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"Not a puzzle so arbitrarily solved"

Queer Aesthetics in Alice Munro's Early Short Fiction

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag argumentiert, dass die Kurzgeschichten von Alice Munro durch eine Erzählstrategie gekennzeichnet sind, die als ‚queer aesthetics' oder ‚queer sensibility' charakterisiert werden kann. Gemeint ist damit ein narratives Bewusstsein für normabweichende Identitäts- und Verhaltensoptionen. In der Komposition von Munros Kurzgeschichten wird zudem eine Befindlichkeit zum Ausdruck gebracht, die Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick als „the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning" bezeichnet. Munros Faszination für die Ambiguitäten sowie die Diversität menschlichen Verhaltens wird anhand mehrerer ungewöhnlicher Figuren deutlich, z. B. der des Landarbeiters Herb Abbott in „The Turkey Season", der als „kinder and more patient than most women" beschrieben wird. In dieser Geschichte verweist eine komplexe Konstellation verschiedener Begehrensformen und Mehrdeutigkeiten auf eine Erzählkonstruktion, die Munro selbst „a queer bright moment" nennt und die ihrer Ansicht nach in jeder Kurzgeschichte vorhanden sein sollte. Wie Munro in einer anderen Erzählung, „A Queer Streak", illustriert, kann sich diese ‚queerness' durchaus auch auf Homosexualität beziehen, obgleich sie nicht notwendigerweise damit gleichzusetzen ist. Im Folgenden möchte ich zeigen, dass Munro das Konzept ‚queer' als Allegorie für die Absurditäten, Kuriositäten und Idiosynkrasien des Lebens einsetzt. Daher ist das ‚Andere' in ihren Geschichten oft mit einem Enigma erfüllt, welches das ‚Deviante' als geheimes Zentrum der Erzählung sowie darüber hinaus als Modell der individuellen Selbstinszenierung definiert.

Abstract

In this essay, I will argue that the short fiction of Nobel Prize winner Alice Munro is permeated by what can be termed 'queer aesthetics' or 'queer sensibility.' By this, I mean a narrative awareness of identity and behavioral options that deviate from the norm. Recognizable in the composition of Munro's short stories, this sentience pinpoints what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning." The same fascination with ambiguity – and with the diversity of human behavior in general – can be found in some of Munro's most memorable protagonists, for example, the farm worker Herb Abbott in "The Turkey Season," who is described as being "kinder and more patient than most

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women." The complex constellation of desires and ambiguities in this story leads to the construction of what Munro herself has called "a queer bright moment" which, according to her, every short story needs. As Munro illustrates in "A Queer Streak," this kind of 'queerness' is not necessarily to be equated with homosexuality, although it may well include it. As I show in this essay, Munro uses the concept 'queer' as an allegory for the absurdities, oddities, and idiosyncrasies in life. The 'Other' in Munro's short fiction is thus often imbued with an enigma that marks the 'deviant' as the secret center of the story and, moreover, as a model of individual self-fashioning. [1]

Résumé

Ma contribution se propose de démontrer dans quelle mesure les nouvelles d'Alice Munro, lauréate du prix Nobel, sont marquées par ce que l'on peut qualifier d'esthétique ou de sensibilité queer. J'entends par cela une sensibilité narrative face à tout ce qui relève de l'identité et des choix de comportement hors norme. On reconnaît cette sensibilité notamment au niveau de la composition des nouvelles de Munro, une sensibilité qui met le doigt sur ce que Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick désigne de « réseau ouvert de possibilités, de failles, de chevauchements, de dissonances et résonances, d'erreurs et d'excès de signification ». On trouve cette fascination pour l'ambigüité – et pour la diversité du comportement humain en général – également chez les protagonistes les plus mémorables d'Alice Munro, dont, p.ex., l'ouvrier agricole Herb Abbott dans « The Turkey Season », ce personnage étant décrit comme « plus aimable et plus patient que la plupart des femmes ». Dans cette nouvelle, la constellation de désirs et d'ambigüités assez complexe est liée à la construction de ce que Munro appelle elle-même « un vif moment queer » qui, toujours selon l'auteure, devrait être présente dans toute nouvelle. Dans « A Queer Streak », Munro illustre que ce genre de queerness *n'équivaut pas nécessairement à l'homosexualité, même si cette dernière n'en est pas exclue. Je voudrais démontrer dans mon article que Munro utilise le concept de queer comme allégorie pour les absurdités, les bizarreries et les étrangetés de la vie. Dans les nouvelles de Munro, l'« autre » est souvent énigmatique, et ce côté énigmatique désigne le déviant comme étant le noyau secret des ses histoires, en plus d'être un model de mis en scène de soi.*

