significantly, is married. Upon arriving at his home, she learns from his housekeeper that Eric has had multiple romantic entanglements, news that leaves her disheartened and frustrated. Nevertheless, Juliet chooses to interpret this encounter as a decisive moment, opting to live by her own values rather than conforming to social expectations. She remains at Eric's house until his return the next morning, and the two begin living together—importantly, without marrying—even after Juliet gives birth to their daughter, Penelope. Munro extends Juliet's narrative in "Soon," shifting the focus from romantic rebellion to familial strain. Now a mother, Juliet returns to her hometown with the infant Penelope to visit her parents. This homecoming re-immerses her in the conservative moral landscape of small-town life, where her unmarried status provokes subtle but persistent scrutiny. Her father, Sam, lies to her about the train's schedule—claiming it no longer stops in their town—out of fear that her visit might trigger gossip and social judgment. This deception enrages Juliet and becomes emblematic of the wider tension between her self-fashioned autonomy and her family's preoccupation with social respectability. She is enraged to learn that her father, Sam, has deceived her by asserting that the train does not halt in their town. Sam's duplicity arises from his apprehension regarding gossip; he fears that if Juliet were observed alighting at the local station (unmarried and with an infant), it would incite scandalous speculation. This circumstance, including the people involved, the rumors, and the setting itself, is beyond Juliet's ability to accept. From her perspective, foolishness and absurdity are present in every aspect of life, yet the citizens of the town continue to be oblivious to this fact. As she continues to pursue her own life in accordance with her ideals, Juliet is unwavering in her refusal to accept their restricted judgments. Following Eric's unexpected death at sea, Juliet is engulfed by profound grief and a deep sense of disorientation. Her loss is not solely emotional but existential, confronting her with the fragility of the life she had consciously built beyond traditional expectations. In time, she enters a new romantic relationship—not out of weakness or longing for convention, but as a genuine expression of her continued capacity for love and connection. Yet this new attachment is shadowed by a persistent sense of guilt, heightened by her growing estrangement from her daughter, Penelope.

As the distance between mother and daughter widens, Juliet's isolation intensifies, prompting her to reconsider the emotional toll of her independence. Her eventual decision to live alone does not stem from bitterness or resignation, but from a quiet, resolute understanding that autonomy and emotional honesty —despite their cost—constitute the only life she can live with integrity. In spite of the fact that her daughter has been estranged from her, Juliet continues to pursue romantic connections, but she ultimately decides to live on her own for the rest of her life. Although Juliet's rejection of marriage traditions is not overtly radical, the way she enacts that rejection is deeply subversive. Through her choices, Munro does not present a denial of heterosexual desire, but rather a refusal to allow that desire to dictate conformity to societal norms. Juliet's ongoing longing for companionship reveals that Munro's critique of heteronormativity does not lie in opposing heterosexual relationships themselves, but in exposing the institutional and ideological structures that constrain them. By choosing to remain unmarried and to seek intimacy on her own terms, Juliet performs a redefinition of heterosexuality—one freed from the patriarchal expectations of marriage and female submission. In this way, Munro challenges heteronormative frameworks not by rejecting love or connection, but by showing that authenticity and freedom within such desires become possible only when they are uncoupled from culturally prescribed roles. Despite the fact that Juliet is determined to pursue her innate desires for love and connection, she is steadfast in her refusal to adhere to the rigid and preset conventions of marriage. She enjoys her existence with the same naturalness and freedom as any other individual, despite the fact that her community considers her to be eccentric or "weird." By embracing authenticity and fighting unfair customs, Munro illustrates that it is possible to disrupt the heteronormative

paradigm of marriage. This is not accomplished by explicitly rejecting love or family, but rather by embracing authenticity.

Deconstructing Taboo: Subversion of Social and Sexual Norms

While marriage serves as the institutional embodiment of heteronormativity, Munro also probes the deeper mechanisms that sustain it—especially the taboos that regulate desire and reinforce social conformity. Normative heterosexual society not only promotes male-female partnerships as the sole "natural" form but also categorically forbids sexual encounters that deviate from this framework, particularly those between individuals of the same sex or between close relatives. To uphold the stability of heterosexual supremacy, desires between same-sex partners or family members are stigmatized and transformed into cultural taboos, hence restricting those types of relationships. Consequently, the gay and incest taboos are upheld as unchangeable societal standards. The desires they explore stem from fundamental human impulses: attraction toward those of the same sex or even toward close relatives represents an aspect of instinctual human longing—unconscious, deeply rooted, and inherently natural. The societal enforcement of taboos suppresses, obscures, or seeks to eliminate these inclinations. Butler says, "the question is not what it is I will be able to say, but what will constitute the domain of the sayable within which I begin to speak at all" (1997a, p. 133). Butler asserts that the taboos surrounding homosexuality and incest are both social constructs and manifestations of the cultural imagination:

