



Trapped in class? Material manifestations of poverty and prosperity in Alice Munro’s “Royal Beatings” and “The Beggar Maid”

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Abstract

This article argues that material objects in Canadian writer Alice Munro’s short fiction both reflect socio-economic concerns of pre- and post-WWII Canadian society and complicate common conceptions of deprivation and material ambition. The analyses of “Royal Beatings” and “The Beggar Maid” demonstrate how Munro describes economic hardships, class anxieties, and social discrimination and distinction through items of material culture such as clothes, furniture, and paintings. These objects and their symbolic significance draw attention to the conflicts resulting from the interplay of her characters’ upbringings, loyalties, and their longings and aspirations.

Keywords Canadian literature · Alice Munro · Short fiction · Materiality · Poverty · Class · Gender · Post-WWII socio-economic transformations in Canada

I don’t take up a story and follow it as if it were a road, taking me somewhere, with views and neat diversions along the way. I go into it, and move back and forth and settle here and there, and stay in it for a while. It’s more like a house. Everybody knows what a house does, how it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way. This is the nearest I can come to explain what a story does for me, and what I want my stories to do for other people.

(Munro 1993, p. 825)

In what is probably one of her most of frequently cited quotations, Canadian writer Alice Munro (*1931) bestows a particular and extratextual materiality on her fiction: she compares her short stories to a house. And in true Munro fashion, she employs this metaphor not to conjure up any obvious associations with walls, construction

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work, or building materials, but to conceptualize the composition of a story as a process that familiarizes an unknown place into a space that invites discovery. In her metaphor, the material dimension of the house is used to evoke solid, physical limitations. These ‘enclosed spaces,’ however, do not symbolize a divide, but create distinctive units of experience that invite and forge connections rather than separation. Munro’s comparison encourages her readers to consider the material objects in her stories—from rooms, floors, and doors to furniture, and ordinary as well as extraordinary items—as literal and figurative building blocks of her fictional construction of human lives.

This article will proceed from this recognition of the double significance of material objects in Alice Munro’s short fiction in order to examine a particular aspect of their materiality: the depiction of poverty and social mobility through items and articles of material culture. It will look at two stories by Munro to propose that material objects in her fiction serve two major purposes: first, they reflect pre- and post-WWII concerns of Canadian society, which includes economic depression as well as an increasing economic participation of women thanks to their greater access to higher education and the expansion of the service sector. And second, they complicate common and stereotypical conceptions of deprivation and socio-economic ambition. The article will locate Munro’s early fiction in its biographical, cultural, and socio-economic context; the subsequent exemplary analyses of “Royal Beatings” and “The Beggar Maid” will then demonstrate how she describes economic hardships, class anxieties, and social discrimination and distinction through items of material culture such as clothes, furniture, paintings, and of course houses and their architecture. These objects and their symbolic significance draw attention to her characters’ upbringing and loyalties, their longings and aspirations, and the conflicts that result from characters’ struggling with both.

To briefly outline the essay’s theoretical approach, the interest in the materiality of literary texts represents in some ways a return to the original motivation of Marxist literary criticism: to identify and analyse the social and economic realities in which creative writing has been conceived, produced, and received. Marxist scholars have understood this material dimension of literature as inevitably determining its ideology, and have consequently paid particular attention both to the conditions of literary production and to the fictional representation of socio-economic circumstances. Since the late twentieth century, cultural materialism has further extended this focus to also consider the interplay of material, cultural, and ideological forces, to draw attention to the historicity of texts, and to examine the aesthetic dimension of both. Therefore, the actual textual presence and fictional representation of objects of material culture has attracted less scholarly attention in recent decades than, for example, the question of the involvement of literature in ideological discourses.

The renewed critical exploration of materiality in literature therefore proceeds from established knowledge but promises fresh insights into the narrative, semantic, and symbolic significance of material objects. It also provides a crucial complement and counterbalance to current debates initiated by so-called poverty studies and its interest in the literary depiction of deprivation and precarity. Further developing Marxist and cultural materialist perspectives insofar as they explore the representation of disadvantaged circumstances as connected with and “encompassing