Introduction

In 1994, during the first heyday of Queer Theory, a Canadian publisher released an anthology of gay and lesbian fiction that carried the witty title *Meanwhile, in Another Part of the Forest*. More surprising than the mere fact of another queer-themed collection of short stories was the volume's subtitle: *Gay Stories from Alice Munro to*

1 I want to thank Manuela Neuwirth, Elisabeth Schneider, and Maja Wieland for their careful proofreading of this essay which enabled me to sharpen my argument regarding the structure and significance of 'queer aesthetics' in Munro's short stories.

Yukio Mishima. While the inclusion of Alice Munro[2] might, at first glance, have been due to alphabetic and stylistic logic, a look at the editors' explanations of their choice in the introduction proves otherwise. The purpose of the volume, so they declared, was to show that LGBT fiction had become a worldwide phenomenon – thus the inclusion of Japanese, British, American, and Canadian writers.

Even more importantly, the corpus of 'gay stories' was not restricted to gay authors, but also to other writers who felt they wanted to depict the whole range of society, including its social and sexual minorities. Conceived in this fashion, the inclusion of Munro's "The Turkey Season" – a short story by a straight writer – was a courageous step, yet not an entirely surprising one, given the fact that the treatment of *minority issues* in Canada had not exclusively been a task performed by *minority writers*. While the nation's most influential gay writer, Timothy Findley, has scarcely negotiated homosexuality in his works, some of Canada's best-known straight authors have dealt explicitly with queerness. Michael Ondaatje, for example, has utilized homoerotic imagery in the first chapter of *The English Patient*.

The employment of 'queer' themes is also prevalent in Alice Munro's fiction. The *Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture* lists Munro as an important force in creating a distinct gay voice in literature. "[O]ne of the best gay Canadian short stories, 'The Turkey Season,' is by the straight writer Alice Munro" (Chambers 1), the Encyclopedia states. "The Turkey Season" is by far not the only text by Munro to feature gay or lesbian characters that are more or less easily recognizable as such. In "A Queer Streak," the gay architect Dane and his lover Theo function as stunningly *average* counterparts to a whole series of 'queer,' yet heterosexual characters. In "Dulse," the American frontier writer Willa Cather has a cameo appearance, in which her lesbianism is thematized. And in "Friend of My Youth," a lesbian relationship of the narrator's mother is brought up as a possibility. Why, one might ask, would a self-identified straight author, who was married twice and has three children, be interested in 'gay topics'?

I will argue in this essay that Munro's writings, especially "The Turkey Season" (1980) and "A Queer Streak" (1985), reflect an aesthetics that can be described as 'queer' in a fundamental sense. I use the term 'queer' here primarily in its original meaning as "strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric" (Oxford English Dictionary)[3] and only in a narrow sense as referring to deviations from the heterosexual norm. Munro's narratives focus on the unusual, the strange, the curious; and they cherish difference and complexity as key components of life.

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2 Reingard M. Nischik notes that Alice Munro "is also the most frequently anthologized author of short stories in Canada" ("Canadian Short Story" 24).

3 This is the first definition given by the Oxford English Dictionary. The word dates from the 15th to 17th century. The second meaning given by the OED is "out of sorts; unwell, faint, giddy." Only the third definition refers to the realm of sexuality: "a homosexual; […] of or relating to homosexuals or homosexuality" (see Oxford English Dictionary, online edition).

