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“I meant the risk. The secrecy. The power”: When Secrets Become Weapons in “Before the Change” by Alice Munro



In Alice Munro's work secrets are related to the great tragedies of our private lives. They are shameful, hidden stories that eat away at characters. Yet in "Before the Change" Munro embraces the secret and transforms it into a central element, dramatizing it in order to show its reversing capacity: secrets are weapons that can change a situation for the protagonists. The secret is then rehabilitated and becomes an element of power, all the more so as it is the locus of irony. This essay relies mostly on Jean-Jacques Lecercle's work on the two types of secret in Munro's fiction, as well as on the work of Deborah Tannen who has analysed gender in conversations.

The etymology of the secret (from the Latin word "secretus" which means "separated") points to something that is put aside, discarded, relegated to the margin. It is akin to what is unseen, to what lies underground. Secrets are central to Munro's fiction and are part and parcel of the generic affiliation of her writing to the mystery or the detective tale. A secret is often found at the centre of narrative and characters, narrators or readers try to uncover it. For example in "The Love of a Good Woman," Enid, the protagonist, tries to find out whether Mr. Quinn actually murdered Mr. Willens (she has been told so by a delirious Mrs. Quinn), but fails to confront Mr. Quinn. In "Vandals," it is the reader (and not one of the characters) who is facing a secret about the protagonist: why is Liza vandalizing Bea and Ladner's house? The secret, as a diegetic and narrative device, is exploited in various ways in Munro's fiction and can lead to ambiguous endings. Secrets, consisting of a piece of knowledge or an act that has been hidden and is known to only one person or a few people, are hidden away for the very reason that they are often shameful. Adultery and murder are indeed often found in Munro's fiction. I have chosen "Before the Change," from the collection *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998), to explore the rehabilitation of those shameful secrets, as this short story displays layer upon layer of secrets. The three principal ones are the clandestine abortions performed by the father, the child given away by the daughter and missing money (the narrator discovers that money is missing at the death of the father). The story illustrates how secrets are handled in a very special way in Munro's fiction, and are rehabilitated as they become weapons. Moreover they are valued as special tools for creation, for the narrator and for the author. In order to analyse the rehabilitation of the secret in this story, I will first demonstrate how secrets give power, then I will show that a strategy of reversal is at work when secrets deprive characters of their power. Finally I will analyse the way in which secrets are rehabilitated as a source of creation.

This short story takes the form of letters addressed to Robin, who we discover later to be the former fiancé of the narrator. As soon as the narrator arrives at her father's house, she pictures the atmosphere as uneasy and the landscape outside becomes the mirror of this discomfort as she wonders: "why does this benevolence of landscape fade, in my father's presence and in his territory [...]?" (256) As in a detective novel, both reader and narrator have to decode elements in order to see through the enigmatic figure of the father. Secrets and vision are immediately intertwined. When she arrives,

the narrator describes the living room and, like a detective taking notes, she surveys the room and makes a list of elements using only nominal and non-finite clauses:

Nothing new in “this room” but the television. Heavy side curtains with wine-colored leaves on a beige ground and the net curtains in between. Picture of Sir Galahad leading his horse and picture of Glencoe, red deer instead of the massacre. The old filing cabinet moved in years ago from my father’s office but still no place found for it “...”. (254)

The narrator shows the importance of decoding signs when she points out the presence of the allegory of death in one of the paintings. Therefore, things are not what they seem to be, the narrator and the reader have to go under the surface to understand the secret in the house, and as in the painting, it will be a secret related to death.