> Because all cultures seek to reproduce themselves, and because the particular social identity of the kinship group must be preserved, exogamy is instituted and, as its presupposition, so is exogamic heterosexuality. Hence, the incest taboo not only forbids sexual union between members of the same kinship line, but involves a taboo against homosexuality as well. (1990a, p. 99)

These taboos transform a fundamentally natural instinct into something deemed "unnatural" and inappropriate in everyday life. The prevalence of such taboos further consolidates and reinforces the power of the heterosexual matrix in society. By rigorously regulating "deviant" impulses, taboos sustain the illusion that heteronormativity represents the sole natural order, thus fortifying the normative framework. In her stories, Munro aims to dismantle the rigidity of social taboos and reframe them as expressions of natural human impulses. Building on Butler's argument that taboos are socially constructed tools of control, Munro's fiction offers nuanced depictions of how such prohibitions shape—and often distort—individual lives. She achieves this through intimate character studies that expose the emotional toll of repression and the fragility of boundaries imposed by social norms. Through her subtle portrayal of Sylvia's repressed lesbian attraction to her friend Carla, and Juliet's instinctual—albeit subconscious—yearning for her father Sam, Munro reveals the authenticity of desires typically hidden or suppressed by cultural taboos. By bringing these forbidden impulses to light, her fiction challenges the societal logic that justifies their repression, inviting readers to question the legitimacy and purpose of such restrictions.

In the story "Runaway," Munro subverts the potency of the homosexual taboo by illustrating Sylvia's meticulously controlled yearning for her domestic aide, Carla. Sylvia neither reveals her desire to Carla nor acknowledges it to her close friends, much less acts upon it explicitly. She suppresses her emotions so rigorously that Carla remains entirely oblivious; when Sylvia's close friends playfully question her affection for Carla, Sylvia astutely refutes any such sentiments. Munro's objective is not to depict a theatrical relationship between the two women as a means of overtly challenging societal norms. Conversely, by delicately exposing the fabricated essence of the homosexual taboo, Munro's methodology is ultimately more potent, particularly due to its ambiguous and subtle execution. She depicts same-sex desire as intrinsic and natural

—unaffected in any way—subtle yet potent, and wholly authentic. Sylvia's judicious self-control, along with her external repudiation of her emotions, fulfills a dual function. On the one hand, it reinforces the veracity of the innate desire's existence (demonstrating that the desire is actually present even if unarticulated); on the other hand, it illustrates how significantly the gay taboo (and the associated fear) influences Sylvia's behavior and sense of identity. Butler states,

> Prohibition reproduces the prohibited desire and becomes intensified through the renunciations it effects. The 'afterlife' of prohibited desire takes place through the prohibition itself, where the prohibition not only sustains, but is sustained by the desire that it forces into renunciation. In this sense, then, the desire is never renounced, but becomes preserved and reasserted in the very structure of renunciation. (1997b, pp. 84-85)

Butler's concept of performativity offers valuable insight in this context. She argues that gender and, by extension, sexual identity should be understood as a process of repetition, shaped over time through the reenactment of socially regulated norms. This iterative process produces the illusion of a stable identity. As she explains, it is "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler, 1993, p. 2). She underscores that performance is not merely a singular deed or a fleeting impulse, but "a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production" (Butler, 1993, p. 95). In other words, the constant dread of violating taboos and suffering punishment (social exclusion or worse) forces and shapes each person's gendered behavior. Butler emphasizes that the performance is driven by the harsh "repetitions of hegemonic norms of power" (1993, p. 124) and the punishments for breaking them (taboos, sanctions, stigma). The restrictive power of prohibition, taboo, and the menace of exclusion or violence are the driving forces that sustain the "ritual" of gender identity. Sylvia's persistently suppressed longing for Carla is shaped by the weight of social taboos and the implicit threat of ostracism, compelling her to conceal any overt expression of affection. Yet this restraint itself becomes a quiet form of resistance: by privately acknowledging her desire and refusing to translate it into the socially accepted language of heterosexual affection, Sylvia asserts control over her emotional life. Her quiet self-awareness turns repression into a performative act of defiance, embodying Munro's broader vision of resistance—not through overt rebellion, but through the preservation of emotional authenticity within the confines of social constraint.