socio-cultural exclusion and a lack of agency, opportunities and access (to knowledge, traditions, rights and capabilities),” scholars in this field argue that recognizing such interdependencies must reinvigorate a critical “discussion about class” (Korte/Zipp 2014, p. 2). As Barbara Korte in particular has shown, literature is ideally suited for such considerations, since it is understood to have “a special capacity to present poverty as the multi-faceted experience of individual human beings rather than in the form of anonymous statistics” (Korte 2010/11, p. 293). Interestingly, this capacity can be read as confronting the established socio-economic and political definition of poverty as a mere “lack” not only “in terms [...] of material, but also human and cultural capitals” (ibid.). It also deviates from contextual appreciations of social realism, which foregrounds the representation of “the dignity of class solidarity” when depicting working-class lives (Rimstead 2001, p. 105). The new poverty studies dismiss such readings as sentimental and instead focus on literary narratives on deprivation that denounce the debilitating impact of neoliberal economics in order to overcome them. With this aim in mind, their analysis of how poverty is fictionalized today also critically considers gender conventions, aspects of ethnicity, age, and education, and forms of individual and social agency.

In spite of her depictions of economic struggles and the strong presence of material culture particularly in her stories from the 1960s and 1970s, there is little critical exploration of the significance of these motifs in Alice Munro’s fiction. One scholar who discussed her creative translation of deprivation with explicit reference to Munro’s use of material objects is Roxanne Rimstead, who defines poverty as a cultural force that has affected Canadian conceptions of the nation, its communities, and even narrative genres (Rimstead 2001, p. 67). In Munro’s stories, Rimstead identifies what she calls the author’s “gaze from a distance” when describing the houses of poor people in particular, a gaze which characterizes poverty as a condition that needs to be overcome and left behind, if necessary at the price of “destroying” the sense of selfhood and identity that had been formed by it (Rimstead 2001, p. 104). She categorizes Munro as a writer of “social embarrassment” who “describes a poor house and poor lives [from] an accultured perspective which shows only the distanced view of poverty and never [...] the social logic [...] of class stratification” (Rimstead 2001, p. 105). Munro’s imagery of the material culture of the lower classes, Rimstead argues, does not “urge[...] the reader to inhabit the emotional spaces of marginalization through empathy and understanding” but instead aims “to control and survey the scene of poverty for its representational and aesthetic impact” (Rimstead 2001, p. 216). As the statements show, Rimstead’s approach to literary poverty representations is informed by a political objective to assess texts with regard to their corresponding to the mode of social realism, which would either motivate readers to develop sympathy with the plight of the poor, or that portray the latter’s cohesion as an inspiring moral achievement.

Rimstead’s critique of what she sees as Munro’s ironic detachment provides a vital strategy for reading the Canadian writer’s stories, but it is necessary to complicate the critical understanding of the aesthetic and material presentation of want in her fiction. Munro aestheticizes material objects to draw attention to individual and communal mechanisms of socio-cultural participation and exclusion in a way that represents both poverty and (the achievement of) material comfort as multi-layered

experiences—and that draws attention to the pitfalls of social mobility. Moreover, she historicizes a particular, small-town, white working- and lower middle-class experience in a period in which Canada was building a national self-confidence. Following the Massey Report (1951), which saw Canadian culture in danger of being colonized by the dominance of US-American cultural products, and which recommended the strengthening of cultural institutions and the arts to foster a national identity, various programmes and initiatives were introduced to support Canadian culture (Kloof 1994, p. 185). The subsequent flourishing of Canadian writing in the 1960s coincides with Munro's own social advancement and establishment as a successful writer: her first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, which contains stories written over two decades, was published in 1968 and won the Governor General's Award, Canada's most distinguished literary prize.

These socio-economic and cultural contexts and transformations have been identified as a significant impact on Munro's writing: many of her stories depict the lives and communities of white workers on the brink of lower middle-class existences, contemplating their hopes, achievements, and class anxieties in connection with the cultural materiality of poverty and deprivation in twentieth-century Canadian society (see, for example, Howells 2016, p. 79, p. 95). Born as Alice Ann Laidlaw into a Scottish-Irish family in Wingham, Southern Ontario, Munro's early fiction also often portrays lives and communities of rural and small-town Canada, which explains why she was initially viewed as a regional writer. And while "Munro represents the Ontario region as defined by the routines of farm work and rigid small-town conventions" (Berndt 2018, p. 306), critics have noticed that she also problematizes

the texture of lived experience and the impossibility of accurate representation. In stories and story cycles rich with detail about the run-down houses, ramshackle yards, piles of junk, and ill-maintained fields of poor districts in southwestern Ontario, Munro's use of the catalog and her unusual combinations of adjectives indicate her interest both in a form of photographic realism and in the way that language derails representation to become its own subject. (Fiamengo 2004, p. 251–252)