Munro's *queer aesthetics*, as I call it, is based on an acceptance of otherness as a vital part of social diversity. In order to qualify as 'queer' in the Munro universe, a character does not necessarily have to be gay or lesbian. Munro seems interested in the oddness of life itself. For her, grasping the complexities of reality also means looking at the idiosyncratic aspects of this reality, its 'queer,' unusual, and contradictory dimensions. My aim in this essay is thus not so much to 'queer' Munro in the mode suggested by some scholars of Queer Theory (that is, to expose the significance of homosexuality in the author's life and writing).[4] Rather, I want to examine Munro's own, distinctive concept of 'queer' – a word she uses surprisingly often in her works. In the author's own understanding, 'queer' signifies not only otherness and diversity, it also symbolizes a specific approach to storytelling which endows literature with a kind of magic, a spellbinding touch.

Queer Sensibility in Canadian Literature and Culture

Munro's appreciation of otherness did not always match the dominant discourse in Canadian literature. Before the Quiet Revolution of the 1970s, Canadian society, in general, was not exactly accepting of minorities; the two most prominent gay authors of the 1960s, Edward A. Lacey and Daryl Hine, actually spent most of their careers abroad – in the United States, Indonesia, Thailand, or Europe. In addition, Canada's 'Stonewall Riot' – if it *can* be called that – took place 12 years after its U.S. American counterpart, namely in 1981 when queers revolted against brutal police forces that had raided gay baths in Toronto (Chambers 1).[5]

The 1980s in the U.S. and Canada saw the emergence of what I will call *queer sensibility,* namely an awareness in literary and cultural practice regarding non-normative behavior. This sensibility seems to lie at the very core of numerous discourses dealing with divergence and identity formation. "Contemporary lesbian and gay male cultures," Steven Seidman wrote in an article from 1993, "evidence a heightened sensitivity to issues of difference and the social formation of desire, sexuality, and identity" (105). The age of postmodernism, Seidman argued, came to herald "a new aesthetic, a sensibility, an epistemological break, the end of grand narratives, and a new political juncture" (106). Around the same time, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, another important queer theorist, proclaimed that the use of the word 'queer' was groundbreaking in that it signaled a profound paradigm shift in contemporary society. Originally referring to things regarded as odd, strange or vaguely peculiar,

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4 See, for example, various interpretations of Tennessee Williams's dramas (Fleche) and Ernest Hemingway's works (Moddelmog), in which the 'queer space' and (latent) homosexuality of the authors are investigated.

5 The emergence of the gay liberation movement during the 1970s and 80s left basically no other choice to politically aware writers than to acknowledge these developments and give room to voices which were often suppressed by the dominant discourse. In her sensitive treatment of practices of social exclusion as well as of symbolic inclusion of queers, Alice Munro has become an important representative of this tendency in Canada.

the term suddenly epitomized an altered understanding of life as being complex and diverse as opposed to linear and normative. "This is one of the things that 'queer' can refer to," Sedgwick avers in her landmark study *Tendencies*: "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning" (8). Apart from its usual connotation of 'lesbian, gay, bi- or transsexual,' the term 'queer' here seems to point to a new understanding, an awareness in which diversity and heterogeneity trump conformism and tradition.

Alice Munro's writings of the 1980s undoubtedly reflect this new understanding. This becomes evident when looking at Munro's short story collections *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982) and *The Progress of Love* (1986). While the term 'homosexual' is used only on one page in *The Moons of Jupiter* (65) and not at all in *The Progress of Love*, the word 'queer' pops up five times in the former book and seven times in the latter, often to denote the pleasures of new horizons of sensory experience. 'Queer' here becomes a symbol of letting go, of merging with the environment.