In the story, Munro demonstrates Sylvia's profound self-discipline in suppressing her emotions. Prior to exploring Sylvia's internal conflict, the story provides a nuanced insight into her concealed affection for Carla. At one point, Carla is outside cleaning the expansive front windows of the residence. Sylvia, observing from within, is surprisingly enthralled by Carla's silhouette on the glass; upon seeing Sylvia's gaze, Carla ceases her task and playfully extends her arms, prompting both ladies to erupt in laughter. Sylvia experiences this collective laughter profoundly, as it courses through her like a vivacious river, enveloping her in warmth. Moreover, after Carla completes her cleaning and lightly kisses Sylvia's bowed head in parting, the kiss lingers in Sylvia's thoughts thereafter: "[...] kiss had been in Sylvia's mind ever since. [...] Sylvia saw it as a bright blossom, its petals spreading inside her with tumultuous heat, like a menopausal flash" (Munro, 2005, p. 18). Although Sylvia experiences these times with great intensity, she conceals them completely and refrains from disclosing or expressing them in Carla's presence.

Sylvia's remarkable self-control in regulating her emotions is illustrated in two significant ways in the narrative. Upon her return from Greece, Sylvia presents Carla with a modest gift. She is enthusiastic about presenting this gift to Carla; nevertheless, she suppresses her excitement by engaging in regular conversation and feigning forgetfulness of the gift, instead of revealing it directly. Sylvia abruptly rises, seemingly

recalling something, and proceeds to retrieve the gift. During her conversation with Carla, she intentionally introduces subjects such as the ocean and swimming to make the subsequent mention of the memento seem more organic when she remembers it. Sylvia is eager to present the gift promptly; her discussions about the sea and swimming serve merely to distract from the fact that the gift is a miniature duplicate of a racehorse she discovered beneath the Aegean Sea. What she omits to add is that the youthful bronze jockey on that figure evokes memories of Carla:

> [...] the strength and grace of the arm that must have held the reins, or the wrinkles in his childish forehead, the absorption and the pure effort there was in some way like Carla cleaning the big windows last year. Her strong legs in her shorts, her broad shoulders, her big swipes at the glass. and then the way she had splayed herself out as a joke, inviting or even commanding Sylvia to laugh. (Munro, 2005, p. 20)

Sylvia's affection for Carla runs so deep that even the bronze horse-and-rider figurine brings Carla to mind. In the boyish rider, she sees the same strength, grace, intensity, and vitality she admires in Carla. Yet Sylvia keeps these feelings entirely to herself; she never reveals to Carla—or to anyone else—the true emotional significance the keepsake and its rider hold for her.

Second, Munro uses a conversation among Sylvia's close friends to press Sylvia toward confronting her true feelings. Through her friends' teasing comments, Munro effectively forces Sylvia to acknowledge the nature of her attachment to Carla. Sylvia not only suppresses her sentiments in Carla's presence but also declines to admit her affection for Carla in front of her friends by denying her crush. While in Greece with her pals, she expresses that Carla's "presence had come to mean more and more to her. How an indescribable bond had seemed to grow up between them, and had consoled her in the awful months of last spring" (Munro, 2005, p. 20). This statement implies that experiencing such emotions is neither inconceivable nor exclusively disgraceful. Another acquaintance perceives Sylvia's unique connection with Carla as merely a manifestation of "displaced maternal love" (Munro, 2005, p. 21). Sylvia embraces this innocuous rationale, reassuring her friends (and herself) that her feelings for Carla constitute merely a form of maternal affection that has been misdirected, rather than a genuine same-sex infatuation. Munro intentionally renders the conclusion of Sylvia and Carla's narrative ambiguous. Sylvia may be deceiving her friends and herself to conceal her genuine homosexual inclinations; alternatively, her emotions could be intricate, conflating mother protectiveness with romantic affection. By maintaining this ambiguity, Munro eschews a didactic resolution, instead emphasizing how Sylvia navigates the taboo through either authentic bewilderment or intentional self-deception. Ultimately, Sylvia outwardly conforms to societal expectations, outwardly rejecting any "inappropriate" desires. Yet the narrative reveals the deeper truth of her inner life. This compliance is not a simple submission, but a subtle form of defiance. By privately sustaining an awareness of her forbidden longing, Sylvia disrupts the illusion of a heteronormative order. Her silent recognition of what cannot be spoken transforms conformity into a performative act of resistance—an assertion of identity within repression. In this way, Munro portrays resistance not as an overt rebellion but as the quiet preservation of authenticity beneath the surface of social compliance.