Munro herself asserts the influence of US-American writers like Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, and Eudora Welty, because "'the region I'm writing about has many things in common with the American South [... Rural Ontario is a] closed rural society with a pretty homogenous Scotch-Irish racial strain going slowly to decay'" (Stainsby 1971, as qtd. in Ross 1986, p. 296). The author described her family as belonging to "the privileged poor" (McGill 2002, n.p.), who lived on "the wrong side of the river, in Morris-Turnberry Township," the poor part of Wingham, Ontario (Simonds 2016, p. 28), "in a 'kind of little ghetto where all the bootleggers and prostitutes and hangers-on [had settled ...] It was a community of outcasts'" (McGill 2002, n.p.). Both her parents had grown up on small farms, and her father provided for the family by establishing first a fox farm and then a turkey farm, endeavours interrupted by the Depression, during which he went bankrupt and took up work as security guard at a local foundry. Her mother, a former schoolteacher who developed Parkinson's disease when Alice was twelve, had ambitions for her daughter, hoping that Alice would

be able to escape their humble situation and become ““a middle-class girl in a much posher place than Wingham”” (as qtd. in Ross 1986, p. 297). During her summer holidays, Alice worked as a maid for a wealthy Toronto family, and later began studying English and Journalism at the University of Western Ontario.

Coral Ann Howells has commented on how the experience of material deprivation not only within her own family, but in her community, has influenced Munro’s narratives, analysing how her “characters try to sort their lives, and those of others, into a plausible narrative form” (Howells 1998, p. 74) amidst

[w]idespread historical developments—world wars, mass education, female emancipation—[which] are enacted in [... the literary realm of] small-town life as the locus of change and continuity. [...] Recording [stories of local and oral ...] history is especially important in a postcolonial country like Canada, which is marking out its [...] identities, reflecting the diversity of immigrant and pioneer cultures. In contrast to the grand narrative sweep of old-fashioned imperial history, local and popular history, the history of families and communities, entails a piecing together of fragmentary evidence. (Howells 1998, p. 78)

It is in the above-mentioned context of a growing national self-assurance and the turn to stories on the side lines of the ‘sweep of old-fashioned imperial history’ that Munro adds the fragment of Scottish-Irish communities to the Canadian mosaic with an explicit focus on people’s material circumstances, and their struggle with the natural environment. In mid-twentieth-century Canada, the shared vision of post-WWII affluence and the appalling living conditions of many First Nations citizens hid from view until well into the 1960s the ‘white’ poverty of elderly people, the country’s large regional income disparities, and the situation of the so-called “working poor,” who occupy

the margin of the labour force. They are frequently the last hired and the first laid off, but even when they are employed they work for low wages and poor benefits. They are seldom able to accumulate savings, and rarely qualify for benefits such as sickness insurance, health and dental plans, private pensions and paid vacations. Their lives are marked by extreme economic insecurity. (Ross/Lochhead 2007, n.p.).

In 1959, the Family Expenditure Survey assigned the status ‘poor’ to “those who spent 70% or more of their income on” material essentials like food, shelter and clothing, in contrast to the “average family [which] was found to be spending 50% of their income on [such] necessities” (Beaujot et al. 2017, n.p.). A decade later, the Economic Council of Canada published a statistic that had used the “low-income measure to estimate the extent of poverty in Canada. It concluded that 27 per cent of the Canadian population lived in [deprivation],” a result that prompted social programmes and welfare plans in subsequent years and decades (Ross/Lochhead 2007, n.p.).

The representation of material culture in Munro’s fiction from the 1960s and 1970s reflects these historical concerns and debates, as the following analyses

of “Royal Beatings” and “The Beggar Maid” will exemplify. These stories were the first of Munro’s to be published by *The New Yorker*, marking the beginning of her renown outside of Canada, and later were included in her original collection *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1977) (Allardice 2013). After *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), this was her second collection written in the literary form of the short story cycle, a genre “especially prominent in North American literature [... that] has sometimes even been considered Canada’s national literary genre” (Nischik 2017, 85), and which sheds light on different stages of the life of the protagonist in order to draw attention to its continuations and disruptions. The stories selected here portray the female protagonist Rose first as a girl, who grows up in humble circumstances and exposed to domestic abuse, and then as a young woman, who attends college on a scholarship and is engaged to the wealthy Patrick. Both stories include various references to material culture in order to characterize Rose and Patrick’s backgrounds and their socio-emotional repercussions, and to problematize the intricacies of social advancement.