> When you start really letting go this is what it's like. A lick of pain, furtive, darting up where you don't expect it. Then a lightness. […] There's a *queer kind of pleasure* in it, not a self-wounding or malicious pleasure, nothing personal at all. It's an uncalled-for pleasure in seeing how the design wouldn't fit and the structure wouldn't stand, a pleasure in taking into account […] everything that is *contradictory* and persistent and unaccommodating about life. (Munro, "Bardon Bus" 127-128; my emphasis)

It is this focus on the contradictory aspects of life, its hidden pleasures and idiosyncrasies that marks Munro's philosophy. Out of Munro's more than 160 short stories, I singled out four that seem to highlight the author's vision as both a philosophical and a political concept: "Boys and Girls" (1964), "Dance of the Happy Shades" (1968), "The Turkey Season" (1980), and "A Queer Streak" (1985).[6]

Boundary Crossing in "Boys and Girls" and "Dance of the Happy Shades"

Munro deals with issues of normativity and boundary crossing already in one of her earliest short stories, "Boys and Girls" (1964). The story revolves around an 11-year old female unnamed protagonist whose uninhibited wildness and sense of autonomy stand in stark contrast to her environment's normative restrictions. While the protagonist, who is also the first-person narrator, sees herself more as a 'heroic' tomboy who likes to sing the tune "Danny Boy" at Christmas and is able to shoot rabid wolves ("BG" 113), her father and the other family members keep admonishing her to stick to the established gender codes. The story reaches its climax when one of the workhorses of the family becomes sick and lies in the barn, kicking and whin-

6 In the following, "Boys and Girls" will be abbreviated as "BG," "Dance of the Happy Shades" as "DHS," "The Turkey Season" as "TS" and "A Queer Streak" as "QS."

nying desperately. Eager to be close to the suffering animal, the protagonist is forbidden to enter the stable since the place is regarded as dangerous – and thus 'male' – territory. "That's none of girls' business," her grandmother tells her ("BG" 119) in a crucial scene in which her innocent childhood seems to end abruptly.[7] The narrator realizes that there are restrictions in life which are based on arbitrary and, as she perceives it, unjust regulations. In the story's microcosm, the social division between "boys and girls" (which already emerges in the story's title) becomes an obstacle that the protagonist can hardly overcome:

> The word *girl* had formerly seemed to me innocent and unburdened, like the word *child*; now it appeared that it was no such thing. A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become. It was a definition, always touched with emphasis, with reproach and disappointment. Also it was a joke on me. ("BG" 119)

Published just one year after the release of Betty Friedan's feminist study *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Munro's story draws attention to the social construction of gender and the cultural constraints that female adolescents have to encounter. Echoing Simone de Beauvoir's famous dictum that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (293), Munro reveals in her story that female identity constitution is determined by parameters of invisible social control. Not only does the protagonist realize that 'being a girl' refers to a firmly defined and limiting role she has to play ("it was what I had to become"), she also comes to the conclusion that this expected performance puts her in an inferior position ("it was a joke on me"). As Nischik points out, "'Boys and Girls' shows competing gender concepts at work, thereby calling into question a strictly essentializing view of gender hierarchies" ("(Un-)Doing Gender" 216). In her story, Munro not only evokes our sympathy for the female protagonist, who is pressed into the corset of social conventions and expectations, she also makes us doubt the meaningfulness of such restrictions in society. When, towards the end of the tale, the narrator is confronted, once again, with the ever-repeating refrain "She's only a girl" and almost resigns in the face of such admonishments ("Maybe it was true") ("BG" 127), the reader is asked to question this social dichotomy. If the codes that normative gender roles entail in social practice make it so hard for characters to find a sense of inner balance and happiness, something seems to be fundamentally wrong with the whole system.

Munro's penchant for non-conformist characters is also revealed in another tale from the same 1968 collection of short stories in which "Boys and Girls" was published – the title-giving "Dance of the Happy Shades." The flamboyant Mrs. Marsalles,

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7 This sentence is accompanied by other restricting maxims which seem to hang over the narrator's head like a sword of Damocles, such as "Girls don't slam doors like that" and "Girls keep their knees together when they sit down" ("BG" 119).