However this short story differs from a traditional detective tale firstly because the secrets involved also concern the narrator. Indeed she does not immediately reveal who Robin is, what type of relationship she had with him, or that she gave their child away. The reader needs to read the clues she leaves in her letters to Robin. For example the first hint at her pregnancy comes through an oblique reference: “My stomach is still a little puffy. There are no marks on it, but I can bunch it up in my hand. Otherwise I’m okay, my weight is back to normal or a little below” (262). The reference to “marks,” together with the ellipsis of “stretch” which allows the word to encompass other types of marks, indicate that the reader must decode the signs (on the character’s body or not) to understand her past. Indeed the narrator at first only makes oblique references to her past; they become clues and signs that the reader must gather and interpret. Secondly this story differs from a traditional detective story because of the nature of the secrets. I would like to argue that the story foregrounds “Secrets” and “secrets” – the two types of secrets analysed by Jean-Jacques Lecercle who spells the former with a capital S to differentiate it from the latter (27-32). Lecercle explains that the Secret is “an extraordinary event,” (27) and it is because it is extraordinary that this Secret needs to be disclosed; its disclosure is usually violent (28) and the Secret is temporary (29). As a consequence of its violence and suddenness, the Secret is “a first step in the reconstruction of reality” (29) and it is something the plot builds toward (30). As for its counterpart, the secret does not need to be disclosed, its meaning lies “on the surface,” (28) it is everywhere and not subject to temporality (29). Besides, the secret is necessary in our everyday lives, on a social level, and it needs “constant reinterpretation” (30-2). To sum up, Secrets are what we commonly associate with the word “secret”; they can be used as traditional narrative devices since they can be hidden or revealed, whereas secrets are more akin to blanks in a story. Bearing this distinction in mind, it is possible to conclude from Lecercle’s essay that detective stories, more than any other genre, rely largely on Secrets. In this short story, however, the two kinds of secrets coexist. Lecercle analyses the secret in three short stories written by Alice Munro and his conclusions are useful to my article, in particular his remarks on the secret at the heart of “Miles City, Montana.” Lecercle shows that this story seems to be about a Secret (the reason for the boy’s drowning or a second drowning that the narrator might reveal) but actually the story is not about a Secret so much as the sudden awareness, for the narrator, of a secret: “the mystery of otherness.” Lecercle explains that “[t]hose others whom one believes one knows, our nearest and dearest, are, in such moments of loud clarity, unknown, mysterious, secret, or else too well known, bringing disappointment” (34-5). A parallel can indeed be drawn between the epiphany of the narrator of “Miles City, Montana”

and the epiphany in "Before the Change." In this story, the narrator also discovers that those who were close to her, or those she thought she had figured out (her father and Mrs. Barrie) will always remain unfathomable. In my last part, I will argue that this awareness will allow the transformation of the narrator into a writer.

The relationship between father and daughter is fraught with animosity, the narrator describing it as an "undeclared underground war" (268). It is itself a Secret of sorts (this is marked by the prefix un- and the morpheme "under") that the narrator will try to uncover by attempting to force her father to voice his Secrets. The secrecy is given more weight by the succession of these two trisyllabic words. As soon as she arrives, the narrator seeks a more open relationship with her father as she tries to kiss him, but something holds her back. She is already failing in her striving to have a peaceful and unobstructed relationship with her father. She will not be able to subdue the reticence she finds in her father, yet her constant trying transforms any conversation into a battle. It is no coincidence that the story should begin with a reference to the debate between Nixon and Kennedy, as this suggests a verbal opposition. And indeed conversations between the daughter and the father become battles grounded in words. As opposed to the verbal fights between Robin and the narrator, those between the father and his daughter are mainly conveyed through direct speech, allowing thus a more direct representation of the conflict. The conversations are further dramatized by the shortness of the sentences and the repetitions, making them very similar to stichomythia:

And I had to say, "I think I know what's going on here."
 His head reared up and he snorted. He really did, like an old horse.
 "You do, do you? You think you know what?"
 I said, "I'm not accusing you. I don't disapprove."
 "Is that so?"
 "I believe in abortion," I said. "I believe it should be legal."
 "I don't want you to use that word again in this house," my father said.
 "Why not?"
 "Because I am the one who says what words are used in this house."
 "You don't understand what I'm saying."
 "I understand that you've got too loose a tongue. You've got too loose a tongue and not enough sense. Too much education and not enough ordinary brains."
 I still did not shut up. I said, "People must know."
 "Must they? There's a difference between knowing and yapping. Get that through your head once and for all." (270)

The paucity of reporting clauses makes the passage read like a jousting drama script, intensifying the confrontational nature of the conversation. The allusion to the posture of the father conveys a sense of a coming battle; on the one hand his position makes him ready for a head-on attack, on the other hand, the reference to the horse reminds one of medieval combats. It is clear here that words are used as weapons for a verbal fight: the father reuses the exact words of his daughter in order to metaphorically throw them back at her. In another conversation, the narrator even underlines the materiality of words. When her father repeats what he has just said (she wanted him to elaborate), she concludes: "'Just a couple of Americans,' he said, as if the words might have got by me the first time" (256). The phrasal verb "get by" suggests that words uttered by her father, just like material objects (like missiles), are supposed to "get to" her.