“Royal Beatings” is replete with images of material poverty that characterize the environment and the population of the community in which Rose is brought up. Her parents’ house is located in the part of town where

the social structure [...] ran from factory workers and foundry workers down to large improvident families [...] Across the road from them was a blacksmith shop, [...] and a house that had been another store at one time. The Salada Tea sign had never been taken out of the front window; it remained as a proud and interesting decoration though there was no Salada Tea for sale inside. (Munro 2010a, p. 99)

Two objects of material culture represent here the socio-economic and historical circumstances of Rose’s childhood: the store that had been shut down illustrates the impact of the Great Depression of the 1930s, which hit Canada as much as it affected the US but without encouraging analogous measures to fight poverty, economic decline, and unemployment (Helbich 1994, p. 54). The Salada sign of the popular tea brand refers to a product that had been introduced to North America as a luxury commodity before it became a common beverage: it symbolizes imperial trade and exploitation, the immigrants settling in Canada during the colonial era, and the changes of consumer culture. Munro’s material imagery, which indicates past hopes and a modest prosperity, extends to the environmental infrastructure of Rose’s town, where the condition of the street further betrays the community’s deprivation and a general neglect: “There was just a bit of sidewalk, too cracked and tilted for roller-skating, though Rose longed for roller skates and often pictured herself whizzing along in a plaid skirt, agile and fashionable” (Munro 2010a, p. 99). The neglected pavement, a consequence of economic stagnation, is contrasted with another object, the roller skates, which signify individual movement, ambition, and escape; they are desired by a protagonist imaging herself in a ‘plaid skirt,’ a Scottish pattern that links her up with her family’s and the community’s ethnic background.

The material items listed in the description represent Canada’s Scottish-Irish communities through references to their immigration history, the 1930s present of Rose’s childhood, and the prospective post-WWII future of socio-economic

advancement that many Canadians achieved. The latter development is pursued in subsequent stories of the cycle that portray Rose's adult life, her relationships, and her professional success. In "Royal Beatings," however, the focus lies on showing the deprivation caused by the Great Depression that Munro conjures up to contrast it with an implied criticism of the public services' resignation on the one hand, and the citizens' struggle to oppose the decline:

There was one streetlight, a tin flower; then the amenities gave up and there were dirt roads and boggy places, front-yard dumps and strange-looking houses. What made the houses strange-looking were the attempts to keep them from going completely to ruin. With some the attempt had never been made. These were gray and rotted and leaning over, falling into a landscape of scrub hollows, frog ponds, cattails and nettles. Most houses, however, had been patched up with tarpaper, a few fresh shingles, sheets of tin, hammered-out stovepipes, even cardboard. This was, of course, in the days before the war, days of what would later be legendary poverty[.] (Munro 2010a, p. 99)

The attempts to ward off further dereliction are individual, not communal, and they appear to be both stubborn and bewildering, given that they achieve only an effect of 'strange-looking' houses. The somewhat ominous expression leaves the reader wondering about the third-person narrator's bias: does the description acknowledge the people's endeavours, or does it dismiss them as pointless?

What the observation quoted above indicates becomes increasingly obvious over the course of "Royal Beatings" and in the subsequent stories of the collection: Munro's material imagery distinguishes between representing poverty as a socio-economic condition and poor characters dealing with it in different ways. What these characters actually achieve is in this context not as important as the recognition of their attempts as such, even when unsuccessful. One example is the depiction of Rose's family's shared response to the limited space and thin walls of their humble home that makes it difficult to retain a minimum of privacy, particularly when answering calls of nature:

The door did not fit, the walls were only beaverboard. The result was that even the tearing of a piece of toilet paper, the shifting of a haunch, was audible to those working or talking or eating in the kitchen. They were all familiar with each other's nether voices [...]. And they were all most prudish people. So no one ever seemed to hear, or be listening, and no reference was made. The person creating the noises in the bathroom was not connected with the person who walked out. (Munro 2010a, p. 99)

As outlined above, Rimstead classifies Munro as a writer of "social embarrassment," and the involuntary exposure to the bathroom noises of others certainly is potentially mortifying (and hence not discussed by the family members) (Rimstead 2001, p. 105). In the wider context of the characters' relations and their personalities, which includes their inability to communicate tenderness and regard for one another's well-being, the insufficient accommodation effectively

materializes their general discomfort with intimacy. The moment of embarrassment, however, is offset when the text comically ridicules their “nether voices” as “not only [...] their more explosive moments but [also ...] their intimate sighs and growls and pleas and statements.” (Munro 2010a, p. 99)