an elderly woman "having another party" ("DHS" 211), exemplifies the lust for life that many Munro characters are filled with. Perceived by her visitors as not living in their "world" ("DHS" 223), Mrs. Marsalles rejects the urging voices in her environment claiming that she "is simply getting *too old*" ("DHS" 211). What's more, she decides to party while her sister is lying sick in bed, recovering from a stroke. The same sense of extravagance and non-conformism is expressed in one of the story's key scenes in which a corpulent female musician (a "girl as big as I am," as the unnamed first-person narrator points out), prompted by Mrs. Marsalles, steps to the piano and begins to play ("DHS" 222). The tune, it becomes clear, "is not familiar" (ibid.). Yet, the pianist manages to mesmerize the audience with her buoyant, jazzy song. "It is something fragile, courtly and gay," the narrator informs us, "that carries with it the freedom of great unemotional happiness" (ibid.). The use of the word 'gay' in this context, I want to contend, is no coincidence. Munro needs this connotation of the extravagant to unfold her aesthetics of otherness. In an echo of her earlier story "Boys and Girls" ("She's only a girl"), Munro encourages us in the final sentences of "Dance of the Happy Shades" *not* to condemn the protagonist as "*Poor Mrs. Marsalles*" ("DHS" 224), but to focus on the intrinsic happiness of the character. As I will show later in my essay, this emphasis on the 'odd' and 'queer' aspects of everyday social practice is emblematic of Munro's complex narratives.

The Enigma of the 'Other' in "The Turkey Season"

Munro's focus on the extraordinary within the ordinary is also exemplified in her story "The Turkey Season" (1980), which revolves around a 14-year old girl who takes a job as a turkey gutter for the Christmas season. Set in the 1940s, the narrative is told from the perspective of an unnamed narrator, apparently reflecting the girl's point of view as an adult woman. On the turkey farm, the protagonist meets Herb Abbott, an affable, but also mysterious worker who serves as her supervisor. Herb is "a tall, firm, plump man" ("TS" 62); and he is idolized by most of the women on the turkey farm, especially the narrator's fellow gutters Marjorie and Lily. The girls' infatuation with Herb is juxtaposed with his obvious tendency to avoid women's company. Everything about Herb Abbott seems contradictory. His behavior, even his way of moving, is marked by flow, transition, and ambiguity. This is also detected by one of the female figures: "Notice about Herb – he always walks like he had a boat moving underneath him" (ibid.). Herb's whole physical appearance is marked by contradictions: "[H]is eyes seemed to be slightly slanted, so that he looked like a pale Chinese or like pictures of the Devil, except that he was smooth-faced and benign" (ibid.).

Herb's potential sexual ambiguity becomes obvious when a youthful male co-worker named Brian appears on the farm. As it turns out, Herb and Brian are very close and actually live together. Brian, who always acts in a coarse and vulgar fashion, is fired for an indecent proposal to one of the farm girls, Gladys. Reflecting upon the incident later, the narrator comes to the following conclusion: "I decided that

Brian was Herb's lover, and that Gladys really was trying to get attention from Herb, and that that was why Brian had humiliated her" ("TS" 74). Notably, the character of Herb seems untouched by these moments of vulgarity and madness. While Brian is called "pervert," "filthy," and "maniac" ("TS" 71), Herb remains unfazed by the nasty accusations and manages to keep up a sense of poise and solemnity. When Brian is chased off the farm, the narrator notices a strange expression on Herb's face that she can only connect to a sense of shame.

> But what would he be ashamed of? [...] It's enough for me now just to think of Herb's face with that peculiar, stricken look; to think of Brian monkeying in the shade of Herb's dignity; to think of my own mystified concentration on Herb, my need to catch him out, and then move in and stay close to him. How attractive, how delectable, the prospect of intimacy is, with the very person who will never grant it. ("TS" 74)

The character of Herb is not only marked as different, reserved, and inaccessible, but he is also imbued with "a sense of promise and [...] perfect, impenetrable mystery" ("TS" 68).