The narrator and the reader understand that in verbal battles, Secrets are powerful allies and provide power. It is the father's Secret that gives him such authority in his

house. The father indeed knows one of the most important Secrets: the Secret of life and death, which takes place inside the female body. The secrecy of the abortions the father has been performing is underlined when the narrator remembers that women who sought her father's services used to come at night (266). Depicted as a tyrannical father, the father uses his social position and the power his Secret gives him; they give him an even greater authority to the extent that he imposes what words can be uttered or not – "I am the one who says what words are used in this house" (270) – therefore censoring his daughter. His authority goes even beyond his house since the community, instead of denouncing him, prefers to turn a blind eye: "the whole town seems to be on his side, or at least on the side of silence" (291). And as a matter of fact, the narrator is on the side of speech, she is saying the words that the father won't say and therefore already positioning herself as an author.

Secrets Give Power

The narrator understands that Secrets are maintained through language, and the father derives his authority from language, whether he chooses speech or silence. First, his words frame him as an expert. Not only does he have medical expertise, but he presents himself as the figure of knowledge, posing as the figure of authority. Here again, language and communication are the tools he uses to assert his position. The following passage illustrates how language is the medium through which the battle is fought:

"I said, "Oh. In Byron's war."

"Byron's war?" said my father. "What makes you call it that? Byron didn't fight in any war "...□"

But then he calmed down and recounted for me or recalled for himself the progress of the war against the Ottoman Empire. He spoke of the Porte and I wanted to say that I've never been sure if that was an actual gate, or was it Constantinople, or the Sultan's court? But it's always best not to interrupt. When he starts to talk like this there's the sense of a truce, or a breathing spell, in an undeclared underground war. I was sitting facing the window, and I could see through the net curtains the heaps of yellow-brown leaves on the ground in the rich generous sunlight (maybe the last of those days we'll get for a long while by the sound of the wind tonight) and it brought to mind my relief as a child, my secret pleasure, whenever I could get him going, by a question or by accident, on a spiel like this." (267-8)

The narrator is attempting to show that she, too, has information, has knowledge and that she may be an expert. She is not interrupting her father but is trying to bond with him by providing further information. However, her father perceives her gesture as a desire to name things, that is to say, to replace him in his role. While the father can decide on the words, he cannot tolerate for his daughter to adopt this position. Following this remark, the father feels the need to reposition himself as the expert on the Ottoman Empire. However, communication is broken ("recalled for *himself*" (267, emphasis added), but for the narrator, something else is achieved: she has pacified her father in allowing him to assert his position of authority once again. Such an attitude has been shown by Deborah Tannen to be particularly feminine, that is why it is possible to say that the verbal battle between the father and his daughter is gender-coded:

Since women seek to build rapport, they are inclined to play down their expertise rather than display it. Since men value the position of center stage and the feeling of knowing more, they seek opportunities to gather and disseminate factual information. (125)

And indeed the narrator is politely listening to her father who gives her facts she does not really care about (it is referred to as "a spiel" [267]): she does not provide us with the information about the Ottoman Empire, and her thoughts are no longer focused on her father's monologue since she is distracted by the view outside and is reminded of her childhood. Her lack of interest is made blatant by the different layers of digression. Her inferior position in this instance is underlined by the comparison with her position when she was a child. Once again, she is the listener, she does not want to interrupt to demonstrate her own knowledge about Porte. Deborah Tannen observes:

The act of giving information by definition frames one in a position of higher status, while the act of listening frames one as lower. Children instinctively sense this – as do most men. But when women listen to men, they are not thinking in terms of status. Unfortunately, their attempts to reinforce connections and establish rapport, when interpreted through the lens of status, can be misinterpreted as casting them in a subordinate position – and are likely to be taken that way by many men. (139)

It is clear that the narrator is placed in an inferior position, and that her father can assert his power in his house.

Mrs. Barrie, the maid, also derives some power from sharing the father's Secret since she helps him during the abortions. She is an aid and comes from a poorer social background, yet she enjoys some power in the house, much more than a regular maid. She even has some power over her boss: she dictates what to watch on TV (256) and what type of conversations can be had (268). Yet she does not use words as weapons. In fact she is not good with words, and does not value them. The narrator informs us that she calls an ostrich a "thingamajig" because "she won't try to say 'ostrich,' or she can't remember" (256) and that she would not admire someone for "knowing something nobody needed to know, like a foreign language" (265). Yet Mrs. Barrie is the one who benefits the most financially from the clandestine abortions.

Reversal at Work: Disclosed Secrets Deprive Someone of his or her Power

However, because a Secret provides power it is also potentially connected with someone else's loss of power. An ironic reversal of situation can take place. Jean-Jacques Lecercle points out this reversal when he writes that "the violence lies not only in the disclosure of truth, it lies in truth itself, which contaminates, threatens to subvert and overturn the society in which it appears" (25-6). This overturning of society is indeed what allows the Secret to become the locus of irony. It is the medium through which power is given and retrieved.