Through connecting with and deploying objects of material culture for characterization, the stories delineate different dimensions of indigence. “Royal Beatings” portrays Rose’s parents as ‘poor’ not only because of their material want, but also because they remain emotionally inaccessible to their daughter. In addition, they are shown to deny the girl intellectual encouragement, and her father punishes Rose with the eponymous ‘royal beatings’ whenever his wife regards her behaviour as wilful and obstreperous. “Don’t you think you’re somebody” and “who do you think you are?” are phrases repeatedly expressed by Rose’s stepmother Flo, whose insistence on obedience and humility is, ironically, both made plain and subverted through another material reference: the story shows Flo on her knees, scrubbing the floor, when she scorns what she calls “Rose’s smart-aleck behaviour, rudeness [...] and conceit.”¹ As Sabrina Francesconi demonstrates, references to a room’s flooring can be “read [...] as a gateway into the realm of Munro’s [...] stories” that function “on a referential level, describing the semantic space where stories are set” but which also have a “semiotic function, [...] encompassing both psychological and socio-cultural values” (Francesconi 2015, p. 88). In order to clean the floor, Flo needs a “scrub pail and the brush and the rag and the pad for her knees, a dirty red rubber pad” (Munro 2010a, p. 106), objects of manual labour listed in a sequence that create internal, masculine half rhymes (‘scrub’/‘brush,’ ‘rag’/‘pad’) followed by an alliteration (‘red rubber’), which communicates Flo’s persistent and repetitive efforts to properly cleaning the house. This combination of work tools and rhyme scheme “anticipat[es] the ‘royal beatings’ Rose will be administered by her father. [The object of the brush] is also functional in describing Flo’s character, her intense energy and theatrical attitude” (Francesconi 2015, p. 91). In the scene, Flo’s increasing agitation while scrubbing is contrasted with Rose’s behaviour, who is sitting on the table, her legs dangling, and looking down upon Flo working away underneath. She contemplates the physical and creative efforts her stepmother had invested into this linoleum flooring, which was put together from different ends, “ingeniously trimmed and fitted together [...] into a] satisfying arrangement of rectangles, triangles, [and] some other shape whose name [Rose] is trying to remember” (Munro 2010a, p. 107). From her own point of view, Rose is not idle while her stepmother tries to scrub away the family dirt. The girl’s ‘occupation’ in the scene, while undoubtedly failing to pacify the situational tension, gestures towards Rose’s adult escape from manual labour through her profession as a TV journalist who is working not with a brush on the floor, but with words, that is immaterial objects broadcasted through the air.

¹ Munro 2010a, p. 106. Munro’s publishers felt that the cultural implications of *Who Do You Think You Are?* would not be understood beyond Canadian borders: for the US-American edition, the title of the collection was changed to the less ambiguous *The Beggar Maid*.

The uncouth representation of Rose's stepmother clashes aesthetically and semi-otically with the material object used to represent her late biological mother who died when Rose was a baby: an egg cup. While "[n]o books or clothes or pictures of her mother remained" and Rose has no memories of her, she believes that her parents' life together then had been

an orderly, far gentler and more ceremonious time, with little touches of affluence. She had nothing to go on but some eggcups her mother had bought, with a pattern of vines and birds on them, delicately drawn as if with red ink; the pattern was beginning to wear away. (Munro 2010a, p. 97)

Similar to the initial depictions of their community's derelict infrastructure and architecture, the elegant eggcups symbolize material comfort and security located in a not so distant past. Rose's longing for an escape from their deprived circumstances is emboldened by her belief that, if successful, she might resume a style of living that she associates with her mother, for whom she also longs. Compared with the 'delicate patterns' of her biological mother's eggcups, her stepmother Flo's construction of their floor is only 'satisfying'—it will, however, and fittingly, give Rose a proper footing, as the subsequent discussion will show.

In "The Beggar Maid," another story in Munro's short story cycle *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Rose attends college and begins a relationship with Patrick, a fellow student from a rich family that she will eventually marry and divorce again a few years later, as the concluding prolepsis reveals. The title refers to the symbolically most significant material item of the story, the painting *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* (1844) by pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones.² This art object, which Patrick mentions when telling Rose that she was "like the Beggar Maid" and that he was "glad you're poor. You're so lovely" (Munro 2010b, p. 133), illuminates a central concern and influence of the text, the "romantic fantasies [...] that] relate Munro's fiction to the traditional subject matter of women's novels[,] while at the same time [...] show[ing] her ironic reversion of popular romance plots" (Howells 1998, pp. 59–60). The irony is derived both from the fact that marrying a 'beggar maid' is actually Patrick's fantasy, and from the banal-hostile ending of their relationship (as opposed to the folk legend, in which the African King Cophetua lived happily ever after with his beggar maid) (Delahunty and Dignen 2012, p. 90). Patrick admires the painting, and his idea of Rose as an underprivileged damsel in distress he has come to save from deprivation allows him to view himself as a chivalric character. He is, however, not the protagonist: while his feelings introduce the story, his vision of himself is not shared by Rose, the unreliable focalizer, who is well aware of his lack of self-confidence and social awkwardness, and who agrees to go out with him not because of the security and socio-economic improvement offered by his wealth, but because she is intrigued by his submission to this courtship fantasy.