In "The Turkey Season," the enigma of the 'Other' becomes an expression of life itself, its riddles and diversity, its manifold appearances. Opposites attract, the narrator muses – since life seems to aim at the reconciliation and merging of all its aspects. "Isn't it true that people like Herb – dignified, secretive, honorable people – will often choose somebody like Brian, will waste their helpless love on some vicious, silly person, who is not even evil, or a monster, but just some importunate nuisance?" ("TS" 74) Life itself is strange and often unfamiliar, Munro tells us in the story. What she is interested in are not classifications and categories, but relationships and possibilities. "I don't want to go into the question whether Herb was homosexual or not," the narrator informs us, "because the definition is of no use to me. I think that he probably was, but maybe he was not" ("TS" 65). Herb is, she concludes, "not a puzzle so arbitrarily solved" (ibid.). The mystery surrounding the character of Herb is "never fully solved," as Walter Rintoul Martin has observed (136). Munro needs to keep it ambiguous for which reasons Herb feels drawn to Brian and if this attraction really has a sexual dimension. Her resistance in the narrative to create coherent identities contributes to the story's 'queer sensibility,' embracing the ambiguous and deviant as part of complex identity structures that can never be fully explained or deciphered.

By including four different female characters in her portrayal of the conundrum surrounding Herb, Munro "achieves the effect of a spectrum" (Martin 136-37). While Gladys is identified by her restrained gentility and the first-person narrator by her insecurity and shyness, Lily and Marjorie are rather marked by a sense of coarseness and even brutality. Through these indicators Munro constructs a complexity within the story that matches the ambiguity associated with the character of Herb. "We all

wanted to see the flicker of sexuality in him, hear it in his voice" ("TS" 66). Yet, this "curious expectation" (ibid.) projected onto Herb is never fulfilled.

This sense of unresolved tension is also conveyed in the final passage of "The Turkey Season," in which the three female characters, all of them infatuated with the unreachable Herb, hold hands and chant in the snow. It is this peculiar scenery that Munro, in her introduction to *The Moons of Jupiter*, picks as epitomizing the gist of "The Turkey Season." "When I think of the story," she writes,

> I think of the moment when Marjorie and Lily and the girl come out of the turkey barn, and the snow is falling, and they link arms, and sing. I think there should be a queer bright moment like that in every story, and somehow that is what the story is about. ("Introduction" xv)

This "queer bright moment," as Munro phrases it, is the essence of life as it shimmers through in fiction. In her depictions of the enigmatic, pleasurable, and rich aspects of living, Munro comes closest to producing a reality effect. "Only a few writers," one reviewer claims, "continue to create those full-bodied miniature universes of the old school."[8] Munro's loving realism goes hand in hand with her recognizable appreciation of queer figures in the broadest sense. Like Henry James's 'figure in the carpet' that epitomizes the secret of life as captured in realistic fiction, Munro's stories work on a subliminal level. They unfold in our imagination and promise to expose the mysteries and oddities of their characters. Thus conceived, the tales resist a form of queer aesthetics associated with masquerade and excessive theatricality. Instead, Munro presents us with a different form of 'queer aesthetics' that stresses the experiences of otherness and deviation as a pleasurable part of the ambiguous, odd, and multi-faceted reality of individual identities and relations within her stories.

'All in the Family' – Eccentricity and Normalcy in "A Queer Streak"

Munro's story "A Queer Streak" (1985) is a good example of the author's technique of showing real life through its queer side narratives. The short tale, which imitates the format of the epic novel, delineates the history of a whole family in Ottawa, in which virtually every member is eccentric, to say the least. There is Violet, at first a seemingly reasonable character who later burns her family documents in an orgy of desperation and meets her true love in the thorny bushes in the thicket after a car accident. There is Violet's father King Billy who shares his name with "a dapple-gray horse that was their driver" ("QS" 209). His wife, Aunt Ivie, who has a "dark, puzzled, grudging voice" ("QS" 210), has lived near a lake as a single woman for so long that "[n]obody ever thought she would marry" ("QS" 211). And there is her sister, "chubby

8 Anne Tyler for *New Republic*; cover text of Munro's *The Progress of Love*.

little Dawn Rose" ("QS" 226) who, at age fourteen, seems innocent, but sends sadistic hate letters to King Billy.