When the narrator discovers the secret actions of her father, he is deprived of his Secret: there is a shift of power. Corinne Bigot notices that this shift of power is represented very soon after the narrator's discovery, in the change in the father's use of language (40-1). The father is forced to be explicit when he declares "I don't want you to use that word again in this house" (270), whereas his authority used to be conveyed through silence. Such a statement is in fact counterproductive because the enforced silence underlines the very existence of a Secret and makes it more obvious. Similarly, by calling the women who come for an abortion "the specials" (272), the father, instead of concealing, makes the Secret even more apparent by calling attention to the way the noun creates a new category by leaving aside what it is premised on.

The narrator finds out about the abortions when she encounters Mrs. Barrie carrying a basin of blood. This encounter is analysed by the narrator as being staged: “she made a grimace of dismay. [...] This was an act” (268). The mention of the grimace reinforces the fact that Mrs. Barrie is only simulating dismay since the word can refer to “an affected expression of countenance” (*OED*). As stated above, Mrs. Barrie is presented as someone who cannot use words to assert her power, and I would argue that instead she chooses to display it, as she uses actions instead of words. Even though the motivations behind Mrs. Barrie’s displaying of the basin are not known, her gesture can be interpreted as an assertion of her power because she feels threatened by the narrator. Ever since her arrival, the narrator has been trying to change things in the house and in her father’s practice, for example by suggesting that the waiting room needs painting (258) or by introducing perked coffee (266), but Mrs. Barrie and her father seem hostile towards these changes. The narrator will learn how to use the staged accident to her advantage, and to turn her father’s Secret into a weapon. By refusing to play Mrs. Barrie’s game, that is to say, by understanding how Mrs. Barrie uses the Secret, she gets the upper hand: “All I seemed to be concerned about was not letting Mrs. B. have it her way. No questions, no shocked realization” (269).

As for the narrator’s Secret, that is, giving away her newborn baby, when she reveals it, the violence of the disclosure is almost caricatured since her father dies when he hears his daughter’s Secret, like a death on the battlefield. The narrator informs us that “he had suffered a blinding and paralyzing stroke” (284). The adjective “blinding” and the reference at the end of the paragraph to “his unseeing eye” (284) invite a literal reading of the expression “blinded by the truth.” The violence of the disclosure is literal.

In this short story, the violence of the disclosure is conveyed through the use of a ternary rhythm. First this formulation is found when the narrator discovers that her father performs abortions: “This was an act. The surprise, the dismay, the hurrying away” (269). Then when the narrator becomes aware that Mrs. Barrie is the one who has her father’s money, the same rhythm is used: “Then I saw the darkening flush, the tide of embarrassment, the difficulty of being grateful” (288). And finally, the ternary rhythm is used when the narrator understands her father’s motives for performing the abortions: “I meant the risk. The secrecy. The power” (285). The characteristic rhythm is used by the narrator in order to mimic the working of her mind at the time of the discovery: the shortness of the sentences and the use of noun phrases convey a sense of abruptness. Although the narrator uses a similar rhythm to convey her discoveries, the aim is different. As the author of the letters, she can *a posteriori* make fun of Mrs. Barrie by presenting her as a poor actor. Once more, even though it is about the same secret (abortions) the narrator represents Mrs. Barrie as a ridiculous character and her father as a dignified person. In the sentences which describe the narrator’s realisation, the use of periods (“I meant the risk. The secrecy. The power.”) instead of commas (“The surprise, the dismay, the hurrying away.” [269]) gives more weight to the authority of the father because the rhythm of the sentence is slowed down, each item is treated as a discrete element and thus gains in emphasis.

The narrator’s Secret is itself ironic, considering the clandestine activities of her father, as the narrator points out: “I have been thinking how ironic that was” (281). Besides, the irony also lies in the reversal of situation. When the narrator decides to give her father a lecture by revealing her Secret, she tries to position herself as the one who

has the expertise. Against all odds; she, too, has an experience of Secrets and of medical processes that some women need to go through to get an abortion since she almost got one. However, as a final irony played on her, her "lecture" will never be heard. The very moment of disclosure was for her to be the climax of a reversal of power, but it is never attained. The irony does not stop here since it was the narrator's former lover, Robin, the recipient of the letters, who wanted her to get an abortion because as a minister, he thought that having a child out of wedlock was a scandal. The reader cannot miss the irony and the hypocrisy of the situation: being frowned upon by the community for having a child just before being married was, on a moral scale, much worse in his eyes than letting his fiancée get an abortion.