² The beggar maid myth is also featured in the poem of the same name by Alfred Lord Tennyson. See Löschnigg (2016, p. 85).

In addition to the eponymous painting, which also signifies the cultural-aesthetic knowledge that Rose gains while studying for her degree in the liberal arts, the story features clothing, furniture, and food to materially represent either poverty or wealth, and sometimes the conflict between these worlds of experience. Such material representation in the story reveals the characters' presumptions of class that are then complicated by their ironically reversed gender roles. And both gender and class determine their interpretation of the Victorian painting: far from corresponding with Patrick's pre-Raphaelite-inspired vision of her, Rose is neither "meek and voluptuous" nor hoping for what she dismissively perceives as the maiden image's "milky surrender, [...] helplessness and gratitude" (Munro 2010b, p. 134). Rose had not heard of Burne-Jones' work before, and looks it up only to understand Patrick's affection; she is neither interested in the painting's aesthetic value nor in its significance in art history. Rose also has little appreciation for the *objets d'art* in her new landlady's house "[...] at the time"—as clause and punctuation emphasize, that would change (Munro 2010b, p. 125). The text suggests that Rose will come to embrace beauty for its appeal eventually, but her initial exposure to this new world of affluence has her embrace not ideas, but more substantial intakes:

[T]here was never enough to eat, and she had taken to buying doughnuts and chocolate bars and hiding them in her room. [...] She craved sweets. Often in class or in the middle of a movie she started thinking about fudge cupcakes, brownies, some kind of cake [her landlady] bought at the European bakery; it was filled with dollops of rich bitter chocolate that ran out on the plate. (Munro 2010b, p. 126, p. 137)

The quite literal greed with which she consumes various dainties mirrors the emotional "greed, greed" she later purports was the reason why she returned to Patrick after having broken off their engagement (Munro 2010b, p. 149). Years later and after their divorce, she develops a narrative about her class anxieties, claiming she had craved the security and comfort that marrying Patrick would provide. This version of her decision, however, is invented only as communicative strategy to satisfy others. In the initial stage of their relationship, Rose's cravings are visceral, and she is not ruminating on them. It is not a coincidence that she is greedy for sweets rather than wanting savoury, healthy, or otherwise nourishing sustenance. Far from aestheticizing poverty, the story demonstrates that Rose had not suffered from hunger; she had 'suffered' from never having been able to indulge in delicate desserts. And it is a rather delicious irony that her hunger for luscious treats easily surpasses her longing for sexual intimacy with Patrick:

She was pleased when it [their first sexual encounter] was accomplished; she did not have to counterfeit that. They had done what others did, they had done what lovers did. She thought of celebration. What occurred to her was something delicious to eat, a sundae at Boomers, apple pie with hot cinnamon sauce. She was not at all prepared for Patrick's idea, which was to stay where they were and try again. (Munro 2010b, p. 138)

Unlike her satisfaction about having mastered the task of sexual intimacy, which betrays a common wish to conform to social conventions, the pleasure that Rose experiences when consuming sweets is genuine and sensual. Her returning to Patrick will be guided by something she will find as tempting as sugary treats, but this time, it is something less substantial: an idea, a fantasy, “a compelling picture of herself” (Munro 2010b, p. 149).

Whereas art objects and foodstuffs connect Rose’s sensual longings with her gender and upbringing, items of clothing and furniture in the story draw more attention to the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of poverty and social advancement. The story portrays Rose’s struggle to understand the unfamiliar knowledge conventions of a humanities’ education, but refuses to draw her in a way that would invite sympathy or admiration for her transgression of socio-cultural boundaries. This absence of empathy is made plausible by the protagonist’s attitude of participating observation: she considers her studies and her encounter with Patrick with an anthropologist’s curiosity. Her life at college forces Rose to comprehend that socio-economic improvement requires not only an academic degree, but becoming aware of and obtaining knowledge about cultural conventions of class. For example, before she began her higher education,