In the story "Soon," Munro explores the incest taboo by examining Juliet's subconscious sexual attraction to her father, Sam. Munro's methodology seeks to normalize what society considers an unnatural desire, thus contesting the authority of the heterosexual matrix to designate certain impulses as prohibited. According to Abraham Rosman et al.,

> the incest taboo forbids sexual relations between certain categories of close relatives. Almost universally, forbidden categories include mother and son, father and daughter, and brother and sister. Since sexual partners cannot be sought within the immediate family because of the incest taboo, they must be sought elsewhere. The incest taboo that forbids sexual relations also necessarily forbids marriage, since marriage almost always includes sexual access. (2009, p. 101)

According to Butler, the heterosexual matrix functions by normalizing specific relationships while delegitimizing others; it instructs us on which impulses to see as "natural" and which to dismiss as "unnatural" (1990a, p. 208). The incest taboo is one such mechanism of denaturalization. In "Soon," Munro subverts this strategy by normalizing an incestuous desire—portraying it from within as an inherent aspect of Juliet's psyche—rather than as a grotesque deviation.

Munro establishes the context for Juliet's illicit yearning by initially depicting her profound jealousy towards Irene, the family's employed aide, who has garnered Sam's particular fondness. Munro reveals an instinctive sexual urge within Juliet, previously dormant under her cognitive knowledge, through Juliet's envy of Irene and the subsequent vivid dream she encounters. In the story, Munro initially illustrates Juliet's profound aversion to her father's excessive adulation and her emotional bond with Irene. This establishes the psychological foundation for the emergence of Juliet's incestuous fantasy. Juliet's father, Sam, speaks glowingly of Irene; in his eyes, Irene is "a dandy girl" (Munro, 2005, p. 109) who has "restored his faith in women" (Munro, 2005, p. 113). Simultaneously, Juliet's mother, Sara, is gravely ill and incapable of overseeing the household, with her condition fluctuating erratically. Irene, a proficient housekeeper, intervenes and reinstates order in Sam and Sara's household. Irene becomes so essential to Sam that he is cautious not to engage in any actions that could cause her discomfort. He even defers Juliet's offer to paint the house's walls, lest the disturbance unsettle Irene or lead her to perceive the family as peculiar. Sam possesses a distinctly conventional perspective on women: he believes that a woman's virtue is defined by her ability to endure hardship silently. He publicly commends Irene's resilience and empathizes with the adversities she has encountered: her husband was murdered owing to criminal associations, her father deserted the family during her childhood, and her small daughter was born with a cleft palate, among other disasters. Juliet, a contemporary and autonomous young lady, harbors no authentic empathy for this enumeration of misfortunes. In fact, "she felt herself rebelling, deep down, against this wretched litany" (Munro, 2005, p. 110) of Irene's woes. She silently retorts in her mind, "Just what is so wonderful about all this misery, does it make her a saint? [...] I hope you don't mean to get us mixed up with people like that" (Munro, 2005, p. 111). Juliet's cynicism illustrates her repudiation of the notion that a woman ought to be exalted for enduring hardship.

Sam's overwhelming commendation of Irene clearly incites intense jealousy in Juliet. Juliet recognizes that Irene has successfully supplanted her as the cherished female in Sam's life; in essence, Irene appears to be sharing, or perhaps appropriating, the paternal affection that Juliet believes should exclusively belong to her. Prior to this distressing encounter with Sam, Juliet had observed him serenading Irene with seductive melodies to attract her attention—conduct that exacerbated Juliet's feelings of revulsion and envy. Juliet's complex feelings, including hatred, envy, and a sense of loss, are a latent expression of her sexual yearning for her father. In psychoanalytic terminology, Juliet undergoes a quintessential father-daughter conflict, reminiscent of the Electra complex; however, Munro depicts it via a non-judgmental lens, portraying it as an unconscious yet significant aspect of Juliet's inner existence.