Finally the narrator operates an ironic reversal of situation herself by depriving her father, in a possible future, of his Secret and therefore of his power. She notices that a Secret can only remain one as long as there are some taboos: "Change the law, change what a person does, change what a person is?" (285). It is to be noted that again a ternary rhythm is used; it summarises the narrator's thoughts and underlines the irony. A similar twist occurs when she addresses Robin to evoke a possible future in which having a child out of wedlock would not be a disgrace. In both cases, Munro also plays with dramatic irony because the law and attitudes have indeed changed – abortion was legalized in 1969 in Canada. Secrets and their consequent power, are both shown as being part and parcel of a system of ethics which is not absolute, but very contextual. Later, we understand that Mrs. Barrie took the money from her employer. This may have been the result of a secret blackmailing. If this is the case, the father is therefore further deprived of his power.

The three Secrets that have been dealt with belong to the category of Secrets with a capital S. But the other secrets are secrets that do not dwell in power relations but are the ground for creation. Their power is a creative power.

Rehabilitating Secrets as a Source of Creation

Secrets with a lower case "s," those which cannot be disclosed because they are always present, allow the narrator to reconstruct herself. The very title of the short story suggests a life-changing event which would lend itself to a rebirth of sorts. It can be the narrator's transformation into a writer: the events narrated are thus those that occurred before her change.

As Georg Simmel claims, secrets open gaps in the narrative from which other realities which differ from visible ones, and other truths can branch out. The ultimate secrets, with a lower case "s" in this story are the father and Mrs. Barrie, and, as a consequence, the nature of their relationship. The narrator's father and Mrs. Barrie remain a blank. The motives for giving his money and the motivation for performing abortions are never explained or figured out by the narrator and, as a consequence, these events trigger endless speculation. Similarly the reason why Mrs. Barrie decides, after all these years, to reveal the father's Secret remains unexplained. Instead, other worlds are opened: the narrator has an epiphany when she becomes aware of a secret, "the mystery of otherness" (Leclercle 35) just like the narrator in "Miles City, Montana." Her father and Mrs. Barrie are not the people she thought they were, and they will remain mysteries, but the awareness of the otherness of other people will enable her to become a writer.

Speculation triggers creativity and allows the narrator to become a writer. Secrets and solutions are not an end in themselves; it is the speculation that stimulates the imagination and initiates the creative process since “the perception of secrecy [...] constitutes the generative principle of Munro’s storytelling, opening up a space for imaginative transformation and fictive artifice” (Howells 39-40). The narrator speculates, and indeed the penultimate section of the story abounds in words and expressions that allow different interpretations:

Since that moment I have been happy.

[...]

The thing I can’t imagine is my father caving in to blackmail. Particularly not to people who wouldn’t be very credible or clever. Not when the whole town seems to be on his side, or at least on the side of silence.

What I can imagine, though, is a grand perverse gesture. To forestall demand, maybe, or just to show that he didn’t care. Looking forward to the lawyer’s shock, and to my trying even harder to figure him out, now that he’s dead.

No. I don’t think he’d be thinking of that. I don’t think I’d have come into his thoughts so much. Never so much as I’d like to believe. (291-2)

Different realities are offered with the conjunction “or,” the modal “would,” the expressions “I can’t imagine [...] What I can imagine,” and when she reconsiders her hypothesis: “No. I don’t think he’d be thinking of that.” The narrator at the end of the story accepts secrecy; she simply states “[s]ince that moment I have been happy.” The fact that she accepts that her letters may have no recipient – and this is an echo of the revelation scene – underlines that now, the process of creation, is what matters to her. It then is no coincidence that the abortions, connected with death, became for the doctor’s daughter the beginning of a life of creation. The abortions are what prompt her to start writing to tell the Secrets that are present in the story.

In this story, Secrets and the words of the Secrets are weapons in the battle between the narrator and the father. That is why the Secret is rehabilitated as a strength: it is no longer a weakness but a means to endless reversals. However, because it is the locus of irony, this rehabilitation is uncertain, and the weapon, the Secret, can be turned on the one who keeps it. This short story can be compared with “Open Secrets,” as the moment of epiphany is, in both cases, very sudden and has no explanation but is an intuition of sorts. However, both the narrator of “Before the Change” and the protagonist of “Open Secrets” decide not to disclose it, they cannot reveal it, and accept this secrecy as part of life.

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