Rose had never heard of the working class. [... Now, the place she used to call home] exposed such embarrassing sad poverty in people who never thought themselves poor. Poverty was not just wretchedness, as Dr. Henshawe [her new landlady] seemed to think, it was not just deprivation. It meant having those ugly tube lights and being proud of them. It meant continual talk of money and malicious talk about new things people had bought and whether they were paid for. It meant pride and jealousy flaring over something like the new pair of plastic curtains, imitating lace[.] (Munro 2010b, p. 126)

The story conveys cultural stereotypes of the poor through everyday items (‘new things people had bought’) and home equipment and decoration (‘ugly tube lights’ and ‘plastic curtains’) in combination with a free indirect discourse that merges the recognition of material want with aesthetic observation and social prejudice. The voice behind the considerations, however, remains obscure: it could represent her landlady’s upper middle-class notions of ‘culture’ as equivalent to civility and access to a liberal arts’ education, which empowers an individual to distinguish between cheap imitation and original, and to appreciate the latter. The indirect discourse could also indicate Rose’s increasing anxiety about her class background, her attempt to leave behind what she learns to dismiss as ‘uncultured’ and tacky. Last but not least, the passage allows for a third reading of this representation of poverty, for in addition to echoing either her landlady or Rose’s conceptions, it can be read as showing Rose using familiar objects of her material culture to contemplate social prejudices as she becomes aware of them. The suggestion that ‘Rose had never heard of the working class’ emphasizes her entry into a new socio-economic realm that is alien to her upbringing. A similar implication can be derived from her conversation with her stepmother Flo about her town’s sanitary infrastructure:

“This would have to be the last part of town where they put the sewers,” Flo said.

“Of course,” Rose said coolly. “This is the working-class part of town.”

“*Working class?*” said Flo. “Not if the ones around here can help it.” (Munro 2010b, p. 126)

Again, the story leaves the reader confused, refusing to clarify whether the label ‘working class’ is being rejected or whether Flo dismisses her neighbours as lazy. Such comments indicate the social and circumstantial definition of poverty, outlined by recent poverty studies, which claim that “deprivation [also involves the lack of ...] the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights” (UN2001, qtd. in Korte 2010/11, p. 293). Based on this definition, however, “The Beggar Maid” Rose swiftly ceases to be poor, for her scholarship gives her a certain economic independence and the choices and security—and the resources to enjoy sugary treats—that come with it. Through her higher education and her new acquaintances, she also gradually acquires the ‘capabilities to enjoy her civil and cultural rights.’ Is poverty in the story then, as Rimstead suggests, indeed only a state that simply has to be overcome, a condition identified with the aesthetic want of ‘ugly tube lights’ and devoid of uplifting ‘class solidarity’?

In her relationship with Patrick, Rose experiences class difference and expects class discrimination. On their first visit of Patrick’s family, her effort to leave a good impression requires, or so she believes, new and more elegant clothes. She taps into the two sources of provision she can draw on—connections, and her own body:

She had borrowed Dr. Henshawe’s raincoat for the coastal weather. It was a bit long, but otherwise all right, due to Dr. Henshawe’s classically youthful tastes. She had sold more blood and bought a fuzzy angora sweater, peach-colored, which was extremely messy and looked like a small-town girl’s idea of dressing up. She always realized things like that as soon as a purchase was made, not before. (Munro 2010b, p. 139)

In spite of this highly symbolic sacrifice, Rose soon ceases to regard the recognition of people of higher status as important when she realizes that she lacks the fashion sense to conceal her background. In addition, she develops an acute dislike of Patrick’s repeated corrections of her accent and choice of vocabulary, his pygmalionesque attempts at transforming her into the girlfriend of his fantasy. The combination of his devotion to her as his ‘beggar maid’ and his criticism of her lower-class manners demonstrate both the possibility of class transgression through education in post-WWII Canadian society, and the persistence of cultural conventions tied to material and class privilege. His attempts echo Rose’s own anxieties, but interestingly do not substantiate them: instead, Patrick’s criticism helps Rose to overcome her insecurity:

Patrick loved her. What did he love? Not her accent, which he was trying hard to alter, though she was often mutinous and unreasonable, declaring in the face of all evidence that she did not have a country accent, everybody talked the way she did. [...] She could make him flinch at a vulgar word, a drawling tone. All the time, moving and speaking, she was destroying herself for him, yet he looked right through her, through all the distractions she was creating, and loved some obedient image she herself could not see. (Munro 2010b, p. 139)