The story reaches an ironic twist when the "queer streak" mentioned in the story's title becomes contrasted with the apparent normalcy outside the family. Violet's engagement to the handsome Anglican minister Trevor Auston by no means signifies that her life now becomes 'normal.' To the contrary, her experiences in the United Church are marked as even more peculiar than those she made before in her unusual family. Almost everything – except eating, as the omniscient narrator sarcastically remarks – is regarded as a sin: "Cardplaying was a sin […]; dancing was a sin for some, and moviegoing was a sin for some, and going to any kind of entertainment except a concert of sacred music […] was a sin for all on Sundays" ("QS" 217). Although Violet tries hard to get accustomed to the strictness of the church, she has to learn that the congregation's rules are also applied to her family. When she informs her fiancé about the dark aspect in her kinship (namely, her sister having sent the hate letters), the minister immediately breaks off the engagement and stops seeing her. Aunt Ivie, acquainted with the "hillbilly squabble" ("QS" 223) of small town life, realizes at once what this scandalous revelation will mean: "They'll say we got a queer streak in the family now" ("QS" 227).

What strikes us as 'odd' in the story is not so much the stock of crazy ideas that inspires Dawn Rose to engage in her foolish charade, but rather the oppressive atmosphere of "emptiness, rumor, and absurdity" ("QS" 223) that seems to rule small town life. The minister's heartless reactions and his ignorant blaming of "female insanity that strikes at that age" ("QS" 230) are marked as unjustified and rude. After Dawn Rose moves to Edmonton, gets married and has a son, the 'queer streak' in the family seems to vanish. "No strange behavior or queerness or craziness ever surfaced in her again" ("QS" 233). The sentence is loaded with irony, since the son that Dawn Rose will give birth to, will, in fact, be gay. (This context is foreshadowed in the concise ending of the paragraph: "She had a son.")

Next to the illustrious crowd of utterly queer characters in the short story, Dawn Rose's gay son Dane and his partner Theo seem like paragons of normality. When Dane, who lives with Theo in the family house, is congratulated on having "finally turned up a serious girlfriend" ("QS" 241), the gay man corrects the statement *calmly*: "A man friend" (ibid.) Of that same gentle nature are Dane's reactions when Violet gives him an excited phone call after the family secret concerning the hate letters is about to be exposed. When Dane receives that call, he and his partner are sitting in front of the television set, like two couch potatoes. The 'queer streak' in the family that the story's title refers to has apparently dissolved into utter normalcy. Dane, a "broad-shouldered ruddy man with the worn outlines of a teddy bear" ("QS" 240) may "look like his mother [the crazy author of the threat messages]" (ibid.), yet his behavior marks him as an entirely average and, what's more, affable character who

just happens to be gay. "There's nought [nowt] so queer as folk – there is nothing as strange as ordinary people" (CDO), an old Northern English expression goes.[9]

Within the framework of her story, Munro fundamentally challenges the conceptions of 'normalcy' and 'queerness,' suggesting that they are merely cultural constructions. Dane's being gay is culturally coded as 'queerness'; in the story, however, it is rather the other family members to which the term 'queer' is applied. This usage of the concept 'queer' indicates a blending of identity categories in Munro's fiction. Very often, Munro's characters are marked as 'queer,' although they are actually defined as heterosexual. Poppy Cullender, the unfortunate drug dealer in another Munro story, is also not necessarily gay, but definitely "queer" ("Chaddeleys" 21), as the narrator points out. It is the character's queerness that makes Poppy an outsider in society. "Poor Poppy," the narrator's mother sighs at one point, "There were always those that were out to get him. He was very smart, in his way. Some people can't survive in a place like this. It's not permitted. No" (ibid.). Not only can we discern a certain tone of regret in the mother's statement; through Munro's technique of focalization, this feeling is also transferred to the reader. The case of Poppy Cullender is symptomatic of the author's negotiation of 'queer characters.' Their otherness is seen as a natural – yet often ostracized and culturally condemned – part of reality itself, a small but significant component in the rich and diverse mosaic of life.

Conclusion – Munro's 'Queer, Bright Moments'

I have argued in this essay that what Alice Munro has created in her short fiction is a distinctive mode of composition that involves markers of 'queerness' on the formal as well as on the content level. As I have shown with regard to four selected stories, the composition of Munro's texts is marked by elements of surprise, ambiguity, and unruliness. The author's storylines seem permeated by disorderly structures which encourage the reader to challenge established codes of thinking and become acquainted with social acts of boundary crossing. This *queer aesthetics*, as I have termed it, seems deeply ingrained in the very heart of Munro's writing. As such, it becomes interwoven with what has been defined as Alice Munro's "own unique narrative rhythm" (May xii).