In addition to illustrating Juliet's jealousy and bitterness, Munro ambiguously conveys Juliet's sexual longing for her father through a dream. According to Sigmund Freud, dreams are the fulfillment of unconscious wishes, the "royal road to the unconscious" (1949, p. 44). Frequently, our most repressed urges—

particularly those originating in early infancy—emerge in veiled manifestations within our dreams. In "Soon," it is revealed that as Juliet matured into adolescence, she progressively redirected her attachment from her mother to forge a notably strong connection with her father. The inference is that a sexual dimension to Juliet's affection for her father had been present from her childhood, although she remained oblivious to it until the taboo dream illuminated the reality. Munro meticulously delineates the dream using nuanced, symbolic language:

> Juliet dreamed she was a child again and in this house, [...] This water came from the hose. Her father, with his back to her, was watering the garden. A figure moved in and out among the raspberry canes and was revealed, after a while, to be Irene — though a more childish Irene, supple and merry. She was dodging the water sprinkled from the hose, hiding, reappearing, mostly successful but always caught again for an instant before she ran away. [...] Her father always kept his back to her, yet she believed — she somehow saw — that he held the hose low, in front of his body, and that it was only the nozzle of it that he turned back and forth. (2005, p. 116)

In this vivid dream, the childlike Irene effectively supplants Juliet as Sam's cherished daughter. The hose that Sam is brandishing in the yard embodies a clear phallic symbolism, representing the male genitalia. The whimsical game that Irene participates in with Sam, evading the water spray, represents a sexual interaction: symbolically, Juliet (identifying with the youthful Irene in the dream) is "making love" with her father in a fun, taunting manner. Significantly, Sam consistently faced away from her throughout the dream, implying that even in her desire-driven daydream, Juliet cannot entirely confront the violation; yet, she perceived the unfolding events, signifying an unconscious awareness of the scene's sexual implications. When Juliet wakes up from this dream, she is overcome with shame and haunted by a "sticky horror [....] the kind that curls through the narrowest passages of your blood" (Munro, 2005, p. 116). This unsettling feeling clearly expresses Juliet's remorse and repulsion towards her own subconscious desire. Nonetheless, that impure fantasy has exposed Juliet's profoundly suppressed sexual longing for her father. The events in the dream are fictional; nonetheless, they authentically reflect Juliet's deepest desires—truths that her conscious mind cannot acknowledge in reality. Through this approach, Munro effectively contests the validity of the incest taboo: by disclosing that Juliet, an otherwise intelligent and ethical individual, had a deep-seated longing for her father (although in an unconscious manner), Munro illuminates the human aspect of the taboo drive. The story implies that the incest taboo transcends a mere dichotomy of monsters and victims, instead reflecting deeply ingrained social conditioning that represses a desire, while disconcerting, stemming from inherent human affection and curiosity. By illuminating Juliet's illicit yearning within the secure confines of a dream, Munro challenges the unequivocal dominance of the incest taboo and the heterosexual framework that deems such impulses inexpressible. Munro's subtle poetics of resistance translates Butler's theoretical abstraction into a lived narrative form, demonstrating how literature can enact the very undoing of gender that theory proposes.

Conclusion

This study has explored how Alice Munro's short fiction, specifically the stories "Baptizing" and "Soon" from *Lives of Girls and Women* (2015), and "Chance" and "Runaway" from *Runaway* (2005), reflects Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Across these narratives, Munro illustrates that gender identity and desire are not fixed or innate, but are continually shaped through repetition, resistance, and reinterpretation within social contexts. Her characters perform gender in ways that blur the lines between masculinity and femininity, thereby destabilizing the binary constructs that underpin the heterosexual matrix. By depicting

women who resist marriage as a social imperative, navigate forbidden desires, and explore intimacy beyond heteronormative frameworks, Munro gives a narrative form to Butler's claim that gender is an ongoing negotiation between personal agency and cultural norms. Del Jordan's rejection of marriage as the sole marker of womanhood, Juliet's emotionally complex engagement with social taboos, and Sylvia's repressed yet authentic same-sex longing all exemplify the performative, rather than essential, nature of identity, shaped by constraint, but never wholly determined by it. Butler's theory offers a focused lens through which Munro's stories emerge as literary acts of "undoing gender," stories that expose the fragility of normative categories and carve out imaginative space for alternative identities and desires. In doing so, this study contributes to Munro scholarship by demonstrating how her fiction moves beyond essentialist or oppositional feminist models, instead embracing a relational and performative view of gender. Ultimately, read through the lens of Butler's theory, Munro's fiction presents a subtle yet powerful critique of normative gender and sexual roles. Her narratives remind us that identity is not a predetermined endpoint, but an ongoing performance, one whose meaning arises precisely through its capacity to resist, reimagine, and transcend the cultural boundaries that seek to contain it.

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