Rose finally reasserts her identity by introducing Patrick to her family and hometown. This confrontation fails to destroy Patrick's 'beggar maid' fantasy, however, which proves to be more resiliently powerful than his exposure to actual deprivation. When they visit Rose's stepmother in her dilapidated flat in Hanratty, the material signs of poverty indeed appear to be scrutinized for their aesthetic want: "The table was spread with a plastic cloth, [and] they ate under the tube of fluorescent light. The centrepiece was new and especially for the occasion. A plastic swan, lime green in color, with slits in the wings, in which were stuck folded, colored paper napkins" (Munro 2010b, p. 142). Again, it is not the sheer material indigence, but the lack of (culturally acquired appreciation for) tasteful home equipment and decorative items that signifies poverty. Returning with Patrick, Rose sees that her home is filled with everyday objects she has learned to identify as markers of deprivation, and whose colour and fabric render them proof of her stepmother's aesthetic deficits. At first, Rose is viewing Flo's home "through Patrick's eyes," and she is indeed embarrassed about "the food and the swan and the plastic tablecloth [... and the] toothpick-holder; ashamed for Flo with her timidity and hypocrisy and pretensions" (Munro 2010b, pp. 142–143). Patrick, however, refuses to acknowledge her stepmother's precarious material existence, her calculating manner and her "coarse-textured food" as in any way related to his girlfriend. He describes her hometown as "a dump. You must be glad to get away" and her stepmother as "not your real mother [after all ...] Your real parents can't have been like that" (Munro 2010b, p. 143). His ignorance towards Rose's discomfort, and his contempt for what used to be her home, provoke a trace of 'class solidarity' after all:

Rose felt immediately that he should not have said that. [...] A] layer of loyalty and protectiveness was hardening around every memory she had, around the store and the town, the flat, somewhat scrubby, unremarkable countryside. She would oppose this secretly to Patrick's views of mountains and oceans, his stone-and-timbered mansion. Her allegiances were far more proud and stubborn than his. (Munro 2010b, p. 143, p. 144)

What provokes her emotional closing of ranks with a stepmother to whom she is not, after all, particularly close, is not so much the fact that Patrick looks down upon Flo's interior decoration or her cooking. Rose feels insulted because he cannot seem to see beyond these material items to appreciate that they were bought 'especially for the occasion'—to make a good impression on him. She takes revenge for Patrick's arrogance and condescension by destroying his romantic vision in turn. After rejecting his proposal and abusing him for being "a sissy" and "a prude" she has

never loved, her eventual acceptance of his offer of marriage, she comes to realize years later, “was really vanity, it was vanity pure and simple, to resurrect him, to bring him back his happiness. To see if she could do that. She could not resist such a test of power” (Munro 2010b, p. 147, p. 149). Rose, the story reveals, marries him although she has neither loving feelings for him nor expectations he might have been able to fulfil. Ultimately, gender clichés trump class: Patrick is (mis)directed into an unhappy marriage by his vision of Rose as a damsel in distress; Rose uses his fantasy as a means of narcissistic—not socio-economic—empowerment. In addition, the story has her overcome material poverty and social embarrassment through her education when she becomes a successful journalist. However, Munro discourages the temptation to read her story as an unequivocal social realist narrative, for the fictional idea that weakened Patrick is indicated to have been the one capacity Rose fails to obtain: a “vision of happiness” (Munro 2010b, p. 150).

To conclude, “Royal Beatings” and “The Beggar Maid” portray small-town, Scottish-Irish, lower class communities in mid-twentieth-century Canada, viewing poverty as a state that indeed needed to be overcome exactly because it signified economic deprivation as much as the absence of cultural capital, resources, and choices. Munro’s representation of poverty and social mobility through objects of material culture refuses to romanticize both deprivation and affluence. It also does not offer emotional gratification to readers either eager to sympathize with the plight of the culturally disenfranchised, or to applaud the latter’s socio-economic advancement. What Rimstead has criticized as an aestheticizing “gaze from a distance” (Rimstead 2001, p. 104) at poor lives has been shown to present items and infrastructure in a much more complex way, which exposes public neglect, acknowledges individual agency, and distinguishes characters’ personalities and their interactions. Moreover, objects symbolizing material comfort are employed to ironize socio-economic ambition: sugary treats ridicule food cravings, and a pre-Raphaelite painting renders silly an upper-class male fantasy but is not valued for its aesthetic appeal. The material manifestations of deprivation and (the promise of) affluence build Munro’s ‘story houses’ as worlds of experience whose nooks and crannies offer new insights into how lives are constructed not only in, but through fiction.

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