The same observation can made in regard to the character constellation in Munro's works. It would be an understatement to say that Munro's protagonists are simply 'odd' or 'peculiar'. While often firmly rooted in society, they are marked as utterly extraordinary characters. Munro herself uses the words 'queer' and, to a certain extent, 'gay' surprisingly often in her texts, always in an ambiguous, yet vaguely affirmative, way, thereby referring to characters and situations that seem curious and unique. The semantic fields of 'oddness' and 'homosexuality' are sometimes blended, leaving it up to the reader to decide if the characters' deviance is really of a

9 See Cambridge Dictionaries Online, http://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/britisch/there-s-nowt-so-queer-as-folk. Accessed on April 17, 2015.

sexual nature. Most of Munro's 'queer' protagonists are marked as highly enigmatic, even contradictory. The enigma of the 'Other,' her works seem to suggest, is also a universal one, that of life's diversity *per se*. Munro's art, as one critic has succinctly phrased it, thus imitates "the tangled yarn of that border area where our drives live us" (Bloom 1). In this sense, Munro's 'queer' characters, far from being exoticized, function as fascinating evidence that the 'Other' is always an integral element of the self, an expression of its multi-faceted shape in a heterogeneous culture.

By the same token, Munro's tales offer a deep *queer aesthetics* in that they employ idiosyncratic and anti-normative angles of storytelling. Her writings do not fulfill the reader's expectations of connecting the queer to the exaggerated and extraordinary. Rather, Munro invites the reader to discover a variety of queer moments, characters, and relations portrayed from various narrative points of view. Her stories can be interpreted as narrative resistance to stereotypical conceptions of 'queerness' and 'normalcy' in that they celebrate the unusual as an integral element of everyday life. While in "Boys and Girls" we are asked to question the restrictions of established gender hierarchies, "Dance of the Happy Shades" encourages us to challenge the normative codes linked to age (the protagonist is an elderly woman who is still organizing parties). "The Turkey Season," possibly one of Munro's most intricate stories, invites us to look behind the mystery of its main character and recognize the complexities of life. Finally, in "A Queer Streak," the concept of 'queerness' already mentioned in the story's title is surprisingly applied to every single individual in the tale's family except the protagonist's gay nephew. All in all, Munro's stories seem to strongly resist stereotypes and engage in a challenging perspective towards the ordinary. While many characters are marked as 'queer,' they are not necessarily gay. What they do share is an affiliation with the strange, yet vaguely familiar sides of life.

This sense of 'queer normality' is accentuated in one of Munro's most unusual short stories, "Dulse," in which the 45-year old female protagonist Lydia experiences a kind of psychological awakening. In the story's odd climax, Lydia has breakfast with an elderly gentleman named Mr. Stanley, who tells her about the American writer Willa Cather who once advised a friend of his on marriage problems. When Lydia protests that "Willa Cather lived with a woman" (57) and was thus not qualified to speak about marriage, Mr. Stanley mildly corrects her and points out that Cather's advice was indeed very helpful, coming from a worldly-wise person. The story concludes with Lydia wondering "if Willa Cather ever ate dulse" (58). This enigmatic ending, that finally recurs to the story's title, points to another paradox – the unusual within the ordinary. The everyday act of eating is marked here as something queer, due to the nature of the meal, namely dulse, a sea lettuce cherished as a snack food by some people on the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. The answer to the question could be the same that is already given for the other peculiar characters of Munro's short stories when it comes to their sexual identity: Yes *and* no. The mere thought of Willa Cather eating dulse in her mansion in Greenwich Village, possibly together with her partner of 45 years, Edith Lewis, is answer enough.

This image is one of those 'queer bright moments,' which, as Alice Munro has so beautifully phrased it, should be part of every short story. Thanks to Munro's masterful use of language, these 'queer bright moments' have also become part of our imagination.

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